



Postmodern Plurality in Terrell's *The Personal Librarian*

Natasha Khalil^{1*}, Nailah Riaz²

Abstract

The current research is motivated by the need to examine and bring to light the postmodern phenomena of Subversion of Metanarratives in Terrell's *The Personal Librarian*. This research study seeks to achieve insight into the overarching narratives in the story, and the process of disrupting those ideas to assert Mininarratives. To achieve this objective, the Theory of Mininarratives introduced by Jean Francois Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) is employed. Through an in-depth theoretical analysis, it is found that Terrell's text exhibits varying grand narratives such as Subjugation of women, Art for Art's sake as well as the metanarratives of Family and Relationship, which are overthrown by postmodern characters. This research study does not concern itself with other aspects such as Hyperreality, Identity Crisis, Historiographic metafiction and Diaspora. Future researchers can study these features in Terrell's novel. The research has significance as it expands on prior research that was carried out using postmodern views. Furthermore, it enhances the understanding of postmodern theory, and of the novel's status as a postmodern work of literature.

Keywords: Intertextuality, metanarratives, mininarratives, postmodern, *The Personal Librarian*.

Introduction

Heather Terrell's *The Personal Librarian*, co-written by Victoria Christopher Murray is mainly set in New York in the year 1905, when racism was rapidly growing in America. Segregation was not only implemented through law but had become part of the culture (Woodward, 2002). Originally known as Marie Benedict, Terrell came to know about Belle da Costa Greene while browsing the stacks of the Morgan Library in New York. Her story persisted in Terrell's mind, and she began to write

¹Student, Riphah International University, Faisalabad

²Assistant Professor, The University of Faisalabad, Faisalabad

*Corresponding author's E-mail: natashakhalil001@gmail.com

Available online: 25-03-2024

This is an open-access article.

this fictionalized account of the life of Belle with Murray, a Black author. *The Only Woman in the Room*, *Carnegie's Maid*, *Her Hidden Genius*, *The Mystery of Mrs. Christie*, and *The Other Einstein*, which is about Albert Einstein's wife, a fellow physicist, are Benedict's well-acclaimed historical novels. The books she published under the pen name Heather Terrell, include *Brigid of Kildare*, *The Map Thief*, and *The Chrysalis*. Christopher Murray, the coauthor of *The Personal Librarian*, has written more than thirty novels. Her well known writings include *Lust*, *Envy*, *Stand Your Ground*, *Truth Be Told*, *Joy and Temptation*.

The novel has a number of postmodern elements including the prominent feature of subversion of metanarratives. Both these concepts, in Terrell's novel, have not been analyzed as yet. This research is thus motivated by the need to examine and achieve insight into this postmodern phenomena in the text. Furthermore, postmodernism, specifically the deconstruction of metanarratives through establishment of mininarratives has not been given significant attention in the field of literary research. This study has been delimited to the analysis of the postmodern feature of Mininarratives present in the text. It does not concern itself with any other features such as Hyperreality, Intertextuality etc., in Terrell's novel.

Postmodern theory has been applied to a discernibly small number of novels. This research has significance as it adds to the existing research conducted from postmodern lenses. It unravels the obstruction of traditional beliefs and fixed accounts through formation of mini stories and different perspectives in local contexts. The research provides an understanding of how the 20th century society as it is depicted in the novel has progressed to an age beyond modernity, and how it shows respect for diversity and a celebration of differences instead of an admiration for the universal. Furthermore, it provides insight into the use of intertextuality and the functions it performs in the novel. The research also adds to the understanding of postmodern theory and of the novel as a postmodern piece of text.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways do the mini, local narratives subvert the traditional, metanarratives in *The Personal Librarian*?
2. Which characters can be defined as being postmodern?

Literature Review

Focusing on the deconstruction of metanarratives, a study was done by Zaidi et al. (2018) who conducted a postmodernist and Marxist discursive analysis of capitalism in Doctorow's *Makers*. They used Lyotard's theory of mininarratives for postmodern analysis, and Van Dijk's model of Socio-cognitive approach for discursive investigation. The study revealed, from a postmodern perspective, that Consumerism and hypercapitalism, two practices of capitalism that ultimately lead to the collapse of the system, are discursively deconstructed in the novel. Different characters, themes, and the plot function to dismantle the grand narrative of capitalism and generate mininarratives. The researchers implied that from a postmodernist standpoint, it is no longer viable for capitalism's institutional framework to be exploited as a conduit for metanarratives of control, whether through consumerism, commercialism, entrepreneurship, or hypercapitalism.

