Historical Fiction Or Fictional History

Postmodern Anglo-American literature, roughly from 1965 to 1985, is generally characterized by a rather confusing ambiguity of genre which is nowhere as evident as in 'new combinations' of history and novel, making their relationship a problematic issue for writers and critics. Postmodern criticism abounds with theories of history and fiction. Some of these theories are concerned with the integrity of these objects or domains whereas others stress their overlapping. The overlapping of history and fiction is clearly apparent in such novels as Styron’s The Confession of Nat Turner (1967), Gore Vidal’s Burr (1973), Norman Mailer’s The Armies of Night (1968), Robert Coover’s The Public Burning (1977) and E. L. Doctorow’s The Book of Daniel (1971) – novels that lay claim to the conventions of an autonomy of fiction and to historical events and personages simultaneously. They express a strong consciousness of the "fictiveness" of all discourse about reality and history. When Blue (the narrator of Welcome to Hard Times) writes about incidents that have firmly lodged in his memory, he questions the validity of
his recollections, sensing that just as memory gives shape to reality, so too, writing influence the shape of memory. This concept is primarily based on the theoretical work of Hayden White, who argues that the presentation of any historical discourse in narrative form represents an introduction of some degree of fictional quality. He observes:

*No set of ... historical events in themselves constitute a story, the most that they offer to the historian are story elements. The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and of high lightening of others, by characterization, motif, repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like – in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play* [1978:47].

Hence, in postmodern criticism the traditional Aristotelian distinction between history and poetry, between ‘what happened’ and ‘what might have happened’ is totally blurred and replaced by a different set of functional questions, pertaining, for example, to the function of narrative forms where ever they appear – a question by no means resolved in the rather messy domain of literary criticism.

While as *Midnight’s Children* and *Ice-Candy Man* show a complete artistic affinity with the historiographic metafiction of the west, the other major partition novels furnish a crucial model for blending the historical with
the novelist's invented world — by merging together the fact and fiction, history and novel and autobiography and romance. Through this blend, these novels have gathered up a large number of the individual experiences of the numerous victims of the partition riots and have equated the experiences of the individuals with that of the nation. As we read the individual stories, we get a sense of the tragedy not just of each individual, but of the tragic nature of overall partition. By creating an aesthetic distance from the historical analogues and by expressing a generalized concern about historical process, these novelists minimize the risk of cross-pressuring the reader by persuading him, on the one hand, to wonder if particular facts are invented, distorted or ignored, and, on the other, to ask why the writer did not turn to biography or history instead of fiction. They neither grossly offend against the high standards of historical accuracy, nor boast of their careful research. They create a world of past thought and feeling rather than interpret or illuminate a personality or group of characters. In other words, they like Herbert Butterfield believe that "the supreme thing" is to catch age's "way of looking at the world" and of accepting life [1924:112]. These novels are dedicated to chronicling and so preserving the memory of a vast and tragic experience of the partition times. They aim to present a "total" model of society undergoing historical change, but avoid reminding the reader of their limitations as textual versions of history.
Many of these novels present the historical characters in fictional episodes, as Nahal presents the fictional tour of the Prince of Wales to Sialkot and the fictitious speech of Gandhi; and Duggal presents the fictional tour of Nehru to the refugee camp. These are the imaginary memoirs which have been constructed by elaborating on the actual documents. As a result of it, they like the postmodern historical novels face the demanding problem of seeking to marry artistic imagination to historical consciousness. However, there is a vital difference between the writers of historiographic metafiction and these Indo-Anglian novelists of partition fiction, which can be understood by comparing the two genres. The great writers of historiographic metafiction, like Doctorow and Coover have written the revisionist texts about the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs, who were accused of spying for the Soviet Union and then executed. In The Book of Daniel and The Public Burning, we do not find a faithful rendering of this historical event but an imaginative revisioning of an historical epoch and event, which makes the Rosenbergs like the pathetic scapegoats in some anthropological ritual. Both Doctorow and Coover are more concerned with imaginative truth than with historical accuracy, i.e., they are concerned with what 'truly happened rather than with what really happened'. Hence, it becomes least important for them to know whether the Rosenbergs were executed for the fault of theirs or not. However, whereas Coover invents outrageous situations for actual figures, in order to
portray the hysteria of McCarthy era, Doctorow creates his own characters and
immerses them in history in order to suggest something larger about American
radicalism in the twentieth century. In a way, Doctorow turns history into
myth. Doctorow himself states about the two Isaacson children that they are as
"the figures in a myth who suffer the same fate no matter what version is told,
who remain in eternal relationship, no matter how their names are spelled"
[1983:16]. Hence, using the imaginary characters as historical personages
create a narrative distance that is somewhere between the intimacy of fiction
and the remoteness of history. This search for a narrative voice is a part of the
quest for the right fictive form; the process – whereby the artist distances
himself from his material. I "don't write autobiography or autobiographical
fiction", Doctorow insists, "I do not take characters directly from my own life
or experience. I put them through several prisms" [Ibid]. These prisms are
necessary, he adds, "to filter myself from my imagination in order to write"
[Ibid:17]. This is exactly what he attempts to do in The Book of Daniel where
he does not take the characters from history; instead he filters history with his
own imagination and brings The Book of Daniel close to fiction than to
history. Robert Coover too has restructured the presumed relationships
between historical and fantastic fiction in his historical novel The Public
Burning. Coover begins the "Prologue" with exemplary factuality in setting
out the historical "argument" of the entire work. The facts are there, the voice
is that of the annalist, who traces out the event, until, in the same voice, he accepts the intersection of history and fantasy. From the beginning, The **Public Burning** develops an account of the development of American’s Civil Religion (The Rosenberg Ritual) and the episodes and the events are pieced together from the voice of the annalist quoting the accumulated ‘*sounds of a nation*’. Side by side even the fantastic operates on several levels, from reimagined discussions in the Senate to the extremes of the dream of Ethel and the vision of the Phantom as Cab Driver.

