A Study of Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* as Historiographic Metafiction

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Based on the poststructualist intellectual thought system, the postmodern philosophy of history has started looking at history as discourse/text. This led to the reformulation of the relationship between history and literature. In consequence, the presence of historical reality in fiction and metaficitonal self-reflexivity in history, the intervention of historian in the process of transformation of past events into history and the realization that history is ideologically constructed have been discussed by most of the postmodern philosophers. In fact, the attempt of postmodern philosophers to study the close affinity between history and literature has shaped the notion of history and the writing of historical novels in the 1960s. This new kind of historical novels, which consciously blur the distinction between history and fiction and create a space for the oppressed people, is what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metaficiton. Using the ideas put forward by the postmodern philosophers of history as the theoretical frame, the proposed paper will take up Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* and discuss how Winterson has used the two narratives of Henri and Villanelle in order to subvert the established notion of history, which is one of the narratives of patriarchy and invent a space for female consciousness. However, it will also be highlighted that Winterson's attempt to create a new space is not to be considered as an escape from the actual world, but a quite essential effort to give multifaceted representation of the actual world.

The notion that history is a representation of objective facts and a kind of empirical search for external truths has influenced the writing of historical novel which was popular during the nineteenth century. This becomes evident from the fact that in most of the historical novels the

settings, characters and events taken from history are used and those events are made crucial to the central characters and narrative. This also suggests the traditional claim that it is possible to seize the past as such and the representation of the past can exist independently of the historian. After the advent of postmodernism, which refutes the fixity of language and text and the assumed connection between language and reality, the traditional notion of history has been subverted. In this connection, while outlining the contemporary tendency that history writing follows in the postmodern age, Gertrude Himmelfarb says that postmodernism turns into "a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past" (72).

In fact, the postmodern philosophy of history bases its arguments on the intellectual system of poststructuralists. The attempt of the poststructuralist theory to split signifier and signified brings about an idea that language shapes and creates reality. This becomes clear that there is no such reality existing outside language / text. Drawing upon this notion of reality, postmodern philosophers look at history as a text, "a discourse which consists of representations, that is, verbal formations" (Abrams 183). Moreover, it has been argued that the past can never be attained in a pure form as historical events, but it can only be reached through chronicles and archival documents. The claim of postmodern philosophers that history is a linguistic construct has shaped the course of the writing of historical novels after 1960s. Bradbury, too, seems to acknowledge that the postmodern philosophy of history has influenced the tendency of history writing towards history and historical themes when he says, "what we understand by history, the means by which we construct significant histories, and the way we relate those histories to our understanding of our own situation has been reshaped by the recent philosophy of history" (432). The direct influence of postmodern philosophy of history on the historical novels implies that one has to be aware of the theoretical postulations which have been formulated on the basis of poststructuralist and postmodern thoughts.

The argument that history is a linguistic construct has made many postmodern philosophers of history to reformulate the relationship between literature and history. Louis Montrose bridges the gap between history and literature when he puts forth the two aspects to the study of a literary text: historicity of text and textuality of history. The former points to the fixation of a text in the context of political and cultural history, whereas the latter lays bare the fact that history is not the exact replica of absolute facts, but a product of textual mediations which, in fact, exist in multiple versions. Elaborating on this concept of history, Hayden White in his *Metahistory* reveals the process of emplotment in which chronicles turn into stories. This

shows that historical facts can be "emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of these events and to endow them with different meanings" (224). This also suggests the role of historian in the process of transforming past events into historical facts. In short, Hayden White's theory of history draws a parallel between the devices and techniques used in both history writing and literary writing.

The close affinity of literature with history widens the gap between history and external reality. This dissociation of history from the absolute fact reveals what history exactly represents. The realization of the fictionality of history shows that the one-to-one correspondence between official historical record and reality is illusory. Moreover, it shows how does official history exclude and oppress the voices of minority people in order to consolidate the power of dominant structure. In this connection, Elisabeth Wesseling states "the absence of ethnic minorities from . . . history does not result from some sort of natural, automatic process, but from deliberate exclusion" (166). Therefore, the emergence of metahistorical self-consciousness in postmodern philosophy of history does not only assert the close affinity of history writing with literature by pointing out the presence of fictive and literary elements in history, but also makes people aware of the muted voices of oppressed minority people.