In consonance with this study, Ashraf and Ahmad (1991) also conducted a postmodern study of *Burnt Shadows* with the aim to analyze the transformation of metanarratives by the creation of local narratives. For this purpose, they employed the theory of mininarratives introduced by Jean Francois Lyotard. The results of the study disclose that local stories in the novel challenge master "narratives such as colonization, imperialism, rationalism, history, culture, truth, stereotypes and science" (Ashraf & Ahmed, 1991). The discussion highlights the way characters defy and reject the stereotypical notions and the legitimizing narratives in Shamsie's literary piece.

Analogous to this study, Awan and Ahmed conducted a postmodern study of Mohammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. They sought to examine the novel in light of Lyotard's theory of mininarratives and language games. Analysis revealed that different characters in the story are somehow linked to some language games that support particular metanarratives. A few characters, like Alice and Joseph Bhatti, dispute these stories, break the standards, and come up with new strategies to play a different game—a game of mininarratives. The text challenges narratives of patriarchy, science, identity, professionalism, and development in a truly postmodern perspective.

Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism has been defined varyingly by many postmodern theorists such as Hassan, Hutcheon, Forghani, Lyotard, Krijnen etc., as providing a single definition for postmodernism would be to violate its plural nature.

Postmodernism is defined by Hutcheon (2003) as “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges’ (p. 03). Contradictory to modernism which focuses on universal truths and realities, postmodernism stresses on disorder and the formation of subjective realities (Forghani, 2015). In accordance with Krijnen (2016), postmodernism is a discourse that “questions and subverts such notions as meaning, reference, knowledge, history, art, gender, and identity”.

In its rejection of an all-inclusive reality and objective truth, postmodernism “questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems” and disrupts them (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 41). Jean Francois Lyotard names these totalizing systems metanarratives. Hence, the current study gives a comprehensive account of the characteristic of postmodernism to challenge and disrupt totalizing systems, through elaboration of the Theory of Mininarratives introduced by Lyotard, in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979).

Lyotard’s Theory of Postmodernism

In the formulation of his postmodern theory, Lyotard rejects Science as a metanarrative. Scientific knowledge, according to Lyotard (1984), “does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with” narrative knowledge (p. 07). He also rejects other metanarratives such as Marxism, Enlightenment, Reductionism, etc. Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) describes postmodernism as having “incredulity towards metanarratives” (p. xxiv). Metanarratives include “metaphysical philosophy, philosophies of history, and any form of totalizing thought - be it Hegelianism, liberalism, Marxism, or positivism” (Best & Kellner, 1991, p.165). Metanarratives contain philosophies, theories, thoughts and worldviews which claim for unity and universality. A metanarrative “tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values” (Branco, 2014, p. 07). According to Lyotard (1984), the metanarrative “has lost its credibility regardless of” its claims to universality, objectivity and totality (p. 37). Thus, he shows absolute rejection of the apparent objectivity of metanarratives. Furthermore, metanarratives are defined also as “the grand overarching stories that a culture tells itself, hiding several contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in the social order” (Mambrol, 2016). It follows that metanarratives are inherently cultural. Hence, they are equivalent to traditional narratives – the universalizing knowledge, beliefs and norms that motivate diverse social practices.

Against the concept of metanarratives, Lyotard introduces an idea of "plural, local, and *immanent petits recits*, i.e. little narratives in a given culture" (Pegelow, 1997, p. 04). A mininarrative rejects the grand schools of thought, and creates an account of its own. Mininarratives make "no claim to stability, reason, universality or truth" (Yousef, 2017, p. 36). In this way, Postmodernism is not concerned with "the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxv). Mininarratives characterize postmodernism, and assert differences. Furthermore, since metanarratives are universalizing, unifying and totalising, and mini narratives are the ones asserting differences, it follows that metanarratives are dominant in nature. Lyotard fervently supports innovation against complete inclusiveness. In his *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1984)*, he states: "The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" (p. 82). The subversion of metanarratives by mininarratives, a war against totality, is at the forefront of postmodernism, and therefore a prominent feature of postmodern literature.

