

Tribhuvan University

2017

Fictionalization of History in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*– Laxmi Suhang

Fictionalization of History in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*

**A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English**

By

Laxmi Suhang

Symbol No: 281906

Regd No: 6-2-1-842-2007

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

June 2017

Tribhuvan University
Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences
Central Department of English
Kirtipur, Kathmandu

Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Laxmi Suhang has completed his thesis entitled "Fictionalization of History in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*" under my supervision. He carried out his research from February 2016 to May 2017 A.D. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voce.

Keshab Sigdel

Supervisor

Date: _____

Tribhuvan University
Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences
Central Department of English
Kirtipur, Kathmandu

Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Fictionalization of History in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*" submitted to the Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Mr. Laxmi Suhang has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

Members of the Research Committee:

Internal Examiner

External Examiner

Head

Central Department of English

Date: _____

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound gratitude to Mr. Keshab Sigdel Lecturer of Central Department of English, for making constant supervision and guiding me with regular inspiration, encouragement, and insightful suggestion throughout the study. His vigorous efforts made me present this research work in this form. Likewise, I am also indebted to the Head of the Central Department of English Prof. Dr. Ammar Raj Joshi for the precious directions in conducting the research. I would like to extend sincere acknowledgement to the entire group of Professors, Readers, Lecturers, and the Teaching Assistants of the Department for their value d inspiration

Laxmi Suhang

June 2017

Fictionalization of History in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*

Using the theory of new historicism as conceptualized by Michael Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt, this research explores new history i.e. discursive and constructed phenomenon in the novel Everything is Illuminated. This research probe in to the unreliable character Alex, one eyed i.e. living with his grandfather in Ukraine. He narrates the incidents in broken English with several discontinuities. Alex presents a dreary, hellish picture of Ukraine of the late 1960's. However, he withdraws his own narration in the course of novel. He even claims that he is not sure about the incidents of World War II and holocaust. Throughout the unreliable narrative of Alex Foer deconstructs the traditional notion of history as the matter of facts and he claims that history is the matter of fabricated power politics

Keywords:History, Linearity, Fragmentation, Holocaust, Jews, Memory, Deception

This research project focuses on Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, a novel that discusses about historical incidents of Second World War, holocaust, and post-world war Europe as well as America. Foer, through the narrative of Alex who is intelligent, thoughtful, and philosophical person, observes upon the truth and fixity of history. Alex also discusses about the pre-established legal and formal general principles of human condition such as death, marriage, and separation. He has vast reading of official history, as he states in the novel, but quiet discontent with it due to its falsity and analyzes the generalizations about history and human conditions. He memorizes and examines various incidents of his own personal life as well as historical incidents by analyzing himself and history but he fails to capture the realistic evidences. Alex is from a family of holocaust survivor who has been damaged both physically and psychologically. He has lost his vision in one eye. He is suffering from a sense of emotional alienation. With his unbroken eye,

he views the world, its people, and their insanities. With his blind eye, he internalizes current events, using his historical and philosophical training to analyze and synthesize. This thesis claims that the author critiques generalizations about history and human conditions, questions such pattern and deconstructs them through the text.

It is the story of Alex, a Ukrainian young man who speaks an awkward and hilarious kind of English. He writes retrospective letters to Jonathan Safran Foer, who in the novel is a wannabe author who visited Ukraine in order to find the small shtetl where his grandfather grew up and from where he escaped when the Nazis came to destroy it. Alex has a grandfather who says he's blind but drives a car and he owns a dog called Sammy Davis. Another strand of the novel is the history of the shtetl from the end of the eighteenth century to the Second World War. It is therefore the story of the ancestors of the fictional version of Jonathan Safran Foer. Alex in his broken English with several unreliable incidents, in fact, narrates the novel.

The purpose of the research is to investigate how historical generalizations or claims become unable to carry fixity and truth behind any occurrences. At the same time, the study's focus is on how a predetermined principle behind various human conditions fails to be applied in each individual condition thoroughly. Since antiquity, some rationalists, historians and political thinkers have created the fixed knowledge, ideologies, truths and principles but such canonical boundaries are being questioned and demolished in the course of time. So, this research aims to create radical thought and action to question and break such monolithic and canonical boundaries through the character of Alex.

Everything is Illuminated questions the existence of the contemporary grand narrative inside the story of Alex, which also helps to question human history. Human history and truth are taken as the matter of truth and reliable but they are unable to be

fixed and to be applied in each case due to changeability of time and truth. Various ideological characteristics, incomprehensible nature of human phenomena, impossibility of certainty, and changeable nature of memories in the narration of Alex appear as unreliable.

