

A Parodic Vision of History in Doctorow's *Ragtime*

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Abstract:- Does parody merely twist the high accounts into a commonplace? In this paper, the label of parody is equally set to give thought to the curvature of time plane in Doctorow's *Ragtime* and to question the presentation of realities in the archival records, with the signification of rethinking the augmented facts in history. This study examines the aperiodic and intertextual consciousness of the novel through parodic vision of history to show how the slanted readings of facts reinforce temporality of glorified acts and tarnish the roles of its celebrated actors, tuned in the notes of popular culture in Doctorow's fiction. In our relational analysis, it is discussed that the resonance of history through the pitches of literature is a re-filing of gaps with the shades of cultural concepts, in a means, to dampen the high frequency of language in mega-narratives. In fine, it is stated that fiction could serve as a medium for deterritorialization of 'truth', both glossing the historical arguments and debilitating their communicative force.

Keywords:- Doctorow, *Ragtime*, Parody, Reiteration, Hyperbole, Carnavalesque, Bricolage.

I. INTRODUCTION

The historiographies of modernity and earlier ages do narrowly play the sole authoritative role to shape the consciousness of contemporary reader. Likewise, despite the struggles of resurging ideologies seeking to reshape and reinscribe the remote regimes of truth, the subject does barely manifest an obligation to be locked in an embrace. The friction could be argued within the scope of discursivity, temporality and, at times, subversive challenges of emerging cultural and social re-readings. This persistently tempers the autonomous aesthetics and authenticity of institutional discourses of modernist realism. New historicists' position including Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher's methodological approaches to literary texts, in the meantime, opens up the space to the intertextuality of fiction and history and, in due turn, to the deconstructive reviews of the so-called frontiers of canons. In the readings of Greenblatt, new historicism, as an interdisciplinary theory, is predicated on the assumption that a literary work is both influenced by its author's times and circumstances in a broader historical framework as well as by the critic's response to that work tainted by his own cultural and environmental context. Doctorow takes up temporal and spatial contingency in his

novel and reflects them in a manner which can be interpreted in parody.

Ragtime was written in 1975 by Doctorow and it depicts New York from 1906 to 1917 and the events of that period, the year the United States was engaged in World War I, and the period when social divisions were becoming wide. It is the era of labor movements and rights struggles, as well as the period for the spread of popular music, say ragtime, in the States. The title of Doctorow's novel is derived from the name of a type of jazz music coming from the songs of African-Americans. In the article 'History of Ragtime', it is defined as "a genre of musical composition for the piano, generally in duple meter and containing a highly syncopated treble lead over a rhythmically steady bass." In the meantime, Cambridge Dictionary describes the genre as "a type of popular music, developed by African American musicians in the early 1900s, with tunes that are not on regular beats." Ostendorf, the cultural history scholar, (1991, p. 592) considers ragtime music as a means to overcome the rigid orthodoxies, and asserts that the genre "stood for more than just musical change: for its white listeners, at any rate, it connoted doing away with self-denial. And this liberation concerned culturally determined libidinal structures, in short, rhythm."

As regards to the concept of the word, ragtime can be explained as a combination of the word 'rag', meaning torn or broken, and 'time' referring to history. It is as if the author of *Ragtime* intended to remind us of the rupture in the presentation of history. Elaborating on the rise of ragtime music, concurrent with the change of taste in popular culture after 1900, Ostendorf asserts that, "Times had changed and were, perhaps ... already out of tune ... rags and ragtime songs retained the 'jingle with the broken tongue ...'" (ibid, p. 591). *Ragtime* is in a way the re-construction of America's past through the fusion of history and imagination. This work is a narrative of mainly three American groups born out of the author's imagination, alongside several real historical characters and occurrences. The novel can be considered as a model parodic game with the historical events and characters.

II. PARODY

Originating from the ancient Greek word *parodia*, the term parody has evolved through time to encompass a range of connotations associated with its use. According to the classical definition of Abrams "a parody imitates the serious

manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject” (1999, p. 26). Literary scholar Linda Hutcheon also elaborates on the concept as “a critical mode of postmodern art in relation to history”, indicating that “discourses of history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network parodies any notion of either single origin or simple causality” (1989a, p. 6). Based on her studies, “to parody is not to destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it” (ibid). As such, it is a useful tool for opening up the text, rather than checking its operation, to myriad of possibilities within literary studies. In Hutcheon’s comparative study of Dante’s medieval work and postmodern narrative of Doctorow, the texts of literature and those of history are equally “fair game” for both of the authors (1989a, p. 4).

