



Challenging Historical Narratives: A Postmodern Comparative Analysis Of Mantel's *Wolf Hall* And Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract: Traditional historical narratives often present events as objective facts. However, postmodern philosophy questions this view and asserts that recorded history may not represent the ultimate truth because it is often written by those in power, who present events from a particular viewpoint. This suggests that what we understand as "history" is not a neutral recounting of facts but a selective interpretation shaped by cultural, political, and ideological biases. To gain a complete understanding of the truth, we must consider several other dimensions of perceived truth. This comparative analysis examines Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, set in the Tudor era, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, set against the backdrop of Indian independence, using Jean-François Lyotard's theory of postmodernism. Scrutinizing the narrative technique and structure of the novels, the study aims to reveal how both challenge traditional historical narratives (or metanarratives). Mantel and Rushdie's innovative storytelling expose the subjectivity of historical representation, encouraging readers to think critically about the stories they are told and question dominant interpretations. This article is an effort towards contributing to the ongoing discussions about the role of narrative in shaping our understanding of the past, asserting that the way history is told can change based on who is telling it.

Index Terms - Comparative Literature, History, Postmodernism, Metanarrative, Jean-François Lyotard, *Wolf Hall*, *Midnight's Children*, Hilary Mantel, Salman Rushdie

I. INTRODUCTION

History is always changing behind us, and the past changes a little every time we retell it.

— Hilary Mantel

Traditional history is often seen as a definitive recounting of past events. It is treated like an objective truth, a kind of metanarrative. But it can be somewhat one-sided as it is a specific discourse that often privilege certain perspectives and marginalize others. Postmodern theory, with its "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv) and absolute truths, offers a powerful framework for re-examining historical narratives. It challenges the notion that history is an objective recounting of past events, instead suggesting that all historical accounts, including knowledge itself, are constructed through the lens of their authors and influenced by cultural, political and ideological biases. This theory is vividly illustrated in literature that blurs the line between history and fiction, and urges readers to question the reliability of both.

In literature, writers like Hilary Mantel and Salman Rushdie use their work to challenge and reshape historical narratives, aligning with Wilde's assertion that "the one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (Wilde 168). Mantel, in *Wolf Hall*, reimagines the life of Thomas Cromwell and presents a version of history that diverges sharply from traditional accounts. In doing so, she underscores the idea that history is not a fixed narrative but a series of competing interpretations. Rushdie, in *Midnight's Children*, intertwines historical

events with fantastical elements that challenges the very concept of a single, authoritative version of history. As Rushdie asserts in *Shame*, “History loves only those who dominate her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement,” (Shame 124). He reminds that historical narratives are driven by perception and power structures, not merely by factual truth.

II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Postmodernism is an intellectual and cultural movement that emerged in the late 20th century. It challenges the traditional notions of truth, reality and authority. Postmodernists argue that truth and meaning are relative and context-dependent. Hence, they question whether a historical event can be objectively interpreted without bias. Hayden White, in his seminal work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, profoundly redefines how we understand historical writing by emphasizing its inherently narrative nature. White argues that historical accounts are not mere objective representations of the past but are structured and interpreted through narrative forms. He states, “the historical narrative is a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (White xxix). This suggests that historians, much like novelists, craft their accounts by selecting and organizing events into a coherent story, often guided by the narrative conventions and rhetorical strategies they choose to employ. Consequently, history, according to White, is less about recounting factual events as they objectively occurred and more about how these events are interpreted and presented through the lens of the historian’s narrative choices.

Jean-François Lyotard complements this idea in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by critiquing the grand, overarching narratives—or metanarratives—that have traditionally been used to explain history and other domains of knowledge. He explains that “the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation” (Lyotard xxiv). This statement underscores Lyotard’s argument that in the postmodern era, society became increasingly skeptical of overarching stories or theories concerning progress, science, or political ideology that claim to offer universal truths. Instead, these grand narratives are seen as totalizing and exclusionary, often serving the interests of those in power rather than providing an objective or neutral recounting of events. This skepticism leads to a fragmentation of metanarratives, where multiple, smaller, and more localized stories emerge, reflecting a diversity of perspectives rather than a singular, dominant viewpoint.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of historical narratives within literature, particularly through a postmodern lens, has been the focus of numerous scholarly works, especially concerning the writings of Salman Rushdie and Hilary Mantel. Wilfin John D’s thesis, *Negotiating Personology: A Psychopathographical Interpretation of Salman Rushdie and Hilary Mantel* explores the psychological influences within the works of Salman Rushdie and Hilary Mantel, using a psychoanalytical approach to reveal how personal histories shape their narratives.

T.N. Dhar’s article, *Problematizing History with Rushdie in Midnight’s Children* examines Rushdie’s postmodern techniques in *Midnight’s Children*, highlighting his subversion of traditional history through the interplay between personal memory and national narratives, challenging metanarratives.