The study dramatizes the logic of historical truth and generalizations of principles about human condition. Alex, a character of the novel, travels over his long course of life to find truth or conclusion. He memorizes and examines the time and events in his life such as world war, his escape from concentration camp, sex, separation, re-meeting, job and makes his own history but without any proofs. He finds no historical fixity and true general principles behind the human conditions. He finally comes to question and deconstruct the notion of historicity and certain principles behind the phenomena of human life. Such issues in the novel examine the problem in historicity and generalization on human conditions and raise the issue of deconstruction of both of historicism and new historicism and authoritative general principle about human life. How do the so-called rationalists, historians and authoritative institutions create false history? How are fixed canonical boundaries created by the certain person in the power? Why historical truth cannot be created? How generalizations about history and human conditions fail to speak the truths? Why and how such canonical boundaries are questioned and demolished in the course of time? How pre-determined fixed general knowledge and principles cannot be applied in each time and each particular case? These are some of the questions, this research raises to solve.

Jonathan Safran Foer travels to Ukraine to find the woman who may or may not have saved his father from the Nazis in his village. He hires Alex as his personal translator, a young Ukrainian man, to help him in his quest. Alex leads him to

Trachimbrod, which is now a deserted field. He tells them the story of how the Nazis brutally murdered all the townspeople. However all his projections of historical incidents come out to be fallible in the course of time. Many critics have given different criticisms in this novel. Critic Donald Cromwell puts forwards his concept about Foer's discussion about memory and history in the novel as:

In addressing these questions, Foer's voice is potently enigmatic when objective details are purposely left out. He spares on physical details as if to shy away from the hard facts that memory can't provide. The only physical detail we get about any of Alex's statement is the way they wear their hair. Dialogue and gossip instead form the basis of what Alex remembers, which makes nearly every conversation doubly interpreted. As Alex says later in life, All my 'conclusions' are reversible. (21)

Donald talks about the feeble memory of Alex in this commentary. Another critic Daniel Hartman has analyzed the novel from the perspective of the memory. Memory, individual rather than collective, accounts for who we are and what we have become.

In addition, early memory is particularly valuable, though it can be misconstrued. Its influence can persist throughout adult life, though what is cause and what effect may be difficult to judge. In this short but compelling novel Hartman tracks the origin of one particular memory through a long and apparently uneventful life towards an explanation that leaves traces of unease that are difficult to dismiss. In this connection, he further adds:

The facts are quite simple. Three school-friends, of whom the narrator, Alex, is one, are joined by a fourth, Adrian Finn, who is much cleverer

than any of them. Nor can he understand why Alex's mother should leave him a small legacy and the news that she possesses . . . Alex's diary, which was the virtual gallery of incidents of her own life. (52)

What remains in his memory is the discomfort he felt on that weekend, a discomfort he cannot explain even at an advanced age. The clue might lie in the diary, but attempts to get hold of it are unavailing. He is up against an initial misalliance to which others are being added, containing the same characters but no further explanation. However the present research does not go against the abovementioned criticisms, rather it seeks to find out the dialectics of the present grand narrative in every respect. Peter Childs confirms Foer as a "serious writer in his sensitivity to exploring issues facing contemporary humanism and liberalism such as the challenges of living in a changing world, the ability to create a balance between individual freedom and moral responsibility" (02). He regards Foer as one of the key figures of contemporary English fiction. Peter Child again comments that Foer's "opens the novel to a psychological realm in which the sense of crisis was felt focuses on a detailed discussion on the binary of Darwinism and literature in *Everything is Illuminated*" (25). Child briefly draws parallels between historical accuracy in representations of World War II and the events Holocaust in the text drawing comparisons to other historical texts and news media clippings. He convincingly shows how Foer reflects human consciousness of moral being in which we seek to find unity out of randomness, order out of chaos, and to pursue 'truth' in the process. For Child, the novel should emulate this dynamic moral thought.

The study draws on the concept of New Historicism to question pre-established legal and formal principles behind any specific human conditions as the novel questions those issues. To be specific, Stephen Greenblatt's ideas of fictious

nature of history is applied to make the thesis prove the hypothesis. It also uses the Foucauldian concept of discursive knowledge and Derridian concept of polemic nature of language to challenge the hitherto grand narrative and to prove the fictionalization of history in the novel *Everything is Illuminated*.

New historicism, which emerged in the late 1970s, rejects both traditional historicism's marginalization of literature and new criticism's enshrinement of the literary text in a timeless dimension beyond history. For new historical critics, a literary text does not embody the author's intention or illustrate the spirit of the age that produced it, as traditional literary historians asserted. New historicists ask, "How has the event been interpreted?" and "what do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?" (Veese 288). New historicists, strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact. There is no such thing as a presentation of facts; there is only interpretation. Furthermore, new historicists argue that reliable interpretations are, for a number of reasons, difficult to produce. Any two historians may disagree about what constitutes progress and what does not for these terms are matters of definition. The main concept of new historicism is that new historicists believe in the impossibility of objective analysis. Discourse is a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience. Although the word discourse has roughly the same meaning as the word ideology, and the two terms are often used interchangeably, the word discourse draws attention to the role of language as the vehicle of ideology. New historicism views historical accounts as narratives, as stories, that are inevitably biased according to the point of view, conscious or unconscious, for those who write them. The more unaware historians are of their biases—that is, the more "objective" they think are—the more those biases are able to control their narratives.

