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FROM REALISM TO POSTMODERNISM: METAFICTIONAL GAMES AND STRATEGIES IN JOHN BARTH'S *THE SOT-WEED FACTOR*

Abstract

This paper examines John Barth's novel The Sot-Weed Factor (1960) as an emblem of early American postmodernism with specific focus on its metafictional strategies. Written as an seventeenth-century pastiche, the novel follows and satirizes the naïve poet Ebenezer Cooke and his blind devotion to literary classics during his voyage from England to the colonial Maryland. The analysis of Barth's playful engagement with self-reflexivity and historiographic metafiction is approached primarily through theoretical concepts of Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon. Barth's metafictional game starts with mocking and parodying of exhausted and conventional literary forms of earlier traditions, such as realism, in an attempt to renew narrative possibilities and to question the role of art/literature as well as the human need to narrativize. By constantly blurring the boundaries between "the real" and "invented" events, Barth's historiographic metafiction deconstructs historical records, e.g. colonial narratives, as subjective narratives and fabrications used to perpetuate domination and exert power. With the analysis of The Sot-Weed Factor as a narrative game and a critical reflection on the limits of historical knowledge, the aim of this paper is to illustrate that Barth's metafictional strategies do not only exemplify postmodernist aesthetics but also inquire into the relationship between truth, history, and narrativization/literature.

Keywords: *John Barth, metafiction, historiographic, The Sot-Weed Factor, narrativization*

OD REALIZMA DO POSTMODERNIZMA: METAFIKCIJSKE IGRE I STRATEGIJE U ROMANU *TRGOVAC DUHANOM* JOHNA BARTHA

Sažetak

Ovaj rad analizira roman Trgovac duhanom (1960) američkog autora Johna Bartha kao simbol ranog američkog postmodernizma s fokusom na njegove metafikcijske strategije. Pisan kao pastiš iz sedamnaestog stoljeća, roman prati i satirizira naivnog pjesnika Ebenezera Cookea i njegovu slijepu predanost književnim klasicima tokom njegovog putovanja iz Engleske u koloniju Maryland. Analizi Barthovog poigravanja sa samorefleksijom i historiografskom metafikcijom pristupa se prvenstveno kroz teorijske koncepte Patricie Waugh i Linde Hutcheon. Barthova metafikcijska igra započinje ismijavanjem i parodiranjem iscrpljenih i konvencionalnih književnih oblika koji pripadaju ranijim tradicijama, kao što je realizam, u pokušaju obnavljanja pripovjedačkih mogućnosti i ispitivanja uloge umjetnosti/književnosti, kao i ljudske potrebe za pripovjedanjem. Stalno zamagljujući granice između stvarnih i izmišljenih događaja, Barthova historiografska metafikcija dekonstruira historijske zapise, npr. kolonijalne narative, kao subjektivne priče i neistine koje su se koristile u svrhu očuvanja dominacije i vršenja moći. Analizom Trgovca duhanom kao pripovjedačke igre i kritičke refleksije o granicama historijskog znanja, cilj ovog rada je ilustrovati da Barthove metafikcijske strategije ne pokazuju samo postmodernističku estetiku, već također istražuju odnos između istine, historije, i pripovijedanja/književnosti.

Ključne riječi: *John Barth, metafikcija, historiografska, Trgovac duhanom, pripovijedanje*

Introduction

John Barth's literary oeuvre is renowned as one of the finest examples of early American postmodernism, reflecting not only his personal development as a writer but also the broader evolution of postmodernist literature in America alongside contemporaries such as Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme. Barth's novels have attracted considerable criticism for challenging traditional conceptions of literature and playfully subverting the neoclassicist idea that literature provides direction to Truth and Good through Beauty. Central to his project is extensive use of metafictional strategies, a topic that this paper explores through one of his early novels, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960). Set in seventeenth-century England (London) and colonial Maryland, the novel follows Ebenezer Cooke, a fictionalized and self-declared poet, in his journey from London to the colonial Maryland. Along the route, Cooke encounters a wide range of characters, including pirates, Native Americans, early American settlers, and historical figures. His narrative wanders and intertwines with the stories of those he meets. Although the novel seems to follow the conventions of realist fiction, with a dense plot and a large cast of characters, these elements are pushed to extremes. This is achieved through metafictional strategies that aim to interrogate earlier writing and reading traditions, as well as to deconstruct and subvert the metanarrative of history's veracity.