Research Methodology

The Personal Librarian by Terrell and Murray is chosen as the object for the current study as the novel is replete with postmodern features. The type of research is qualitative; textual analysis will be conducted on the novel to fulfill the objectives of this research study. Nature of the study is analytical. Concerned text will be analyzed in light of Lyotard's theory of mininarratives. Particular parts of the novel will be evaluated, and conclusions will be drawn from the analysis. Since the study has a theoretical basis and will be conducted to obtain new information from the analysis of the novel, the type of research in terms of its purpose, is fundamental. The research takes a novel, namely *The Personal Librarian* as its research object. Hence, the data is of primary type.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis first demonstrates the metanarratives found in the novel and delineates their disruption through mininarratives. It then focuses on the intertextual references in the text.

Subversion of Metanarratives through Mininarratives

The postmodern individual posits variation and nonconformity. He/she deviates from the organized and overarching principles and norms that are practiced in a society or culture. Belle da Costa Greene, the female protagonist of *The Personal Librarian*, rises as a postmodern force. She

lives in a society that advocates dominance for men, and subjugation for women. There is no space for women in the business world. This is evident when Belle, as the personal Librarian of J.P Morgan, visits auctions and art galleries to collect valuable books, manuscripts, and art pieces. She is faced with surprised reactions of men in her society. For instance, at a Massachusetts auction, the men wonder and gossip what business a woman has at an auction. The thought of a woman being in a professional space where she apparently shouldn't belong is confusing and disturbing to them. This demeaning attitude of men reflects evidently even in their ways of going about the business world. The Grolier club, being a highly reputable private club that houses moneyed bibliographies and books and promotes scholarships, is a place Belle admires greatly. Yet she is well aware that she can never take a look "behind the closed doors of her Romanesque town house" because as a woman, she would "never be admitted" (p. 2). This signals the reality of the 20th century society where subjugation of women worked as an overarching narrative that operated dominantly in the business circles. Terrell vividly expresses this hostility and deprecatory attitude of the novel's men when in a conversation with her mother, Belle says, "Mama, I will never blend in with my peers. Those men will always perceive me as different, as an outsider. Because I am a woman" (p. 119). The novel's protagonist is confronted with the unsettling attitude of men towards women. She resists this traditional metanarrative of subjugation by boldly asserting her position among her acquaintances. In the same instance as above, she states: "I've come to believe that the best path to success is by embracing my gender, Mama. Flaunting it even" (p. 119). Instead of surrendering to the so called 'objective' values of society that render women as inferior, Belle makes her gender an entity that only makes her strong, and constructively different. She advances from categorizing Morgan's possessions and organizing his cabinets to offering advice on purchases and going to meals, events, operas and dances at his request with both social elites and art professionals. Terrell's Belle, thus, creates a mininarrative of her own, one that advocates equality of opportunity.

Besides subjugation of women, another linked grand narrative that asserts itself is the notion of the Female gender as cultured and restrained. Women of the 20th century were supposed to act polite, and maintain submissive behavior. This notion positions itself firmly in Belle's character. Terrell makes Genevieve a constant reminder for Belle to be 'ladylike'. Her manners and conduct are conditioned to be moderate, and feminine. This belief is imposed on her in such a strong manner that she continuously tells herself to act like a lady. Even when her "stride is quick", it should be "acceptable for a lady" (p. 1). Although she has an outshining spirit, she

suppresses her boldness to fit in the conventional society. However, as she begins to work a challenging job, as a librarian, Belle realizes how "important it is to be bold" (p. 77). She comes to understand that if she keeps shy and polite appearances, she will never be able to fully act on her potentials, and be a part of the progressing world. She concludes that her mother's directions and the conventional idea of women mark a boundary to her potentials. To make her place in the world, she has to be audacious. Belle begins to wear daring dresses, and at a point in time, speaks without significant consideration, whatever comes to "mind at dinners, operas, and parties" (p. 158). She rejects the standards the society has set for her, and through her dressing style as well as her behavior, she deconstructs the metanarrative of female as a deferential and phlegmatic entity. She decides to "plunge headlong" into the art world which holds profound meanings for Terrell's characters (p. 77).

