



## A Postmodern Critique of Contemporary Pakistani English Novels in the Light of Historiographic Metafiction

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### ABSTRACT

The present research attempts to analyze Pakistani English novels namely *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), *The Scatter Here is too Great* (2014), and *A Season for Martyrs* (2014) as historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon proposed historiographic metafiction as a theory that re-conceptualizes history by combining fact and fiction. Pakistani novelists represent social, political and historical issues of the region through this genre of postmodern fiction. This study shows that official history related to partition, military rule and politics is being questioned in the selected texts. Textual analysis is used as a research method.

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### Introduction

"History . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." (James Joyce).

Linda Hutcheon, a Canadian postmodern theorist, used the term historiographic metafiction for the first time, in the form of a theory. According to her, historiographic metafiction reproduces history through a combination of fact, fiction, parody, fragmentation, irony, and other postmodern devices. Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1983) states, "It's theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs . . . is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past (5)." Historiographic metafiction, as a genre, explores the limits and boundaries of traditional historical discourse as it generates multiple alternative versions, in order to narrate history. It, also, deconstructs binary oppositions such as master/slave, top/bottom, true/false, rational/irrational, objective/subjective, and colonizer/colonized. According to postmodern philosophy, history is discursive, because it is constructed, subjectively, through text therefore, the concepts of, accuracy, neutrality, and reality are no more applicable. Historiographic metafiction, as a postmodern genre, mistrusts crucial ideals of conventional history like; truth, precision and accuracy. It favors the generation of pluralistic versions of history in the same way as supported by another theorist Paul Ricoeur, who supports this fusion of history and fiction when, he, in his book *History and Truth*, regards historiographic metafiction as an innovative rewriting of history.

In south Asian history, certain historical events, which are still in debate due to their influence on contemporary scenario, hold great importance for instance; 1947 Partition of subcontinent.

It is, infact, one of the controversial historical events that has influenced the emotional, historical, and cultural progress, of both the countries i.e. Pakistan and India, till date. Therefore, this event has been observed, interpreted, rewritten and represented by fiction writers of both the affected countries. Like Indian, Pakistani English fiction, too, retells this tragic experience of partition from critical and plural perspectives; moreover, it incorporates history and, in this way, blurs the distinction between reality and imagination. Kamila Shamsie, Sara Suleri, Bapsi Sidhwa, Mumtaz Shahnawaz, Muhammad Hanif, Bina Shah and Bilal Tanweer are few writers who have written and explored this historical event of 1947. The novels, written by these authors, present the event from the standpoints of women, children, slaves, minority and the marginalized sections of society.

The current research is based on the study of three contemporary novels namely *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, *The Scatter Here is to Great*, and *The Season of Martyrs*. These novels are written by well known and globally recognized authors including Muhammad Hanif, Bilal Tanweer and Bina Shah. Muhammad Hanif was born in Pakistan, in 1964. Initially, he served as army officer but left later, to join journalism. He has written three novels, and his famous novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* was published in 2008. Bina Shah, a renowned novelist and journalist, belongs to Pakistan. She was born, in 1972, in Karachi, a major city of Pakistan. She completed her studies from Harvard Graduate School of Education, America. She has written four novels and a few collections of short stories. She is a regular columnist for Dawn news paper; one of the leading newspapers of Pakistan. Her novel *A Season for Martyres* was published in 2014. Bilal Tanweer was born in Karachi.

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He is a novelist, a poet and a translator, who has earned his degree in MFA (Creative Writing) from US. Tanweer, being a name in new generation writers of Pakistani English fiction, records the ongoing social, cultural, historical and political issues of Karachi in his debut novel *The Scatter Here is Too Great* (2013). The study aims to explore the selected texts in the light of historiographic metafiction as these texts rewrite history as a blend of irony, parody, fact, and fiction. The present research further explores the theories of postmodernism propounded by Linda Hutcheon and Jean Francois Lyotard.

### Research Objectives

The research aims at:

- Evaluating the contemporary postmodern English fiction produced by Pakistani authors.
- Extending the conceptual dimension of the research to historiographic metafiction.
- Highlighting the plural narratives which retell various historical events.