By the same token, the intertextual reciprocity in *Ragtime* “transforms history into fiction” (Ramin et al, 2014, p. 161) and revamps fantasy into history. Parody of history in Doctorow’s novel aims at breaking down the boundaries between reality and fiction and adds new dimension to the re-readings of history. *Ragtime* according to its author is “a novelist’s revenge on an age that celebrates non-fiction” (Rodgers, 1975, p. 144). In an article of *The New York Times*, Gussow (1975) quotes Doctorow as elaborating on his novel saying that “It defies facts. Give ‘em all sorts of facts--made-up facts, distorted facts. I begin to think of *Ragtime* as fictive nonfiction”. Additionally, according to Hutcheon’s criticism, “...it [*Ragtime*] is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the world and literature” (1989a, p. 4). In our study of the novel, the parodic effect, as a popular cultural index, on historical events and elements is realized by employing some artistic techniques.

➤ *Reiteration*

The ragtime musical genre is primarily featured by its duple meter “conducted with a downward/outward motion ..., followed by an upward motion ...”, (Hamm et al. as in fig. 1).

This is the pattern, with the line of reiteration, by which parody connects to the source texts in *Ragtime*.



Fig 1 A Duple Conducting Pattern (Hamm Et Al.)

Doctorow’s fictive work is the array or disarray of historical figures, including the famous magician and artist Harry Houdini, the revolutionary Emma Goldman, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, Henry Ford the automaker of Ford, Robert Peary the Arctic explorer, Evelyn Nesbit, and J.P. Morgan among others. The resurrection practice in the novel also touches a number of historical events. Representation of acts and actors serves as a mechanism for history to repeat itself but in an ironic manner. Doctorow brings historic figures into his narrative, and portrays their characterization in unusual and ‘unreal’ circumstances. His style of weaving these traits together and giving so much detail to the real characters, with their constant motion of upward and downward, foreground and background in the segmented intervals, makes the reader confuse some frames and question their historical substance.

Characters such as Freud and Goldman are introduced as the real historical figures, and then they are represented with extremely amusing and bizarre traits, as if the narrator had been laughing at their historical background. Doctorow continues the game with Houdini who once lived in the United States. In other instances, Morgan and Ford, who were the symbols of materiality in their own era, are shown with interests in meaning and spirituality when they are moved to our time. Even more ironic is Morgan’s visit to Egypt for a revelation which turns out to be a failure. Similarly, the “great Edison” thinks of inventing a vacuum tube and discovering connections with spirits.

In *Ragtime*, every historical character or event is tempoed with the first beat that is accentuated as ‘real’, followed by their representations in the second beat that is less so, though the placement of rhythmical stress is sometimes irregular. In other words, the consciousness of the reader is nonplused and is drifted to perceive by sense the stress in lower beats in intervals, where the represented parts sound, so to speak, more real. (Fig. 2)

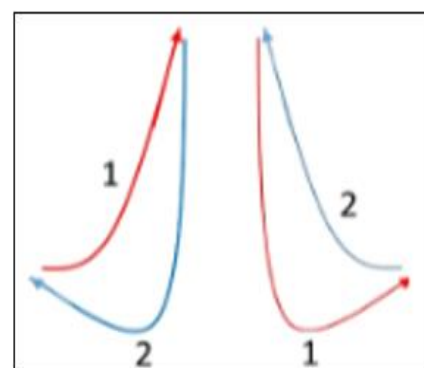


Fig 2 A Duple Irregularly Conducting Pattern

The effect of discordance is achieved through the reiteration of the pattern in the course of narration. By deconstructing the standings of renowned historical figures and incidents and by dramatizing their traits in amusing and satiric manners, Doctorow “forces us to rethink and perhaps reinterpret history” (Hutcheon, 1989a, p. 17) or even cast doubt on the narratives of modernist bourgeoisie.

➤ *Hyperbole*

Exaggeration is another literary craft by which Doctorow acts out a jest on the historical texts, exercising deliberate excessive emphasis especially on the forgotten or on the simple object. The use of hyperbole with amusing overtone in the story aims to challenge the frames of self-esteem within certain classes of the American community. When the storyteller talks about Roosevelt's daughter's concerns about conserving natural resources, he deliberately exaggerates her manner. In the news released about her African safari, the reader learns that "The great conservationist had bagged seventeen lions, eleven elephants, twenty-one rhinos, eight hippos, nine giraffes, forty-seven gazelles, twenty-nine zebras, and kudu, wildebeest, impala, eland, waterbuck, wart hog and bushbuck, beyond number" (Doctorow, 1976, p. 92). The story moreover embraces an intensely sarcastic tone that complements the significant failure of upper class America to comprehend the status of their other half. Doctorow writes "They dined and danced while hanging carcasses of bloody beef trailed around the walls on moving pulleys. Entrails spilled on the floor. The proceeds were for charity" (ibid, p. 39). By detailed stress on their low-pitched wild persona, as the other half, and setting it against the amplified pretentious self, Doctorow plays havoc with the white community's self-satisfied echoes in the writings about their own history.