Prior to the analysis of specific examples of metafictional strategies employed in Barth's novel, it is pertinent to briefly revisit the theoretical postulates of metafiction as defined by a prominent postmodern literary critic Patricia Waugh in her foundational study *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984). Waugh defines metafiction as "*fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2).* Metafiction, in this sense, is fiction aware of its own artificiality, highlighting its constructed nature rather than presenting a mere reflection of reality. Waugh notes that this approach parallels the Saussurean, structuralist view of language as a system of arbitrary signs, which implies an imperfect relationship between words and the world. Postmodern metafictionists often adopt a poststructuralist perspective in which meaning is never fixed but constantly deferred, thereby challenging the earlier notion of language as a passive reflection of a coherent, objective reality. Similarly, metafiction questions the mimetic aims of earlier literary traditions, exploring alternative realities and worlds while raising ontological concerns (3-4). Building on this framework, Larry McCaffery, in *The Metafictional Muse,* sees metafiction as the reworking of tradition in a new mode, fiction concerned with its process of creation or with the human need to fictionalize, and as fiction which looks into the role of art and the artist (3-15). Linda Hutcheon extends this categorization to include historiographic metafiction or novels that are both self-reflexive and grounded in historical events and figures (5). In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth seamlessly incorporates all of McCaffery's metafictional types, blending them into a form of metafiction that self-reflexively examines literary creation and engages with historiographic concerns, thus interrogating both literary form and historical narrative. Building upon these theoretical foundations, the sections that follow examine specific examples of Barth's metafictional games.

Rewriting Realism: Barth's Challenge to Realist Narrative Conventions

In 1967, John Barth published two twin essays titled "Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "Literature of Replenishment" (1980). The first essay explicates the exhausted traits of literary traditions that preceded modernism, including modernism:

By “exhaustion” I don’t mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities -- by no means necessarily a cause for despair. (Barth 1984: 53)

Barth explains that realist and modernist forms have been overused and are no longer viable for the postmodernist author as such, i.e. they need renewal. The second essay aimed to extend the first one and map the literary preoccupation of the postmodernist writer. Barth does not agree with arguments that postmodernist literature is an extension or intensification of modernist literature or with the arguments that it is a subversion of realism like modernism is. According to Barth, postmodernist writer “neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth- century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents” Therefore, postmodernist literature is “the synthesis or transcension” of realist and modernist “antitheses” (1984: 142).

Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* is an ideal example of the synthesis of modernist and realist writing conventions where Barth both uses and questions them. The vantage point for analyzing this instance of metafiction is the title itself. It was taken from the seventeenth-century satirical poem “The Sot-Weed Factor” (1708) by Ebenezer Cooke, an Englishman, which recounts the social organization of Maryland. Barth took both the title and the name of the poet to follow his protagonist’s trials and tribulations on his voyage to and in Maryland. Barth’s Ebenezer Cooke comes from a well-to-do English family that owns land in the New World. He is sent there by his father and prior to going to Maryland, Ebenezer assumes the role of the Poet Laureate of Maryland and a Virgin. He is presented as a naïve young man who has fixed interpretations of the world although he has not experienced it fully. Therefore, the voyage is both physical and metaphorical, resembling the *Bildungsroman* conventions popular in realism. The contents of the novel shows that it follows the realist tradition, containing four parts and sixty-five chapters in total which fulfills Barth’s ambition “to perpetrate a novel so thick that its title could be printed horizontally across its spine” (1984: 52). By relying on and subverting the realist tradition, Barth is commenting upon the writing process as artificiality and not as a reflection of the real world which should be taken for granted. All the traditional narrative strategies and perception of fiction are relativized by being taken to extremes.

To illustrate what Barth does with conventions of the realist novel, one should compare *The Sot- Weed Factor* to Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749). Both novels have thick plots, a variety of characters, the *Bildungsroman* theme, constant twists and identity switches, chapter titles which summarize the chapter, etc. Barth goes a step further by deliberately exaggerating in all of the above-mentioned narrative strategies. For example, the fourteenth chapter of Fielding’s novel is titled: “What Happened to Mr Jones in His Journey from St Albans” (Fielding 140). The chapter’s title seems long but Barth’s eighteenth’s chapter’s title is even longer:

The Poet Wonders Whether the Course of Human History Is a Progress, a Drama, a Retrogression, a Cycle, an Undulation, a Vortex, a Right- or Left-Handed Spiral, a Mere Continuum, or What Have You. Certain Evidence Is Brought Forward, but of an Ambiguous and Inconclusive Nature. (Barth 1967: 432)

Barth is not only using realist novel conventions, such as lengthy titles, for writing his novel but is situating the action of the novel in the seventeenth century from a twentieth-century perspective in order to explore his fiction writing in relation to the realist tradition (2017: 67-68). Carolyn Brumbaugh directs attention to the frequent identity switches and disguises in Barth’s fiction which are exaggerated to the point that the protagonist and the reader cannot

differentiate who took whose identity. Brumbaugh further notices that Barth exploits the story-within- a-story technique to such an extent that it interrupts the linear development of the story:

This story-within-a-story technique also denies the reality of time. The stories continually interrupt the supposedly natural progression of events until the task of placing the many tales in any chronological pattern becomes impossible. In this way, the framework in which one usually places reality, along with that reality itself, is destroyed. (52)

This type of narrative layering not only disrupts the chronological sequence of events but mirrors the novel's broader concern with instability or rather how the lines between story and history, author and character become irrevocably blurred. The reader's traditional strategies of narrative interpretation are challenged since the reader can no longer follow the narrative in the usual (chronological) manner. Just like Ebenezer, the reader has difficulties differentiating between reality and fiction because they are both "a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures" (Waugh 7). The other option would be for the reader not to try understanding the narrative as a reflection of real life since they are not on the same ontological level, which is Barth's ultimate message. Waugh claims that metafictional novels in their exploration of fiction writing create an illusion and lay it bare:

In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merges them into the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction'. (6)

The blurring between creation and criticism of that creation is also shown through the character of Ebenezer. He emulates poetry in a Sidneyan manner, saying that poetry offers practical solutions to life problems unlike philosophy and history. His thinking is also reminiscent of the above-mentioned understanding of literature as a mirror of real life. Ebenezer even dreams of founding anti-Plato's Republic where poets would rule as gods and offer advice for problem solving (Šoštarić 2017: 68). His comprehension of literature and poetry is tested numerous times in the novel. Some of the first tests are more of contemplative nature. When Ebenezer goes to seek the audience of Lord Baltimore, who turns out to be his teacher Henry Burlingame in disguise, he is asked about the work a poet can offer to the world:

Now, did I read here *Ebenezer Cooke, Tinker,* I'd likely hire you to patch my pots; if *Ebenezer Cooke, Physician,* I'd send you the rounds of my household, to purge and tonic the lot; if *Ebenezer Cooke, Gentleman,* or *Esquire,* I'd presume you not for hire, and ring in my man to fetch you brandy. But *Poet,* now: *Ebenezer Cooke, Poet.* What trade is that? How doth one deal with you? What work doth one put you to?" (Barth 1967: 49)

Burlingame is not deprecating poetry (literature) totally but is trying to make Ebenezer understand that it cannot help in reality in all life situations. His beliefs in the utility of poetry are tested when he defecates after the incident with the pirates. Instead of using common sense to clean himself, Ebenezer tries to think of situations similar to his in literature:

No, he resolved at last, it was to literature he must turn for help, and should have sooner, for literature alone of all the arts and sciences took as her province the entire range of man's experience and behavior. (Barth 1967: 112)

Ebenezer think of Rabelais and his Gargantua's pieces of advice on how to wipe oneself after defecation. Gargantua suggests using a live goose's neck for that purpose. Since the goose is not available, Ebenezer understands that literature cannot help him so he uses pieces of paper

from his notebook. This particular scene serves as a comic climax of Ebenezer's delusional attitude to the applicability of fiction in real life. It also portrays Barth's attitude toward the exhaustion of literary paradigms as he commented in an interview: "What the hell, Reality is a nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there, and literature never did, very long" (Enck, "John Barth: An Interview"). Barth is again making an allusion to the impracticability of realism in art, stressing that art and reality are not the same, can never and should never be the same, which in turn means that art must liberate itself from traditional mimetic limitations and assumptions. By exploring Cooke's writing process and his self-narrativization, Barth is simultaneously problematizing his own writing and discussing the dividing line between fiction and life. While Barth's parody of traditional literary conventions foregrounds the artificiality of fiction, his metafictional strategies go beyond the literary form. In other words, Barth does not only question the process of storytelling and fictionalization, he also problematizes how history is constructed and narrativized just like fiction.