### Literature Review

Historiographic metafiction views fiction as a possibility to interpret and rewrite history both thematically, and stylistically. Linda Hutcheon, as the originator of the term, states in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) that, "by this I mean those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages (5)." Unlike conventional history, historiographic metafiction, as a postmodern genre problematizes the traditional historical „truth“ through fusion of fact and fiction, as Salman Rushdie refers this postmodern blend as, „chutnification of history“.

Alice in her thesis titled *The End of History in English Historiographic Metafiction* (2011) states that, „Hutcheon considers historical consciousness and reflection upon history to be fundamental in the postmodern literary experience; according to her, historiographic metafiction perfectly represents the poetics of postmodernism (1).“ Keith Jenkins views in his *Re-Thinking History* (1991) that, „History is a chronological collection of discourses about the world that appropriate the world and gives it a sense (20).“ Traditional historical discourse with its claim for absoluteness, accuracy and objectivity stands as a metanarrative but postmodernism, as a movement, negates all grand narratives as Jean Lyotard, a French theorist, calls this age as „incredulity towards metanarratives“. His philosophy challenged the traditional notions including history, science, modernism, truth, liberty, humanity and enlightenment.

Contemporary Pakistani English fiction is, thematically, based on multiple genres such as history, politics, eco criticism, culture, religion, nationalism and gender studies. The study shows that, along with this interdisciplinary approach adopted by the writers, the postmodern fiction, also, liberates history from the chains of dominated ideology. Historiographic metafiction, being a postmodern genre, generates pluralistic versions of history as Dhar in *History-Fiction Interface in Indian English Novel* (1999) states that,

“History is used as a resource for legitimizing power structures and ideologies (28).“ Pakistani English authors such as Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Ice Candy Man*, Sara Suleri in *Meatless Days*, Mumtaz Shahnawaz in *The Heart Divided*, Kamila Shamsie in *Burnt Shadows* and Mehr Nigar in *Shadows of Time*, have rewritten the history through pluralistic mininarratives. There is a considerable part of Pakistani English fiction that is based on the themes of

military and politics, and their institutional and legitimate impact on the country. The work, of renowned historians like Ayesha Jalal, Tariq Ali, Saeed Shafqat, and Husain Haqqani, reflects upon the military as an institution that lacks the ability to fulfill due responsibilities with reference to its role in Pakistan.

In 1947, downfall of British government divided subcontinent into two separate countries i.e. Pakistan and India. Millions of Hindus and Muslims were killed, on both sides of the countries, due to the clashes and, still, the partition trauma not only resides in the psyche of people but, constantly haunts them too. It is still a controversial historical event, and it is interrogated, in contemporary times, in terms of its necessity, validity, objectivity, legitimacy and consequences. Though, we find the record of partition in official discourse but, it is from the narrow perspectives of British government, Muslim league, or congress, only. The selected novels examine and represent the event from the various viewpoints of marginalized, slaves, layman, women or children. Infact, Pakistani English novelists critically perceive 1947 event, in their fiction, as H. V. Hodson states,

“Every historian, however impartial and careful of the truth...must have a personal point of view, without which history is anemic and my view point cannot but be British and that only an Indian or a Pakistani could write from the viewpoint of his own people and leaders.”<sup>1</sup> The literary representation of history, from the perspective of natives, celebrate the marginalized sections of binary oppositions i.e. colonizer/colonized, master/slave, male/female, truth/falsity, and objectivity/subjectivity. Historiographic metafiction generates micro narratives as it focuses on the colonized, slave, women, falsehood and subjectivity.

*A Case of Exploding Mangoes* exposes the loopholes in the institution of military and politics, through the mouth piece of elite, officers, and low rank commoners. Generally, it is considered that military is there to defend its people but, the novel, presents mininarratives which deconstruct this traditional „constructed“ image. The novel critically interrogates the stance, taken by the politicians, in the name of progress of Pakistan. A research study entitled

*Praetorianism in A Case of Exploding Mangoes: A Critical Analysis* quotes Saeed Shafqat in these words, “Pakistan committed itself to an Islamic system, albeit a progressive one, during its gestation period (98).“ These lines criticize the political islamization of General Zia that led to controversies which are still prevalent, and discussed, in the contemporary time. His attempt made him a controversial figure, in the history, as it is thought that, “actually Islamization of the country was only one of the many masks which he wore on his face to elongate his rule (ibid.99).“ Talbot in his research study entitled *Pakistan: A Modern History* (1998) describes the exploitative approach of Zia in the similar fashion as Hanif does in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. Talbot views that Zia focused only on, “regulative, punitive and extractive aspect of Islam, rather than its „social aspect“ (271).“

