IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Exploring Graham Swift's Waterland as a Historiographic Metafiction

Rajdeep Changmai

Student 4th Semester

Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam

Abstract:

This undertaken work is an attempt to analyze Graham Swift's *Waterland* as a historiographic metafiction. The term historiographic metafiction was coined by the Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in the book *A Poetics of Postmodernism:History, Theory, Fiction* (1988). The concept of historiographic metafiction suggests that history is basically a construction and it cannot present facts objectively but is influenced by bias, interpretation, and memory. The main character and the only narrator of the novel is a history teacher named Tom Crick. The novel is a story intertwining history's grand narrative with Tom's little narrative. This paper argues that Graham Swift's *Waterland* undercuts the value of history as a grand narrative and how this postmodern novel blend historical events with fictional elements while simultaneously questioning the nature of historical knowledge and narrative. Swift deconstructs traditional understandings of history and storytelling, showing how both are deeply intertwined with personal memory, subjective interpretation, and the instability of truth. Tom Crick's account on the relevance of historical facts is quite doubtful and the paper also argues that Tom Crick cannot be reliable narrator and history is not an objective, factual record but a narrative process shaped by memory, storytelling, and interpretation.

Keywords: Historiography, Construction, Interpretation, Grand narrative, Postmodern.

Introduction:

Graham Swift, born on February 4, 1949, in London, is a prominent English novelist known for his intricate narratives and deep explorations of memory, history, and identity. He studied at the University of Warwick, where he developed his passion for literature, later becoming a key figure in contemporary British fiction. Swift gained significant acclaim with his novel *Waterland*, published in 1983, which not only won the Whitbread Book of the Year award but also established him as a major voice in historiographic metafiction. His works often blend fiction with historical events, challenging readers to reconsider the nature of history and storytelling. He is author of ten novels, two collections of short stories, including the highly acclaimed *England and other stories* and of *Making an Elephant*. Throughout his career, Swift has engaged with themes of loss, the passage of time, and the interplay between personal and collective histories. As we delve into *Waterland* today, we will explore how Swift's unique narrative techniques illuminate the ways in which history is constructed, remembered, and retold. The novel *Waterland* intertwines personal stories with historical events, creating a layered narrative that blurs the line between fact and fiction. Tom Crick, the narrator, reflects on his own life while recounting the history of the Fens, illustrating how personal experiences shape historical understanding. Swift explores the tension between historical events and individual experiences, suggesting that both are essential to understanding the past. The novel explores

significant events, such as the Industrial Revolution and local history, grounding its fictional narrative in real historical contexts

Objective:

The aim of the given paper is to present a reading of Graham Swift's *Waterland* as a historiographic metafiction where historical narrative is blended with fictional elements to challenge conventional understandings of history.

Thesis:

This paper attempts to argue that in *Waterland* how Graham Swift employs historiographic metafiction to illustrate the subjective nature of history, revealing how personal narratives and collective memory intertwine to construct our understanding of the past and how ultimately history is a construct shaped by individual perspectives and cultural context.

Research Methodology:

The methodology used in the paper involves a close reading of the primary text and the relevant criticism on it. The primary text and secondary sources as well as educational journals have been used as the theoretical frame of reference.

Literature Review:

The existing analysis seeks to present sketches of some secondary reading materials conducive to formulating the research questions and conducting the study accordingly. There is various analysis of *Waterland* which reveal a rich variety of themes and perspectives. Critics have approached the novel through multiple lenses exploring its narrative structure, ecological themes, feminist dimensions, and the nature of history itself. In his 2017 lecture to the British Academy, John Burnside, Professor of English at the University of St Andrews, discussed an important strand of British fiction over the last thirty years – exemplified by work by Graham Swift, Adam Thorpe and Michael Bracewell – in which the growth of "cultural totalitarianism" has engendered a profound grief for the consequent loss of communal and ritual life, as well as for the land itself which has been "savagely degraded" over the same period. In this extract, he talks about the 1983 novel *Waterland* by Graham Swift.

In Stephan Schaffrath's JSTOR journal article "The Many Facets of Chaos-versus-Order Dichotomy in Graham Swift's *Waterland*,he describes how *Waterland* plays with the reader's human need to make order out of chaos and the human ability to determine. Here, he too talks about multitudes of perspectives.