Characters like J. P Morgan, Bernard, and Belle understand the messages art conveys, and highly appreciate its beauty. J. P Morgan has been collecting artistic treasures for years. He wishes to create an art collection that is unmatched in importance among other European and American collections. For Bernard, his relationship with art is a "love affair" that happened, not immediately, but "in stages over time" (p. 156). As Bernard remarks, observing Renaissance paintings and drawings "transported me away from myself and my reality to a time and place where true genius was possible" (p. 156). Art turns into a means of escape, and creates a productive space for Bernard. It is in interpreting the allegorical meanings hidden in artworks, that he transcends temporal and spatial limitations. Terrell makes art a tool of seduction for Bernard and Belle. This is noticeable when Bernard talks about his love for Italian Renaissance artwork. "His talk of art mesmerizes me", Belle thinks (p. 156). Thus, art is used as an instrument by Bernard, intentionally or unintentionally, to charm and attract Belle. From a very young age, Belle has a talent for understanding and appreciating art. With Bernard, she finds a different perspective through which she can perceive the art world. For her, "art springs alive in the Italian town and hills" (p. 183). Following this, it is concluded that Art comes to have multiple connotations for the characters. The characters' response to art works to create a metanarrative. Art becomes the expression of emotions, and its appeal, a universalizing truth. Terrell's characters legitimize the notion that art, by nature, appeals to an individual's feelings. However, while art has keen connotations for most of the characters, Terrell makes Jack a character with a perspective different from the rest. J. P Morgan's son, Jack, becomes the owner of the Pierpont library after Morgan's death. He owns the acquisitions of his father, but "does not connect with the art in the same way that Mr. Morgan

did” (p. 244). Art becomes a mere means of profit for him. He stands for a belief that negates the one supported by the other three characters. He thinks of artistic pieces as objects and assets, not as works that have an influence on the psyche. Art holds no profound meanings for Jack, and it does not appeal much to his emotions. Jack, thus, subverts the belief that art has charm, and that it conveys a message to the senses. He creates a small, local narrative that supports the idea of art as a mere material asset, and a means for economic progress. His notion of art, resembles in no way, to Morgan’s affection for art.

During her career as a librarian, Belle and her employer’s relationship grows dynamically. Their relationship reaches a stage where it cannot be explained by the means of a single, universal definition. The nature of their “relationship vacillates” (p. 131). At times, they tend to be romantically interested in each other whereas on other occasions, their relationship appears to be paternal. When Morgan tells Belle to stay away from Bernard, at first, “he sounds paternal” but later, Belle wonders whether it is more “possessiveness than protection” (p. 170). Their connection is paternal and romantic at the same time, going against the traditional conception of relationship. They both play a multitude of roles for each other. Terrell makes this clear to the readers through Belle’s following thought process.

For him, I was the daughter and son he never had, the confidant he’d always sought, the business and art partner who’d boldly advocated for his goals, and the lover he’d dreamed about but held in abeyance. For me, he was the father I’d lost, the companion with whom I could discuss the day’s minutiae, the business mentor who’d supported me beyond my wildest dreams, and the lover for whom I longed but could never have. (p. 240)

Their relationship refuses to conform to society’s standards, and overthrows the metanarrative of single-nature relationship. Both the characters create a mininarrative that asserts difference, and advocates the multifaceted nature of a relationship.

In the novel, Racism is another traditional belief that appeals for universality. The so-called ‘objective’ ideology of racism made its way into Belle and her family’s life so wildly that there remained no hope of equality between Whites and Blacks. This prejudice is described by Genevieve when she states, “there is only black and white—nothing in between—and they will always be separate, but never equal” (p. 23). Racism then becomes the reason Genevieve transforms her family’s identity from Black to White. Belle also acknowledges the idea that a

colored girl would not have the opportunity that she, as a White girl, is able to have. It appears that Belle and Genevieve, two Black people, do not fight against the racial prejudice but somewhat acknowledge and embrace the Whites' discriminatory attitude by blending among the Whites, the superior race, so to say. However, this does not seem to be the case with Belle's father, Richard T. Greener. From the outset, Richard stands against Genevieve's decision to transform the family's identity. He gives an account of his hard work for the rights of Black people, and expresses extreme censure and condemnation of this choice when, in a heated debate, he says to Genevieve:

You have made official our status as whites. After all the work I've done to advocate for the equal rights of black and colored people. After how hard I've argued in courts and in newspapers and journals and on stages, that all citizens should be treated the same—whether they are black, white, or colored. That we should not be defined by how many drops of African blood run in our veins, but by our character and our deeds. That we should not be ashamed of our heritage and we all, blacks and colored alike, should unify in our fight against prejudice. Your act goes against everything I stand for and everything I've worked for—. (p. 22)

