



Salman Rushdie's use of Historiographic Metafiction in 'Fury'

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Abstract

The paper aims at highlighting the historiographic metafiction in Rushdie's *Fury* from the perspective of the postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon. The novel has not been analyzed theoretically along these lines and therefore, it is a maiden attempt on our part and it will benefit both academicians and scholars to have an in-depth knowledge of the novel from the historical perspective. Moreover, a special feature of the novel is its engagement with history mixed with postmodern devices like intertextuality, subjectivity, irony, parody and subversive hilarity. The novel is autobiographic in nature besides delineating his own story, Rushdie parallels it with history. Rushdie would like to show us that the history in his novels is as much fictional as any other and that it should not be seen as an objective chronicle of the times which forms the backdrop of his novels. Besides situating itself within the frame of historical discourse, historiographic metafiction maintains its self sufficiency as fiction. The textual past of world and literature are intertextualised, where fiction and history take a parallel status. The fictional representation of history is constructed through the form of metafictional mode of writing. To attain this aim, the novelist introduces historical figures, sources, events and self-conscious narrative. Rushdie creates an irony, while narrating the fury of Solanka. Between the conventions of autobiography and history writing, he (Rushdie) fictionalises his own autobiography through interweaving of fiction and history. Solanka's fury is that of Rushdie, who was banished from the rest of the world and finally finds America the only habitat to survive. The reader finds the mingling of fiction and fairy tale, as the irony is subversive in the novel. The use of parody throughout the novel serves as a tool to prove that historical accounts are artifacts.

Keywords: historiographic metafiction, intertextuality, artifact, parody.



Historiographic Metafiction in *Fury*

Historicism dominated literary scholarship up until the 1940s and the emergence of the New Criticism, which turned literary study toward textual analysis. It either studied the links, explicit as well as covert, between literature and topical events, it described the way a literary work embodied the “worldview” – the reigning values and understandings of its age. While the firmness of direct suggestion of the historical novel or even the nonfictional novel has departed, because both history and literature are fictional realities. From the postmodernist perspective, the relation between fiction and history is intricate for their reciprocal implication. According to new historicists, the relationship between literature and history is one of circulation, exchange, and negotiation rather than of reference or reflection. There is no single historical discourse of a period; instead, the critic must trace out multiple and complexly interconnected histories that make up an age. While the connections between historical realms occur through representational exchanges, encoding and refiguring of social energy and cultural imagery that are not reducible to the terms of economic determinism or referential reflection, they can nonetheless be described as the reproduction and circulation of mimetic capital.

Rushdie would like to show us that the history in his novels is as much fictional as any other and that it should not be seen as an objective chronicle of the times which forms the backdrop of his novels. Unlike history which is usually linear and chronological, his narration is cyclical and he obviously shows a desire to shape his material so that the reader will be forced to accept its non-objective nature. His aim is to go beyond a mere attack of the British and other colonizers to highlight the way in which history can be changed and manipulated by those in power. He describes historical events through the emotions of his characters.

Besides situating itself within the frame of historical discourse, historiographic metafiction maintains its self sufficiency as fiction. The textual past of world and literature are intertextualised, where fiction and history take a parallel status. The fictional representation of history is constructed through the form of metafictional mode of writing. To attain this aim, the novelist introduces historical figures, sources, events and self-conscious narrative. The metafictional novel questions



the reality of past through self-conscious structuring. This form points out the arbitrariness of the history and propagating narrative the only tool to rewrite about the past. Just as literature is a verbal artifact, history is no different from the other. Michel Foucault very aptly writes:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first line, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. And this network of references is not the same in the case of a mathematical treatise, a textual commentary, a historical account, and an episode in a novel cycle; the unity of the book, even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case. The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse.

Therefore the canvas of metafiction focuses and poses question about the relationship between fiction and reality by using literary devices like irony and self-reflection. The goal is achieved through the combination of metafiction and historical fiction. Metafiction bares the tricks used by writers to show novels are all made up. It shows that fiction forms its own autotelic universe that does not correspond to anything in the real world. It does not pretend to create an illusion of truth. History is presented as an objective document of observed facts. One is not made aware of the biases that the selection and interpretation of facts is highly subjective and that facts may be distorted to serve the interests of certain people. It means that the truth of history that we have held sacrosanct is also a made up thing. As Jeanette winterson has pointed out, 'Rushdie's use of irony, parody, and exuberant carnivalesque imagery and language' on the other, 'his particular cultural roots and the particular subject matter of his fiction have led many critics to see him as an exemplary postcolonial writer' (1).

