

RETELLING THE HISTORY: ANALYSIS OF DOCTOROW'S *HOMER AND LANGLEY* ON ACCOUNT OF HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

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Abstract

The focus of the study is to trace the intertextual references of the American civil war through E. L. Doctorow's historic fiction Homer and Langley from the genre of postmodern Historiographical metafiction. He problematizes the grand narrative of the reality of the ideology of the American dream. Doctorow painted the real picture of American culture and their attitude towards war victims, slavery, political instability, and migration due to war in his fiction on real patterns. Doctorow's postmodern narrative is the transformation of the daily historical chronicles. This research is the real picture of American war genres and their future impacts. The qualitative study of the novel in the light of Lyotard's postmodern theoretical impression will explore the problematizing of the grand narrative of the historical truths to understand the reality of the American dream.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Historiographical Metafiction, The American dream, problematizing the grand narratives.

Introduction:

This paper examines Edgar Lawrence Doctorow's ability to retell the historic truths through his fictional exposition. He beautifully discovers Linda Hutcheon's intertextuality of Historiographic metafiction. He reexamines the past to redefine the concept of totalization of grand narratives by inspecting the reality of the American dream in his postmodern novel *Homer and Langley* (2009).

Doctorow employs all the postmodern features of Lyotard's theory to inspect the actual perspective of American civil war and its long term aspects (Kelly, 2015). His characters are the outcome of cultural and economic change. He revisits the war on impacts objectively with authority that transformed the American lifestyle. He discovers different postmodern features in this historical fiction like sociology, politics, and psychological trauma through the perspectives of Hutcheon and Lyotard. In his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard first discussed postmodernism (Brugger, 2001, p. 77). According to his theory, human motives are the parodies of disconnected sequences of life actions and beliefs (Byatt, 2001, p. 31). The present is always connected with the past; consequently, they provide the foundation of the future. The postmodern Historiographic metafiction is the combination of historical documents and imagination of the writers (Foucault, 1977, p. 92).

Doctorow, once again, portrayed the effects of war, economic depression, and social behaviours on human life, but this time with the psychological perspective. He followed Hutcheon's line of thought that the social and historical realities always surgically compose the literary fiction (1989, p. 6). The postmodern novel *Homer and Langley* (2009) is the representation of Doctorow's Historiographic metafiction. The text focuses on the inner lives of the two Collyer brothers under the extramural effects of the social and historical perspectives. The power distribution in the society can associate the totalitarianism of reality of a particular time, situation, and space (Hania, p. 3). In this text, Doctorow inter-textualization of the two historical personages, the secluded brother, Homer and Langley. The logical reality and social

ties form an impartial concept of the grand narrative of the Historiographic metafiction (Waugh, 1984). The unpredictability of the grand narrative is the combination of historical reality and fiction is the concept to be questioned in postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984, p. 2; Lyotard & Thebaud, 1985).

The writer relates the historical information with the social, cultural and political pragmatic aspects of the powerful who controls the whole structure (Lyotard, 1984, p. 48). Michel Foucault rejects global narratives and resources (Friedrich, 2012, p. 68). Linda Hutcheon explains it as the parody of intertextual folded truths in postmodernism (1989, p. 8). According to Doctorow, the historian tells what happened in the past, but the writer retells how it feels (1983, p. 27).

Doctorow continues fancifully with the historic occasions and personages, including references of other novels. He expresses the fabricated criticisms, renovation, and questions the historic grand narratives of powerful nations in his metafiction novels (1987, p. 309). In textual analysis, the historian is the narrator of the factual history present in the historical archives. Doctorow names this notion as the inter-textualized truth and universal feature of his fiction.

Jose Maria Heredia (1842-1905), a famous Cuban writer, views that writers acclimate historical incidents in fiction to take hold of readers attention. The social, economic, moral, and political aspects of history are explained through characters' situations. Lukacs points out that historical novels must not interpret the growth of characters individually (1937). Hutcheon's point is that the rotation of patterns of notable grand narratives and then their problematization through different personages and actions is the Historiographic metafiction. The individual truths are agreeable but challenging to hold, just as the parts of medieval paintings of Christ's Passion (Barnes, 1989, p. 245).

