

Fragmentation in Historical Metafictions

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Abstract

This essay is concerned with fragmentation, a characteristic technique of postmodernist literary works. As postmodernism is also concerned with the rethinking and reworking of history, two ways are presented in which fragmentation can appear in historical metafiction (term coined by Linda Hutcheon). Firstly, the fragmentation caused by relying on the characteristics of individual memory is described in connection with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and secondly, the fragmentation implied by the introduction of multi-layered identities and nomadic subjects in Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Sexing the Cherry*.

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Introduction

Postmodernism has a rather special relationship to history. As it has its roots in modernism, it is mostly ahistorical, however when dealing with the past it recognizes its significance and the fact that history's effects cannot be avoided. Unlike modernism, postmodernism does not try to break its ties to history, but problematizes "the entire notion of historical knowledge" (Hutcheon, 89). Nevertheless its approach to history is not "innocent", but replete with irony (Umberto Eco).

Literary works that deal with history in a postmodern way combine the concern with history with the self-reflexivity of the narration, its self-awareness as piece of fiction, thus rethinking and reworking the past, acknowledging that historicity can only be genuine today if it is aware of its own provisional, conditional identity (Hutcheon 87-114). Linda Hutcheon, a contemporary literary critic, developed the term histori(ographi)cal metafiction to describe the above mentioned type of postmodern literary works which 'lay claim to historical events and personages' and where the process of writing about history is as much in focus as the history itself (Hutcheon 5).

Being products of postmodernism, historical metafiction tackle the question of history differently than earlier historical novels. Based on Georg Lukacs' definition of the historical novel there are two criteria that do not apply to historical metafiction. Firstly, in the choice of characters: in historical novels characters are types, results of a generalization of the image of people at the time, whereas in postmodern works characters are more often peripheral figures, in the world of plurality and diversity there is no room left for types, for cultural universality. Secondly, the historical metafiction differs from the historical novels in the use of historical details: while the latter assimilates them to create verisimilitude, in the former the accent falls either on the futile attempts of assimilating the historical details, or on the fact that it purposefully misplaces historical events and dates in order to 'foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history' (Hutcheon, 114).

This break with the usual requirements of the historical novels is also reflected in the narrative. The usual flowing story line is replaced by a string of fragments, the world is seen in a 'broken mirror' (Rushdie). As fragmentation can occur on many different levels, the purpose of this essay is to present two different causes of this phenomenon in two historiographical metafiction: Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* and Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*. In the former, one of the causes of fragmentation will be proven

to be the use of nomadic and multi-layered identities, while in the latter the structuring based on the characteristics of the individual memory.

Nomadic identities in *Sexing the Cherry*

Jeanette Winterson is a contemporary British writer, who became famous in 1985 with *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. *Sexing the Cherry* is her third novel, which was published in 1989. Critics argue, that it is a novel characteristic for female postmodernist fiction because of its fragmented style, handling of time and the questions related to gender it raises through the way characters are portrayed ¹ (Clark and Piero 302). It is also an example of historical metafiction as the novel rewrites the beheading of Charles the First from the perspective of the enormous Dog Woman.

Rosi Braidotti elaborated the theory of nomadic subjectivity based on the philosophical terms of nomadism developed by Deleuze and Guattari. Nomadic subjects are complex, multi-layered, unfixed identities which do not have a reference point to which they could be subordinated, thus the selves' form of being is that of constant "transitions" and "passages". She applies this theory to the contemporary understanding of identity: today people are defined by many "axes" (class, ethnicity, gender, etc.) and the concurrent functioning of multiple axes leads to "multi layered identities". However, this theory can be applied to many aspects of postmodern politics and art, as the nomad is simply an identity without a central point around which it can rally, it is unfixed. (Braidotti)

The notion of nomadic subjectivity can be applied to Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Sexing the Cherry*. The Dog-Woman and Jordan of the first part of the novel can be considered nomadic subjects reappearing in the second half as the young activist and Nicholas Jordan (Meyer 217). The aim of the following section is to prove that the nomadic subjectivity applies to this novel by outlining the similarities between the two pairs of characters and by emphasizing the ontological instability present in the novel that allows the existence of nomad characters. (Onega)

¹ It is interesting to notice that the character's attitude towards language is also a postmodern one. In postmodernism silence is often present when words fail to convey the wanted meaning. E.g. Beckett writes: "how can I say it, that's all words, they're all I have, and not many of them, the words fail, the voice fails, so be it, I know that well, it will be the silence". In *Sexing the Cherry* this attitude is shown best in the narration of the Dog-Woman: "There was too much to say so I said nothing" (Winterson 108)