Del Ivan Janik in an early article on Swift observes that "Swift may prove to be the most outstanding English novelist of the final quarter of the twentieth century" and considers *Waterland* a novel of "expansiveness and complexity." David Leon Higdon regards Swift (and Julian Barnes) as two of the "most promising authors" of the 1980s and *Waterland* as "truly extraordinary", whereas Malcolm Bradbury considers it "Swift's most intricate and thoughtful book."

Discussion:

According to Linda Hutcheon,"historiographic metafiction" refers to literary works that are self-consciously aware of their fictionality and simultaneously question how history is constructed. These texts blur the line between historical fact and fiction, emphasizing that history, like storytelling, is subjective and shaped by narratives. *Waterland* concerns the history of two East Anglian families, the Cricks and the Atkinsons, separated by social class and wealth, but linked by a tragic secret. The narrator Tom Crick is about to be forced into retirement and, though he has personal grief of his own to contend with. It is the age in which he lives that denies history any place in the education system that Crick grieves for the most.Graham Swift's *Waterland* which was published in the year 1983 is a prime example of Historiographic metafiction. Tom Crick is the narrator of the novel and he is a history teacher. The story begins when he's a Fenland

teenager during wartime and Swift tries to validate Tom being a history teacher because he wanted to explore the whole mystery of 'history'. At the very first chapter we get to know that how Tom was influenced by his father in terms of storytelling. For his father Henry Crick apart from being superstitious he had a knack for telling stories and these stories were with a moral or no point at all; believable stories and unbelievable stories and His father acquired this art of storytelling from his mother. I would like to mention a paragraph from Ch.8 of *Waterland:*

> Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man - let me offer you a definition - is the storytelling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall - or when he's about to drown - he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life. (85)

Tom describes to his students that they lived in a lock-keeper's cottage by the river Leem, which flows out of Norfolk into the Great Ouse and something about the nostalgic smell which is half man and half fish actually Henry Crick trapped eels in the river Leem. His father Henry Crick is a lock keeper on the river Leem in charge of raising the sluice. Tom while taking classes talks about the marshyland Fenland where he lived as a child. It was a low-lying region of Eastern England, over 1,200 squares miles in area, bounded to the west by the limestone hills of Midlands, to the south and east by the chalk hills of Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Norfolk The chief fact about the Fens is that they are reclaimed land, land that was once water, and even today, is not quite solid. The Fens were formed by silt which shapes and undermines continents; which demolishes as it builds; which is simultaneously accretion and erosion; neither progress nor decay. It symbolizes the slow and frequently invisible accumulation of experience, memory, and history. History is composed of innumerable little incidents that add up over many generations, much like silt accumulates over time to make the Fens' landscape. Silt also symbolizes forgotten or buried histories. Just as the silt covers and conceals the landscape beneath it, the events of the past are often obscured, buried beneath the layers of time. The plants began the formation of the second vital constituent of the Fens and the source of their remarkable fertility. Once it supported great forests which collapsed and sank when climate changes caused water to re-immense the region. Because of the Fens' wet climate, peat which is a dense, organic substance made of decomposing plant matter is largely retained. This preservation is important because it implies that, despite our best efforts to move on, certain parts of the past, such as memories, are stuck or preserved. Peat represents the portions of history that resist deterioration, the memories and traumas that endure beneath the surface, whereas silt represents the passage of time.

Tom Crick was nearing retirement of his post as a history teacher because his headmaster Lewis Scott believed that what Tom teaches the students at the name of History is merely about his personal stories e.g. something about living by a river, something about a father who trapped eels, and a drowned body found in the river etc. Moreover, Lewis accuses Tom of cutting back histories that means he emphasized more on his small narratives over the grand narrative of history. ultimately emerges. History is, in instance, an academic subject that is about to be retrenched school because the headmaster considers it "a rag-bag of pointless information" (31) Lewis advised him on early retirement on full pension and he wanted the closure of the History department because day by day the number of students opting for history was declining but he was forced to retire because his wife Mary Metcalf had stolen a baby from the safeways in Lewisham. Tom Crick has served as a history teacher for almost 32 years and in his last class as a history teacher he wanted his students to listen to him for one last time. He in a way admits that he presents a subjective, personal and often fragmented narrative rather than a linear, objective account of facts. He says how in a middle of explaining a history lesson he gets diverted and starts telling personal memories and local folklore. There is rebellious student in his class named Price who questioned him about the authenticity of history Once while Tom was discussing "The French Revolution" Price interrupted him and told him that History was "a fairy tale". Price and the younger generation always tried to focus on the here and now and the future and they believed that history was all about past which were not reliable too. Price answers Tom in his class, "The Only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it's got to the point where it's probably about to end" (9).