The postmodern philosopher Linda Hutcheon suggests that the re-construction of truths in the broader approaches of fiction and history is a constant progressive process. She names the combination of 'historical truth' and 'narration' as "Historiographic metafiction" in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1989, p. 6). Postmodern fiction, over time, is expanded regarding grand narratives and teleological aspects of Historiographic metafiction. Accordingly, metafiction is the transformed model of historical novels by re-conceptualizing, re-stating, or rewriting history. The fictional writers restructured and rationalized the late 20th-century description (Fludernik, 1994, p. 96). It includes the techniques of intertextuality and language constructions. American postmodern literature is intentionally detached from history. A conscious effort in breaking the past from the present is a parodic aspect of fiction (Newman, 1985, p. 172).

Doctorow's metafiction is looking for the Collyer brother's inward and outward life. The historic transformation of human emphasis more towards the medium than community life, especially in the time of the great depression after the industrial revolution. The economic shift bought up the neoliberal exercise that transformed American society's social and cultural values (Steven, 2018, p. 22; Kravchenko & Krasniashchich, 2014). He also discussed the same themes in his novels, *City of God* and *Andrew's Brown*. The first-person narration emphasized the sincerity of his narrative as Homer introduced himself as a blind brother, losing his sight gradually like a movie, in which the action slowly but steadily moves towards the end (*Homer and Langley*, 2009, p. 6). Then he introduced his friend Andrew, a scientist, a father who lost both of his wives, Martha and Briony (*Homer and Langley*, 2009, p. 6).

They got fame after their death inside their house, under highly miserable conditions. Doctorow tried to find out the reasons behind their actions, inspirations, and relationship. They lived in Harlem, Manhattan, till their death in 1947. Their ancestors belonged to Victorians and financially stable upper-class families; later transformed into accumulators and died due to extreme poverty and filth. Their death brings them into the limelight as the New York journals published their story on the front page. They were buried under the gigantic hill of rubbish in their house. Marcia Davenport was the first who fictionalized this story in her novel *My Brother's Keeper* (1954). In his memoir *Ghostly Men* (1991), Franz Lidz portrayed the story of two uncles, lived near the Collyer house. The movie *Unstrung Heroes* (1995) was the adaptation of this novel, in which Hermit lived near Collyer's apartment and was inspired by them. Richard Green also staged his play *The Dazzle* (2015-16) in England. It was also the inspiration of the TV series season-1 and episode-9 with the title 'Trapped'.

The story was parodied as the firefighters could save the brothers through the tunnel passage. 'A Collyer's Mansion' later became a firefighting term in the East Coast region for the house full of dangerous trash for the occupants and the rescuers. Doctorow limelighter their unknown, personal, and miserable life in their city. Homer got the degree of admiralty law, while Langley was an engineer and chemist. Langley was also a professional pianist and performed at Carnegie Hall. Langley worked as a layman in the Trinity Church as well. Doctorow parodied the reality in textual fiction, as he portrayed Homer as a professional Pianist. In actual it was Langley who continued to deal as a pianist after their parent's death. He also switched their birth order (Lundquist, 2013).

For example, the isolated lifestyle of minorities, in the form of historical progression and struggle, seems like a genre with the names like black literature, feminism, colonialism, etc., is the new appearance of the Historiographic literature. The characters of the minority community their life struggle is retold from the perception of white people (Yadav, 2019). The novel represents the struggle of migrated people to mingle into a new culture; for example, the Japanese couple who serves finds shelter in Langley's house.