Michael Foucault is quite possibly the most influential critic of the last quarter-century. His interest in history is about nonlinearity of history. His enterprise is essentially to historical discourse and to textualized history. Foucault refuses to see history in terms of linearity and development. Rather, he sees it in terms of a kind of power struggle. Power for Foucault is not necessarily a repressive, tyrannical things; it is a generative, productive force. Power is that which binds together the disparate forces of a society (even though that binding is illusory). No event stems from a single, coherent cause, but is the product of a vast network of signification and 'power'. This is evident in his volume *Discipline and Punish*(1997).

Stephen Greenblatt's brilliant studies of the Renaissance have established him as the major figure commonly associated with New Historicism. He in his book *Poetics of Culture* takes history as a text that is interpreted by different cultures to fit the ideological needs of their own power structures, which is a new historical concern. In this context, new historicism might be defined as the history of stories cultures tell themselves about themselves for Greenblatt. Or, as a corrective to some traditional historical accounts, new historicism might be defined as the history of lies cultures tell themselves. Thus, there is no history, in the traditional sense of the term. There are only representations of history for him. Likewise, another critic Louis A.Montrose takes history as texts and textualization of history. His emphasis on a dynamic, temporal model of culture and ideology-a ceaseless jostling among dominant and subordinate positions, a ceaseless interplay of continuity and change-such a perspective opens both the object and the practice of cultural poetics to history.

Everything is Illuminated is about the elusiveness of identity and the treachery of memory, regret and the hope of redemption. Though its atmosphere is dreamlike, it actually is hyper-realistic, portraying with enigmatic precision of a very

high order “real” life as each of us actually experiences it. Thus, the novel is the first person account of physically deformed narrator Alex. He wants to account the historical truth and personal truth as real eyewitness. However her all efforts topple down like the house of cards.

New Historicists, greatly influenced by Michel Foucault’s concept of discursive analysis of Power relation gives another strategy of political reading of the texts. The power relations are reflected through discourses, which do not find overt manifestations but implicitly expressed in the text. Alex the narrator of the novel is Translator in his occupation. Alex is Jewish intellectual educated in Western philosophy, a one-eyed man from Ukraine. He claims that he is the future author of the greatest biography ever written of H.G. Wells’s. Throughout the novel he meditates on the human condition, past, present, and future. He accounts about holocaust and second Great War. He is an observer and a half-blind prophet in a time of social decay. Alex sees the world through the erudite eyes, his mind, and his heart. He filters the world through his intellect. And yet, the truths he knows are intuitive, and he realizes that value in life is found through making and acknowledging the human connection and bond, and living up to the spiritual and moral truths of the “human contract” (43). Finally he himself tells that there is not demarcation between fiction and facts.

Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* depicts the narrative of Alex. The novel begins in goofiness and ends in silence and memory. How it gets from one to the other is the subject of the journey undertaken by three men and a dog into the secrets of the past. Alex and his grandfather (also named Alex) drive American Jews named Jonathan in search of their roots to the places where many of their ancestors died. The trip through a bewildering but beautiful Ukrainian countryside involves a Soviet-era car

that may not exactly have air bags. The grandfather is the driver, although he claims to be blind and insists on going everywhere with his "seeing eye bitch," whose name is Sammy. Alex's English seems learned from a thesaurus that was one word off. He tortures words to force them into sentences from which they try to escape. Whatever Alex narrates in the novel seems to be false and discursive only.

The concept of new historicism was developed from the concept of genealogy developed by Fredrich Nietzsche. Later Foucault developed the concept of new historicism questioning the old archeological model of history. Historicists, greatly influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of discursive analysis of Power relation, come to give another strategy of political reading of the texts. The power relations get reflected through discourses which do not find overt manifestations but implicitly expressed in the text. Foucault further focused upon the intricately structured power relations in a given culture at a given time to demonstrate, how that society controls its member through constructing and defining what appears to be universal. It implies that New Historicists "aspired to a politics of culture" which is covertly manifested in a text because power structure is administered by the state. "The state's control of its citizenry was internal rather than external. The state subjected its people by creating them as subjects, devising fixed categories under which people could be described and thus controlled" (18). This was the conjunction Foucault evoked as "Power Knowledge" (Foucault 86). Foucault observes History as the discourse between the social and the aesthetic circular in his text *Discipline and Punish*. He further defines history as:

The final traits of history is its affirmation with knowledge as perspective. Historians take unusual pains to erase the element in their work that reveal their ground in a particular time and place, their

preferences in a controversy the unavoidable obstacles of their passion.

Nietzsche's version of historical sense is explicit in its perspective and acknowledge in its system of injustice.(90)

Foucault attempts to discover the system of particular discourse and relate it with the study of power and knowledge. He interprets it as essential historical discourse and textualization of history. He refuses history in terms of linearity and development. Rather he observes history in terms of power struggle. Historical continuity for Foucault is paradoxically discontinuity. Knowledge is not knowledge of self rather it is only perspective.

