

THE HISTORICAL FIELD AS A CHAOS OF BEING IN WILBUR SMITH'S *PHARAOH*

U. Fathima Farzana,

*Research Scholar and Assistant Professor of English,
Sri. S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur (India)*

ABSTRACT

Fact and fiction merge together to create a chaos of being in historical fiction. It is the duty of the historical writer to submerge facts subtly within the spheres of fiction. Twenty-first century has had a comeback in these historical texts as researchers are rereading these fantasies through semiotics and metahistory. Wilbur Smith is a contemporary South African historical writer whose Ancient Egypt series, of which Pharaoh is the last, who manipulates fiction to reveal the tyranny behind great and noble heroes. The much glorified Ramses I and Ramses II of nineteenth dynasty Upper and Lower Egypt are combined into the formidable Rameses of Luxor in the narrative. The people of Egypt are relieved when Utteric becomes Pharaoh – the Egyptian connotation of a god-King. Oppression and torture follow even when his successor Rameses ascends the throne. Smith uses his narrative as a tool to excavate the long lost and forgotten facts of the tyrants who called themselves noble. His Egypt is very different from the glorified versions of historians. This paper analyses some of the metahistorical elements hidden between the lines of fiction and explicates the historical field as an unstable body of chaos.

Keywords: *Historical Field, Narrative, Tyranny, Rameses*

I INTRODUCTION

When it comes to historical narrative, it is hard to separate fact from fiction. The author's conscience and resourcefulness can either fall towards the truth or towards the golden flights of imagination. Sir Walter Scott was once considered the pioneer of historical narrative. But the twenty-first century has seen a comeback in historical fiction. Newreaders and re-readers want history that is free from his-story. Novelists like Ken Follett, Philippa Gregory, Dame Hillary Mantel and Wilbur Smith assert that the facts once overlooked are now real. After years of meticulous research, they bring to the unexpected audience the cold touch of real history – the facts that have been buried long ago by a society that wanted history to be interpreted according to their beliefs. Now that history stands clear, it is the duty of historical narrative to excavate these long forgotten facts.

Modern historical fiction goes beyond facts. It reveals perspectives of people that history did not record. Vantage grounds of criminals, victims and damned innocents like that of Anne Boleyn in Dame Hillary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*

make up the soul of the narrative. These novels expose the flaws in heroes and saints. For instance, Ken Follett reveals the flaws of Thomas Beckett and justifies his murder in his *The Pillars of the Earth*. Another theory is that history is believed to be written by tyrants so they could hide their flaws and present themselves as heroes. These novels pierce through this wall of illusion. When Thomas Malory chronicled the history of the mythical King Arthur, he obviously left out facts that confirm the monarch's tyranny. It is the duty of these novels to read between the lines of history itself. This paper analyses the Metahistory behind the making of *Pharaoh* and how Wilbur Smith breaks up the pharaoh myth.

Wilbur Addison Smith is a South African historical fiction expert specializing in the long lost ancient cultures of Africa. *Pharaoh* (2016) is the last in his Ancient Egypt series. He began with *River God* in 1994. The six-book series commences with the reign of Pharaoh Memnon and ends with the ascension of Pharaoh Rameses I. Smith mixes factual data of Rameses with fiction, including his fictitious tyrant brother Utteric. The perspective is that of underdogs – slaves, captive women, enemy soldiers and lepers. He avows that there is nothing called glorious victory in history. The history of Upper and Lower Egypt is a much worn papyrus reed of battles, bloodshed and greed tinged with hierarchy and tyranny.

The narrator of the Ancient Egypt series is the slave-turned General Taita of Luxor. Taita is what the Egyptians called a “long-liver and blessed by the gods” (Smith 5) or a demigod. When Smith writes history, he distorts the facts. For instance, one of the central characters is Serrena who is the future wife of Rameses. Serrena, surprisingly changes her name to Cleopatra: “I have chosen my title. I shall be known as Queen Cleopatra. Which, as I am sure you know, means ‘the Glory of her Father’” (187). Historically, Raemeses' wife was Sitre and the Cleopatra of Alexandria had nothing to do with the nineteenth dynasty of Upper and Lower Egypt. But the characteristics of both women are similar. Smith hints that Cleopatra of Alexandria was a unique female warrior despite her reputation.

Hayden White, the formulator of Metahistory, explicates the process behind the construction of historical narratives. A writer uses historical facts to emplot through modes of argument and ideological implications. The historical field is the atmosphere and the sphere of action, representing anything from magnificent castles to a single cell in a dungeon. The Coliseum of Rome and the Inquisition are two famous historical fields used by various writers in multiple plots, even bordering on the Gothic and the paranormal. Behind the magnificence and splendour lie the truth: slavery and slaughter in the former and torture and religious hegemony in the latter. Wilbur Smith's Luxor is a historical field that goes beyond magnificent palaces and mansions to battlefields and the prison grounds named ‘The Gates of Torment and Sorrow’ (42). Utteric invents a new method to dissolve his father's powerful and just cabinet. He throws all the ministers into this dungeon on the pretext of something or the other. He also rips the limbs off of his Chief Minister Irus in the arena. Immortality was a major concern in Egypt; it was the foremost power of a Pharaoh. Utteric cheats his subjects by killing a double with an arrow and exchanging himself after the event.

Another characteristic feature of the field is the tyrant's distortion of religion to serve him well. As soon as Utteric becomes Pharaoh, he converts to the cult of Bubastis and forces his people to worship the god of homosexuals. On the other hand, the major characters like Taita and Serrena are disappointed because their gods do not answer their prayers. Historical objects are either people or symbols that mark the field. These objects are used by writers as markers of the truth. They are things that are symbolic of even abstract qualities like the Holy Grail representing tyranny. Serrena's ruby-hilted blue sword is an heirloom that she alone can wield. It is yet another symbol of oppression and subjugation like Arthur's Excalibur.