The partition novels written before 1980s differ from these postmodern historical novels in several respects. For example, whereas *The Book of Daniel* and *The Public Burning* are invented memoirs of the historical episode of the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs, *Train to Pakistan* and *Azadi* are personal memoirs of the respective novelists. Both Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal had themselves fallen a prey to this historical tragedy as both were forced to flee across the borders – their families being uprooted from their native land. Unlike *The Book of Daniel* and *The Public Burning*, the partition novels present the tragedy of partition more faithfully than the well-known historians of the times. Though these novels dramatize the impact of the momentous event of history on a few individuals, these individuals represent virtually the entire subcontinent. Nahal Confesses:
For historical fiction to carry a deeper meaning, it must succeed at the realistic level first ... Indeed this is the only genre in which the artist cannot dispense with realism. In other types of novels, the artist can create his own milieu... like a spider the novelist can live within the dream world created by him. Not so in a historical fiction [1985: 41].

Hence, it can safely be argued that these novelists are in no way concerned with the questions raised by the postmodern Anglo-American novelists. Similarly, they do not attempt to blur the line between history and fiction in order to establish, like historiographic metafiction, that there is no absolute qualitative difference between narrative history and narrative fiction. The postmodern Anglo-American novelists of 1965-85 are very keen to show that history and fiction should be recognized not as qualitatively distinct genres but as opposite ends of a single spectrum. The theoretical ends of such a spectrum, they argue, are, on the one hand, narrative, which contains only purely historiographical characteristics, and, on the other, that possessing only fictional ones. Everything between these points possesses characteristics of both, though, of course, in varying measure. As a result of this theorizing, a body of narrative discourse exists which can not strictly be categorised either as history or as fiction, because it 'feels' like something in between. The distinguishing feature of this kind of 'historical novel' is that the writer deliberately develops an imaginary memoir out of the actual historical
document. Even the reader is expected to grant the novelist’s right to disguise history and then do with it what he will. Since the disguise signals the author’s privilege to change history in any way he should choose, it becomes rather difficult for the reader to know in advance what will happen. Instead of anticipating the disguise, the reader mostly waits to see how it is developed and, as such, he operates on two distinct levels – the historical and the fictional. The writer, on the other hand, engages the reader in a process of constantly measuring the internal and forward – fiction looking glances within the text against what he knows to have actually happened. The critical activity in analysing this kind of novel has less to do with defining its conventions than with explaining the double articulation of the text i.e., its autonomy as a novel and its historical referents. The partition novels (excluding Midnight’s Children and Ice-Candy Man) are not concerned with this theorizing, though they too, like the writers of historiographic metafiction – Doctorow, Coover and Mailer – combine history, romance and autobiography in their novels. These novels depict the actual historical characters and the actual events of the past, and as such can be designated as historical novels as the term has been used since Scott. Since the writers of these novels deal mainly with historical persons in the actual course of events, they most often face the danger of offending both literary and historical standards, the literary imagination being hobbled by documentary limits or the historical imagination being frustrated
by the lack of authentic evidence. However, the artistic skills of K. Singh, Malgonker and A. Hossain enable them to overcome this problem and present the masterpieces of historical novel by a successful blend of history and art as has been done by the historical novelists of the nineteenth century.

The Rape, Azadi, The Dark Dancer and Twice Born Twice Dead work on a different level and can be labelled as 'documented historical novels'. This kind of novel, as indicated earlier (Chapter III), threatens to collapse the conventional distinction between history and fiction because the writer, operating within the different set of generic conventions, fills in with imagined details the gaps in recorded history. Admittedly, this distinction is a matter of degree: historians have never been prohibited from speculating, nor have they ever been prevented from inventing characters. Nevertheless, the historian conventionally must identify his speculations and inventions, refer them to what documents exist, and defend them against previous interpretations. The documented historical novelist, by contrast, usually slips in his inventions and speculations unannounced.