He condemns Genevieve's decision to such an extent that it becomes the reason for their separation. They get divorced and Richard continues to fight for Black people's rights. Being a Black person and identifying as one, Richard strives for the equality of Blacks and Whites. He publishes an essay called 'The White Problem' in which he calls Racism a 'problem' Whites created. Richard, thus, challenges and refutes the universalising ideology of Racism which has been passed down from generations to generations, and continues to affect Black people around the world. He creates a mininarrative in the story by striving for Black people's rights, and by being proud of his identity.

The label of Black, however, is not the only mark Richard and his family were identified by. They are also Fleets. As Fleets, they have to abide by certain rules that have been traditionally imposed on them. "To be a Fleet was to be...hardworking (the women were all teachers and the men, all engineers)" (p.14). All the fleet women, as informed by Terrell, adopted the profession of teaching. As demonstrated initially, Belle deconstructs this overarching notion, and overthrows a significant part of being a Fleet. Furthermore, Terrell also tells the readers that "Fleets were understated in dress and presentation" (p. 14). Genevieve adheres to this norm, and advises Belle to wear minimal dresses and be 'ladylike'. Belle, on the other

hand, decides that being moderate in her dresses and constrained in her speech is not the way to success. She wears dresses that stand out and boldly flirts with her acquaintances. Thus, she creates another mininarrative when it comes to the Fleet tradition. Fleets are also defined by their connection “to the community”. Genevieve, however, cuts this very connection apart when she leaves DC to live in New York. The transition from Black to White, and the pretence of belonging to a Portuguese descent further confirm this break from her people. Genevieve, with her family visits DC only when her mother dies. Other than this, the family completely disconnects itself to the Fleets, thus breaking another narrative that constitutes the identity of Fleets. Genevieve and Belle, hence, assert difference and pluralism by not adhering to the Fleets’ standards.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is concluded that certain characters in Terrell’s novel perpetuate different metanarratives while other characters rebel against those legitimizing beliefs, and overthrow them. As a result, they create mininarratives that assert pluralism, and advocate different standpoints, creating multiplicity in the novel’s context. The analysis has brought forth the metanarrative of subjugation of women, that of Teaching as the only safe career for women and the view of women as ladylike and submissive which are all closely related to each other. These universalizing beliefs are subverted by Belle who becomes a bold example of women empowerment. Other traditional narratives that are deconstructed by various characters are Art for Art’s sake, the metanarrative of family, of relationships and of marriage as well as the overarching notion of Racism and that of Fleets. It becomes clear that Belle is the most powerful postmodern force as she subverts many legitimizing, traditional narratives throughout the course of the story. Other characters like Morgan, Bernard, Genevieve, Jack and Richard also work to create mininarratives. However, their status as purely postmodern individuals is ambivalent since some of them also perpetuate certain metanarratives.

References

- Best, S., & Kellner, D. (1991). *Postmodern theory: Critical interrogations*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Branco, L. A. R. (2014). *Jean-François Lyotard: a response to Jean-François Lyotard’s view of postmodernism and the denial of the metanarratives*. Cambridge University Press.

- Forghani, N., Keshtiaray, N., & Yousefy, A. (2015). A Critical Examination of Postmodernism Based on Religious and Moral Values Education. *International Education Studies*, 8(9), 98-106.
- Hutcheon, L. (2003). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. Routledge.
- Krijnen, J. (2016). *Holocaust impiety in Jewish American literature: Memory, identity, (post-) postmodernism*. Brill.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition*. Manchester University Press.
- Mambrol, N. (2016, April 3). *The postmodern as "the incredulity towards metanarratives."* *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Retrieved February 18, 2023, from <https://literariness.org/2016/04/03/the-postmodern-as-the-incredulity-towards-metanarratives/amp/>
- Pegelow, T. (1997). 'Feminism'and'Postmodernism': Are There Some Things at Stake in Lyotardian Thought for Feminist Theorizations?.
- Woodward, C. V., & McFeely, W. S. (2002). *The strange career of Jim Crow*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Yousef, T. (2017). Modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism: A critique. *International Journal of Language and Literature*, 5(1), 33-43.