The first part² of the novel *Sexing the Cherry* has two main narrators: Jordan and his adoptive mother, the Dog-Woman. The time of the narration is the seventeenth century; although, Jordan tends to wander off in fairytales, thus escaping the bounds of the conventional time and space. (Rozett 35) Farwell finds that the Dog-Woman is fixed in historical time while Jordan questions its stability (Farwell 179). However the Dog-Woman's narratives are by no means realistic, and that is because not only the handling of time determines what we find real (as opposed to fiction) but also the way matter is perceived. Conventionally, historical time would imply some sense of reality. In this case this does not occur, because of the "fictional" elements introduced in the narration of the Dog-Woman³ (Meyer 217). The inability to oppose fictional to real, the fusion of real and unreal causes the sense of uncertainty and that of ontological instability present in the text. (Onega) And as the certainty of being is questioned, the presence of nomadic subjects is almost self induced (because it itself deconstructs any notion of fixed identity (Braidotti)).

The second part of the book is entitled "Some years later". This part is set in today's world, and there are still two main narrators: Nicolas Jordan and the activist/chemist woman, however, there are parts in which the narrations of the Dog-Woman and Jordan are interwoven in between these. At this point it becomes clear that there is a connection between these two sets of characters. This relation is constructed on several congruencies between them, some of which are conspicuous.

The first item on the first page of the second part of the novel is a picture of a pineapple sliced in half. The image of a pineapple appeared in the first part of the book before every narration of Jordan, so the reader developed a conditioned reflex of expecting a narrative of Jordan after seeing that image. However, in this case (and in several that will follow) the pineapple is sliced in two. It is still the same pineapple, just its wholeness is gone, it is present in another state. This symbolic representation also supports the idea that Nicolas Jordan and Jordan are the different manifestations of the same consciousness. This is also the case of the sliced banana, the picture that appears before the narrations of the chemist woman. The image of this fruit appeared every time the Dog-Woman was the narrator in the first part, so the reader would logically expect some kind of continuation of this pattern. This expectation is fulfilled to a certain degree as there is continuity in this interrupted and "dispersed" narrative (Clark and Piero 302), however subtle.

² My own division, the first part is until the last chapter: "Some Years Later" (Winterson 111)

³ E.g.: "I was invisible then"; "Far above us, far far away like a black star in a white sky, was Samson" (Winterson 14,25)

The connection between the two sets of characters (i.e.: Dog-Woman – activist woman, Jordan – Nicolas Jordan) can also be observed in their personalities. There are many similarities between the Dog-Woman and the activist. In the first part the Dog-Woman has a grotesquely enormous body, which she uses as a source of power. In the second part the activist herself was over-weight at one point. She also used her obesity to gain power, she says: “I wanted to be bigger than all the things that were bigger than me. All the things that had power over me” (Winterson 124). However, after being admitted to the university she gradually lost weight, probably due to the fact that she could obtain power by her knowledge (Braziel and LeBesco 219). The Dog-Woman did not have this opportunity because of the conventions of the historical period she was part of.

Another common feature between the two characters is their attitude towards the societies they live in. The Dog-Woman seems to be a fierce royalist who opposes the Puritans; however she cannot fit in the royalist resistance because of her ways of doing things. She is an independent woman in a man’s society, although she is not defined by her feminine nature. She has failed in all her heterosexual relations, she uses her female aspects as weapons (“ I told Johnson that if he didn’t throw back his cloth and let us see this wonder I’d cram his face so hard into my breasts that he’d wish he’d never been suckled by a woman” (Winterson 12)). This way she exceeds the “normative gender model”, achieving power in a world of men. Another idea that supports this statement is that the icon of the Dog-Woman is a banana (Alderson 21), and in the text itself banana is associated with the “private parts of an oriental” (Winterson 12). The same pattern can be observed in the case of the activist woman, though in another context. She is attractive (Winterson 125), but she did not have any successful relations either, and she is also opposing the main-stream tendency of the time: she is campaigning against the big companies and against the pollution they cause. She is too, alone with her cause. It is interesting to notice that neither of the characters has a name.