The very beginning of *Everything is Illuminated* arouses feeble situation of the protagonist. Jonathan's grandfather's biography is conflicting with narrator's. As a Holocaust survivor, he lays claim to an altogether deeper resonance and dignity: "Alex's grandfather had a symbolic character. He, personally, was a symbol. His friends and family had made him a judge and a priest" (12). He gains this symbolic dimension because, like someone in a myth, he came back from the death. However, he is reluctant to claim the authority that seems to belong to him as a survivor. His life seems sorted out, a chain of little victories and failures with no real unresolved past mysteries.

Alex fails to capture the reality and lost in the maze-like experiences. He is blind due to misshapen of gun accident. In Greek myth, Tiresias's blindness is the price of his ability to see the future, but Alex, who has lost only one eye, seems to have gained only partial insight into the cosmos—enough to ask questions, not enough to find answers. This incomplete mysticism is captured in one of the novel's most memorable passages, when Alex sees some illegible graffiti on a vacant building: "Most scrawls could be ignored. These for some reason caught on with Alex

as pertinent. Eloquent. Of what? Of future nonbeing . . . But also of the greatness of eternity which shall lift us from this present shallowness” (45).

Everything is Illuminated is loaded with the Alex’s past activities and his present responses. He looks back and tries to find truth about events which happened in the past not so much to him, but to people with whom he was once connected. He tries to find out what exactly happened and how he was personally involved in it. The novel is concerned almost exclusively with memories. For Alex, there is no evidence to support or disprove truthfulness of his memories in the first part of the book, apart from his own reflections of their reliability. In addition, Alex gives the reliability of his memories many thoughts. Through the whole novel, Alex challenges the exactness of memory, either by his own thinking, or through his recollections of discussions between his friends. Alex spent most of the interwar years as a journalist in London, revolving around with English intellectuals. In particular, he was good friends with English journalist, however he claims that he was good friend of H.G. Wells. However, about this incident there is no objective record.

Alex’s constant questioning of truthfulness of his own memory makes the reader aware of his unreliability. Paradoxically, at the same time, it gives Alex an aura of frankness and honesty. Alex of course is an unreliable character, but his unreliability seems to result from fallibility of memory, not from a twisted personality and intentional lying. Alex seems to be as honest with the reader just as he is with himself. This appears as the problem, however, because it is often hard for her to confess himself bad feelings or to recall unpleasant or shameful memories. This tendency can be observed:

It's true, I am afraid of dying. I am afraid of the world moving forward without me, of my absence going unnoticed, or worse, being some

natural force propelling life on. Is it selfish? Am I such a bad person for dreaming of a world that ends when I do? I don't mean the world ending with respect to me, but every set of eyes closing with mine (Foer62).

Problem in objective truth is accepted by Alex himself. Truth is no more than representation. It is difficult to reach nearer to objective truth. One should be satisfied with symbols.

Alex sometimes turns to the reader in search of compassion or in an attempt to be emphatic. Indeed, for a man who survived the Holocaust, Alex seems very little interested in social and political questions. He is not an abstemious man. Whatever may have been the statement for Alex about sexual intercourse he is not reliable in his account. His perception towards Gruner, a rich, beautiful and promiscuous young woman whose sexuality is offensively ripe justifies the same fact of his sexual attraction: "In Angela you confronted sensual womanhood without remission. You smelled it, too" (78). That comment on sexual smell is not new for Alex.

Pioneers of New historicism theory are Foucault and Greenblatt. The New Historicists have drawn upon Foucauldian tenet of discursive nature of literature which is a cultural construct; however, a complete harmony in society is illusory because constant but repressed struggles keep on running parallel between powerful and powerless in the society. In literature, the suppressive and marginalized voices against dominant power structure and stricture is heard implicitly, meaning thereby, text does not display the dominant and overt history, however hidden history or histories are intertwined in literature.

Stephen Greenblatt allows the strategy of speaking with the dead, as an ethnographer and writer speak with the living being while alive, so the reader / critic

and New Historicist can speak with the writer through his text, thus positioning the new historicist as a second interpreter. Thus a New Historicist tries to read the text of a past author who was present in his own time as an ethnographer. Seturaman remarks that this condition does not allow a New Historicist to be objective in his study of the work composed in remote past: “The New Historicism, while trying to understand history cannot be objective and we can never recover the past without our own present self modifying what used to be considered objective and stable” (574). Likewise, Jackson too speaks with the same canon as he writes:

Nevertheless, as readers of past literature, we are demonstrably decayed because we do not bring to it the experience that it required for its imaginative and intellectual realization in its own time; instead we bring the experience that is required for the realization of literature in our time, an experience in which only fragments of the earlier experience survive. The consequence is in several respects analogous to the antique statue’s loss of limbs. (38)

Just as an antique and broken image needs repair to come in its previous condition, similarly the text can be actualized by the reader with his present perception because through this he tries to reconstruct the past with his imaginative faculty, while at the same time maintaining a close nexus with the present too. The suggestion being that the New Historicists lay emphasis on the necessity of awareness of the critic while analyzing a text because he belongs to present but has to read the text written in the past and has to reconstruct the past with two sorts of historicity working parallel.