When History Becomes Story: *The Sot-Weed Factor* as Historiographic Metafiction

Although metafiction diverges from and parodies earlier (non-) literary texts and conventions, it does not impose its vision as the new and ultimate truth. Postmodernists use historiographic metafiction to relativize ideologies presented as objective truths of the world. By general consensus, history is objective and unquestionable with its "finite and closed knowledge (Hutcheon 75). The term 'historiographic metafiction' was used by Hutcheon to describe metafiction that relies heavily on history to explore its fictionality and destabilize its objectivity (87-93). It draws upon earlier discourses "to challenge those discourses and yet to use them, even to milk them for all they are worth" (Hutcheon 133). Historiographic metafiction "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" (Hutcheon 89).

Barth's historiographic metafiction deconstructs a plethora of the stereotypical /historical conceptions of America during the colonization movement in the seventeenth century. The available historical texts that speak of the colonization of America foster the alleged white Eurocentric socio-political supremacy (Šoštarić 2017: 78). The usual portrayals of America, in (non-) literary texts, present America as a land of abundance and opportunity created by non-partisan and open-minded people. This is visible, for example, in John Smith's "A Description of New England" (1624). Smith, one of the most notorious explorers, says the following about early America:

Here nature and liberty affords us that freely, which in England we want, or it costeth us dearly. What pleasure can be more, than (being tired with any occasion a-shore in planting vines, fruits, or herbs, in contriving their own grounds, to the pleasure of their own minds, their fields, gardens, orchards, buildings, ships, and other works, &c.) to recreate themselves before their own doors, in their own boats upon the sea, where man, woman and child, with a small hook and line, by angling, may take diverse sorts of excellent fish, at their pleasures? (10)

Smith describes it as terra nullius where one can create fortune and exercise free will. Such ideas were the guiding light for most people who went to America at the time. The main protagonist of Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Ebenezer Cooke is paradigmatic of the above-mentioned Anglo-centric view that America is a cornucopia that he should pay homage to. He readily assumes the identity of the Poet Laureate of Maryland and explains that he would write a panegyric on Maryland's beauty:

beauteous beyond description; verdant, fertile, prosperous, and cultured; peopled with brave men and virtuous women, healthy, handsome, and refined: a Maryland, in short, splendid in

her past, majestic in her present, and glorious in her future, the brightest jewel in the fair crown of England, owned and ruled to the benefit of both by a family second to none in the recorded history of the universal world. (Barth 1967: 51)

Ebenezer sees the colonization of America as his chance to become a poet who is ultimately necessary to grant meaning to America in his poems. His laudation of America is also symbolic of 'the white man's burden' that grants the right to civilize and domesticate the "salvages". Ebenezer's proclivity for Eurocentric feelings of supremacy, which ascribe meaning, confirms that the mythologizing of America and its colonization took place at the same time (Šoštarić 2017: 78-79). Ebenezer's understanding of the New World is ridiculed by Lord Baltimore (the supposed governor of Maryland) who is actually Ebenezer's teacher Henry Burlingame III in disguise. Lord Baltimore presents him the history of Maryland in the chapter titled "A Brief Relation of the Maryland Palatinate, Its Origins and Struggles for Survival, as Told to Ebenezer by His Host" (Barth 1967: 52). Baltimore's account of Maryland's history speaks of trials and tribulations in the socio-political arrangement of Maryland and presents it as the embodiment of repugnant mystery. Ebenezer is aggravated by Baltimore's story and accepts it as the indubitable state of affairs. Once in Maryland, while experiencing a series of misfortunes, Ebenezer hears other versions of the story Baltimore told him, which makes him question the reliability of Baltimore's fabulation. Furthermore, this reinforces the idea that history is fabricated just like fiction and that it hews the purposes of those in power. Through the constant stories of power struggles in Maryland, Barth demystifies the European role to civilize as a mask they used to get money, territory, and power (Šoštarić 2017: 80).