Jules Michelet calls the historical field a "Chaos of Being" (qtd. in. White 144) in *Histoire de France*. According to him, history shows a "victorious humanity astonished by the attainment of that for which it had struggled" (White 144). *Pharaoh* paints an Egypt on the verge of collapse when her soldiers desperately need guidance to win against the Hyksos. Everyone believes that the new Pharaoh Utteric would lead them to victory. But he proves to be more fatal to the land than the Hyksos. The people regret that such a flimsy coward was their Pharaoh: their King, their god and their demon. Man, the primary object in any historical field, is shown as the lonely occupant of an infested land – "they appear, they suffer and they die" (145). The field, apparently, is infested with monarchs, battles, plagues and torture. Taita's friend, King Hurotas of Lacedaemon is also the same, however noble he is. While Utteric openly plunders his own treasury and mass murders his opponents, Hurotas is greedy for land. He leads conquests and captures lands. After the capture, he sells the women to brothels and takes the men as slaves. When Khamudi, King of the Hyksos, is captured, all of his progeny are drowned in the Nile. The worst torture is reserved for Khamudi who goes last. Hurotas reserves the best form of torture to the last:

This began with skinning him alive using knives that were heated to a glowing red in charcoal braziers; followed by drawing and quartering, which evoked further merriment from the spectators. It seemed that Hurotas' men had a particularly robust sense of humour (Smith 34-5).

The historical sea is more threatening than the world of savages. The historical writer always yearns for the past of the past. The glorious past is always mourned for. Taita finds a hidden shaft near Luxor that could lead to Abu Naskos, Utteric's secret hideout. The dilapidated shaft was constructed by the "Old People" (Smith 270) who were an ancient race of demigods, known and feared for their wisdom and strength. Taita finds the shaft and the soldiers enter the hideout. The historical sea of Lacedaemon is more threatening than the savage world of the Hyksos or of Utteric's Luxor. Serrena renames the Gates of Torment and Sorrow as the Garden of Joy. But she adorns her paradise of innocents with the skull of dungeon master Doog at the entrance. The historical sea shows that Hurotas and his admiral, Hui were villains once. Hurotas was called Zaras in Egypt. Both of them were part of the security detail to Princesses Tehuti and Bekatha's transportation to Crete. They were to be married off to King Minos so Egypt could have a powerful ally. But Zaras and Hui abduct them and marry them instead. Utteric's fury on Taita

and these Lacedaemons was born because of this. The historical sea is a being of chaos that reveals everyone in their true forms. White remarks that history is lifeless and buried:

The burdensome structure of customs, duties, tolls, laws...money, the whole rotten system of carefully encouraged rivalries between cities...all these ramparts crumble and fall in a day” (151)

The Chaos of Being is created when the field shows the following: (i) Religion is used for dominance. Religion is mixed up with everything. While Utteric uses Bubastis, or the feline goddess Bast, to subjugate his people, Hurotas and Serrena have Aelurus, the Egyptian counterpart of Artemis. Serrena is technically the daughter of Apollo and therefore, she is a demigoddess. Before her wedding ceremony, she kills the Laconian boar to demonstrate her power. Serrena gains superiority through feat of arms. Hurotas and his daughter ruthlessly subjugate the neighbouring sixteen petty kings with their religion and power. Hurotas prays to Hathor, another convention of Bubastis who “is as savage as a lion but mild as a cat...later developed by turns into Hathor” (Henry Sayce 138) – Smith links the Kings through their deities and shows how similar they were.(ii) Mysticism is used to “evoke the edict of destiny” (White 146). Wilbur Smith reveals the cruelty of the noble ones like Hurotas, Serrena and Rameses through the mystic Taita. This slave-General is a seer and a sage. He is very close with the Egyptian goddess Inana. He discovers the purpose of the secret shaft because of the goddess. Taita, Serrena and Rameses defeat the evil Terramesh with Inana’s help. Inana helps them because she despises Hecate – and Terramesh is Hecate’s son. Even mysticism is tainted with tyranny in the chaos of being.

History is an endless struggle of the mob against the man. *Pharaoh* has Rameses, the man, who must defeat the mob of Luxor. Wilbur Smith assigns details of both Ramses I and Ramses II to his protagonist. The historical timeline shows that it was Ramses II who fought against the Hyksos. Combining both details, Rameses emerges powerful but selfish. In the last battle, he kills Egyptians soldiers – his innocent countrymen who had pledged loyalty to Utteric because they did not have a choice. History, as a Chaos of Being, repeats itself. The tyrant Utteric is replaced by Rameses, who as Wilbur Smith reminds with his mixture of characteristics, is the one known for his construction of statues and temples. This Rameses is Shelley’s ‘Ozymundias’ and the Biblical Pharaoh who ousted Moses.

“History dissolves the nation, the people and the revolution,” wrote Michelet (qtd. in White 158) when he was disappointed with the French Revolution. Smith shows people challenging their allegiances in an instant. Merimose accepts Rameses as his Pharaoh an instant after pledging for Utteric. He does this because he has no choice. When Rameses throws Uteeric off the throne, Merimose would be headed straight for the dungeons if he did not do so. The graceful and lithe Serrena – named for ‘peace’ – shoots Panmasi, Utteric’s general, with an arrow through his spine to give him a slow and painful death. History seems to depict a new society rising out of the ashes of the old one like a phoenix, more glorious than the last. This is an illusion called the Chaos of Being – one that the writers condemn through their fiction, their legends and their myths.

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