

Available online at <http://www.ijims.com>

ISSN: 2348 – 0343

## **An Appreciation of Factual and Fictional Characters in the Context of Historiographic Metafiction and Intertextuality as Pat Barker's Regeneration Trilogy**

Chetna Mahajan

M.Phil. Scholar , University of Jammu ,India

Pat Barker's specialization to experiment with a keenly chosen factual and fictional details in a seemingly simplistic and straight narrative, actually has an abyss of varied levels of characterization of the events and layers of storyline that tends to further the plot and themes of the novel by conveying diverse experiences of her real and non real imaginatively created characters in the backdrop of a harrowing story of world war atrocities and complexities. Well all this done so amazingly in an uncluttered prose and poetic verses through her amply demonstrated award winning intertextuality style, so well innovated in the novel *Regeneration*. This quietly powerful story begins in the backdrop of World war scenario in 1917, wherein all the main characters are perhaps purposely showcased as leading double lives, some consciously, others as a result of traumatic experiences, social taboos and state and citizens conflicts.

This research paper attempts to investigate and probe the functionality of intertextual writing in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*, the first novel in a trilogy, and takes references from its other two sequel parts namely *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*. First published in 1991, *Regeneration*, based on actual events during World War is an epitome of how an author should combine real elements of history and literature and what a historical novel can achieve with authentic usage of pre and post war literature, poetic verses and events across the varied themes in the entire plot as if its greatly influenced by Hutcheon's term historiographic metafiction.

A term that has been widely debated as Pat Barker herself quotes in her author's note: "Fact and fiction are so interwoven in this book that it may help the reader to know what is historical and what is not." [1], and Hutcheon stating that one of the features of contemporary historiographic metafiction being "the double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the 'real'" [2], it is worth examining whether *Regeneration* fits into the category of historiographic metafiction or its just expression of intertextuality engaged by the author to drive advantage of authenticity from the literary works of say Owen, Sassoon, Dr Rivers in the real context of events as unfolded in the war theatre.

To address the foretasted queries, let us briefly ponder over those portions of Barker's novel that are historical and scrutinize the ones that are primarily fictional in the light of postmodernist historiographic writing by Hutcheon and other critics so as to highlight the commonalities and differences in the purpose and application of facts and fictional characterization approaches to *Regeneration* and henceforth the impertinent purpose and literary plan behind such a classification to whether term this work as historiographic or metafictional or rather an amalgam of both ?

The novel accounts for the actual period of world war time between July 1917 up to November 1917 and its plot is purposely set up in the corridor of factual British hospital, built in that era exclusively for the Shell shocked mentally ill British officers at Craiglockhart. The novel's opening is wittingly folded with the conversational narratives between the army psychologist Dr. Rivers and anti-war activist and poet Siegfried Sassoon, both the characters chosen as real historical yet dramatic enough. For instance their stay in Craiglockhart at the above referred time is verifiable through the publicly accessible diaries and letters of Siegfried Sassoon, as well as through the published notes of W.H.R. Rivers. [3]

Similarly the public protest about the conduct of war by Sassoon, which was read out in the House of Commons and can be traced back accordingly, was the factual reason for Sassoon to be sent to a hospital for mentally ill officers and this event has been ably incorporated in the opening theme of the novel so as to bring forward convincingly with facts and figures about the growing discontent and futility of

war as prevalent in the minds of the soldiers and now brought into the conscious of the readers from the very beginning of the novel. When Sassoon met Rivers for the first time as part of shell shocked treatment that consisted of talking sessions, wherein Rivers tries to make his patients face their war experiences so that they could learn to live with them as the nerve regeneration experiment.

Other historical characters and events in Barker's novel include Wilfred Owen, who after being blown up on a railway embankment and buried alive is true to records, is shown as suffering from a shaky, tremulous and confused memory and was therefore referred to the same hospital.[4] He, however, was treated by Arthur Brock, who has also published a book about his treatment methods of ergotherapy. A description of this treatment can be found in Hibberd's biography of Owen.[5] Sassoon and Owen met the first time when Owen, who had admired Sassoon even before they knew each other, knocked on Sassoon's door to ask to have some copies of Sassoon's latest book signed.[6]

Hence we see that purposely Barker sticks to the known facts here and retells the story as it is commonly accepted as true. She successfully incorporates the fact that Sassoon helped and improved Owen's poetry by including a set of scenes like the one when Sassoon corrects mistakes in Owen's poems and suggests alterations, which is well documented in Owen's original manuscripts.[7]

In fact, Barker's novel is not much about the actual fighting rather its what the emotional and psychological consequences of it as experienced and confronted by the men and so author attempts to present the war either from an officer's point of view or Images of war as portrayed through accounts of different soldier's experiences. Hence it also does not come as a surprise why Pat Barker chooses these two characters to confront Dr Rivers, a character again chosen from the history to present the point of view of the State and military who always intended to re prepare the shell shocked men to go back to the fronts and eventually sacrifice for the so called maddening nationalism and false ego of masculinity about what the two gifted writers wrote many letters, poems and diary entries to fall back on. Although a huge amount of information was therefore accessible, it has to be kept in mind that Barker still had to invent, based on the obtainable information, "a psyche for her characters"[8].