Historiographic metafiction revitalizes the emotional aspects and the possible provisions of past events. The ancient signs are systematized by interpretation of positive philosophies in Historiographic fiction. (Muneer, 2020, 162-163). Doctorow inter-textualized Homer's blindness with the Greek poet Homer, where he uses his beliefs to see the future through his intellectual ability of inside vision. The allegory of his gradual blindness is the accurate darkening site of American society. He interestingly wants to count the time...undeniably sad but happy to experience...I have an extraordinary hearing capacity, enough to adjust myself to the environment...ears become my eyes (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 6). Langley is infused into his science life as he symbolized his ears like a bat and tests this hypothesis because of his nature to review everything in his surroundings (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 6). Doctorow inter textualized the Spanish flu (1918) in the form of the death of Mr and Mrs Collyer. The unpleasant moment of death completes its task in a few hours (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 16).

Doctorow's fictional characters are the images of their age. The subjectivity of tone is more substantial than historical figures, like J.P. Morgan in *Ragtime* (1982) (Wright, 1993). He used the commentary technique to maintain the truth for the critical analysis of historical events. Doctorow portrayed the self-reliance attitude of the American society that one is enough for one's self. Homer and Langley are the record keepers of their parent travel journeys in their memory. Doctorow uses the Historiographic metafiction within the text in the form of Homer's

memoir. The collection of their parents seems messy inside the Collyer mansion for outsiders, but for them, it is their heritage. Homer recalls his strangely tragic and secluded childhood when the upper class could annually afford such vocational trips to Europe. A loving family cared for them in a large mansion in the city of Manhattan. The ship horns sound like the music of celebrations (Sell, 2021).

Historiographic metafiction is the re-interpretation of readers along with the composites of different writing devices (Shamshayooadeh, 2018, p. 98). They carry antique Islamic tiles, exceptional books, marble fountains, damaged Roman sculptures, or historic and smelly armoires (Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 9). In this loneliness, they grew up, and they assume it as a style of life. Homer shares his time with his only friend, the piano, that he opts for professionally, as well. On the other side, Langley is feeling loneliness on and after coming back from the war front. After World War I, he has a transformation in his personality. Langley is sick of war and starts chattering, which might be due to the mental disease of neurasthenia. He lost control over his actions, cravings, and brain because of his hysterical behaviour. Doctorow leaves it on his readers to interpret the end according to their understanding of the historical event (Muneer, 2020, p. 165). Doctorow's narratives are the shreds of evidence of Hutcheon's theory that historical fiction is interpreted in national and international history's social and cultural context (1989, p. 9).

Capote's in cold blood (1965) by Truman and *Confessions of the fox* (2018) by Jordy Rosenberg's commentaries on the historical events and political issues. Truman also discusses the police attitude, racism, and managerialism of the 21st century. Daniel Defoe, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, Bertolt Brecht, and Kurt Weill set the patterns of historical fiction.¹ The most tarnished case of intelligence trial in the 20th century Soviet Union is the theme of *Red Love* (Redfern, 2010). Milan Kundera's play *Jacques and his Master* is subtitled as *An Homage to Diderot in three acts*. Susan Daitch presents the intertextual parody of the 1848 revolution in Paris in *L.C. Lucienne Crozier* (Fludernik, 1994, p. 8). Its introduction is a symbolical intertext of *Wuthering Heights* and the *Communist Manifesto*.

The Collyer brothers' life is a parody of the traditional American progression from richness to rags due to their overwhelming attitude. They are not ready to accept the changing neighbourhood, filled with blacks, as the rich and white Victorians (White, 1973). Doctorow again explores the power-hungry levels of the American upper-class society (Booker, 2017). It is the prevailing ego, as the social mood, in Manhattan and later in the twentieth century (Schwab, 2018, p. 95). The brothers have their travelling plans as the summer camps with other mates of the same age group, where they explore different places individually (Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 9).