Rushdie and other practitioners of the historiographic metafiction parody how writers make up their stories to show history could also be a made up story. Their crossing into the territory of history in their fictional works is intended to close the division between the two. Rushdie's novels



have a strange juxtaposition of history and fiction where historical facts coincide with the life of the protagonists and create a unique combination. Rushdie plays with historical incidents and conventions to show as unreal, as fictive as things that fiction refers to. “He would go back where he was not known...A memory from forbidden Bombay peremptorily insisted...the memory of the day in 1955 when Mr Venkat...became a *sanyasi* on his sixtieth birthday and abandoned his family forever, wearing no more than a Gandhian loincloth, with a wooden staff in one hand and a begging bowl in the other” (Rushdie 80).

Let's first choose our starting point from Rushdie's seventh novel, *Fury*, about the relation between the way Professor Malik Solanka, as depicted, and Rushdie. Rushdie, who lived in India till 1970 and later went to England and worked in an advertising agency. A traditional metafictionist essay on Solanka might be entitled simply “Solanka and Rushdie,” Since the character of fictional Solanka and the real one so resemble one another. Throughout the novel, Malik Solanka has been delineating his resemblance with those of the historical personages, through intertextualizing the past with fiction. The metafictional mode is signaled in the very beginning of the novel where Rushdie complexly interconnects history with fiction. “Desdimona's death is an ‘honour killing’. She did not have to be guilty...that's why he did not listen to her.” while Solanka is relaxing himself under the shower, “to quote Eleanor's thesis against her was a cruelty he might have easily spared her...truly to set himself beside the Moor of Venice and the king Lear, to liken his humble mysteries to theirs”(Rushdie 11-12)? Rushdie has spread the flannel of fiction, equated it with metafiction and therein relates the follies of Othello and King James I to himself.

The novel is about its central figure, Malik Solanka's struggle to write his autobiography, the novel is by its very nature about fiction writing itself. The complex narrative structure involves framed or embedded narratives – what has been called “a Chinese box structure” by Linda Hutcheon, of stories within stories, the fundamental elements of metafictional novels (57). Solanka fictionalises his own autobiography and situates the events of past to version, thereby acting as the protagonist of the novelist. Throughout the narration he reminds the reader, through



self reflexive remarks, about the fictional nature of the story. Besides this, Rushdie is there as the writer of the novel and “we” as the readers. This quality of the novel makes *Fury* a novel about fiction writing and draws attention to its status as an artifact, and the inclusion of historical events and personages in the novel’s metafictional discourse implies their fictionality and problematizes them as well.

Rushdie aptly handles his characters to suit his own purpose, Little Brain, Solanka' creation in the novel, represents the bold personages of history. In her interview with Galileo Galilei, unafraid, offered her own view: “Man, I wouldn’t have taken off that stuff lying down. If some pope had tried to get me lie, I’d have started...revolution, me. I’d have set his house on fire. I’d have burned the ...city down” (Rushdie17). Solanka is highly selfconscious both as the narrator as well as the writer and it is this self-consciousness which makes him reflect on his process of narration. The autobiographical element is highly contextualised and correlated throughout the novel, and the correlations are frequently changed from one stream of imagination to another. The self conscious narrative parodies the realistic and historical representations of the past because these are barrowed from the critical distance and are in conflict with the context of the novel. Solanka’s fictitious accounts with self reflexive comments are portrayed to the reader through the use of irony. On abandoning his first wife Sara, the fury of separation is fully expressed by Malik Solanka through the following:

“Life is fury, he had thought. Fury-sexual, Oedipul, political, magical, brutal-drives us to our finest thoughts and coarsest depths out of *furia* comes creation, inspiration, originality, passion, but also violence and pain, pure unafraid destruction, the giving and receiving of the blows from which we never recover. The furies pursue us...we civilize ourselves to disguise- the terrifying human animal in us...self-destructive... we raise each other to the heights of joy. We tear each other limb from limb” (Rushdie 30-31).

Rushdie creates an irony, while narrating the fury of Solanka. Between the conventions of autobiography and history writing, he (Rushdie) fictionalises his own autobiography through interweaving of fiction and history. Solanka’s fury is that of Rushdie, who was banished from the



rest of the world and finally finds America the only habitat to survive. The reader finds the mingling of fiction and fairy tale, as the irony is subversive in the novel. The use of parody throughout the novel serves as a tool to prove that historical accounts are artifacts. In the following reference, Solanka is trying to give real reasons behind the failure of the David Summit Conference, organized and announced by Bill Clinton in 2000, which further led to the turmoil and bloodshed between Israil and Palestine and stuck to the facts; however, what fallow is a fictional explanation of the recorded historical events, which force the reader to question the validity of such historical treatises: “The Middle East peace progress staggered onward and the outgoing American president hungry for a break through to buff up his tarnished legacy, was urging Barak and Arafat”, Ehud Barak and Yasir Arafat, “ to a Camp David summit Conference. Tenth Avenue was perhaps being blamed for the continued sufferings of Palistine” (Rushdie 65-66). The use of parody offers Rushdie now grounds to represent the voices of an individual and by means of metafiction Rushdie is able to show historical reality as reconstructed and problematizes the objectivity of history. When the novel incorporates actual historical events into the metafictional context of the novel, it questions the boundary between so-called fact and fiction.