As an another example of overstatement, the narrator talks about Theodore Dreiser's story in finding the direction of chair in the room, saying that Dreiser spent the whole night in his chair looking for the right direction. By the same token, at the end of his tour to America, relieved to be back to his hometown, Freud contemplates "America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake," (ibid, p. 215). In the tales of elites in *Ragtime*, although "the audience is aware that such claims are to emphasize the traits of the characters [and classes as such] and are not to be taken literally ... they release and release [her] from the circle of truth" (Ruzimbaevna, 2022, p. 327). The spectators are invited to reflect on the moments in history the narrators of which have passed over silently and unarticulated. In the same manner, Ucan et al follow Doctorow's example trying to illustrate the representation of "augmented reality" in the virtual museum of mythological characters (2020, pp. 363-5). They argue that the caricatured representation of figures highlights the inevitability of arts' involvement in the re-narration of historical moments largely meant to remain untouched and unspoken.

➤ *Carnavalesque*

According to the definition by Scholes and Nagley (2011) in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, syncopation, as an element of (non)rhythm in the ragtime music, signifies "the displacement of the normal musical accent from a strong beat to a weak one ... [with] any irregularity, either brief or extended, that has the effect of rhythmic contradiction when introduced into this pattern." Furthermore, in the pattern analysis of ragtime syncopation, Witek et al (2017, p. 995) discuss that "syncopation affects free body-movement in musical groove." Additionally, "Implied in this music was a quest for freedom from the shackles of minstrelsy ...

Undoing the shackles, the corsets, the encrustations, opening the closets ..." (Ostendorf, 1991, pp. 591-2). Implied in the three statements about the ragtime music is the syncopated irregularities of beats, and contradictions to the normalcy of pattern in the formulaic versions of jazz music with the effect of liberating body movement from the restraints of measured rhythms. Likewise, the carnivalesque air in *Ragtime* serves as a liberating cultural force from the confines of mainstream narratives of history to parody the dutiful accounts and the intransigent depictions of personality.

In the novel, Father character, himself a descendant of migrant generation to the New England, is ostensibly resistant to the changes in the progressive era and is devoted to socio-cultural norms of 19th century. On the face of it, he does not yield to the suspension of distance, which is a familiar motif in the popular cultural festivities. In *Ragtime*, these entertaining festivals feature the occasions when migrants of diverse walk of regions in the American context bring the unlikeliest attributes of distinct classes together for free interaction or free expression. Ironically, however, Father's psychological makeup is within the nostalgia of bygone days and it remains haunting in his life. In the narrator's words, Father is "the immigrant, as in every moment of his life, arriving eternally on the shore of his Self" (Doctorow, 1976, p. 369). Even though he is obviously of a different economic standing compared to the vast immigrant communities, he nonetheless exhibits migrant emotions. He never develops a profound sense of distinctness, therefore his socioeconomic pose becomes irrelevant and he appears to be lost in the rites and rituals of the majority of American community, that is, of the migrants in his solitude. Hence; he role-plays as the carnival participant within.

Significant as it may sound, while the carnivalesque within ensues engagement in insulation, the carnivalesque without is rewarding as the participants are engaged and adjust their material and emotional life to the tastes in and of public. Tateh's motion pictures can be interpreted as the metaphoric sketch for the entire novel where people for a couple of pennies sit and involve themselves in celebrating, racing, fighting or making love. Despite Father, the realization of such rituals by Mother character features a discordant tune introduced to the norms, releases her from the restraints of conventions and provides her with transformation psychologically and intellectually. She becomes fascinated by the idea of motion pictures and by the outlook that it provides on the life on a daily basis. Disappointed with her past spent with Father, she is rewarded with eventual union with Tateh, with his artistic flavor and its liberating energy.