### Methodology

The current study is qualitative, and descriptive. Moreover, textual analysis is the research method, opted for this study and only those passages, events, and characters are chosen from the selected texts, which provide historical

<sup>1</sup> Hodson, H V. “Preface”. *The Great Divide*. London: Hutchinson & Co., 1969. Print.

record based on the theoretical concept of historiographic metafiction. The current research is built on the theory of historiographic metafiction proposed by Linda Hutcheon.

However, it also discusses the novels from the perspectives of mininarratives which, as a postmodern theory, was proposed by a French philosopher named Jean Francois Lyotard.

### Discussion and Analysis

Postmodernism enquires history in a critical way that, in fact, problematises the existing historical „knowledge“.

Similarly, the study proves that the selected novels as postmodern historiographic metafiction, shatter the faith on traditional image of past as these emphasize on the multiplicity of narratives. The novels incorporate the fact that, postmodern fictional representation of partition does not concern with official historical records rather it focuses on the victimization of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, women, children and the marginalized. Through micro-narratives, it presents that, during partition mess, there were women who were raped, houses were looted, and children were brutally murdered. These fatal incidents proved the event as a controversial historical tragedy that fell on subcontinent. This postmodern version of history, takes the south Asian reader in particular, and the world reader in general, away from the official single sided history of partition 1947. Mike Featherstone in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (2007) writes about this retelling of history in these words;

Postmodernism“s critique and rejection of the metanarratives of modernity (science, religion, philosophy, humanism, socialism, etc.), all of which seek to impose some sense of coherence onto history, direct us away from universalization toward the particularity of local knowledge (33).

The novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, thematically, is multidisciplinary, as it presents a literary and fictional blend of various disciplines like politics, history, religion, and military. Hanif blends fictional and real characters who hold international recognition from politics and army, through the devices of irony, parody and intertextuality. His novel is based on the historical era of General Zia“s rule as president of Pakistan and, Chief of Army Staff in 1980. The story criticizes army, an institution that is generally considered to defend the country but it seemed busy doing opposite and to secure lucrative positions in Zia“ era.

General Zia“s death occurred as a result of plane crash, and Hanif fictionalizes Zia“s character to narrate his experience as a ruler, military commander, and as a family man. His state of fear (before death) is, ironically, represented in the novel that despite having a number of body guards he was in a state of constant fear. He expresses his disgust over one of his staff member when he asks him about the identity of his opponents as text writes it in these words;

Those files lie. I am asking *you*, not General Akhtar. You are my shadow, you should know. You see everyone who comes to meet me; you know every nook and corner in this house. It's your job to protect me. As your Commander-in-Chief, I demand to know: who are you protecting me from? Who is trying to kill me? (Hanif 56)

Later, his death happened due to the tragic crash of plane named „Pak one“, on which Gen Zia and American ambassador Arnold Raphel were travelling. The novel highlights different conspiracy theories that were formulated after the horrible death of Gen Zia in plane crash. It generates

multiple viewpoints through the mouth piece of different characters that, also, challenge the single „truth“ version of historical „reality“. It represents that how one event is perceived differently depending upon the context. It retells the doubts that plane crash happened may be because of a mango crate, a crow, blind women“s curse, or a snake, beside other suspects. The novel records historical development of Pakistan as it writes, “but this afternoon, history is taking a long siesta, as it usually does between the end of one war and the beginning of another (ibid 2).”

*A Case of Exploding Mangoes* re-tells the history of Pakistan in General Zia“s era when he was a president, and he introduced Haddood ordinance, Federal Shariat court, Majlis-i-Shura and adultery laws, on the citizens of Pakistan. The novel records the voice of resistance, raised by the marginalized section that presents the fact that how powerless people stood against the dominant ideology of the ruler. It narrates the historical incident when women action forum arranged a protest against the ruler as an article entitled “Sexual Harassment” writes;

Feminist groups were in the vanguard of the struggle for political and social rights during the heyday of the Gen Zia“s martial law regime, and women activists were the first to launch public protests against legislation that amounted to state-sponsored gender discrimination – placing the issue of women“s rights at the heart of the national democratic struggle (Quoted in Dawn Newspaper).