The narrative of Alex shows that how his memories which did not fit into his own perception have altered the incidents of the novel. He is “a man of twenty-plus, and at leisure” (Foer 45) wakes and prepares breakfast in his bedroom on Manhattan's

West Side. It is early in the morning, but Alex cannot sleep, partly because he is obsessed with the pickpocket he has seen at work on the bus he takes to. He notices that pickpocket as "a powerful Negro in a camel's-hair coat, dressed with extraordinary elegance" (Foer 48). He has cornered on that man and is going through an old man's wallet, "still in rapid currents with his heart, like an escaping creature racing away from him"(49). Alex pulls the cord and gets off the bus, hoping that the pickpocket will not follow. He dodges into a building and waits for a while, then makes his way to a hamburger joint where he orders a cup of tea. He does not see the pickpocket and thinks pickpocket has eluded him. "By now Alex's greatest need was for his bed. But he knew something about lying low. He learnt in Ukraine, in the war, in forests, cellars, passageways, cemeteries" (50). He fails to recognize and remember who exactly that pick pocket was? Alex has seen the pickpocket at work several times since the first sighting, but when he tried to report to the police, He fails to report the exact incident. It is Alex, however, who always found it difficult to unrest that incident of pick pocketing and perceived it as an issue. Alex also fears, that it will also happen to him, who will be "left with a lifetime of bitterness" - that is the reason, why he decided to suppress memories of that incident (50). Alex's present situation, concerning his present state of mind, it is ironic to see. What he narrates is no more than fabricated narration. Moreover, Alex's character falls rather in the category of the "social backdrop", or "cartoonist's doodle" (Smith 12).

Everything is Illuminated is a frame story; a fact that readers learn late in the plot. Part one, two, and three describes a fictional realistic universe, which is shattered in the novel's epilogue where it is revealed that the novel's protagonist is Alex. In the beginning, he explains how he has manipulated events to fit into her narrative intended to make amend for the damage of his life. The narrative, thus,

entails a historical perspective, because it is self-consciously aware of its own status as fiction and automatically questions the relationship between fiction and reality.

The novel questions what is considered the truth when fiction is presented as reality.

Postmodern theory focuses on what history and literature share, rather than what separates them:

They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic construct, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality (Hutcheon 105).

In postmodern theory, history is not considered obsolete, but is rethought as a human construct. In other words, history is a factual representation rather than a fact. It does not deny that the past existed, it only argues that history only will be accessible through text: “We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts.”(16). Historical facts will only be accessible through a representation, made available in textual form. Linda Hutcheon has coined novels that combine history with a historical perspective as ‘historiographic fiction’, because they implement a self-reflective perspective while claiming to portray historical events and personages. Hutcheon considers these novels not just metafictional, nor historical because they are both metafictionally self-reflective while speaking about real historical realities (Hutcheon 5).

Everything is Illuminated is a historical novel because of its setting, which takes place in the past. It begins in 1935 in Ukraine, then moves on to World War II, and ends in contemporary time. Jie Han and Zhenli Wang argue that the novel is

historical because of how “the fates of individuals are intermingled with the verisimilitude of history and society. And history, fact and fiction are knitted into the narrative framework” (136). What makes *Everything is Illuminated* different from the classic understanding of a historical novel is that Foer offers more information than the historian. Foer combines historical facts with fiction, therefore, automatically blurring the lines between fact and fiction. The effect is that he creates a new version of the whole by narrating the past in a new manner. As a result of this, Foer provides a number of possibilities that would have been ignored by the historians, as these are not part of the historical truth. However, Han and Wang argue that these possibilities are no less real than historical facts: “Those possibilities, whether they are a real history of the past or not, are no less real in his fictionalized world” (137). Foer especially, blurs the lines between fact and fiction in the scenes where he depicts Alex’s presentation of Second World War II. Here, he combines the historical event with his storytelling. In their article, Han and Wang count that many of Alex’s depictions of war are influenced by his father’s experiences during the Second World War, which makes his methods similar to that of the historians. While the historical facts may not be depicted mimetically, they are still historical facts because “in his fictional world, history becomes fictionalized. The writer’s design of plot and structure reflects his attitude towards history” (137). In that way, *Everything is Illuminated* becomes a historical novel with a postmodern perspective, because the intention is not to depict real life events mimetically, but to depict a representation, or a revision, rather, of the past in a new context.

