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Book Review

The Postmodern Representation of Reality in Peter Ackroyd's Chatterton by Arya Aryan

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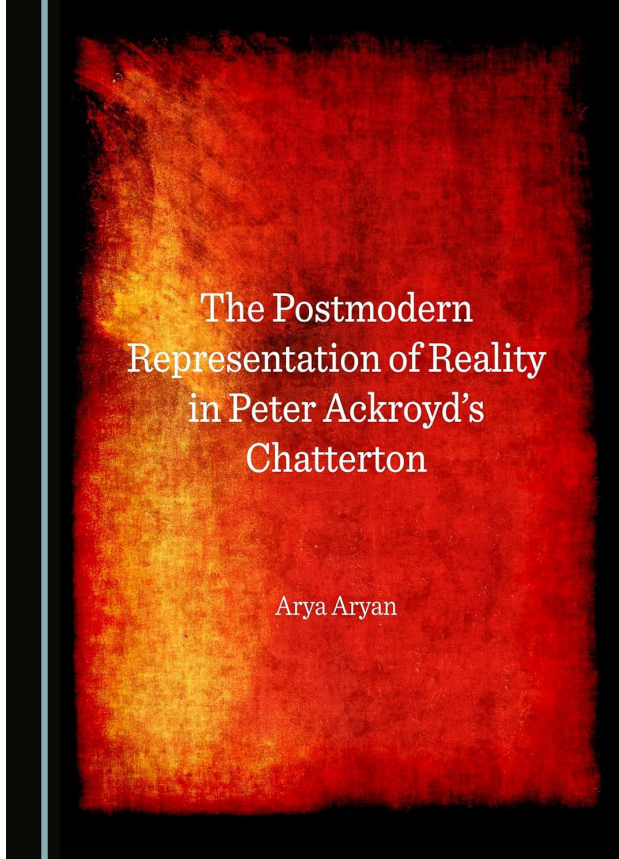
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Arya Aryan's *The Postmodern Representation of Reality in Peter Ackroyd's Chatterton* provides an elaborate and admirably deep analysis of the representation of reality in Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987). It does so by revealing how the novel challenges the long-standing dichotomy between representational and anti-representational perspectives that have been central to literary analysis for centuries. Aryan explains that contemporary postmodern literary critics, including Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon, associate postmodern literature with a central paradox in postmodern literature – self-referentiality – and suggest that a text is intrinsically confined to referencing itself. However, as Aryan argues, *Chatterton* reveals that historiographic metafiction disrupts traditional notions of representation within literature and simultaneously renders the text as both a heterocosmic entity and a hetero-referential construct. In other words, Aryan discusses that the novel uniquely reflects the real world by invoking actual historical events and figures, challenges its own capacity to portray reality, and manifests self-referentiality in a way that defies traditional narrative conventions. The premise of the book is underpinned by postmodernist theories and a close reading of the novel. Aryan perfectly analyses and reveals the delicacies of Ackroyd's narrative strategies and techniques in creating a heterocosmic and hetero-referential fictional world. The significance of the book lies in its unique contribution as the sole deconstructive examination of how reality is represented within postmodern texts. It therefore serves as an essential source for scholars and enthusiasts of postmodernist theory and literary practices, with a particular emphasis on historiographic metafiction.

Aryan, already a specialist in postmodern and contemporary literature as evinced in his publications, including *The Post-war Novel and the Death of the Author*, "Fiction as Therapy: Agency and Authorship in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*" and "The Traumatized Shaman: The Woman Writer in the Age of Globalised Trauma", establishes his authority in the field in this book. Drawing upon works by Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh, Aryan explicates how Ackroyd employs a series of narrative techniques to problematise the realist, romantic and modernist theories of representation of reality. An elaborate analysis of the novel's narrative and artistic strategies and techniques, which result in demystifying the text's meaning-granting process, serves as a powerful argument underpinning Aryan's discussion. The author of the book distinguishes the postmodern representationality of reality from that of realism, romanticism, and modernism. As opposed to modernism, which propagates the anti-representationality of a work of art, postmodernist re-presentation highlights the text's possibility of artistic

representation. It acknowledges the existence of reality and the text's possibility of representation but problematises it via different narrative techniques such as emplotment, paratextuality, parody, self-reflexivity, under erasure, and *mise-en-abyme*. Aryan's analysis of the novel is rooted in a deconstructive methodology, employing close reading and textual analysis of both form and content.

In five well-argued and elaborated chapters, Aryan investigates and closely examines Ackroyd's narrative techniques and strategies which problematise the representation of reality and simultaneously challenge the auto-referentiality of art. Chapter One introduces postmodern theories, narrative strategies and some concepts, including the representational and anti-representational concepts of art, heterocosm, paratextuality, and under erasure. It ends with its original argument which is a poetics or theory of the postmodern representation of reality. As Aryan explicates, the postmodern representation acts as a junction where the self-reflexivity and autonomy of modernism intersect with historical and realist representationality, and does so by obscuring the distinction between representational and anti-representational perspectives (p. 11).