Similarly, the character of Zeenat; a blind woman, who even being innocent was victimized by laws which were made under the slogan of islamization, symbolizes the plight of all the women, in general. A research study entitled *An Analysis of the Role of Comprador Class: A Neo-Colonial Study of A Case of Exploding Mangoes by Hanif* (2015) states that the “Flogging and whipping were introduced to sow and instill fear in the minds of the people in the name of Islamic penal code (11).” General Zia ruled for eleven years and dominated politics, education, army and law. In that era, there was put a ban on freedom of speech, association, assembly, democracy, independence of judiciary and press. The characters, in the novel, criticize all the unfair means used by General Zia, to achieve the powerful position of president as text writes that, everything was made corrupt and it seemed that, “If general Zia wanted to become an elected president the then ISI chief, general Akhtar is busy to ensure that ballot boxes were stuffed in time (196). He, also, went to U.S in order to initiate and participate in the matter of bilateral cooperation necessary for progress of the country. The novel presents a different satirical perspective of his historical visit and it writes about his sheer excitement to meet an American lady journalist. He thinks that, “Joanne, would be here shortly, and just thinking about what she might be wearing and what she would smell like made him nervous (107).”

*A Season for Martyrs*, as a historiographic metafiction, retells the history of Benazir Bhutto, one of the prime ministers of Pakistan. Moreover, the novel reproduces history of Sindh, and, Bhutto legacy prevailing in Pakistan. It gives multiple perspectives on history and existing practice of party politics, in an ironical tone. It fictionalizes the real occasion of arrival of Benazir Bhutto who, after exile of nine years, comes back to her country called Pakistan. The text highlights the excitement of people who greet her by shouting

slogans of „Jiye Bhutto“ (long live Bhutto) for her, her father, and her clan. After witnessing this expression of deep love and regard from her people, she feels extremely overwhelmed and, “she was out there, in front of her people, listening to their cheers of Jiye Bhutto! Jiye Bhutto (Shah 271).”

The novel presents plural perspectives which come from below, silenced, subalterns, slaves, children, women, and lay men. It portrays unconventional perspectives of marginalized section of society whose voice, otherwise, go unheard.

The presence of multiple strands of history, impart knowledge about the land called Sindh, for instance, when the novel praises seven historical figures who are remembered and known as Queens. It writes, “The Seven Queens, the great heroines of Sindh, whom Shah Latif had immortalized in his poetry-Sassi, Marvi, Noori, Laila, Sohni, Heer, and Moomal-they are manifestations of love between God and man, lover and beloved (ibid 43).” The novel, also, portrays a different history than traditional history when it reflects upon the unity between Muslims and Hindus who, in conventional historical discourse, are portrayed as great rivals. Specially, in the wake of partition 1947 of the subcontinent, the people of both the religions and nations (Pakistan and India) are, officially and generally, considered as great opponents of each other. There are certain reasons like Kashmir issue, water conflict, politics, media, Bombay attacks, line of control cease fire, state sponsored terrorism, and, even, sports such as cricket, exaggerate the prevailing hatred, between the two, at maximum. The novel shatters this narrative that has been formed and endorsed by a chain of historians and it writes that, „Muslims and Hindus had coexisted in Sindh for centuries; they even worshiped together at the Sufi shrines in the interior“ (ibid 55). This line gives a message of humanity that prevails despite the existing differences of religion, culture and politics.

The novel laments at the interference and decisions which were made by U.S, years ago, with reference to Pakistan but, unluckily, they proved to be counterproductive in the contemporary time, and, also, brought severe consequences. American government launched *War on Terror* on the land of Pakistan after 9/11 World Trade Twin Towers Attacks that could not prove a wise strategy in favor of the later. Text writes it that, “Had either of them known what kinds of horror they were going to subject Pakistan to when they began the War on Terror? In the six years since 9/11, the country had fragmented (94).” Bhutto legacy has a strong hold in Sindh since its emergence, novel describes the history of this political party, “Bhutto became so popular that in 1967 he formed his own party, the Pakistan People’s Party; entranced by his message of people power, men and women from all over joined, whether they were Sindhi, Punjabi, or Muhajir (ibid 202).”