In the case of the other set of characters, Jordan and Nicolas Jordan the similarities are more obvious. Both are explorers, the only difference being that in the narrative where Nicolas Jordan appears he is left nothing to explore, so he enrolls into the navy academy. Onega argues that in the first part Jordan appears as the archetypal quester, who is setting off on an “innenwelt” journey (Onega 302). Nicolas Jordan is fantasizing about making magnificent discoveries, but his tragedy is, that he cannot fulfill these dreams either in “reality” or in his dreams: “I tried to look at the pineapple and pretend I’d never seen one before. I couldn’t do it. There’s little wonder left in the world” (Winterson 113). Jordan was helped to achieve his journey because he was in a favorable situation due to several factors:

the historical circumstances that allowed discoveries; his initiator: Tradescant; his mother, who let him be free, even from the bounds of his genre⁴ (“I cannot school him in love” (Winterson 40)).

However, the most powerful elements in assuring some kind of continuity of the story and the connection between the two sets of characters are the constant metafictional remarks that are echoed by the characters (Estor 13) and the overlapping of the stories.

In the second part of the novel, the two parallel stories somehow overlap. The story of the Dog-Woman and the activist meet through the latter’s dreams and “hallucinations” (“he’d see her, the other one, lurking inside. She fits, even though she’s big” (Winterson 127)). The outside world cannot comprehend this “double personality”⁵, this “alterego” and labels it as mad. The same happens to Nicolas Jordan who has to hide his pineapple, so his mother would not argue with him. If this event is viewed as the continuation of Jordan’s longing for a pineapple, it becomes not only understandable, but perfectly logical, too.

Continuing this line of thought, the most relevant metafictional remarks are those which deal with the question of reality/fiction, or with ontological problems. The two motto-like paragraphs question the conventional perception of time and matter already at the very beginning. Later on the narrators themselves make comments reinforcing these initial assumptions and also reflecting on their own identity and existence. Here are two examples from Jordan’s narrative:

Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time [...] my own life was [...] squashed between facts, was flying without me... (Winterson 9)

Running away from uncertainty and confusion but most of all running away from myself. I thought I might become someone else in time, grafted on to something better and stronger. And then I saw that the running away was a running towards. (Winterson 80)

In the second part of the novel, the activist woman states:

There are so many fairy stories about someone who falls asleep for a little while and wakes up to find himself in a different time. Outwardly nothing is changing for me, but inwardly I am not always here, sitting by a rotting river.[...] I have a spirit, a soul, any name will do, then it won’t be

⁴ As she herself wasn’t defined by hers. Not being defined by his own masculinity he was able in the dance school of Fortunata to transcend his human condition. (Onega 310)

⁵ Actually it is on personality, passing through time.

single, it will be multiple. [...] It may inhabit numerous changing decaying bodies in the future and in the past. (Winterson 126)

These images of “life was [...] flying”, multiple identities, though one consciousness, the speaker strongly recalls the idea of the nomadic consciousness, as Meyer defines it: “Nomadism, then, allows the character the necessary and useful facets of multiple homogeneous identities without being cornered by the bounded limits of a solitary one” (Meyer 217).

The connection between the two sets of characters can be perceived as that of a body and its shadow (Braziel and LeBesco 218). Based on the arguments presented above, it can be asserted that the relation between them is tighter, their essence, their consciousness is related, moreover, it is identical. There is another tell-tale sign of this: in the first part of the novel, which is placed in the seventeenth century, several contemporary scientific terms appear (Estor): e.g.: “Artists and gurus are, in the language of science, superconductors” (Winterson 91), “The city, being freed from the laws of gravity, began to drift upwards for some 200 miles, until it was out of the earth’s atmosphere.” (Winterson 97)

It can be seen that by applying the theory of Braidotti to Jeanette Winterson’s novel, *Sexing the Cherry*, the way in which the handling of characters induces the fragmentation of the narrative became apparent. The Dog-Woman and the activist woman, Jordan and Nicholas Jordan although apparently belonging to two different eras, can be interpreted as having the same consciousness, being different manifestations of the same nomadic subject. This interpretation is supported by the metanarrative discourses throughout the text, as well as the relation between the two sets of narrators. This causes the fragmentation of the text while still upholding a sense of continuity through the nomadic subjects, feature which makes this novel ask for re- and re- readings.

Remembrance and history in *Midnight’s Children*

Salman Rushdie is one of the most well known contemporary authors; his novels are known for their fragmented nature dealing with various transitions between the east and the west, present and past. He has also published several essays which reflect on his way of writing, one of which is ‘Imaginary Homelands’. In this work he analyzes the different issues related to the writing of the *Midnight’s Children*, for example how the events known as historical facts are changed or devaluated in an individual’s memory.