Parody pretends the rearranged ironic situations based on ethical fact (Doctorow, 2008, p.70). Additionally, irony is a component of parody that clarifies the unconventional mimicry or replication. Furthermore, the cultural growth and information about the environment are described through a parody of realities in fiction (Muneer, 2020, p. 164). Postmodern Historiographic metafiction minimizes the gap between the text and the real world (Lodge, 1977, 239-240). After the industrial revolution, Doctorow textualizes the environmental pollution in the episode of the Collyer brothers trip of coastal terrain, full of natural beauty, in simple cabins. The smoke smudges the air due to the extensive use of coal resources, mining, industry, harvesting

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confessions_of_the_Fox

through machines, and steam engine movement at night for industrial products (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 9).

Discussion

- **The Truth of American Civilization:**

Doctorow textualizes the outdated natural, historical events and personages as the conversational miniature that endure social paradoxes' forces (Steven, 2018, p. 1). Harlem crowd started gathering in front of their house, often, as their unconventional lifestyle was the source of curiosity for them. Homer rejects that people are dumb when they have many genius persons, like Beethoven, who can rebuild the nation. Langley agrees with the idea of a genius nation but emphasizes the theory of replacement again as a social structure (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 13). The known historical particulars are intentionally fabricated in customary historical fiction to foreground the imaginable cue failures of recorded history (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 110) to retell the readers that facts must not be taken for granted rather must be questioned for the sake of hidden reality (Farhangpour & Abdolsalami, 2016, p. 12).

Homer is the first person who can profess his resentment and depression towards life and society in describing his theory of replacement...he starts collecting daily newspapers (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 15). He reads war news from Europe...as the part of that war, he develops his Langleian ideology that all generations are marching, and marching, and marching to replace the earlier one; scorched as a trade commodity, dim the images, and messed with laborious work (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 15). Collyer brothers practice this in their house as Siobhan dies due to excessive working load during the dance parties (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 52).

Doctorow challenges American society's legacy and moral values where they take death as an active business opportunity. The responsible people buried the dead bodies and performed the traditional formalities speedily like a duty. It is the social, cultural, and communal responsibility to support each other to dispose of extreme reactions like murder. The legends will always be in America in the form of different personages (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 14). They raise the prices for funeral expertise; Mrs Collyer's funeral arrangements cost double that of Mr Collyer (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 16-17). On the death of Siobhan priest charged the money for church expenses in the absence of government support due to economic depression (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 52). Here Doctorow challenges the grand narrative of moral values in the serious matter of life and death that is so easy that society makes it too difficult. Homer observes that people consider life a permanent condition (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 54).

Social Dilemmas of War Affects:

Doctorow textualized the American social and cultural values during the economic depression, where the rich were throwing dance and tea parties while the poor were starving. They allow a gangster group and hippies to live with them in the mansion. In American culture, the nightclub is where people laugh without any reason, the company of females is available, and every person is greeted at the door. Alcohol is banned just for the sake of safety rather than health measures. The gangster Vincent is the real show of power, symbolizing American hegemony in the world that the imitators follow each step blindly (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 35). Doctorow parodies the American people's behaviour about the demonstration of legal and illegal relationships. Doctorow, through Homer, presents the teleological aspect for the future generations through the Historiographic metafiction narrative (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 37-39).

Langley newspaper project compiles the bundle of junks in the house from floor to ceiling. He tries to categorize the stories like wars, massacres, expeditions, industry, accidents, love affairs, religious matters, crimes, politics, elections, law and order agencies, business news, protests, judicial issues, natural disasters, and many more (*Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 39*). Doctorow textualized that Langley, in reality, tries to fix the American civilization in one edition, the impossible task (*Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 40*). The American nation must try to know the realities even of their life ends.

Langley finds a business opportunity in recalling his parent's dance parties in their mansion. The females dress up especially for these occasions and their children for the sake of admiration. It is the human instinct that needs praise from fellow human beings, either for their manners or display of wealth. This is the only technique of catharsis of their anxieties that Langley suggests. They charge one dollar as entry fees with tea, cookies, and five-cent for cream sherry (*Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 51*). The well-dressed couples, in reality, are the industrial abusers and in a struggle to regain their position but first to conquest themselves (*Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 52*).