The emanation of historical novels in the 1960s from the postmodern philosophy of history hints at the fact that the deliberate blurring of distinction between history and fiction in those novels is not to be considered as a mere playful experimentation, but as an act of strong political commitment. Linda Hutcheon in her *Poetics of Postmodernism* labels the form of historical novels, which are greatly influenced by postmodern philosophy of history, as historiographic metafictions. She herself explains the reason for such a label thus, "historiographic metafiction puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real" (92). The above definition highlights the presence of both the element of self-reflexivity and historical reality. This paradoxical intermingling of metafictional self-reflexivity and historical events and personages leads to an ontological questioning of objective reality. Historigraphic metafiction is not only concerned with the question of the truth-value of objective historical representation but with the issue of who controls history. This shows that historiographic metafictions emphasize the notion that historical facts are ideologically constructed. This becomes evident when Linda Hutcheon says, "All past 'events' are potential historical facts, but the ones that become facts are those that are chosen to be narrated . . . This distinction between brute event and meaning-granted fact is one with which postmodern fiction seems obsessed" (75). As a result, the excluded events are foregrounded, their

stories are retold and alternative histories are composed in historiographic metafiction. In fact, the techniques like intertextuality, parody, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and the rewriting of history foreground the process of problematising the discourse of history.

More than the feminist concern of Jeanette Winterson, her incorporation of postmodern techniques in order to pose an ontological questioning of hegemonic thought system, in fact, blurs the distinction between fact and fiction in *The Passion*. This conscious blurring of distinction between fact and fiction is done by mingling the metafictional self-reflexivity and historical material. The comingling of history and fiction, in turn, opens up the possibility of reading *The Passion* as a typical historiographic metafiction. This does not mean that the feminist concern, which forms the core of Jeanette Winterson's writing, has to be brushed aside. Interestingly, Winterson problematizes the discourse of history, which is one of the narratives of patriarchy, to invent a new space for female consciousness. Moreover, Jeanette Winterson does not attempt to construct a system in opposition to patriarchal system, rather she distorts the very dichotomy of centre and margin.

The combination of two contradictory narratives: historical and fantastic can be overtly seen in the two distinct and intermingled narratives of Henri and Villanelle in *The passion*. Winterson chooses a very precise and meaningful historical period as a contextualizing frame for the development of the story her characters tell in the novel. The foregrounding of history shows the attempt of Winterson to make her characters problematize the established notions from within the system. Firstly, Henri in the beginning seems to believe in and consolidate the patriarchal norms established by Napoleon. In the course of the novel, he realizes that the patriarchal ideologies are illusory and those ideologies have been shaped by the historical narrative. Henri's diary gains significance as it exposes history as the totalizing discourse. Moreover, his diary consciously parodies the writing of history and opens a space for alternative versions of history. Secondly, Villanelle's creation of mysterious, magical and chaotic world in opposition to the rationalistic, totalizing and patriarchal world of Napoleon seems to guarantee the fulfillment of her unnatural desires. The close reading of the text would show that Villanelle's world is not an extreme opposite to Napoleon's, but an imitation of it. This suggests that Villanelle does not want to create a space for a distinct gender identity, rather she wants to blur the very categories of identity. In this connection, it is worthy to mention Judith Butler's notion that all the identity categories, which are mostly believed to be essential and absolute, are performative. According to her, all identities, including gender identities, are "a kind of impersonation and approximation . . . a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (21).

