

Historiographic Metafiction: Fragmented Histories and Fluid Identities in Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*

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Introduction

Canadian literary scholar Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historical metafiction” in her landmark 1988 book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. She defines, “Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity” (Hutcheon 93). In “Nationalism In 21st Century Bollywood”, Jaydeep Padhiyar and Milind Solanki assert, “History is something that gives the nation its identity. Historical changes are the reasonaback the emergence of nationalism” (Solanki 48). In postmodern literature, it refers to a unique style that combines self-conscious metafictional tactics with historical writing. This narrative structure, which combines fiction with history, emphasises how both literature and history are produced and interpretative, raising doubts about the very feasibility of discovering an “objective truth” about the past. Fundamentally, historiographic metafiction recognises that history is a narrative shaped by ideology, viewpoint, and selection rather than an objective account of facts. Similarly, despite its inventiveness, fiction frequently references historical events, cultural memory, and archival documents. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon states that, “historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past, but it

textualises accessibility to us today” (Hutcheon 114). By creating novels that both tell stories and explore the act of storytelling, postmodern authors purposefully cross this line. By doing this, they demonstrate how language, narrative traditions, and power systems are always used to mediate historical knowledge. Self-reflexivity is one of the characteristics that distinguish historiographic metafiction. These writings frequently use satire, intertextuality, or direct commentary on the writing process to highlight their own identity as fiction.

In “Historiographic metafiction in Gillo Pontecorvo’s *La batailled’ Alger*: Remembering the “forgotten war”, Valérie Orlando, proclaimed,

The historiographic metafictional text posits historiography not by its sequential events but by its social, cultural, and economic orientations, which favour the plural, or what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari designate as “the multiplicity” of the subject (A Thousand Plateaus). The multiple others, the diaspora, those lost voices of history, reinscribe themselves as a “mentalité collective”, eclipsing the importance of linear, historic time and space. (Orlando 263)

They achieve this by making readers think critically about how history is created and remembered rather than allowing them to accept the historical information at face value. To challenge the legitimacy of official records, novels could, for example, reinvent real people with made-up motivations and dialogues or place fictional characters in historical settings. Examples of historiographic metafiction include Julian Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), which challenges historical fact and biography; Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), which reimagines the trauma of slavery through collective history and personal memory; and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), which combines magical realism with the history of post-independence India. Each of these pieces examines the methods used to know, write, and recall the past in addition to recounting it. Hutcheon reminds readers that all histories are tales that are influenced as much by omissions as by inclusions, emphasising that this genre problematizes the representation of historical fact rather than rejecting it.

Moreover, postmodern scepticism about objective truth is embodied in

historiographic metafiction. By portraying history as fragmented, subjective, and contentious, it challenges the Enlightenment belief in rationality and progress. Common techniques that enable writers to both participate in and subvert historical discourses are irony, satire, and pastiche. These works encourage readers to critically analyse both the past and the current ideological frameworks by undermining the authority of historical knowledge. Historiographic metafiction is a potent literary form that blends postmodern self-awareness with historical research. It highlights underrepresented voices, questions the line separating reality from fiction, and reveals how history is constructed. It does this by making us face the vulnerability of memory, the bias of historical documents, and the need to consider how and by whom history is written.

Hari Kunzru is a British-Indian journalist and writer who is renowned for his analysis of globalisation, migration, race, and identity in contemporary society. In 1969, born in London to an English mother and an Indian Kashmiri Pandit father. Kunzru frequently combines aspects of his mixed heritage in his writing. He studied at Oxford University and the University of Warwick. In “Hacking the Society of Control: The Fiction of Hari Kunzru”, Peter D. Mathews emphasised, “Kunzru’s novels can thus be viewed, in this respect, as acts of resistance to the authority of totalizing systems” (Mathews 621). Kunzru’s first book, *The Impressionist* (2002), was praised by critics for portraying a young man of mixed race navigating colonial and postcolonial identities across continents. Other notable works include *Gods Without Men* (2011), which combines several stories around a mysterious desert town in the American Southwest; *Transmission* (2004), which satirizes global tech culture; *My Revolutions* (2007), which explores political radicalism in Britain in the 1970s; and *Red Pill* (2020), which is a psychological study of surveillance, truth, and authoritarianism. A well-known journalist, essayist, and fiction writer, Kunzru has written for publications such as The New York Times, The Guardian, and The New Yorker. He has been an outspoken opponent of nationalism, intolerance, and censorship and is well-known for his progressive views. In “Crime Narratives in Peter Ackroyd’s Historiographic Metafictions”,

Petr Chalupský states that,

Peter Ackroyd suggests that crime and violence are deeply embedded in the city's texture and consequently have inspired numerous literary accounts, either in the form of factual recordings or fiction. Such narratives in fact, perpetuate the memory of the most notorious crimes, creating modern 'myths' that influence subsequent writers. (Chalupský 122).