This leads us to reconsider the similarities and dissimilarities between history and fiction. While composing a fictional world, an author imagines certain characters, events, and states of affairs, which, he thinks, enjoy certain properties and stand in specific relations to one another. Any such coherent
group of imagination is called a fictional world which the author describes through the skilful use of language. The reader, while reading these descriptions, ascertains certain resemblances between the projected world and the real world. Sometimes, the resemblances between the imaginary world of a novel and the actual world are so clear, obvious and transparent that inductive references about the actual world are drawn from the novel. The persons presented in novel are, of course, the off-spring of the imagination, but it is an imagination guided by an author’s experience of actual people. Just as fiction has its bearing on actuality, in the same manner, history has in it a bit of fictional element. History, as Hayden White and others argue, is not a mere chronology of a series of facts but a ‘structure’ in which facts become conceptualized and their essential relationships are brought out. Viewed in this perspective, history is a form of fiction, in the same manner, as fiction is a form of representation. The process of weaving the events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality is a poetic process which is employed by the novelist as well as by the historian. As such, contemporary postmodern novelists, in Anglo-American tradition oppose the fact/fiction polarity by either fictionalizing the history or by historicizing the fictional.

However, it should not lead us to conclude that there is no difference between these two genres: history and novel. Matt.F.Oja suggests five broad
criteria to distinguish narrative fiction from narrative history. According to him, history and fiction tend to traffic in different kinds of truth: history by literal historical truth, because it has to verify whether a certain event or chronology of events did occur, which can be verified by objective or empirical means. Against this, fiction is characterized by non-literal historical truth and the degree to which a given set of events, including human actions and emotions, are consistent with what we know about individuals and society in a specific historical context which can hardly be verified empirically. Similarly, history focuses more on supra-individual factors: political and economic forces, institutions, class, ideology, demographics, technological development, in short on "the big picture". The fictional end focuses on "the small picture", i.e., one person's experiences in an historical context which involves a relatively high degree of invention because such a focus generally forces the writer to account for inner factors – emotion, motivation, psychology, mentality and so on. Again history deals with the Why of events, as well as of the What: generally speaking, historians are not content to tell only What happened, but also Why. By contrast, fiction writer, operating on the individual level, is not necessarily concerned with explaining why events proceeded in the way they did; he is engaged primarily in exposition, in telling the story of what happened. Again, one vital difference between history and fiction is that historians deal with a set of events, human actions or even
human attitudes, which have an objective reality that they are trying to uncover through empirical evidence. Although they also add a good deal of subjectivity through invention of details, organization and selection of facts and emplotment of the narrative, yet in a fundamental way, historians are constrained by the need to discover and work with a set of facts which already exist and which they look upon from without. Writers of fiction are not so constrained: they might be said to operate from within the narrative, pushing its contours out this way and that to develop their themes and images. A fictional narrative does not have objective reality until the author creates it.

The historical novelist differs from other novelists in part because he or she is assuming, to some degree, the historian’s relationship to the narrative, which differs from that of the conventional fiction writer. Lastly, says Oja, fiction is characterized by a greater effort on the author’s part to involve the reader in the story on an emotional or even moral level. The reader’s passions are aroused and he feels for and against, passes judgment on actors and events. The historian tries to create a vivid and truthful image of the narrative and does not require the reader to become as emotionally or morally involved in the narrative they are presenting as it more commonly does in the case of narrative fiction.
Hayden White and other postmodern writers do not agree to this distinction, but argue that even a historian adds a good deal of subjectivity to his narrative through invention of details, organization and selection of facts, emplotment of the narrative and so on. White’s theory can easily be applied to historiographic metafiction like Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Coover’s *The Public Burning*, Docxow’s *The Book of Daniel*, Vidal’s *Burr*, which are primarily imaginary memoirs developed out of the actual historical documents. This theory, in its present form at least, cannot prove very useful in evaluating either the traditional historical novels like *Train to Pakistan, Sunlight on a Broken Column* and *A Bend in the Ganges*, or the documented historical novels like *The Dark Dancer, Azadi, The Rape* and *Twice Born Twice Dead*, where the writer deals with actual historical persons or events and exhibits greater amount of ‘historic sense’. Even Aristotle’s separation will not remain as sharp a line as the one his followers claim to find in his *Poetics*, but his idea of a distinction, suitably redrawn, can be valuable in opposing the fictionalizing of history and the “deconstruction” of literature’s engagement with history. Even when both art and history, as they often do, focus on a historical situation, the historian’s truth is bound to be more literal than the artist’s, just as the artist is bound to be more figurative than the historian’s. The one is constrained by public evidence while the other, even in a historical novel, has some vital freedom to invent and to draw on
personal experience. In order to assess and evaluate these historical novels, therefore, two boundaries are to be set: one between historical novel and other fiction, and the other between historical novel and narrative history. Instead of trying to establish them simultaneously, we should take up the boundaries one at a time. Similarly, instead of trying to establish them for all historical novels, the boundaries must be redrawn, and in different ways, for each of the three types of historical fiction: traditional, documented and metafictional.