We are also invited to watch the black musician Coalhouse Walker's animation on the theatrical stage of the novel where he, in the company of his men, symbolically wears the white mask to challenge their style and mannerism. He represents African-Americans who mean to defy the prejudices and regularities upheld by the white community. He receives recognition with a sense of pride that is unusual

for the black people at that historical juncture. Morgan's adaptation of a spiritual figure and Ford's conditional reincarnation, among other impersonations in the novel, further signify the syncopated lead over the steady bass and invite the spectators to bear witness to the "displacements", "contradictions" and "irregularities", in representation of uneven history in a carnivalesque context.

➤ *Bricolage*

History for the advocates of New Historicism is more of a fragmentation and rupture of "petites histories" (Veenstra, 1995, p. 179), than a set of organic and coherent histories or events. In *Ragtime*, the patchwork quality of the narrative, as Çolak asserts, is "images of unrelated moments and spaces" (2022, p. 262) and lends the novel a plural account of society in a certain period of time in America. In the work, each exploited story, half-done without the expression of knots, accelerates to another story. The pieces lend the spirit of original character or event a deflated, deficient and humorous tone. In the meantime, the aesthetics of music in *Ragtime*, contributes to and "projects a world view, namely a uniquely urban, modernist attitude of improvisation, invention, and bricolage," (Ostendorf, 1991, p. 586). Doctorow brings to the fiction an assortment of incongruent parts and bids the reader to jumble them together in confusion while amused.

By way of illustration, Harry Thaw's escape from prison is followed by a chain of patchy incidents. After he is impersonated as Houdini the magician performer, the narrator shifts focus to the concurrent events in Houdini's life. Soon after, the storyteller states that a rumor in certain cities had it that Morgan and Ford had formed a secret society. Then, the narrator ties Houdini's story with that of Ford and Morgan. The explosion occurs. This connects Houdini's story line to that of Coalhouse. The novel also encompasses a large scope of social events in America that "bear the marks of the early stages of this [struggling] process of assimilation, since their authors are wrapped up in amazement and wonder at the sight of new worlds and unknown peoples" (Veenstra, 1995, p. 179) who are coming from somewhere with their prints of conflicting assemblage on the soil.

Why else, Doctorow deploys Coalhouse Walker the black ragtime musician in turn-of-the-century to orchestrate a concerto with the mismatched players - like celebrated Evelyn Nesbit with the sexualized extremity, the two "dignified visitor" psychoanalysts Freud and Jung in the Tunnel of Love, the renowned Ford and Morgan as the reincarnated spiritualists, and a number of other historically po-faced figures - to prompt a checkered picture? Why then this bricolage studio? Ostendorf contends that "These recycled narrative units are in Doctorow's words industrialized forms of storytelling, which he brings into his own, jagged order and which he dots with cynical or compassionate asides" (1991, p. 584). These exploited fragments of America's modern history in *Ragtime*, as the dominant mode of expression, equally recollect their point of reference in time and breaks them apart from their historical referential value.

III. DISCUSSION

The line between reality and fantasy is blurred in Doctorow's fiction through the mechanics of parody. Historical and imaginative events are woven in the way that, by the end of novel, the resonance of historical 'truth' and voice of its authors are softened. Doctorow reimagines the original episodes and re-molds the reality. Then he asks "who to say it didn't happen" with the implications that it is possible to write the impossible. At the heart of *Ragtime* is the writer's critical view of grand history, its hidden gloom, and the challenges to its recurrent poses. With an allusion to Born's analysis of making time in relation to culture, it is conceivable that Doctorow's production of time, in not one but several dimensions of temporality, "poses challenges to the problematic nature of prevailing forms of historicism, contextualization, and periodization" (2015, p. 361). Borrowing Hutcheon's interpretation, Doctorow's parody of history in political terms "... both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (1989b, p. 101). Doctorow both borrows from past and incorporates it into the questions of new times in fiction. It is, so to speak, a "metahistory" (White, 2014) that unfolds itself through the machinery embedded in the fiction, where the territory of traditional historiographies can no longer be protected with diligence from the neighboring disciplines (Chkhartishvili, 2019, p. 599). *Ragtime* provides us with a loose, open, and swingy mood of history that has less been heard of in the conventional narratives.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this analysis, the researcher discussed the breadth of parody's scope and its workings as per the territorialized past. The literature focused particularly on the satiric and pastiche connotation of parody in Doctorow's *Ragtime*. It was shown that the writer deploys a number of literary capacities including reiteration, hyperbole, carnivalesque and bricolage in the fiction to delineate the wavering reputation of historical events and personae. And in bending 'facts', Doctorow is at liberty to write his own libretto for the performance of the black ragtime player, Coalhouse Walker.

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