Hari Kunzru portrayed the picaresque journey of Pran encounters multiple historical events that encompass and develop his life to an undetermined destiny. Being of mixed heritage, an illegitimate child, Pran moves to different places with forced fate, from a foster father's house to Africa, where he learns the real impressionism in his life. He immigrated, struggled and experienced the new world. He became a victim of the colonised India under British rule, the Punjab Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, human white trafficking and slavery, and sorcery, especially in Fofe communities in Africa. The journey developed a sense of belonging and an impression in him. Throughout the book, he takes advantage of race, class, and nationality, altering his identity as needed to stay alive. The hollow, performative, and brittle character of every identity he adopts highlights the novel's central theme of the fluid and fragmented self. He draws attention to the performative and manufactured character of identity by impersonating white, British masculinity. In the end, Pran/Bridgeman loses his roots and finds himself without a permanent identity or place to call home, symbolising the displacement that many individuals in the colonial and diasporic world experienced. Through the use of satire, irony, and a global setting, Kunzru explores themes of race, identity, colonialism, and belonging in *The Impressionist*, producing a powerful reflection on the consequences of empire and the challenges of selfhood.

Fragmented Histories in *The Impressionist*

The diversity of viewpoints is another crucial element. Women, colonised peoples, ethnic minorities, and the socially downtrodden are among the marginalised voices that orthodox historiography has often ignored, while historiographic metafiction often elevates them. In doing so, it challenges

prevailing beliefs and upends big narratives by providing counter-histories. Rewriting history becomes a means of resistance, bringing to light experiences that have been suppressed, but also recognising that these reconstructions are still incomplete and dependent.

“Kashmiri Pandit”, “The Spanish Flu”, Colonised India under the British rule and its impacts, “Jallianwala Bagh massacres”, and Falkland Road; the prostitutes of Bombay and the expedition of the Fotsé community in Africa are the major fragmented histories fictionalised through imaginary characters. Kashmiri Pandits and their migration to new places, with their constrained rules and regulations. Amarnath Rajdan, one of the Kashmiri Pandits, has a great concern with hygiene. He assumed himself as the most hygienic personality and has higher standards in society. He was

The proud author of no less than 276 published articles, which have appeared in organs ranging from Kashmiri Youth Society pamphlets. . . . On etiquette, he mourns the decline of the formal canons of traditional politeness. On language, he is a fierce opponent of debased or impure usage, impropriety, profanity, and slang. In literature, he favours the ancient writers over the Moderns. In pictorial and plastic arts, likewise. Food, he has opined, should be prepared plainly and notoriously, taking care to avoid faddishness, innovation or undue richness of sauce. (Kunzru 30)

Yet he succumbed to Spanish Flu in 1918. In “The 1918 Influenza Pandemic and its Legacy”, Jeffery K Taubenberger and David M Morencsstate, “In 1918-1919, the ‘Spanish’ influenza pandemic appeared nearly simultaneously around the world and caused extraordinary mortality, estimated at 50-100 million fatalities” (Jeffery K Taubenberger 1). Most of the people were infected by this virus and died. Nevertheless, Amar Nath Razdan had hygiene concerns, and he died during this pandemic.

Hari Kunzru has gracefully narrated the fictional history of Fatehpur. The emergence of Ala-u-din Khan and the disgruntled Mughal generation established his own kingdom in the Punjab hills. Exemplifies the

fragmentation of the Mughal empire and the opportunism that led to the formation of new states. How Ala-u-din Khan found the unnecessary nature of war, and blessed by the pir, and established the city as Fatehpur. He became a Nawab of Fatehpur. The Britishers greatly influenced the Indian Nawabs. They have converted their palace into comfortable homes for the Britishers. The Nawab had seen Buckingham Palace, and “was shocked to find it far smaller than the homes of many middle-ranking Indian rulers. He built up the new palace for them. “So, the new palace was to be like a much larger version of the Pavilion, bigger, generally Oriental rather than Indian design, and above all, the kind of thing that English people would appreciate if invited to the kingdom to ride or shoot”(Kunzru 77). The city of victory, however, was under the rule of the British.