Suddenly, one day police raid the mansion and place the demand of 15% ransom every week. Doctorow challenges the liberty of law and enforcement agencies. Langley ironically places a harsh comment that the uniform is discredited...who bothers...your America...feeling its real glory (*Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 56*). Doctorow challenges the narrative of civilized society where the Police raided these parties at that time, which is now part of American culture, legally and morally acceptable in the society.

Homer has long conversations with his own shadow or Langley, away from the community. Homer prophesied his future death inside the mansion under the stacks of newspapers. The odour of demolishing commodities and the sound of footsteps are clear and loud (*Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 60*). The individuals in their fragmented worlds of loss, social and political, are placed on accounting for the cost of war (Hales, 2009, p. 153). Stereotyped partiality of American society, directly or indirectly, is portrayed in *Homer and Langley* (Cholifah, 2014, p. 2).

- **American Realities of War:**

Doctorow's colour images are the presentation of the American attitude towards war and blacks as Homer describes that the houses are getting darker and spirits of skaters are dissolving into the skies...trees are losing their shapes...end of season... the white colour of ice is the last colour with some brightness in his memory. Still, it also changes into grey and finally black...complete darkness (*Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 6*). Doctorow, in this chronicle, metafiction re-totalizing the failure of the grand narrative of the American dream based on its fundamental beliefs (Wutz, 2009, p. 514).

An army officer informs Homer during the pandemic time that Langley is missing on the war front. Homer shouts in anger and fear...is this way, you inform the families about the dead person. The officer corrects him immediately that he is gassed (*Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 17*). The war catastrophe affects the soldier families as Langley is the only hope of Homer, after their parents. Homer justifies his act of firing his family servant Wolf, the old man...America is at war with Germany. He names him after the musician; he names another genius, Wolfgang (*Homer & Langley, 2009, p. 18*). In Julia's episode, Doctorow compares the immigrants with hordes who provide their labour to this country, replacing the earlier ones every year. The American

immigration policy allows these people to enter and trust in them more rather than the nationals who love their country (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 29). This hollow attitude becomes after the war in American society. Langley proves that war has no logical ground as the solution to the problems.

Doctorow historicized the war and its bitter penalties in the narrative of Langley. He challenges the ideology of war to bring peace to society. Laney comments that troops replace each other either during the march or after their death. They act like war is an orderly and disciplined act that ends at victory. He refuses to participate in the final parade with fools. Homer lies in front of the army to hide Langley as he prefers to face the legal consequences from the government and army court. The act of ceasefire infuriates him as he rigorously decides to deposit it back to the government. The war news sounds fake to Homer when he fit himself in Langley's army equipment (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 20).

The war on cold fronts demolishes the human body. The troops have to fight on two fronts at a time; the enemy troops and the ice. They cannot take off wet shoes due to freezing temperature...inside the channel; the blood circulation dims and transforms from red to blue. In the tents, the rats are in significant numbers, mad with hunger. They horde over the dead soldiers in their coffins without any fear. Langley retells that they fill the coffin in seconds, howling, twisting, shaking, and fighting for blood like the troops on the bodies. The alive army officers open the bursts on them inside the coffin of the dead soldier...nail the lid and enclose the dying rats and dead humans together.

American soldiers loot homes and war produces freed slaves in the name of freedom from the capitalists (Tsimpouki, p.1). The novel retells the story of social chaos without the feelings of love, relationships, and trust. In reality, the causes and penalties of war are concealed in the political realities (Blight, 2002, p. 5). The army lines lean forward in the shades of fog due to bombardment and firing. Langley rejects killing the humans he knows nothing about without any logical reason and hovers his officer. He is against illogical murder. It is a severe act of disobedience under the army rules, where they are taught just to follow orders. He is punished with the patrolling episodes, one after another, late at night. He is ordered to crawl over the thorny wire under the reddish flaming sky. One morning he inhales the odourless gas that dissolute so rapidly but burns the body. Like other troops and common people, Langley is unable to understand the purpose of this American expedition.