The novel *The Scatter Here is Too Great* is a postmodern fusion of history, fiction and politics with reference to Karachi, particularly, and Pakistan, generally. The novel is mainly divided into five sections which are further subdivided into nine short but interconnected stories. The narrator is the constant character in each of the story who gives commentary on every character while the characters, subjectively, talk, argue and interpret their historical experiences, and they, also, relate past events with the present. In one of the story entitled *After That, We Are Ignorant*, the narrator comments on historical eleven years rule of General Zia who has always

remained a controversial president in terms of his sincerity and service to his country. He says;

But that general, Zia, that dog of CIA, he liked blood. Where else do you think all this Islam and drugs and guns and bombs came into this city? Americans gave him the money and guns and a carte blanche for drugs to fight the Soviets, and he fucked the country and this city for his jihad next door. He used to see things in his dreams and made them his policies. Yup Americans loved his dreams because he was screwing the Soviets and Comrades in them (Tanweer 22-23).

Another character Comrade Sukhansaz blames General Zia’s policy of islamization which has formulated the basis of present day divisions and sectarianism in the country. It has not only spoiled the situation inside the country but it, also, has constructed a negative image of Pakistan in the global world. He expresses his disgust over the behavior of people when he says that, “In this country, everything is either Muslim or non-Muslim. Is your shoe Muslim? This cap, does it go to the mosque? Is this colour a Muslim? And then no one can talk about religion (Tanweer 23).” These lines show that he, ironically, talks about the general understanding of Muslims who look towards their religion superficially but ignore the real message. Infact, Islam is a religion of peace, compassion and forgiveness but, sadly, majority of Muslims does not practice it, in its truest sense. He seems so obsessed by this militant version of islamization that he does not tolerate his son to be taught religion by traditional teachers who, themselves, lack basic understanding of Islam. His wife says about his fear that, “He considered religion mixing up with everything the cause of all the problems in this God-forsaken country (ibid 54).”

The novel writes and explains history of religion that, not only, retells it but it, also, imparts knowledge to the global reader. It does not leave the reader in any state of ambiguity as considerable explanation is given by the author, in order to facilitate the global reader. The story named *The World Doesn’t End*, the main character Akbar reveals the historical fact about two figures called Gog Magog who are suppose to arrive in this world when it will end. They were two famous warrior leaders, but they were put in an iron four wall as a result of punishment. They were chained so they could not use their hands to push aside that wall but they try to break that wall through constantly sucking it. Each day, they lick and break the wall to a considerable extent but, next day the wall restores its formal length and size. It is believed that a day will come when this wall will not restore itself, then Gog and Magog will come out, and it will be the end of this world. The narrator describes that his brother Akbar who is, by profession, an ambulance driver, happens to see a bloody bomb blast and, since that time, he is unable to recover from his disturbed state of mind. Therefore, he is taken to a religious expert, who is considered to treat the patient spiritually as the text writes;

Akbar told him that on the afternoon of the bomb blast, he and his paramedic were lifting the wounded into the ambulance when he saw two men in long pink robe, walking among the dead bodies. They were walking over the corpses, touching them, looking joyous and thrilled. Most strangely,

no one – not the police, press or anyone else present – was paying attention to them. Akbar was convinced that these were Gog and Magog; that they had finally broken free of their thousands of years of wall and were here now; and that they were in this city, the harbingers of the Day of Judgment (Tanweer 147).

### Conclusion

The study reveals that fictional representation of history, in Pakistani English fiction, challenges the concepts of objective and accurate conventional historical discourse. The selected novels present a blend of history, imagination, fiction, story, allusion, emotions and subjective experiences. They present contrasting and plural perspectives on various historical events, and, in this way, fill the gap in traditional historical record. The selected novels, being postmodern historiographic metafiction, connect present with past and, also, trace that how past events influence the present day Pakistan as the study is delimited to this country, only. Moreover, these novels introduce the changing role of postmodern fiction, in general, where it transcends the conventional perception of being fictitious and imaginative only. The study proves that the selected novels are multi-generic as they combine history, politics, journalism, realism, detective elements, fantasy, and mystery, in one single work. Further research is needed to expose literary and fictitious endeavors of south Asian writers who rewrite world history such as Hiroshima atomic bombings of 1945, World Trade Tower attacks of Sep 9/11, Opium war, colonialism and other events.

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