This chapter is followed by three chapters which demonstrate the postmodern representation of reality via a profound analysis of Ackroyd's *Chatterton*. In Chapter Two, Aryan first provides a theoretical framework for postmodernism and its theories and artistic practice. Aryan argues that postmodernist writers "contest artistic representation prescribed by realism, as well as the universalising concepts of liberal humanism in favour of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-reflexive, paradoxical and popular-esoteric postmodernist works" (p. 14), and that "metafiction . . . marks the problematisation of the representation of reality" (p. 14). Aryan also expands and draws upon Patricia Waugh's exploration of metafiction and Linda Hutcheon's take on historiographic metafiction to develop a methodology for a deeper understanding of the postmodern mode of writing and to provide a theory or "poetics" which he calls "postmodernist re-presentation" (p. 15-16). Herein lies one of the original aspects of the book compared to other related published works, as it contributes to, and develops, the methodology and a deeper perception of historiographic metafiction. This type of fiction is imitative, but with a twist; it imitates in order to interrogate what it imitates, thereby making readers aware that any representational perspective of art is inherently problematic (p. 20), which is actually a critical stance emphasised through the use of irony and parody.

Aryan also points out a fallacy in the argument of many postmodernists who reject the mode's possibility of representationality. As he puts it, "to claim that a novel is an artistic production which has nothing to do with our life and the external reality . . . is a fallacy due to its very paradoxically imitative characteristics" (p. 20). On the one hand, historiographic metafiction is aesthetically engaged with language and self-reflexively exposes its own fictionality; on the other hand, it makes references to historical events and personages. The latter marks the mode's representational relation to real life and history. These lead to the problematisation of how reality is represented. In doing so, historiographic metafiction exposes modes of representation as ideological constructs and aims to eschew the illusion of a mass consensus inherent in liberal humanism and contemporary capitalism (p. 24). To that aim, such a mode of art "brings the past to the fore in a dialogue with the present" (p. 26). Moreover, Aryan argues that a prominent feature of this mode of fiction is its aesthetic preoccupation and self-reflexive engagement with narrative techniques and strategies to reveal that even works that appear highly objective, including historical texts, utilise literary narrative strategies to some extent in order to construct meaning (p. 36).

Chapter Three shows how Ackroyd's *Chatterton* exemplifies a heterocosmic, rather than a macrocosmic, fictional world constructed via different narrative techniques and strategies. The novel, set in three different historical timelines, investigates the death of Thomas Chatterton and reveals the "meaning-granting process" (p. 42) of history as a discourse. As Aryan puts it, *Chatterton* delves into the exploration of how meaning is constructed and the processes through which events are ascribed significance – essentially, how 'facts' are fabricated (p. 42). It does so by conflating and blurring the border between "biography and fiction" and between "forgery and innovation" (p. 44). The novel puts history under erasure by providing three simultaneous but contradictory accounts of the death of Thomas Chatterton, each supported by sufficient evidence such as Chatterton's biography, letters, and poems. Particularly illuminating in this chapter is Aryan's analysis of Ackroyd's contestation of the Romantic concept of originality, as Chatterton represents Romantic ideals of originality, authenticity, and genius. However, Ackroyd reveals that Chatterton himself was a forger.

In Chapter Four, Aryan shows how *Chatterton* reveals that meaning is created in a process and suggests that the novel is not simply anti-representational. He posits that the novel, as a form, does not merely suggest the impossibility of representation but actively engages the reader with its constructedness through the narration process.

He also argues that the novel serves as an exemplar of how art reflects the external world, albeit filtered through the medium of fictive elements (p. 77). An example of such theory is Henry Wallis' portrait of the death of Chatterton which is still able to refer to an external referent as we identify the figure in it as Thomas Chatterton. However, it does so as a result of the painter's different artistic techniques which are revealed in the novel. Similarly, Ackroyd's novel is able to make references to external events and personages, such as Thomas Chatterton, Henry Wallis and George Meredith, yet problematises its very referentiality by revealing its narrative techniques and strategies. As a result, the novel is pitched between representationality and anti-representationality, leading to hetero-referentiality. Aryan concludes that, in contrast to poststructuralism, which attributes the ambiguity in a text to the fundamentally unreliable nature of language, the novel, when viewed as metafiction, adopts a perspective that merges deconstructivist and formalist elements. He ends the book by making some suggestions such as a study of the novel "with a focus upon the concept of voice and ventriloquism" as Thomas Chatterton "fakes and composes poetry by adopting the voice and identity of a medieval monk", "Charles is a ghost writer who writes for Harriet" and "George Meredith embodies the substantialised voice of Thomas Chatterton's death" (p. 105). This could help better understand the process of artistic creation and storytelling and the ways authors substantialise "disembodied voices into palpable characters" (p. 105).

The book's main argument is that much of the theoretical and philosophical debate on the representation of reality in literature has been, though frequently more implicit in literary fiction, either representational, postulating immediate and direct access to the external reality through the medium of art or literature (as in literary realism), or anti-representational, assuming a work of art as an autonomous entity (as in modernism) or attributing the crisis of representation to language itself (as in metafiction). However, a significant gap in the literature is the scarcity of a detailed and comprehensive explanation of postmodern theories (including those of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Linda Hutcheon, Patricia Waugh and Marc Currie) and a practical deconstructive analysis of *Chatterton* which reveals the text as hetero-referential. Aryan's book fills this gap very well with its impressive close reading of the novel and is illuminating for students and researchers of postmodern literature.

Reference

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