Actually, Crick is challenging Tom's way of narrating the story and its authenticity. Tom Crick says since a fairy tale must have a setting, a setting which, like the settings of all good fairy tales, must be both palpable and unreal. While talking about Fenland he talks about his ancestors (His name of Crick which was spelt "Coricke" or "Cricke" during Charles' day). When we talk about the cricks there comes fairy tale, superstition magic and occult. The cricks are mainly water people meaning the original inhabitor of Fenland. Tom thinks of the image of his ancestors. He then tells about the arrival of Dutch and their engineer Vermuyden hired by King Charles. then by his lordship, Francis, Earl of Bedford. They built Denver Sluice on the river Leem. In 1748, among the records of wages paid to those employed in rebuilding The Denver Sluice are the names of the brothers James and Samuel Crick. Others John Crick for repairing the west bank, Peter Crick for scouring the jack water Drain and and cutting new Middle drain, Jacob Crick who maintained the windmills at Stump Corner.

Then comes the story of the Atkinsons whose history is associated with progress. Thomas Atkinson is a prosporous Norfolk Farmer and maltaster from the hills where the Leem rises and flows westwards to the Ouse. Thomas Atkinson buys, little by little and at rock bottom, acres of marsh and peat bog along the margins of the Leem. He hires surveyons, drainage and dredging experts because the problem of the Fens has always been the problem of drainage. The Atkinson family, who stand in for the ebb and flow of dominance and power in the Fens, is intimately linked to the history of the Crick family. Much of the region's economic growth was attributed to the Atkinsons, especially their brewing business and their attempts to drain the Fens to make way for productive farming. The Atkinsons emerged from beer. Thomas Atkinson's youngest son is named Alfred and his brother George constructed the New Atkinson Brewery and established the Atkinson Water Transport Company. In 1848, Alfred is elected mayor of Gildsey. In his senior years, he and his brother construct a family getaway in the country called Kessling Hall. The main contributor to the Atkinson family's success is Arthur Atkinson, the son of Thomas and Sarah Atkinson. Under his direction, the Atkinsons become one of the most prominent and affluent families in the area as their brewing company thrives and takes center stage in Gildsey.

The cyclical nature of history that is fundamental to *Waterland* is reflected in Arthur Atkinson's ascent to fame. The Atkinson family's domination is a result of his achievement, but it also creates the circumstances for their eventual downfall, especially in the generation of his son Ernest Atkinson. Again, Graham Swift in the Chapter 9 'About the rise of Atkinsons' blends history with fiction. During the American war of independence, William Atkinson, son of Josiah Atkinson began sending his barley direct to the brewers. The Atkinsons, who stand for 19thcentury industrial and technological innovation, are portrayed as the epitome of progress. They are aspirational, progressive, and have a significant impact on the Fens, social and economic development. Arthur Atkinson is the founder of the Atkinson brewing empire, which becomes the dominant industry in the region. His brewery is central to the economic development of the Fens and serves as a source of wealth and power for the Atkinson family.The Atkinson family has an additional connection to the water besides working for its control and eradication. They are brewers of beer. In the words of Tom Crick: "whereas the Cricks emerged from water, the Atkinsons emerged from beer." (87) The Atkinsons took an interesting approach to their task: "We must help the poor besodden Fenlanders. They need a little cheer in their wretched swamps. They cannot survive on water." (92) So the Atkinsons dedicated their lives to the mastery of water, overseeing its transformation from a liquid of oppression (water) into a beverage of merrymaking (ale). Witness the legend inscribed over the portals of the New Atkinson Brewery built in 1849 in Gildsey: "Ex Aqua Fermentum . . . Out of Water, Ale." (118) Ernest Atkinson, the last significant figure in the family, embodies the family's decline. He is a charismatic yet troubled man who, after inheriting the family's brewery and wealth, becomes eccentric and erratic. His choice to close Atkinson's Brewery is among his most notorious actions. The flood also symbolizes the cyclical nature of history and the idea that everything returns to its origins. Despite efforts to drain the Fens by the Atkinsons , water would always comeback return through rain and floods, causing disasters. Gildsey, a town at the junction of the Fens' two largest rivers, is a battleground for flood waters since its founding. The town's central street, Water Street, is named after these floods. The novel features three major floods: the first in 1713, caused by a man-made sluice collapse, the second in 1874, and the third in 1947, after World War II. The flood is baptismal in nature, purifying the Fens and the Fenlanders, particularly the New Atkinson Lock, allowing Tom Crick to escape the watery roots of his ancestors and leave the Fens for London. Being able to swim is essential for living and working with and against water. A game that Mary, Tom, Dick, Freddie Parr, and a number of other kids play is one of the pivotal moments in *Waterland*. After an underwater swimming competition, one boy will be permitted to glimpse the prepubescent Mary nude. Being a skilled swimmer, Tom Crick has