Although Nawab Murad is still the ruler, he cannot tie his shoelaces without the agreement of the Crown’s representative, Major Privett-Clampe. . . . If his opinion is not heeded, a word, a dispatch, would be enough to cause serious, even succession-changing trouble. The major is a very powerful man indeed (Kunzru 97).

They were trying their best to settle things. The nawab tried to manipulate the British Resident to give him dominant power. “The British prefer Firoz because he wears a tie and has promised to let them build factories” (Kunzru 106). They tried all the things which make him happy, so they brought Pran, and made him as Rukshana. A hijra, for Major Privett-Clampe. He is described as, “He who is the British Resident here. He is a very powerful man, and a very stupid one. Though he is pickled in gin, he holds the fate of our beloved kingdom in his hands. Luckily, little Rukshana, he has a weakness. . . . He likes beautiful boy-girl. Like you.” (Kunzru 87). How the Nawab and Firoz were trying to manipulate the Major and the dominance of power through Pran. Even Major advised Pran, “If you listen to what the white is telling you, you can’t go wrong”(Kunzru 109). The coloniser had set their standards to colonise the Indian minor groups. They have trained the white men, so they can set their rules in India. Major Privett-Clampe also use Pran,

instigating the importance of the English Language.

So Pran starts visiting Major Privett-Clampe on a weekly basis, to wear a school uniform, recite poetry and watch him jiggle around under his desk. He puffs and rings and is told to keep it up, and gradually his English accent improves, and he learns stirring passages from Victorian poets about martial prowess and the sacred duty of keeping one's word . . . he discern that it is in some way responsible for Privett-Clampe's importance, and the importance of Englishmen in general, so he pays attention to it, hoping to divine its secret. (Kunzru 112)

The nawab was also in favour of pursuing the Britishers. Hari Kunzru narrates that, "A Fatehpur shooting party is always a jolly affair. Even one or two of the zenana women are allowed to join in, which is how Pran comes to attend and to have his first sight of the celebrated Mrs Privett-Clampe" (Kunzru 115). So "Peshawar Vale Hounds" was established in Lahore by the Britishers who brought hounds for sports in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in India, especially for hunting the Indian Jackal. "The latest news is that in three days' time Sir Wyndham Braddock, combined Punjab States Resident, will be arriving with Lady Aurelia to shoot some tiger, eat too much, and have himself inventively pampered at the expense of the state of Fatehpur" (Kunzru 134). Firoz organised the party to entertain Sir Wyndham Braddock and to seduce Mr Privett-Clampe. "They get a suitable picture, then he will be given money and allowed to leave. If not, there will be no further use of him" (Kunzru 145). The wives of the Nawab also had an interest in the Shooting along with Khwaja-sara and other Hijira. Even multi-religious characters of the 18th-century Indian society, and a complex interplay of religious and political factors in maintaining stability at a local level. It also shows the political fragmentations, religious conflicts and socio-economic conditions, offering valuable insight into the transitional period of Indian history marked by the Mughal empire and the emergence of new regional and religious states.

Another major event that has been discussed by Hari Kunzru, the “Jallianwala Bagh Massacre,” took place on 13 April 1919 in Amritsar, Punjab. He has fictionalised it as a background for the expedition for Pran and his migration from India to England. Kunzru in detail depicts,

The Punjab is the breadbasket of the British Raj, and also its army recruitment ground. This landscape of a flat field crossed by irrigation channels and low mud banks means everything to the sahibs, and lately they have felt it slipping from their grasp. First, there were rumours. Indian talking secretly to Russians and Germans, of Bolshevism, sedition- the inevitable fruits, said the hardliners, of educating natives. Handbills were pasted in public places. *Prepare yourself to kill and die*. Then, soon afterwards, small omens. A Hindu procession joined by Muslims. Shouts of *Mahatma-Gandhi-ki-jai* ... Religious enemies seen drinking from the same cup. The Sahibs began to count their guns and say to each other that the time for talking was over. There were not enough of them ... Throughout the Punjab, club smoking rooms filled with talk of firm government, of hitting first, and hard. (Kunzru 180)