“Rome did not fall because her armies weakened but because Romans forgot what being a Roman meant. Might this new Rome actually be more provincial than its provinces; might these New Romans have forgotten what and how to value, or had they ever known?...who demolished the City on the Hill and put in its place a row of electric chairs, those dealers in death’s democracy, where everyone, the innocent, the mentally deficient, the guilty, could come to die side by side” (Rushdie 86-87)?

Postmodern fiction, by calling attention to the made up nature of fiction and history, shows us that reality itself is of our own making. Rushdie keeps harping on the fact that the America he is portraying is Solanka’s/ Rushdie’s vision of America but none less true. His narrative does not stop at showing fiction as forming its own reality that need not have a one to one correspondence with what we take to be reality. Art has its own truth and its own reality. Rushdie’s fiction is rooted in a very real history and is grounded in the particular problems and dilemmas of the selected one.



Rushdie's intertextuality and keen observation of the historical occurrences make visible this unpleasant reality. Besides being an Indian, Solanka's isolation is not a result of his race or ethnicity, his exile is self-enforced.

“We all fear the cold machine like thing in human nature will destroy our magic and song. So the battle...is the battle of human spirit and, damn it, with my heart I am probably on the other side. But my people are my people and justice is justice and after you have worked your butts off four generations and you are still treated like second-class citizens, you have got a right to be angry. If it comes to it I'll go back. I'll fight alongside them if I have to, shoulder to shoulder. I am not kidding, I really will” (Rushdie 158).

Rushdie's novel incapacitates America's strength not by attempting to swab it out, which would be unattainable, but by changing focus to the dislocating power of fury and other cruces of human life. Solanka's life in Manhattan demonstrates such disagreement. If there is no escape from the American domain, Solanka would run off into the heart of the empire and stay as critical as he can by stuffing it. As an architect of Little Brain who ironically has less existence than his being, Solanka lives a denial in which he is both a recipient (of wealth and fame) and sufferer (of fury and frustration) of celebrity culture. solanka's life is already drawn in the “brilliant, brittle, gold-hatted, exemplary American life” (Rushdie 82). Solanka can confront and pose to America and push it to the extent and problematize it by continuously revealing the disagreements and excesses uncontainable within it

Rushdie does not merely employ a historical setting; he turns to history as a theme. He has not delineated history in *Fury* as his other novels, like *Midnight's children*, *Moor's Last Sigh*, *Shalimar: The Clown*, *The Enchantress of Florence* etc. Besides intervening history, the novel is autobiographical in nature. Rushdie takes up history of America vis-a-vis India and other Western countries, expressing his concerns over the failure of political promises like ‘American Dream and Secular India’. The story of America and India runs parallel to the life of the narrator Solanka resulting in a unique coupling of the personal with the public. While narrating the historical events, Rushdie introduce errors intentionally, merely to show that fiction cannot be confined to history.



Rushdie is more concerned with the process of history making than showing difference between fiction and history. Solanka refutes the traditional assumption about the cosmic creation of life in the following:

“His explanation of his creations arrival at autonomy was rejected by the Mogol with a snort of disbelief. There followed ... a long dispute between the two men on the nature of life itself- life as created as a biological act, and life as brought into being by the imagination and skill of living. Was life “natural”, or could the “unnatural” be said to be alive” (Rushdie 188).

Rushdie juxtaposes the ‘remembered’ truth against recorded truth and establishes the validity of the former. Oral history precedes by the logic of memory, which works by selecting, distorting, adding. This would seem a very imprecise manner of recording events compared to scientific history. But Rushdie tries to show that even the so-called objective history involves a selection and representation of events in a manner that distorts and alters them. This is not made obvious as history is written. Rushdie takes us through the process of history making.

Solanka while giving the descriptions about the death of the doll called Little Brain, is in reality a six year old girl named John Bennet, who was killed in 1996 in her father’s house. “When he got home back, little Brain was gone. Or, almost gone...one doll had been locked away in a cupboard in Solanka’s study...the house feels emptied...after the death...This wasn’t just the death of a child, Solanka was thinking: more like a killing” (Rushdie 102-103).