survived life. However, Freddie Parr, who is discovered dead at the start of the book, is completely incapable of swimming. No one can swim farther than Dick Crick. Dick, a "potato-head," is not like the people around him. Dick's status as the world's best swimmer is appropriate given his role as the "Savior of the World."

The biggest scandal concerns Tom Crick's mother, Helen Crick. It turns out that Ernest's liaison with a servant produced Helen, his illegitimate daughter. Tom's father, a World War I veteran who married the nurse means Helen who brought him back to health in the Kessling Hall. Tom describes how Earnest Atkinson becomes a recluse, falls in love with his daughter Helen, and lives with her as husband and wife. Helen becomes a nurse and wants to marry a wounded soldier, Henry Crick (Tom's father). Earnest Atkinson wants a child by Helen, and she agrees to his request on the condition that she can raise the child as if it is Henry's. The child, Dick, turns out to be mentally retarded. Earnest leaves a letter for Dick, hidden in the chest in the attic, to be opened on Dick's eighteenth birthday. The letter explains that Earnest is Dick's real father. After leaving the letter, Earnest shoots himself.

One of the personal memory of Tom Crick is the death of his friend Freddie Parr and how his potato head brother Dick is associated with the murder. In the chapter "Holes and Things," we come to know that Mary Metcalf daughter of Harold Metcalf shared a romantic relationship with Tom. Tom Crick is friends with Freddie Parr, a local youngster from the Fens who is notorious for being a bit of a prankster and troublemaker. He is a cheeky individual who frequently makes fun of people, such as Dick Crick and Tom's future wife Mary Metcalf. When Freddie's body is discovered floating on the Leem River, next to the Crick family's old lock gates, he passes away. At first, it was assumed that Freddie's death was an accident since he had been drinking and may have fallen into the river and drowned. But as the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that Freddie's death was not just an accident. A complex romantic triangle between Tom Crick, his older brother Dick Crick, and Mary Metcalf is at the core of Freddie's demise. Tom and Mary have a covert adolescent romance in which they experiment with sex while still young. Dick does, however, also have a strong, unsaid love for Mary, even though he is not emotionally or intellectually capable of completely comprehending or expressing it. Dick is frequently teased by Freddie, who is always pulling practical jokes, about his clumsiness and his unrequited emotions for Mary. The characters' tension rises as a result of this taunting and ridiculing, particularly as Dick grows more protective of Mary.

Two distinct methods are used to construct Mary Crick's character in Graham Swift's *Waterland*: her actions and speech as a child and an adult, as well as her husband Tom's voice and interpretations. In addition to using his role as a high school history teacher and his courses on the French Revolution to track his own history, Tom also attempts to trace his wife's life's trajectory and the person she has become by using his narrative of his own history. Mary's pregnancy is not going well. She makes the decision to have an abortion. This is when Crick comes in handy. The abortion is performed by Martha Clay who appears to be a witch. Given that Mary is no longer pregnant, it is technically successful. But Mary becomes sterile as a result of the poorly performed abortion. She is incapable of becoming a mother. This development clarifies why Mary, a middle-aged lady, stole a baby. Over the years, the anguish of never being able to have children has affected her more and more. Her mental health has been significantly impacted by this.