James Joyce writes in *Ulysses* that “[h]istory . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (Joyce 60). The Amritsar massacre left a nightmare effect on generations for decades. Punjab became a political centre for the British. Indians have peacefully gathered to revolt against the Rowlatt Act and arrested Indian leaders at Jallianwala, a walled garden. General Reginald Dyer and other perpetrators’ troops attacked the walled garden by blocking the entry and exit gates. They opened fire without giving any warning to the people. In “The Spectacle of Death and Deception: Analysing Fictional and Non-Fictional Writings on the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre” Md Shahnawaz, asserts,

This geographic location of Punjab and the diverse ethnography resulted in the diverse semantics that add more layers to the memory of this gruesome event. . . . When we talk about a particular event, be it the Holocaust, the First World War, or the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, these are not just public events but also personal trauma (Shahnawaz 54).

General Dyer firmly addressed the troops,

You are teaching a lesson, he said. They will not forget it in a hurry. The General nodded. His troops fired 1650 rounds. . . . Corpses were piled in drifts around the walls of the Jallianwala Bagh. The well in the corner was choked with them. As darkness fell, relatives looking for their dead were attacked by jackals and feral dogs. Under Martial law, there was an eight o'clock curfew. Most of the townspeople were now too scared to break it, so the wounded remained where they lay until morning. The Jubilee Hospital was run by Europeans. Not one person applied there for treatment. . . . The next day, bodies were burnt five to a pyre. People made haste to hide the evidence that their relatives were at the gathering. No one knew how many were dead. In the afternoon, the General summoned Indian leaders to the Kotwal. I am a soldier: he told them in clipped parade-ground Urdu. For me, the battlefield of France and Amritsar are the same. Speak up if you want war. If you want peace, open their shops once. You will inform him of the badmashes. I will shoot them. Obey my orders. (Kunzru 183)

Pran was stuck in the Punjab for many days and left the place with the help of a white man, a Britisher who had an assumption that Pran was like him, a white man. He let Pran migrate to some other safe places. Pran becomes the victim of white trafficking and prostitutes. Pran earned a new identity as “Pretty Boby, crown prince of that most notorious of all red-light districts, the sewer of India: Falkland Road” (Kunzru 201). *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay* is also a pictorial book by Mary Ellen Mark, published in 1981. She describes

Falkland Road is a notorious street of prostitutes in Bombay. It is like any busy lower-class street in Bombay, densely populated by vendors, merchants and shops, but also overcrowded with girls, from 11-year-olds to 65-year-olds ex-madams. The street is lined with old wooden buildings, which teem with prostitutes hanging out of the window, in the viewing cages on the ground floor, and on the steps. From sunrise to sunset, the customers pass down the street to survey the girls. (Mark)

Hari Kunzru has depicted the harsh reality of Bombay, where prostitution becomes a major business for survival. “The Royal Geographical Society” was established in 1830 to survey the geographical sciences, and it became a major supporter in 19th and 20th-century expeditions to Africa. “The government wants the proper survey of the Fotseland region.”(Kunzru 429). After the survey by a professor and his team, they found that “The Fotse are a docile, joyous people, almost untouched by the ills of modernity, their pastoral” (Kunzru 448). Which came first, the changes or the spirits? There were no such things in the past; thus, no one would have talked in such a way or even mentioned the old and new times. Time was simply time. People adopted their ancestors’ habits. However, they are primitives; they have settled their own lives. Pran becomes a witness to the Fotse expeditions.

Fluid Identities: The Chameleon Protagonist

The Impressionist

Pran, the protagonist of the novel, has a picaresque journey. He was born as an illegitimate child to a foreigner, Ronald Forester, and an Indian mother. He was named Pran Nath Razdan. From Pran to Jonathan Bridgeman, he transmutes identity throughout the novel. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler avowed, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 33). Pran’s identity is also a product of his environment and society. Murat Aydemir in “Impressions of Character: Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*” comments

Since *The Impressionist* features a protagonist who travels from India to Britain to Africa, and whose identity changes to an extraordinary extent according to the demands of each setting he finds himself in, the novel questions our aesthetic ability (or willingness) to identify, and to identify with, a character who migrates and transforms. (Aydemir 199)

Pran was expelled from his own house, being an illegitimate child of Amar Nath Razdan. He moved to an unknown place, a brothel, where he was forced to accept the third gender and was named Rukshana, a hijra and became a victim of White Trafficking. He became an object of Colonised India under British rule and the Mughal emperor's socio-political agendas. He became just a pawn in political games and was assigned a task to seduce Major Privett-Clampe, a British resident in India. He tried his best to escape from the cage, and succeeded in his plan and reached to Amritsar, Punjab. Where he was titled as 'White boy' represented the man of the Britishers. Pran witnessed the impact of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and the pathetic condition of Indians. Being a White Boy, he was helped by a Britisher and left Punjab and shifted to Mumbai.