The historical aspect that is added to the narrative in *Everything is Illuminated* creates a parallel between the storyline of Foer’s novel and the construction of his novel. In the construction of his novel, Foer implements historical facts (particularly

his aspect of World War II) in order to underline the history of World War II and Holocaust. Additionally, the historical aspect is added in the meta fictional frame, because Foer is using Alex to make the reader aware of the choices he has made in the process of rewriting his own historical past. Alex's presentation of World War II will never be factual and will always be a reconstruction of a factual event from the perspective of the present. The constructed nature of the depiction of World War II, therefore, serves as a parallel to Alex's plot construction. Alex can never factually represent his own historical past, but will again be a particular construction seeking to achieve a particular effect. His relationship between history as an objective, external set of events and individual experience as subjective and fallible is an interesting tension. The historical novel uses both the individual experience of the character with the historical context in order to create a multidimensional narrative as Manzoni explains "The historical novelist is required to give not just the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete. In a way you want him to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history" (3). The individual experience is the breathing flesh whilst the history is the sturdy skeleton and both novelists bring this metaphor alive in their novels.

Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* rejects the traditional historians' tendency to read straightforward narratives of progress in the historical record. Foucault adopts the term "archaeology" to designate his historical method and he articulates what he means by that term by specifying how his method differs from both traditional history and the traditional history of ideas. He further asserts:

Historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods, as if, beneath the shifts and changes of political events, they were trying to reveal the stable, almost indestructible system of checks and balances,

the irreversible processes, the constant readjustments, the underlying tendencies that gather force, and are then suddenly reversed after centuries of continuity, the movements of accumulation and slow saturation, the great silent, motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events (3).

Foucault, by contrast, argues that one should seek to reconstitute not large "periods" or "centuries" but "phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity" (4). The problem, he argues, "is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits" (5). Instead of presenting a monolithic version of a given period, Foucault argues that we must reveal how any given period reveals "several pasts, several forms of connection, several hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination" (Foucault 6). Thus historical descriptions are necessarily ordered by the present state of knowledge, they increase with every transformation and never cease, in turn, to break with themselves.

In *Everything is Illuminated*, Alex uses narrative in order to account the history, as an external set of events, to reshape it using his story. Throughout the novel, the third person narration gives the readers a false sense of reassurance. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that it is in fact Alex's perspective. Foer himself argues "How are we, as readers, to believe in the validity of the innermost thoughts and motivations of these characters when, as it turns out, they are told from the perspective of someone who has a clear interest in how we judge the story" (56). The diverse narrative perspective gives the reader a chance to experience history in different perspective based on the characters individual experience.

However, Alex believed that unlike objective sense of history, his stories were "under no obligation to the truth, he had promised no-one a chronicle" (Foer 280).

He blurs the link between history and stories and it appears that neither is telling the truth but they both work together in order to create meaning. History is created because someone has to give their account what has happened, how else one would know about the suffering of soldiers in World War II or the French Revolution and it is the person's individual experience that account is from. The account of a German in the Holocaust and a Jew would be distinctly different but it is in literature that "the only place [Alex] could be free" to create what she wishes, whatever ending she wanted, it was a place she could reshape history (Foer 289). However, he discovers that "in later years, he regretted not being more factual, not providing himself with a store of raw material. I would have been useful to know what happened, what it looked like, who was there, what was said" (Foer 280). His memory, his individual experience of history does not compare to the objective and factual idea of history, it is that "raw material" (280).

Discursive nature of truth can be further explored through Alex's character. Alex is characterized as a disabled man, who cannot distinguish between the fictive world and real life. We must remember how that presentation of Alex derives from himself. In other words, he has chosen to represent himself this way because it will give a particular effect. A critic Finney characterizes Alex as a man who lets art shape his life just as much as he shapes that life into his art: "His observation of life around him is conditioned by the fictive world that holds him in its grip" (78). He is surprised to find that the lecture is taking place in a large hall and not a small seminar room. He stands before them and began to narrate about the atmosphere of Ukraine before the Second World War:

The disgraced Usurer Yankel D took the baby girl home that evening...

He made a bed of crumpled newspaper in a deep baking pan and

gently tucked it in the oven, so that she wouldn't be disturbed by the noise of the small falls outside... When he pulled her out to feed her or just hold her, her body was tattooed with the newsprint. (Foer 243)

Alex perceives both the dream and reality in the same line. Alex's life is shaped around the books he reads and he only understands the world through familiar narratives. In the library, his first reaction is to understand the scene from a point of view he is already familiar with the incidents. The misinterpretations of events that make her notice Alex looking "so huge and wild" (Foer 123). His previous mention of him as "a maniac" is an indication that "Alex is shaped by a melodramatic imagination that originates in the books he has read" (Finnley 79). Alex draws on literature in all shapes of his life, which makes him able to disentangle his life from the things he reads in her books. Literature is intervened in every decision he makes and everything he perceives, causing him to misinterpret particular events.

Greenblatt gives such examples by describing the power and dominance of power, and its control over the knowledge, , "a second mode of subversion and its containment" is adverted: "the recording of alien voices...of alien interpretations"; in this case, that is the consequence of "the threatened extinction of the tribe" (25).

Greenblatt further elaborates:

There was no town where we had any subtle device practiced against us but that within a few days after our departure from every such town, the people began to die very fast, and many in short space...The disease was so strange that they neither knew what it was, nor how to cure it. (378)

Greenblatt comes to the conclusion that power supports "the idea that God is protecting his chosen people by killing off untrustworthy I", and that "power depends

upon the registering and even the production of such materials” (27). In relation to that, he states “power can only define itself in relation to subversion, to what is alien or other, and at the heart of power is therefore the production and subsequent containment of subversion” (64).