The European civilizing mission on account of their race and gender superiority is another example of narrativization and historiographic metafiction in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. The term 'narrative' comes from the Latin word gnārus which translates to 'knowing,' 'expert,' 'acquainted with'. Therefore, narrative is, as Gerald Prince states, "a particular mode of knowledge" that "does not simply record events; it constitutes and interprets them as meaningful parts of meaningful wholes" (qtd. in McQuillan 129). Clearly the meaning of narrative is not harmless and should be approached with great care since it posits knowledge of something as truly objective and devoid of any bias. In the light of colonization of America, knowledge pertains not only to the process of presenting European civilizing mission as righteous but also to the confirmation and perpetuation of that attitude through Eurocentric historical records. Therefore, Barth suggests that John Smith mentioned above has a pivotal role in upholding the legitimacy of European colonization. John Smith is usually known as the paragon of white masculinity who is saved by Pocahontas from being executed by her father. Barth presents three versions of the John Smith story through two diaries of John Smith and the diary of his companion Henry Burlingame I, the grandfather of Ebenezer's teacher and companion Burlingame III. Both of them write about their explorations and contact with Native Americans but from different perspectives, always trying to denigrate each other's manliness. Smith speaks of his feats in *Generall Historie of Virginia* and his secret diary titled *A Secret Historie of the Voiage Up the Bay of Chesapeake From Jamestown in Virginia, Undertaken in the Year of Our Lord 1608 By Captain John Smith, & Faithfullie Set Down in Severall Parts By The Same*. The existence of the secret document compounds the situations, even if it had not been for Burlingame's diary which talks of the same events from a different angle. Smith describes the defloration of Pocahontas as something only he, as a white man, was able to do. The same bragging manner is applied to his coitus with Hicktopeake's queen who is a nymphomaniac (Šoštarić 2012: 81-82). However, after having had allegedly successful sexual intercourse with Smith, the queen became loyal to Hicktopeake, while Smith boasts of his sexual escapades to Burlingame I saying:

When that I saw the dawn grow light without the hutt, I did wake Burlingame, ere therest of the companie arose, and address'd him boastfullie in this wise. That I had deflowr'd Pocahontas before his eyes, and had farther layn with Hicktopeakes Queene, what tyme he had abandon'd her for harlot. (Barth 1967: 358)

On the other hand, Burlingame I dismisses Smith's version of the Pocahontas episode as completely deceitful in *The Privie Journall of Sir Henry Burlingame*:

Moreover, he made so bold as to shew me a written account of his salvation by Pocahontas, the wch he meant to include in his lying *Historie:* this version made no mention whatever of his scurrilous deflowring of the Princesse, but merelie imply'd, she was overcome by his manlie bearing & comelie face! ... He shuns her as much as possible, albeit in her absence, and in his *Historie,* he makes the finest speaches in her praise. (Barth 1967: 467)

Burlingame I also mentions that Smith owes his virility to an eggplant recipe. Each man is trying to minimize the importance of the other or rather deconstruct the other's narrative. Moreover, each of the two men is insisting upon his version of the story as the real one, thus rendering Ebenezer, and the reader as well, unable to differentiate between fact and fiction. Barth here elucidates that impartial knowledge of the past is not possible since subjectivity is immanent to all human beings and that there is no "genuine historicity" (Hutcheon 89). In addition, through different versions of the same story, Barth shows that history is textualized just like fiction because it is rooted "*in the systems* which make those past "events" into present historical "facts." (Hutcheon 89). One such system within the context of the novel is the Anglo-European metanarrative that their genocidal campaigns and land alienation on the American soil are justified and presented as objective historical facts. Hayden White also discusses the similarities between historiography and fiction in *Metahistory*: *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973). White says that historiographer needs to use the same techniques as a writer of fiction when assembling the data from the past to create a whole. According to White, a historical work should be approached as "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" with "a narrative structure for their presentation as icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past. (ix). White's study challenges the usual distinction between fiction as subjective fabrication and history as objective matter. It follows that history is a fabrication which needs careful analysis. White's observations of the nature of historiography support historiographic metafiction in refuting and blurring the dividing line between fact and fiction. In the same vein, Hutcheon propounds that fiction just like history has "a truth claim" since both are human constructs conditioned by particular systems (93). Referring back to Smith's defloration of Pocahontas and sexual satisfaction he provided to Hicktopeake's queen, it is important to note the prominence of Smith as a white male. Through Smith's hyperbolized narrative, Barth exposes "the white man's noble mission" as gendered and racially coded. The figure of the Native woman, embodied by Pocahontas in this context, is reduced to a passive entity or a mere territory waiting to be conquered, which mirrors the language and leading ideas of colonization. As Šoštarić argues, in both cases Smith is not only controlling female sexuality but also positioning himself as the one who saves the Native American male and the well-being of the overall Native American community. His potency reduces the sexuality and power of the native man, all of which further legitimize the Anglo-European claims to the land of and the rule over the native population. Smith's journal indicates that due to his masculinity, he/the white man deserves to be the new ruler of the newly discovered world (82). In this sense, historiographic metafiction emphasizes the importance of reception because uncritical acceptance of stories, both within fiction and social reality, only perpetuates these stories as absolute truths, whereas more critical engagement helps challenge and dismantle them as pure ideologies used to sustain power.

