Preface

This dissertation attempts to address the confluence of fact and fiction, of historiography and the construction of fictional narratives as part of the essential shift in the concepts of history and its fictional representation that postmodernism brings to the fore. In the process it analyses the modes in which postmodern fiction structures the perception of the past so as to underline history’s status as a fictional narrative.

The study does not attempt a comparative analysis of the works of John Fowles and Umberto Eco. Rather, it focuses more on certain theoretical aspects that have gained prominence in the postmodern writings on fiction and history, for which the novels of these two authors serve as instances. The historian’s attempt to represent the past reality as it was, fails since to make such an attempt with the tools of traditional historiography is nothing less than attempting the impossible. Raimundo Silva, the proof–reader in Jose Saramago’s novel, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, inserts the word ‘not,’ into a historical text generally regarded as a record of “immutable facts of history” (1996: 38), and creates an alternative history of a key event in Portuguese history. This is emblematic of the postmodern vision of history in which history and fiction constantly overlap. In the terrain of postmodern fiction the process of historiography and the fictional representation of historical material are recurring themes.
Postmodern representations of history call attention to the innate flaws of the traditional modes of historiography. In the process they reveal how the representation of history becomes a challenging task due to the intricate relations of knowledge and power that accompany it. Through the problematisation of historical knowledge, the novels of Fowles and Eco reject the notion of historical truth as an absolute entity. Instead, they focus on the fact that the forms of historical knowledge are provisional, fragmentary and plural. This realisation arises from the recognition that historical texts are discursively constructed.

The first chapter presents the theoretical foundation of the study, calling attention to the postmodern revival of historical fiction. Postmodernist representations of history, theoretical and fictional, undermine the authenticity of history and present it as a narrative discourse. The concept of history as an objective account of the past has been replaced by the view that it is a subjective construction which is unreliable. Unlike the classic historical novelists who sought to erase the disjunction between historical fact and fictional invention by camouflaging the seam along which history and fiction meet, Fowles and Eco lay bare this disjunction and expose the seam. They regard history as narrative, not event, as the imposition of order where there is chaos and as the illusion of teleology where there is absence of meaning. History, as they present it, seems to have splintered into separate discourses that lack reliability, and has become a form of fabulation depending on the narrative strategies of fiction. Thus, this perspective is in fact a shift from
the positivist concept of history as objective truth to the textualist concept that views history as a form of literary discourse. The preoccupation with the inaccessibility of the past necessitates a shift of focus away from the past itself, which has been the object of historical enquiry, to the modes by which it is represented.

The second chapter focuses on the interrelations of power and knowledge involved in the process of constructing historical texts. Historiography entails construction of the past which is informed by the politics of the period in which it is written and particularly, the ideology that invariably seeps into the historical discourse. Historians construct subjective versions of the historical reality, laden by ideology and the interests of the power structures that inform the process of writing. Fowles and Eco take a postmodern perspective of history, which undermines the traditional emphasis on continuity, development and progress. They regard history as ineluctably linked with knowledge and the quest for truth. When history is seen as a discourse that constructs rather than reflects the past, it follows that historical knowledge is based on texts, not on empirical facts. That is, the purpose of history undergoes a shift. Fowles and Eco subvert knowledge and the truth claims of history with a proliferation of esoteric information, which adds to the indeterminacy of knowledge, and by creating labyrinths that are either physical or in the form of an enigmatic scheme or idea that presents a baffling plethora of clues. Thus they emphasize the polysemous nature of the so-called historical truth. This treatment of history is inherently
paradoxical in creating the illusion of historical events only to expose them as fabrications. Historical evidence refers not to events but to events as interpreted by historians and, in closer analysis, such evidence exposes the processes underlying the construction of historical knowledge. The novels of Fowles and Eco lay bare and subvert these very processes. In the novels that come under the purview of this study the historian’s search for truth is often portrayed as a quest which is often presented in tandem with search for truth depicted in one of the major genres that evolved in the cultural context of Enlightenment rationality: the detective novel. Consequently, it becomes necessary that the next chapter should focus on the tropes of the detective genre in postmodern fiction that deals with historical themes and historiographical issues.

The third chapter explores the quest for truth that the historiographer is involved in, and its parallel in fictional representation. In the view of Fowles and Eco, the very basis of knowledge is questionable as it is reached through a reconstruction of history that is arbitrary. The quest for knowledge or truth, and the alternative histories thereby constructed are further subverted by Fowles and Eco by a variety of strategies. These include displaced apocalypse, subversion of the detective genre, destabilization of the fictional world by plurality, mise–en–abyme, conspiracies, and an enigmatic proliferation of unresolvable clues. The search for truth in which the historian and the detective are engaged in the novels discussed in the present study does not reach a conclusion. Through the non solution of enigmas Fowles and Eco subvert the positivist
concept that reality is accessible through reason. The search for truth by
the historian and the detective, as depicted in their novels, often leads to
ambiguous spaces. The attempt to tackle past realities with the tool of
reason fails because of the misconception that these realities exist in a
temporal plane. The seekers of truth can move only on a spatial template
where evidence of past realities is available in the textual or narrative
format.

The fourth chapter discusses the correlations between textuality
and spatiality, and history and space, which are essential for the
understanding of the postmodern historical paradigm. In the realm of
history focus has always been centred on time and the role of space in
history and social relations has been more acknowledged than analysed.
Spatial thought has been regarded contrary to the spirit of history itself.
The postmodern perspective on history disrupts the authority of the form
of historicism which favours time. This chapter explores the essential
spatiality in the fiction of Fowles and Eco and deals with the
representation of the past in the form of enigmatic spaces. Through the
depiction of heterotopias the novels that come under the study highlight
the spatial rather than the temporal aspects of history. The emphasis on
the discursive and historiographical concerns in postmodern fiction, as
opposed to the historical aspects of the traditional mode which focussed on
the essential reality of the events of the past, subverts the idea of history
as a temporal process. This reveals the inadequacy of traditional
historicism and historiography and necessitates an analysis of historicity
in terms of spatiality. It also signifies the fact that in the contemporary world the spatial or geographical imagination has an added relevance. The implications of gender and class distinctions on the spatiality of history are also discussed here.

The concluding chapter is a recapitulation of the study and presents its findings and new avenues to be explored in the study of postmodern fiction. It regards the widespread use of historical themes in the fiction of various literatures as a kind of reply to the end of history debate, leading to a mature understanding of the paradigms of history and its theoretical and fictional representations. Fictional works by Fowles like *The French Lieutenant’s Woman, A Maggot* and “The Enigma,” and *The Name of the Rose, Foucault’s Pendulum* and *The Island of the Day Before* by Eco, come under the purview of this study though it is informed by other works by these authors.