As we follow Little Brain, fitting historical event to suit Rushdie’s thesis, we realize how objective histories too impose on related facts. Solanka provides a certain motivation to events to write himself into the central role. A similar process occurs during the process of interpretation of events into the recorded histories. Rushdie tries to show that the perceived absence of history in nations like India and America is due to the difference in the historiography that lingers on the status of facts.

Within the close snare of the present-day media verse, the author is in danger of losing control of his creation, as is the case for Solanka and his Little Brain doll. He too may develop into



a product, celebrity or icon, as his art is fated to become a buyer object. The ongoing continuity of centrality of the artist figure in these novels is thus a indication of a dissatisfaction which extends from the personal to the political. As Sarah Brouillette cogently explains in her analysis of *Fury*: “the novel’s significant solipsism is its paranoia about the way mass media make cultural products available for highly politicized forms of appropriation or interpretation that betray the controlling intentions of the author” (136-156).

The novelist is occupied with the refiguring of an ideal artist. In order to authenticate artistic agency, he proposes imagination and inspiration as a solution to the frequency of contemporary pop culture. The American dream, essentially being lived by *Fury*’s protagonist, Solanka, in his living form as complicit multi-millionaire web artist, is thus redrawn in the shape of an Internet saga where the myth of success is metamorphosed into an awful anti-utopia. In this unreal space, rebellion becomes a truth. The obliteration of a repressive empire in the twilight of its domination is described via the interpolation of an excerpt from the saga which constitutes chapter twelve in its entirety and prefigures the “intervention of the living dolls from the imaginary planet Galileo-1 in the public affairs of the actually existing Earth” (Rushdie 226).

Rushdie’s introduction of the metaphor Galileo moment, his stress on the need to follow what he considers being true boldly in front of the horrifying enemy, appears to be based on his own familiarity of a Galilean recantation in the whirlwind of the *Fatwa*. Rushdie’s use of the myth of Pythia is constantly linked to the myth of furies in Solanka’s bedroom. The seemingly simple reference to the Furies turn into a mixed-up as each one of the Furies provides both as tormentor and muse, as Celia Wallhead explains: “Rushdie describes two types of furious passion, one negative and the other positive. They are linked by the female figure. The same three females in Malik’s life who turn into Furies become, one after the other, Muses that inspire his creative work” (204). Furthermore, this is a further instance of Rushdie’s propensity to willingly create complex characters through intertextual references that stretch out to themes and subthemes of the novel. The most recurring reference, like religion and mythology falls victim to Rushdie’s method of deliberately shifting identities. Asmaan, the protagonist’s son, whose very name is allied to sky and



to paradise, is never depicted exclusively as a particular god, but he is continually portrayed as a fountain of heaven on earth, the source in Solanka's life that wholeheartedly believe.

The complicacy is further increased with the other characters having multiple references linked to them: for instance, Eleanor is repeatedly associated to Desdemona, while Sara Lear's name puts forward yet another Shakespearian connection. Therefore, through the most recurring mythological elements, Rushdie prepares extra space for manifolded layers of character depth and imagery because this skill supports the themes of hybridity and fragmentation. This deviatory hub of images has developed into a qualitative trait of Rushdie's novels, as Michael Hensen states:

“Terms that frequently come up in Rushdie's novels are impurity, intermingling, transformation, mongrelization, melange, hotchpotch, pastiche and finally palimpsest... All these terms show that in Rushdie's novels identity is not a unitary entity but rather a fragment, not stable but fluid, not single but multiple, not coherent or continuous but hybrid... Thus, personal identity has to be seen as a perpetual process of negotiations with oneself and one's environment”. (164-176).

Scholars have come across such themes in most of Rushdie's novels, to the level, by which he has become the characteristic author with the combination of postmodernism and postcolonialism, and this perception is particularly appropriate in the case of the novel *Fury*. Rushdie's intention of reflecting the theme of hybridity is served through varied and shifting images in the novel. Thus, Rushdie's interest in this novel is to dramatize his encounter with history. In *Fury*, Rushdie objects the belief that any type of historical discourse can make claim to precisely demonstrating past events. Like Edward Said, he too believes that “description is itself a political act” and “describing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it.” (Rushdie 13-14). Therefore, he finds historical discourse problematic and questionable. Furthermore, he critiques the idea of the possibility of an “objective” view of the historical past. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie writes:

“History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our



perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of Saleem’s unreliable narration might be, I believed, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to “read” the world” (25).

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