Narrators of *Everything is Illuminated* approach a traumatic event and the trauma it causes. It argues that the narrative strategies employed in the novel deliver a credible and moving, but dignified fictional representation of the Holocaust experience, despite the previously stated limitations. As was mentioned before, there are three story lines and two narrators in the novel; a young Jewish American writer Jonathan Safran Foer and Alexander Perchov, a Ukrainian of the same age, who is Jonathan’s guide on his travels in Ukraine. Their narratives, which are in fact two novels the protagonists write, mingle and are periodically interrupted by letters from Alex to Jonathan, which form the third narrative thread. Jonathan’s responses to these letters are never included and their actual existence is disclosed only by Alex’s comments on them. In fact, the novel is not that much about Jonathan. Even though Alex admires him and addresses him as the main “hero” of his story, Jonathan is hardly more than a listener, partly because of the fact that he comes to a country where nobody speaks his language and all the communication, including the testimonies of Lista and Grandfather at the end of the story, is retold by Alex who thus becomes the protagonist of his own narrative and is in the end the one whose life is most affected by what he learns about his family history (Foer 1). This element of mediation of a story is important for conveying historical experience in Foer’s work. Firstly, both Alex and Jonathan are the second generation of Holocaust survivors, and the experience of their grandfathers is mediated through their narratives. The fact that the readers are not forced to face the testimony directly gives them some space to

absorb the experience and be less involved in its “re-experiencing” which, as Foer argues, is what generally happens to interviewers/ listeners of Holocaust survivors (62). A more distant perception of the traumatic event is desirable since it prevents the reader from getting lost in or numbed by a firsthand experience. At the same time, Foer makes the testimony still very authentic thanks to Alex’s interpretation. For example, when Grandfather speaks for the first time about the death of his friend Herschel in the town of Kolki and Alex interprets every sentence for Jonathan, as happens here ‘Herschel is wearing a skullcap in the photograph because he was a Jew.’ ‘Herschel was a Jew.’ ‘And he was my best friend.’ ‘He was his best friend.’ ‘And I murdered him’ (234).

This exchange continues throughout the two final chapters, still conveying the traumatic experience strongly to the reader, especially when some sentences remain untranslated, that is not interpreted, to Jonathan, as if lingering between the victim and the listener, and once Grandfather’s testimony turns into an experimental stream of consciousness narrative .

There is not enough information to decide whether to believe Alex and whether to stand on his side or not. For instance, Alex did not say how and why exactly he works as a translator. There is a basic paradox in the way Foer makes use of Alex’s voice. Even as Alex disclaims the moral authority of the survivor, the logic of the novel depends on that very authority to sustain its deep criticisms of American society. Foer elides the contradiction somewhat by making Alex a very untypical Jew. There is much perplexing the kind of words Alex uses. He is a vegetarian, and in a hotel dining room he is told potatoes do not, cannot, have never, come without meat. He is finally served one boiled potato and he eats as if meat. Then he goes to his room, a narrow single bed in the midst of vast emptiness. Alex advises Jonathan to

lock his door,"There are many dangerous people who would try to steal things from Americans and also kidnap them"(67).The journey continues. Sammy a dog begins to love Jonathan. Grandfather speaks like a crusty anti-Semite, Alex covers for him in his translation. Whatever Alex narrates is no more than false narration to Jonathan.

Indeed, for a man who survived the Holocaust,Alex seems very little interested in social and political questions. The disaster he sees unfolding around him is spiritual, moral, and above all Alex's view of his past is challenged only by his own thoughts about (un)reliability of memory. He does not have any other sources of information about the past than his memories - no tangible records, and with people who could remember the same events as he is either no longer in contact, or they are dead. So he does not expect to find out much about his past anymore. Yet, with the strange inheritance, new questions arise. He does not deserve knowledge about holocaust nor about world war.He does not know anything about the situational context in which it was written, he does not know what precedes and what follows. Yet he tries for its interpretation, especially of the last, unfinished sentence. At the point, Alex starts to think, whether his settling for a content, peaceable life was a good option. "Yes indeed if Alex had seen more clearly, acted more decisively, held to truer moral values, settled less easily for a passive peaceableness which he first called happiness and later contentment. If Alex hadn't been fearful, hadn't counted on the approval of others for his own self-approval . . ." (Foer 88-89). As Alex searches for tangible evidence of his past, his old feelings start to reappear and with them, long buried, suppressed memories. "Just when you think, everything is a matter of decrease, of subtraction and division, your brain, your memory may surprise you. As if it's saying: Don't imagine you can rely on some comforting process of gradual decline – life's much more complicated than that" (Foer 112). When his old feelings

for his past renew, the old memories connected with it come up. All these memories are strongly connected with emotions, which he forgot thanks to his “instinct for self preservation”(Foer 112).