The first section titled "The Emperor" makes the readers anticipate that the novel portrays the Napoleon wars as the story of military success of a great man whose deeds expanded the French Empire in the last decades of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. In fact, Jeanette Winterson tries to give a different version of the wars. She portrays her alternative history from the perspective of Henri, who shares in the general climate of passionate enthusiasm and decides to become a soldier, ultimately gets destroyed by Napoleon's unquenchable thirst for power. This alternative version of history is given by Henri in his diary which serves as a kind of war journal. Henri begins to record events with an intention to seize his time as such for future reference, "something clear and sure to set against my memory tricks" (28). When Henri is sure about retaining the exact context of the events that happened in his time, his friend Domino raises objections to Henri's recording, "The way you see it now is no more real than the way you'll see it then" (28) and also questions Henri's character as a historian:

Look at you. . . a young man brought up by a priest and a pious mother. A young man who can't pick up a musket to shoot a rabbit. What makes you think you can see anything clearly? What gives you the right to make a notebook and shake it at me in thirty years, if we're still alive and say you've got the truth?" (28)

On hearing the objections of Domino, Henri defends himself by claiming that he is interested to observe how his perception towards the records differs over a period of time, "I don't care about facts, Domino, I care about how I feel. How I feel will change, I want to remember that" (29). This explicitly shows what Henri strives to write is far from an objective and a chronological account of historical facts. While attempting to write the history, Henri himself feels difficult to convey what exactly happened. This becomes clear when he says in a self-conscious manner, "trying to convey to you what really happened. Trying not to make up too much" (103).

Henri's war journal does not follow the conventions of traditional history writing and questions the validity of objective history. His parody of history writing reveals Napoleon not as a great Emperor, but as a short man who pushes a whole chicken into his mouth. The very first sentence suggests that Napoleon will be shown in a different light:

It was Napoleon who had such a passion for chicken that kept the chefs working around the clock. What a kitchen that was, with birds in every state of undress; some still cold and slung over hooks, some turning slowly on the spit, but most in wasted piles because the Emperor was busy. Odd to be governed by an appetite. (3)

Instead of focusing on army and war, Henri's narration portrays the untold stories of prostitutes and soldiers. He brings out the harshness of military life, especially how soldiers are treated by Napoleon. Henri has been taught that "soldiering is a fine life for a boy" (8). He gets disappointed as he realizes the true condition of soldiers' life when he gets the first impression of the camp:

The space from the ground to the dome of the canvas was racked with rough wooden cages about a foot square with tiny corridors running in between, hardly the width of a man. In each cage there were two or three birds, beaks and claws cut off, starting through the slats with dumb identical eyes. I am no coward and I've seen plenty of convenient mutilation on our farms but I was not prepared for the silence. Not even a rustle. They could have been dead, should have been dead, but for the eyes. (5-6)

Silence, mutilation, dumbness and the choking sensation of being a prisoner in a wooden cage are metaphysical images for the way in which Napoleon treat his soldiers. For Napoleon, the soldiers are mere playthings. This becomes clear when Henri sadly notes in his war Journal, "July 20th, 1804. Two thousand men were drowned today" (24) and "In the morning, 2,000 new recruits marched into Boulogne" (25). Instead of giving an account of coronation, Henri narrates the untold story of vivandieres (prostitutes) who are used to satisfy the sexual passion of soldiers. Napoleon himself orders Vivandieres are to be sent to special camps. In his rewriting of history, Henri pushes the patriarchal norms established by Napoleon to the margin and gives significance to individual subjects whose voices have been mostly denied and silenced. Henri gives minute details about the life of prostitutes in the army camp:

The vivandieres were runaways, strays, younger daughters of too-large families, servant girls who'd got tired of giving it away to drunken masters and fat old dames who couldn't ply their trade. . . unlike the town tarts, who protected themselves and charged what they liked and certainly charged individually, the vivants were expected to service as many men as asked them day or night. (38)

In addition to his parody of history writing, Henri also overtly acknowledges the fictionality of his narration. While narrating the events of his time, he refers to fictionality of what he narrates by uttering the self-reflexive phrase, "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (5). This phrase gets repeated throughout the novel. Henri utters this phrase when he wants readers to believe what seems to be very hard to accept and at the same time, he makes the readers realize that it is a construct. This metafictional aspect of the novel, therefore, problematizes the validity of the historical representation in the novel and foregrounds the fictionality of history by self-

reflexively playing with the artificiality of the text. The blurring of fact and fiction through this self-reflexive playing complicates the veracity of the historical accounts that the novel refers to:

By saying this narrator is telling stories . . . Winterson makes us suspect him or her as an historian, so even though the 'trust me' tries to establish reliability, we are set in an endless oscillation between faith in and distrust of the narrator. We no longer merely take what history says as the truth, but we must treat it as if it is our own memory. (Pressler 18)

From the above discussion, it is made clear that the historical period of Napoleon is portrayed from the perspective of Henri. Interestingly, Winterson has feminized Henri's character in order to problematize the traditional gender identity and bring the voice of the marginal. In other words, the feminization of Henri's character makes him question the validity of objectivity of historical representation and interpret the historical events from the subjective views. The feminized aspect of Henri's character is due to Winterson's preference to depict him as a meek and sensitive man. When he goes to army with a dream of being a drummer, he is asked to be the neck-wringer of chickens as he is not strong enough. This restricts Henri to the domestic sphere – Kitchen and changes his perspective of looking at war. At another instance, instead of enjoying with the prostitutes, he feels outrage and sympathy on looking at the maltreatment of women. In fact, right from the beginning Henri is palpable as he is fond of his mother and always longs for the home atmosphere, "I was homesick from the start. I missed my mother" (6). The feminization of Henri's character disrupts the established notion of history, which is one of the narratives of patriarchy, and paves way for the representation of the excluded voices of individual subjects in general and female consciousness in particular.

The self-conscious narration of Henri destroyed the constructed boundary between history and fiction and clears the way for inscription of a third narrative which is more subversive and innovative discourse in the novel: Villanelle's story. Unlike the world of Napoleon in which Henri resides, Villanelle's world is full of fantastic elements. She has constructed Venice as a city of mystery where you can easily lose, or find, your way, at the corners of which you are told your fortune, your heart can really be stolen and boatmen have webbed feet and can walk on water:

> Miss your way, which is easy to do, and you may find yourself staring at a hundred eyes guarding a filthy palace of sacks and bones. Find your way, which is easy to do, and you may meet an old woman in the doorway. She will tell your fortune, depending on your face. This is the city of mazes. (49)

Villanelle uses the fantastic elements to create a world which denies categories and boundaries. This is because she believes that there is no way of reflecting female difference and voice under

such a totalizing discourse where binaries are strictly constructed. Paradoxically, the close scrutiny of this fantastic world shows that this world symbolically alludes to the heteronormative society. In other words, the creation of a new imaginary world is not to be taken as an effort to escape from the real world rather it is an initiation to give a multifaceted representation of the actual world. Winterson herself acknowledges this when she says, "I wanted to write a separate world, not as an escape, as a mirror, a secret looking glass that would sharpen and multiply the possibilities of the actual world". This statement suggests Winterson's understanding that there is no chance of escape from the clutches of totalizing discourse and if one attempts to create a new world that will be the replication of the actual world. Moreover, the only possibility of bringing out a subversive discourse is to denaturalize the dominant structure and maintain that there is no fixed state of point, but there are only multiple positions.