Before transforming into Jonathan Bridgeman, a British youngster who eventually enrolls at Oxford, he was compelled to take on the identities of Rukhsana, a brothel servant, and Pretty Bobby, a white boy who had an affair with women from red-light districts. If Bobby makes himself invisible to others, shapeshifting, changing names and keeping his motives hidden, he does so no less to himself. Secretly hints at depth, and this is what people fantasise about when they see him" (Kunzru 250). He became the crown prince of Falkland Road's prostitutes. However, he found an escape from here with the help of a foreigner, called Jonathan Bridgman, who died in India. Pran took his identity as "Jonathan Pelchat Bridgeman: Spavin & Muskett: solicitors and Commissioners for Oaths of the Grey's Inn Road, London" (Kunzru 284). And he found "*dare we let them die in darkness when we have the light of. . . . There is nothing here for him anymore, nothing to make him stay. He feels the earth moving swiftly and frictionless beneath his feet*" (Kunzru 286). He took admission at Oxford University and learn the etiquette of foreigners. He learnt from the professors, "We must look upon these boundaries as a good thing? Were these none, the flowers would lose their identities in a hybrid swarm, and nature would be in a desperate **mess**" (Kunzru 310). In *The Location of Culture* (1994) Homi K. Bhabha establishes,

Hybridity is the sign of productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority). (Bhabha 112)

Jonathan Bridgeman accepted all the cultural and social identities of the new place. "He tries to feel what the others feel, and wonders nervously what he has become" (Kunzru 293). He just wanted to imbibe with the surrounded communities. He realised, "The life itself, an English Life, was enough" (Kunzru 299). He lived a hybrid life of Jonathan Bridgeman. As Jonathan was satisfied with his foster identity, "Between the petting couples in the back row, he eats an ice and feels Englishness begin to stick to him, filming his skin like city grime. This is what he wanted. This is enough" (Kunzru 303). He learned the language and also pursued anthropology. "He always wrote that Englishness is sameness and the comfort of repetition" (Kunzru 314). First time he encounters the primitive class of Africa and their advancements. He was enthusiastic to learn the way of life of the Fotse Community. He became a part of "The Royal Geographical Society" and embedded himself in this expedition. "This will be his first journey to Africa, where he hopes to see the West African shorthorn up close and study the practices of the Fotse farmers." (Kunzru 401)

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (1990), edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Stuart Hall defines the

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall 222)

As Pran learns the real impression of life after too many journeys till he reaches Africa. He asserts, "For now, the journey is everything. He has

no thoughts of arriving anywhere. Tonight, he will sleep under the enormous bowl of the sky. Tomorrow he will travel on” (Kunzru 481).

Conclusion

Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist* (2002) epitomises the postmodern mode of historiographic metafiction as defined by Linda Hutcheon, where the act of narrativising history becomes as significant as history itself. The novel foregrounds the fractures of colonial and postcolonial experience through its mosaic of historical episodes—the fall of the Mughal empire, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the underbelly of Bombay, and the colonial exploration of Africa. These fragmented histories resist coherence, reflecting Hutcheon’s theory. Within this unstable historical framework, the protagonist Pran embodies what Homi Bhabha terms the “third space” of enunciation: a liminal realm where identity is constantly negotiated, hybridised, and transformed. His chameleon-like adoption of multiple racial, social, and cultural selves demonstrates the performative instability of subjectivity, aligning with Stuart Hall’s view of identity. By situating Pran’s picaresque journey against colonial and cultural dislocations, Kunzru critiques the essentialist notions of race, class, and nationality, exposing them as constructs sustained by power and ideology. The novel thus dismantles the illusion of a unified self and reveals identity as fluid, contingent, and historically produced. *The Impressionist* (2002) ultimately offers a profound meditation on the intersections of history, power, and subjectivity, asserting that fragmented histories inevitably engender fragmented selves.

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