Salman Rushdie reflects on these aspects of postmodernism in his essay, 'Imaginary Homelands', in relation to his novel, *Midnight's Children*. What makes his work unique among the other historiographical metafiction is the fact that he achieves the fragmentary nature characteristic of postmodern works by relying on the natural characteristics of memory. In the novel the narrator, Saleem, states: 'Memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality'.

These traits of memory are contemplated on in the essay entitled 'Imaginary Homelands' and 'Errata or Unreliable Narrator in *Midnight's Children*'. In these works Salman Rushdie explains how his own personal memory functioned when he was writing his novel, and how his status of Indian writer living abroad affected his work. The author had to accept the fact that his memories contained only bits and pieces of his past, to accept that 'he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors'. But as the concept of a whole, unquestionable picture of past was replaced with a broken image, 'the shards of memory acquired greater status', what remained became emblematic, for instance an old song could reenact the feeling of a whole lifestyle.

Another problem raised by the Salman Rushdie in his essay, 'Imaginary Homelands' is the question of the validity of memories as recordings of history. The author perceives his novel not as a retelling of the reality of the past, but as 'one version of all the hundreds and millions of possible versions' of the past, versions existing because of the hundreds and hundreds of points of view and memories of the people who witnessed the events in the past. The India in his novel thus distances itself from the actual country, the author creates 'fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands'. This way, memory becomes a viable alternative to recorded fact in Rushdie's opinion: 'the broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed'. Here we can recognize the total abandoning of the Proustian idea that it is possible to recreate the past unchanged (Reder).

Many people accused Rushdie of inaccuracies regarding the history of India, and its mythology. In 'Errata or Unreliable Narrator in *Midnight's Children*' he explains that these "mistakes" are meant to make the reader suspicious, conscious of the fact that he is reading about the past as constructed through memories. As the author says, Saleem is 'no dispassionate, disinterested chronicle. He wants to shape his material that the reader will be forced to concede his central role. He is cutting up history to suit himself'. The remembering

as a narrative technique not only affects the historical events that are assimilated, but also the narrative flow of the novel. Saleem once says in the novel:

‘You are amazed; but then I am not, you see, one of your 200-rupees-a-month cookery johnnies, but my own master, working beneath the saffron and green winking of my personal neon goddess. And my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings -- by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks.’

Memory resembles pickling because it selects events, moments from Saleem’s memory and also because it preserves. Saleem says at a point that ‘to pickle is to give immortality... The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind ...to give it shape and form – that is to say, meaning.’ The metaphor of pickling is transmits the powerful image of memories as ways of preserving the past while also transforming it in the meantime.

‘I was actually doing a novel of memory and about memory’ one can read in Salman Rushdie’s essay. Historicity is achieved by the means of individual memory, and the reflectivity characteristic for a historical metafiction is guaranteed by the ‘suspect’ narrator, Saleem, whose mistakes are the ‘mistakes of a fallible memory’, and who is aware of the fact that he is remembering, reconstructing, revisiting the past, and conscious of the natural features of memory. ’ Memory defines the rhythm of the narration, as individual memory pauses at apparently insignificant details, while skipping parts which others might find important. The plot is often constructed on metaphorical relations between two happenings rather than following a metonymically built chain of events. Different events which happened in different times are often interrelated through similar imagery, for example the image of a hole in the sheet at Saleem’s grandparents’ wedding and Azis’ nose. (Rushdie, 2006) Memory works through associations, not logical constructs, hence Salman Rushdie’s novel, *Midnight’s Children* can be regarded as a historical metafiction in which individual memory serves as the leading force behind the construction of the narratives, and in which the act of remembrance guarantees both the self-reflexive and the historical nature of the fiction, ‘a novel about the past, seen through memory’ (Reder 12).

Conclusion

The views of the two authors of the two novels presented are expressed in the following quotes: ‘The past is... a lost city in the mists of the lost time’ (Rushdie), respectively ‘All you can do with past is to reinvent so that people don’t feel that they are in a place they know, because past is not a place we know’ Winterson (Reynolds and Noakes). The common ground

between the two ideas is that the past cannot be recreated; it is something alien to the reader. This thought is continually instated in *Sexing the Cherry* and *Midnight's Children* through the fragmented narrative flow caused by the existence of nomadic identities and the free interpretation of what were known as facts in the Indian history by the way memory functions.

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