History and the Here and Now have the same sources, potent of which is curiosity. It was Tom's curiosity about the Atkinsons and Cricks, his need for an explanation, that stories he tells in *Waterland*, and it was Mary's sexual curiosity the series of events that touched off the need. Throughout these events we can see that Tom Crick has always narrated the story from his point of view for instance his views about Mary's abortion could be different if we look it from the perspective of Mary Metcalf. So, we could probably say that Tom Crick is an unreliable narrator. Again, the cyclical nature of history is described by Tom Crick. Since eels are migratory animals that frequently return to the same locations to reproduce, the Crick family's work as "eel-catchers" further represents this cyclical nature and the recurring patterns of existence. The Fens' flooding and draining serve as a reminder that history, like nature, is cyclical rather than linear and must be handled but never completely tamed. Historical events are portrayed as cyclical rather than linear throughout the book. Tom Crick highlights how comparable forces and events recur throughout time in his observations on historical events including the French Revolution, the World Wars, and the fall of the British Empire.

Another thing Swift describes is about the myth. One of the most significant events occurs in 1820, when Thomas Atkinson strikes his wife Sarah in a fit of unreasonable jealousy. She loses her mind as a result of the attack but lives another fifty-four years to become something of a local legend. Thomas Atkinson's lovely young wife is named Sarah Atkinson. She is the daughter of Matthew Turnbull, a brewer. Her spouse punches her in the face when she is thirty-seven, and she smacks her skull on a writing table as she falls. She survives for more than fifty years, but the attack has left her mind entirely destroyed. The notion that she possesses the ability to see and influence the future is one of the many local stories that surround her during the protracted period of her insanity. At the age of 92, she passes away in 1874. Sarah experiences emotional and mental instability following the blow. She is kept in seclusion for the remainder of her days at Kessling Hall, the Atkinson family mansion. Her insanity is thought to be a symbolic representation of the suppressed conflicts and unsaid traumas in the Atkinson family, in addition to being the outcome of physical damage. Sarah becomes a local legend in Gildsey as she grows increasingly distant from reality. She is said to have magical skills, including the ability to predict future events, especially the catastrophes that befall the Atkinson family and the deaths of her descendants.

Graham Swift, by giving various definitions of "historia" at the very beginning of *Waterland*, gives his readers multiple understandings of the concept of history. Tom Crick investigates the past events by narrating them like a historian as well as a detective who is in search of a mystery buried in his past. Graham Swift clarifies his reason for choosing such a protagonist as follows,

> Making him a history teacher gave a direct validation to something else the novel was urging me (ambitiously enough) to do, to explore the whole mystery of 'history' (local, personal and global)its meaning, if it has any, its distinction, so far as there is one, from mere 'story.'(Swift vii-viii)

This way Tom Crick blends his private and public history, contextualizing and reformulating his narratives to highlight the interconnectedness of his personal and public experiences. Crick's past stories are connected to his present existence through the Fenlands, a fictional setting. However, the Fenlands in Crick's narration and the real Fenlands are not the same due to his past influencing his present. The novel begins with the death of Freddie Parr, revealing the difference between the Fenlands in Crick's memories and the real Fenlands.

Conclusion

Graham Swift's *Waterland* is a powerful example of historiographic metafiction with its combination of historical storytelling and introspective reflection on the nature of history itself. By arguing that history is subjective, cyclical, and entwined with individual memory, the book consistently challenges the conventional view of history as a sequential, objective narrative of events. The work blurs the lines between fact and fiction by fusing the Crick and Atkinson families' personal experiences with more significant historical occurrences, forcing the reader to reevaluate how history is written and understood. By presenting history as something constructed through narrative, rather than an objective record of events, Swift aligns his novel with the postmodern suspicion of grand historical narratives and suggests that the past is always subject to reinterpretation. Through this seminar we can prove that Graham Swift's novel challenges the traditional conception of history. This conflict between history as fact and history as fiction is personified by Tom Crick, who serves as both a storyteller and a history instructor. His thoughts on the past, both his own and the world's, show that overcoming ambiguity, gaps, and contradictions is frequently necessary to comprehend history. By the end we realize that history is not a single and authentic truth but it is a web of stories which are reshaped by the passage of time.

WORKS CITED:

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 2003.

Ivan Janik, Del. "History and the "Here and Now":The Novels of Graham Swift". Twentieth Century Literature , 1989, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp.74-88. JSTOR ,https://www.jstor.org/stable/441776. Accessed 01 Mar 2021.

Schaffrath , Stephan. "The Many Facets of Chaos-versus-Order Dichotomy in Graham Swift's 'Waterland' .nterdisciplinary Literary Studies , Spring 2003, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 2003), pp.84-93. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41208819. Accesed 01 Mar 2021.

Swift, Graham. *Waterland*. Simon and Schuster, 2019

Waterland | Encyclopedia.com. www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/waterland.