Harold, a great musician, the son of their black cook, joins the air force, enabling the Collyer brother to feel proud. The golden star symbolizes troops who sacrifice their legs, arms, or life in the war. Doctorow ironically explains the Americans' attitude that the deadpans needs a war to shape them as a community (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 73). Collyer brothers, at least, have a sense of moral duty towards life in the presence of a motherly figure like her but never regard her (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 77). This is the prevailing attitude in the young generation, especially after the end of the war. Doctorow did not present any chunk of reunion or resolution of the conflict.

Doctorow parodied the great democratic and civilized country for its half-baked policies. Mary expresses her distress in the letter that the uneducated, malnourished children and worthless people for the government are, at least, still in love with Jesus. Doctorow again indicates the crumbling social attitude towards religion in the privileged, rich, and big cities like New York...heedless (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 106).

The news of any murder distresses Langley's life furthermore. He devotes a separate section for this news in his timeless newspaper. The four black girls were massacred due to the bombing of the Baptist church in the South. The students, young men, registering for the vote, and three politicians are killed on the roads of Great America. The nine hundred political refugees in South American countries commit suicide due to the fake promises of their leaders of a happy life. This news shows the beauty of Langley's heart when his brain could escape from cynicism (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 126, 127). The teenage boys threw stones at their windows. Langley used his engineering skills to board the windows and doors with wires. He reused the trash and tripping wires for the tunnel system traps (*Homer & Langley*, 2009, p. 156).

- **Conclusion:**

The novel criticizes the nineteenth-century Americans' upper-class attitude towards the overrated mansions and excessive materials inside them, in the background of materialized development. American dream always persuades it to shock the world with its surprising actions. They keenly observe the world and are always in search of capturing the resources of other nations. Linda Hutcheon typifies Doctorow as the Historiographic metafiction writer with the ironic sincere paraphernalia about the communal life. It brings variation in his writings under the historical and geographical context of postmodern capitalist America. Collyer brothers are exhausted and replaced the social relations with material objects. Society is synthesized with non-living things. Through his imagination, animated thoughts, and characterization, he recreates the scenes of Manhattan city, a town of Collyer family setting.

Doctorow maintains the compactness of his narrative rather than emphasizing the expansion of the tale. He critically challenged the metanarrative of American success and failures in the twentieth century. The life of Homer and Langley is a critical dialogue between the period of the nineteenth century and its relevant problems with the beginning of a new century. It represents the failure of the capitalist society to fulfil the prospects of the stable brightening future of the world. This age brings with it the new issue of massive production beyond the needs of the masses to catch the consumers and then dumping issues.

Doctorow historicized the real incident of Collyer's brother's death in 1947. On 21 March, Police received a call, and then they found Homer's body under the newspapers. After 18 days, the laborer found Langley's dead body, ten feet away from Homer's bed. His body was in a miserable condition, in a two-foot tunnel, under the spring and drawers. The rats bite the body and smell due to the decomposition process. According to Police, it was his last effort to serve Homer with the meal, but he lost his life in his traps. He could not survive with his over-occupied memory, so the mansion. Space is necessary for life for the people and sometimes for one's self. The relationships and community are the essential elements of the Natural circle, so celebrate them in the daylight. The governments must revisit their war policies, as the money can be utilized to better society and the living humans beyond classism, gender, race, and nationality.

Doctorow's Historiographic metafiction comes across the unspoken realities of personal experiences. For him, memory is the preservation of the past to reenact it for future generations. It can reunite society by elaborating on the civilizations. The teleological aspect of the grand narrative of war with the Historiographic elements reactivates the displaced culture and black people's identities. He suggested that invasions, inside or outside the country borders and conflicts, include racism, political clash, social struggle, rape, genocide, and cultural abduction. The historians and fiction writers must parody the textualization carefully. They must narrate the

past in the present perspective for the future teleological impacts. The generations must grasp some positive attitude towards the future, out of past blunders.

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