Conclusion

Focusing on metafictional strategies through which the novel resists traditional notions of literature as a mirror of reality or a codified set of rules to be blindly followed, this paper has examined John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a representative example of postmodernist metafiction. Metafiction in *The Sot-Weed Factor* functions as liberation from earlier traditions and/or exhausted literary forms by acknowledging its artificiality. Through different narrative strategies, including fragmentation, temporal disruption, shifting identities, the novel foregrounds the postmodernist idea that meaning and reality are contingent. Parody and literary criticism that Barth employs in the novel underscore the critical role of postmodernist literature and postmodernism itself: destabilization of authority and deconstruction of the relationship between fiction, history, and ideology. Barth's metafictional games require active participation of the reader who, together with the characters navigates uncertainty, uncovers meaning, and engages critically with narrativization. The reader is invited to rethink cultural frameworks that shape the human experience, as proposed in one of the chapter titles: "Certain Evidence Is Brought Forward, but of an Ambiguous and Inconclusive Nature" (Barth 1967: 432). On the other hand, historiographic metafiction in this novel serves to destabilize inherited knowledge and traditions, specifically the European "civilizing mission" of the North American continent in the light of its Eurocentrism and toxic masculinity. By ridiculing historical figures and presenting historical events from various impermanent perspectives, the novel expresses skepticism toward history as an objective matter and alludes to it as a subjective and ideologically conditioned mode of domination. The broader significance of metafiction and its varieties in this novel illustrates the liberating nature of literature, i.e. it presents literature not as a mere reflection of reality but as a transformative act.

Zaključak

Fokusirajući se na metafikcijske strategije kroz koje se roman odupire tradicionalnom poimanju književnosti kao ogledala stvarnosti ili kodificiranom skupu pravila koja se slijepo slijede, ovaj rad je predstavio roman *Trgovac duhanom* autora Johna Bartha kao reprezentativni primjer postmodernističke metafikcije. Metafikcija u romanu *Trgovac duhanom* funkcionira u svrhu oslobađanja od ranijih tradicija i/ili iscrpljenih književnih oblika priznavanjem svoje artificijelnosti. Kroz različite pripovjedačke strategije, uključujući fragmentaciju, vremensku distorziju, promjene identiteta, roman predstavlja postmodernističko načelo da su značenje i stvarnost kontingentni. Parodija i književna kritika koje Barth koristi u romanu naglašavaju kritičku ulogu postmodernističke književnosti i samog postmodernizma: destabilizacija autoriteta i dekonstrukcija odnosa između fikcije, historije, i ideologije. Barthove metafikcijske igre zahtjevaju aktivno učešće čitatelja koji zajedno s likovima prolazi kroz neizvjesnost, otkriva značenje i kritički se bavi narativizacijom. Kako je sugerisano u jednom od naslova poglavlja: "Neki dokazi su izneseni, ali su dvosmisleni i neubjedljivi" (Barth 1967: 432), čitatelj se poziva da iznova promišlja o kulturalnim okvirima koji oblikuju ljudsko iskustvo. S druge strane, historiografska metafikcija u ovom romanu služi destabilizaciji naslijeđenog znanja i tradicije, posebno evropske "civilizacijske misije" sjevernoameričkog kontinenta u svjetlu njene eurocentričnosti i toksične muškosti. Ismijavajući historijske ličnosti i predstavljajući historijske događaje iz različitih i promjenjivih perspektiva, roman izražava skepticizam prema historiji kao objektivnoj materiji i aludira da je historija subjektivni i ideološki uvjetovan način dominacije. Širi značaj metafikcije i njenih vrsta u ovom romanu ilustruje oslobađajuću prirodu književnosti, odnosno predstavlja književnost kao transformativni čin, a ne kao puki odraz stvarnosti.

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