Manasvinee Mukul’s thesis, *History, Women, and Culture in Hilary Mantel’s Fiction* analyses how Hilary Mantel reinterprets history through a gendered perspective, exploring recurrent themes, autobiographical influences, and the impact of Mantel’s research and personal experiences on her fiction.

Ash-Shaibani’s thesis, *The Treatment of Myth and History in Salman Rushdie’s Fiction* examines how Salman Rushdie uses myth and history to deconstruct colonial ideologies, employing postcolonial, new historical, and archetypal approaches in analysing five of his novels.

While these studies provide rich analyses of Mantel’s and Rushdie’s individual works, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning a direct comparative analysis of their narrative strategies, particularly in the context of challenging historical metanarratives. Most existing research tends to focus on either psychological interpretations, cultural analyses, or thematic explorations within the works of each author separately. This article addresses a gap in literature by conducting a comparative analysis of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Using Lyotard’s postmodernism, it examines how both authors challenge traditional historical narratives through innovative storytelling techniques.

IV. MANTEL'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Hilary Mantel is known for her unique approach to historical fiction, where she blends historical facts with creative imagination. As she herself explains, "Like a historian, I interpret, select, discard, shape, simplify. Unlike a historian, I make up people's thoughts," (Mantel, Huffpost) highlighting her unique role as both a chronicler of the past and a creator of inner lives. Mantel's goal isn't just to repeat history but to reflect on it in new ways. This approach is evident in *Wolf Hall*, where Mantel crafts an alternative history by exploring the personal thoughts and ambitions of historical figures that reinterprets the events of the Tudor court from a fresh perspective. Hilary Mantel uses the unreliable narrator, stream of consciousness, and present tense to offer a subjective, immersive, and revisionist view of history:

4.1 Unreliable Narrator

Mantel used Thomas Cromwell as the central figure and narrator in *Wolf Hall* who offers a subjective view of events which are heavily shaped by his own experiences and ambitions. His unreliability as a narrator is apparent in how he interprets and rationalizes his actions. When Cromwell says, "You don't get on by being bright [or] strong. You get on by being a subtle crook," (Mantel 60) he shows he knows his methods are morally questionable. However, by calling himself a "subtle crook," he downplays the importance of intelligence or strength, making his actions seem necessary for survival rather than ruthless. This suggests that Cromwell is carefully choosing how he presents himself, making it hard to fully trust his version of events.

Cromwell's unreliability is further underscored in his reaction to how others perceive him. When he confronts the reality of how he is viewed by others, the mask of self-assurance slips momentarily. After examining a portrait of himself, he reflects on a comment made by Mark Smeaton, a court musician, saying, "I fear Mark was right." When asked by his son Gregory who Mark is, Cromwell explains, "A silly little boy who runs after George Boleyn. I once heard him say I looked like a murderer." Gregory's response, "Did you not know?" (Mantel 527) is a stark reminder of the gap between how Cromwell sees himself and how others see him. This exchange suggests that Cromwell may be wilfully blind to the darker aspects of his nature, or at least reluctant to fully confront them. His dismissive attitude towards Mark Smeaton, calling him a "silly little boy," further illustrates his tendency to downplay or discredit any external judgment that does not align with his self-image.

4.2 Stream of Consciousness and Present Tense

Mantel's use of stream of consciousness and present tense are crucial in creating an immersive experience for the reader. The stream of consciousness technique blurs the line between Cromwell's thoughts and the external world, pulling the reader directly into his mind. This technique allows readers to experience Cromwell's internal world, particularly his grief over his dead wife and daughters, which frequently surfaces in his thoughts. The use of the present tense enhances this immediacy, making historical events feel as though they are happening in real-time.

4.3 Revisionist History

Hilary Mantel challenges traditional views of history by showing how it can be reinterpreted. Princess Mary captures this idea when she says, "What is defined can be redefined, yes?" (Mantel 290) This means that what we believe about the past can change depending on who is telling the story. Cromwell also reflects the same idea when he argues, "A lie is no less a lie because it is a thousand years old" (Mantel 566), suggesting that just because something has been believed for a long time doesn't make it true.

Cromwell, reflecting Mantel's broader critique of history, directly confronts the glorified image of Thomas More, a figure traditionally portrayed as a saintly martyr. He challenges this narrative by saying "You call history to your aid, but what is history to you? It is a mirror that flatters Thomas More. But I have another mirror, I hold it up and it shows a vain and dangerous man, and when I turn it about it shows a killer" (Mantel 566). Cromwell's words highlight the idea that history is subjective, often shaped by those who write it. By offering a "different mirror," Cromwell presents an alternative view of More, one that reveals his flaws and darker tendencies. This redefinition of More's legacy underscores the novel's revisionist approach, suggesting that history can be manipulated and reinterpreted.

Finally, Mantel's idea that "Beneath every history, another history" (Mantel 66) reinforces the notion that the official narrative is merely one version of events. This suggests that there are countless other stories and truths lying beneath the surface, waiting to be uncovered.