This is the narrow sleek line of demarcation that Pat Barker so aptly draws intelligently so as to use intertextuality with the existing available historical characters and events and weave the same into her narrative plot as if the real characters and fictional account seemingly dilutes into one comprehensive storyline depicting the author's own concepts and notions as perceived about world war and its consequential impact on the society as a whole in general and as an individual in particular.

Any way one has to now ask why it is so odd to bring history and literature together as Pat Barker has attempted to do as the challenge is to speak as close and real as what happened in the past – means it focuses on facts while still using Fiction is like incorporating about something as imagined of that need not necessarily be occurred already. Therefore Historiography combines history and fiction by using narrative techniques to convey a historical event but still manages to keep the authenticity alive by utilizing adequate intertextuality style of narrative as successfully engaged by Pat Barker throughout the novel arguably as one can learn from the distinction between Facta and Ficta by Aristoteles.[9]

By and large it's understood that in Barker's *Regeneration* too, though Barker based her novel on historical facts, yet a description of a historical event in narrative form like this one can in no way be entirely free from subjectivity or claims to be completely neutral and objective. It has to be kept in mind, as Hutcheon in her essay "The Pastime of Past Time" points out that: "we only know the past (which really did exist) through its textualized remains." [10] This is almost like artists who tend to recreate the different art work or theme or lyrics in case of musician or say painter in spite of addressing same subject matter or emotion.

Hence while Barker used first-hand sources like incorporating pieces of historical evidence into her novel as in case of "A Soldier's Declaration"[11]. She even dates the declaration so that it is obvious for the reader that he deals with a historical source. Barker puts into practice what Hutcheon meant with "intertextuality". She shows the reader that her novel is based on written texts. Another example to bring forward is the inclusion of the creation of "Anthem for Doomed Youth"[12], which is one of Owen's famous poems. However with

the inclusion of real characters like Sassoon, Owen, Rivers, Brock and so on, in addition to the verifiability of the included facts in the novel, the reader who is aware of the existence of some of these characters and the truthfulness of the facts might be led to believe that also all minor details are true and that no fictional elements, like Billy Prior's character, are included at all.[13] which is not the real intention of the author as such. Therefore though Owen, Sassoon and Graves were gifted poets, the description of war theater the ramification of war neurosis and the narratives of all such events, may have been influenced by their own personal perspective and once the Pat Barker uses their work as authentic sources of historical narration, perhaps this way inadvertently the subjectivity may have crept into Barkers' work as well and the art of language usage is something the reader ought to be conscious of all the time.

Interestingly with authentic historic characters like Sassoon and Owen, the freedom of the author is somewhat restricted but with the fictional character like Billy Prior, whom author was able to create more vividly and freely and the same applies to all fictional characters in *Regeneration* like Sarah Lumb and her female friend as it seems Barker intentionally opts to include the description of the hard and unhealthy work in munitions-factories, which had to be done by women and caused the skin to turn yellow because of the toxic fumes and the details about one of the working-women who would rather not have her husband back from the front, who used to beat her up, illustrates one of the side-effects of war – war as one of the catalysts of the emancipation of women.(14)

Overall this research paper tends to infer that Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* is actually in a class of its own as it hardly fits into the typical case of historiography or metafictional work rather it assumes the role of both or none at times throughout the narratives and charts its own course using the most appropriate events and qualities of characters as it befits the larger story line of the writer. Though the theme set as perceived by the author has some features are near to historiographic metafiction as defined by Hutcheon Like the inclusion of historical sources in narrative form in order to make the reader aware of the "intertextuality" of the novel and similarly Barker also brings attention to sections of the population like working women that are normally neglected while talking about the First World War. Hence this enables the reader to see the historical event in a broader sense but definitely *Regeneration* is not in true form a historiography metafiction as likely to be, as Barker's protagonists are narrated using selective information wittingly and thematic events deliberately.

## Bibliography

- [1] Barker, Pat. *Regeneration*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991, 251.
- [2]Hutcheon, Linda. "'The Pastime of Past Time': Fiction, History, Historiographical Metafiction". *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Ed. Michael J. Hoffmann, Patrick D. Murphy. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996, 476.
- [3] See Sassoon, Siegfried. *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries: 1915-1918*. Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. Bristol: New Western Printing Ltd, 1983.
- [4] Cf. Caesar, Adrian. *Taking it like a man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets Brooke, Sassoon, Owen, Graves*. Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1993, 145.
- [5] Hibberd, Dominic. *Wilfred Owen: A new Biography*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2002, 251-258.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 264-267.
- [7] Löschnigg, Martin. "'...the novelist's responsibility to the past': History, Myth, and the Narratives of Crisis in Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy (1991-1995)*". *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik: A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture* 47.3 (1999), 217.
- [8] Graves, Robert. *Good-Bye to All That: An Autobiography*. Jonathan Cape Ltd, London, 1929.
- [9] Löschnigg 1999: 218.
- [12] Cf. *ibid.*, 218.
- [13] Cf. distinction between Facta and Ficta by Aristoteles
- [14]Wickert, Erwin. "Von der Wahrheit im historischen Roman und in der Historie ". *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur* 1 (1993),