While trying to find a space for female consciousness, Winterson, in fact, goes to the extent of transgressing the gender boundaries. She does not conform to any fixed identity as she constantly switches her role. She is depicted as 'masculine woman' as she is shown in the public sphere as a woman who works in casinos and likes roaming out on the streets. Villanelle further distorts the gender boundary by cross-dressing. She wears male clothes while working in casinos as a part of her job but it is revealed that she continues dressing as a man in her private life as well, "She took to working double shifts at the casino, dressing as a woman in the afternoon and a young man in the evenings" (102). Villanelle's cross-dressing implies Winterson's deliberate attempt to confuse the gender roles. Moreover, Villanelle transgresses the gender boundaries with her unique bodily features. It is told that she is born with webbed feet, which helps her walk on the water. Mostly, in Venice the son of a boatman is born with webbed feet. The very fact that a woman is born with webbed feet, which is hidden beneath the boot, dissociates the connection of biological features from the gender identity. In this respect, her masculine body works like her cross-dressing, "Villanelle enters the male domain because of a genetic inheritance. The oddity of webbed feet can remain hidden for years beneath boots, but there is no mistaking the implications: the search for clear-cut distinctions where gender is concerned is futile" (Doan 148). In addition to blurring the gender categories, Villanelle problematizes the heterosexual relationship by falling in love with a woman she calls "the Queen of Spades". Villanelle also accepts that she has affair with men and women. Villanelle's uncertain gender identity, bisexual affair and passionate love for "Queen of Spades" make her a threat to the heterosexist division of gender identities and roles as the extension of patriarchal oppression.

When Henri falls in love with Villanelle, readers are made to anticipate that she would accept the norms of heterosexual relationship. In contrast to the expectations of the readers, Villanelle subverts the traditional gender roles in this case as well. In fact, when Henri makes love to Villanelle, she plays the role of man. This does not mean that Villanelle is in love with Henri rather she treats him as a mere object of pleasure. In doing so, she reverses gender roles and more importantly, textualising feminine desire which is not usually explicitly presented. This proves beyond doubt that Villanelle problematizes the traditional notion of desire and proposes a space in which feminine desire is made visible and can therefore be both experienced and expressed freely.

More than posing the postmodernist distrust of the validity of historical knowledge and the probelmatization of gender categories, the presence of two alternating narratives of Henri and Villanelle goes to the extent of ontological questioning of unified and eternal reality. The fusion of Villanelle's narrative with Henri leads to dialogism and fragmentation as she brings different interpretations to the events, exposing the limits of history written only from the perspective of men. Though both the narratives are fixed in the context of same historical period starting with sometime before 1797 and ending in 1805, yet two diverse stories are narrated by different characters. While commenting on the fragmented reality, Henri says:

I see a little boy watching his reflection in a copper pot he's polished. His father comes in and laughs and offers him his shaving mirror instead. But in the shaving mirror the boy can only see one face. In the pot he can see all the distortions of his face. He sees many possible faces and so he sees what he might become. (26)

Villanelle too reflects on the fragmented reality when she looks at her reflections on water, "On the lagoon this morning, with the past at elbow, rowing beside me, I see the future glittering on the water. I catch sight of myself in the water and see in the distortions of my face what I might become" (62). The reflections of both Henri and Villanelle put forth the assumption that there is no single reality which can be attained through single perspective. This is the reason for the presence of multiple perspectives on single event in the novel. This multiple explanations for events, in fact, fracture the totalizing and unitary past.

The straddling of narration between historical reality and metafictional self-reflexivity has been shown as questioning the validity of historical knowledge and clearing the way for the portrayal of voices of marginalized, particularly the female consciousness. In doing so, the subjective presentation of feminized Henri's views on the army life during the reign of Napoleon, and the attempt of Villanelle to create a fantastic and mysterious world for blurring the categories

of conventional gender identities and problematizing traditional notion of desire have been brought to the fore. Moreover, it has been argued that there is no chance of reality outside the text and the existing textual reality is the product of ideological construction. Therefore, the undermining of realism by fusing history with fiction, questioning the validity of objective historical representation, presentation of alternative histories from the perspectives of two representatives – Henri and Villanelle – of oppressed and excluded classes of society – "Soldiers and Women" (45) and repetition of the self-reflexive phrase 'I'm telling you stories. Trust me' emphasizing the fictionality of reality prove beyond doubt that *The Passion* can be treated as a typical historigraphic metaficiton. In this connection, it is worthy to quote Susan Onega's comment on *The Passion*: "The Combination of history with fantasy aligns *The Passion* with historiographic metafiction, the type of novel characterized with intense self-reflexivity and a relish in story-telling which Linda Hutcheon considers to be the best expression of the contradictory nature of postmodern ethos" (56).

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