V. RUSHDIE'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a breakthrough in postcolonial literature that challenges conventional historical narratives through a variety of innovative narrative techniques. Rushdie employs fragmented narratives, an unreliable narrator, and metafictional elements to critique the idea of a singular, authoritative version of history. These techniques not only reflect the complexity of post-colonial India but also invite readers to question the very nature of truth and historical representation:

5.1 Fragmented Narratives

In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie employs fragmented narratives to mirror the complexity and diversity of Indian history and identity. This narrative fragmentation reflects the chaotic and multifaceted nature of post-colonial India, where various cultural, religious, and political forces are constantly at play. The novel's structure itself is non-linear, with Saleem Sinai, the narrator, frequently moving back and forth in time. This non-linearity creates a sense of disorientation and reinforces the idea that history is not a straightforward, chronological account but rather a collection of fragmented memories and stories. As Saleem states, "Memory's truth, because 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" (Rushdie 242).

Further emphasizing this point, Saleem himself acknowledges the limitations of his narrative, stating "Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence... I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail" (Rushdie 14).

These admissions imply the subjective and fragmented nature of his narrative, where the lines between fact and fiction are blurred.

5.2 Unreliable Narrator

Saleem's role as an unreliable narrator is central to the novel's exploration of truth and fiction. Saleem's self-awareness of his role as a "juggler-with-facts" emphasizes the inherent subjectivity in his narrative saying "I have been only the humblest of jugglers-with-facts; and that, in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case" (Rushdie 373). Here, he directly acknowledges his manipulation of historical facts. In a nation where truth is dictated by those in power, Saleem's story, though filled with contradictions and embellishments, emerges as a more authentic reflection of reality than the official accounts.

Saleem's admission, "To tell the truth, I lied about Shiva's death. My first out-and-out lie," (Rushdie 510) directly acknowledges his unreliability as a narrator. This confession is significant not just because it reveals a lie, but because it highlights the tension between truth and fiction in his narrative. Saleem's claim of this being his "first out-and-out lie" is immediately undercut by the fact that it is followed by the acknowledgment of the lie itself, which blurs the line between truth and fabrication. The reader is left questioning the veracity of the entire narrative, aware that Saleem's story is shaped as much by his desire to impose meaning on his life as it is by historical events.

5.3 Use of Metafiction

Metafiction, or the self-referential aspect of a narrative that draws attention to its own construction, is a prominent feature in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Saleem, is not only a participant in the story but also its creator, constantly reminding the reader of the artificial nature of his narrative. This technique invites readers to question the authenticity of the story being told and to consider the ways in which history and fiction are intertwined. Saleem directly addresses the reader, acknowledging his role as the creator of the narrative and the challenges he faces in telling his story when he says "I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning—yes, meaning—something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (Rushdie 4).

Saleem draws a parallel between himself and Scheherazade, the legendary storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*, who told stories to delay her execution. By invoking Scheherazade, Saleem not only situates his own narrative within a broader tradition of storytelling but also reflects his anxiety about the significance and coherence of his story. This comparison is a metafictional device that reminds the reader that the narrative is an artifice. Saleem's frequent admissions of his narrative's flaws and his struggle to recall events accurately also contribute to the novel's metafictional nature. He often interrupts the flow of the story to question his own memory or the reliability of the details he is providing e.g., "What's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same" (Rushdie 87).

VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *WOLF HALL* AND *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

Both Hilary Mantel and Salman Rushdie confront the concept of a single, authoritative historical narrative by presenting history through subjective lenses, thereby inviting readers to question the reliability of conventional histories. In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel's choice of Thomas Cromwell as the central figure allows her to offer a revisionist take on the Tudor court, where history is seen through the eyes of a man traditionally depicted as a villain. Mantel's narrative, rooted in Cromwell's internal world, disrupts the established historical narrative by portraying him as a more complex, morally ambiguous character. The use of an unreliable narrator, stream of consciousness, and present tense further reinforces the idea that history is not an objective recounting of facts, but rather a constructed narrative shaped by the perspectives of those who tell it.

Similarly, in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie employs fragmented narratives and an unreliable narrator to challenge the notion of a singular historical truth. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, offers a disjointed and self-contradictory account of post-colonial India, reflecting the chaotic and multifaceted nature of the country's history. Rushdie's narrative structure, which blends history with myth and memory, underscores the idea that history is not a linear, objective record but a collection of stories that are constantly being rewritten. By questioning the veracity of Saleem's account, Rushdie encourages readers to critically examine the ways in which history is constructed and understood.

VII. CONCLUSION

Both *Wolf Hall* and *Midnight's Children* challenge traditional historical narratives through various narrative techniques. Mantel uses unreliable narration, stream of consciousness, and present tense to reframe Tudor history from Cromwell's complex perspective, while Rushdie employs fragmented narratives, metafiction, and an unreliable narrator to reflect the chaotic nature of the history of post-colonial India. This analysis highlights the importance of recognizing history as a constructed narrative shaped by power and perspective. Future research could explore additional narrative techniques and their impact on public perceptions of history, further examining how fiction influences our understanding of the past.

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