Again, apart from political reading of the text, New Historicists also suggest that since literary text embodies numerous voices and is discursive in nature, hence, an innovative process of reading is but a quintessential methodology to be adopted and that best method is of dismantling the text, which is the prominent feature of deconstruction.

This validates that fact that after dismantling the texts the multiplicity of meaning be put forth “On the one hand, therefore, historicism is suspicious of the stories the past tells about itself; on the other hand, it is equally suspicious of its own partisanship. It offers up both its past and its present for ideological scrutiny.” (Hamilton³). This is because “the textuality of the text leads to its textuality is closer to deconstructive method of studying the text through its ‘polysemy’ and expanding traces” (Finnley 223). Since text is the product of society and embodies it and hence contains multiple meanings as Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of ‘dialogic’ nature of text overlaps with this. Roger Webster says that language for Bakhtin has the potentiality of multiplicity because language “for Bakhtin is not in any sense fixed and stable but always in a state of flux; meaning is never singular and uncontested but rather plural and contested” (40). According to Bakhtin language is dialogic and the text displays ‘many voiced’ and ‘heteroglossia.’

Memory in the plot is covered by the interconnection with other themes and by the importance of the theme for the story. As Alex searches for tangible evidence of his past, his old feelings start to reappear and with them, long buried, suppressed memories. “Just when you think, everything is a matter of decrease, of subtraction

and division, your brain, your memory may surprise you. As if it's saying: Don't imagine you can rely on some comforting process of gradual decline – life's much more complicated than that" (Foer 112). When his old feelings for holocaust, the old memories connected with it come up. All these memories are strongly connected with emotions, which he forgot due to "instinct for self preservation" (Foer112).

At the end of the novel Jonathan finds a letter sent Alex. , Alex confides in Jonathan the details of his life in Ukraine. At first, he exaggerates and brags about how many women with whom he is "carnal" and how much money he spends at nightclubs. He also praises Jonathan effusively, telling him how honored he is to write for a great American writer. In time, he becomes honest with Jonathan, explaining that he is actually a virgin and prefers sitting on the beach to spending money at nightclubs. He also begins to give Jonathan some critiques in return for his own. Alex hates the fact that no one ever gets what he wants in Jonathan's writing. Alex tells Jonathan that he and all his relatives are cowards, because they choose to live a life "once-removed," never really feeling things fully. As a sign of his disapproval, he sends back Jonathan's latest payment with the letter. Then he tells Jonathan that Grandfather committed suicide. Alex ends the letter by apologizing to Jonathan for being so blunt with him. We come learn more about the circumstances of Alex's own life through this note. For a time after Alex returned from visit, he notices about his nerves, "his claim . . . damage to his nervous system as well as his eye" (Foer 256). Yet "once all the questions are answered, the reader is left in the same state that Alex is in the book's final pages-floored at life's essential mysteries, and frustrated that they cannot be relived" (Hartman 12). Whatever Alex narrates seems to be a pile of lie. We learn more about the circumstances of Alex's blindness and

mental dementia. It removed Alex's protective shield of self-deception and brought a strong feelings of remorse and unrest.

Everything is Illuminated examines the limitations of memory. Memory can be deceiving, as when Jonathan effort to recovers lost memories of his grandfather's life through the narration of Alex. He sees memories as the key to unlocking his family's secrets. By learning about his family's past, he efforts to learn about himself. However memory can also be confining. When the people of Ukraine become obsessed with. Each memory begets another, and soon they cannot distinguish between memory and current events. They are immobilized by memory, like Lista the old woman. Lista considers herself the keeper of the memory of Jonathan's Grandfather. She tells Jonathan that survivors are not lucky, meaning that, like herself, they bear memory as a burden. Like the townspeople, she must spend the rest of her life locked in the pain and confusion of memory instead of reaching for new opportunities. In a different way, memory is confining for Grandfather. His memories of the war are so painful that he refuses to acknowledge them as a result he cannot distinguish between fiction and facts.

Finally, the theme of history in the novel discussed occurs on two levels – on the level of the narration and on the level of the plotline. In the narration, the theme of memory is implemented by the unreliable narrator Alex who tells story depending largely or exclusively on his subjective recollections of the past. Foer essentially creates a plot with the purpose of presenting how narratives are constructed by plot structures. He does this by creating a character like Alex, who is an 'author' himself. Alex's story is autobiographical, however, with his manipulations of events we learn that he has essentially created a plot structure, which has the purpose of achieving particular effects. Additionally, it is evident that he lets the plot actually produce

events that never happened, again, emphasizing the constructed nature of her narrative. The different ontological levels of control in the story serve to understand how all narratives are plot structures, which has the purpose of creating particular effects. For example, chosen to let Alex end up with vascular dementia, which lets him have an ethical dimension to his narrative. Alex's narrative remains constructed and fabricated than reliable truth.

Works Cited

- Child, Peter. *Criticism and Inquiry*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Cromwell, Donald. "The Poetics and Aesthetics of Saul Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*." *English Studies* 90.2 (2006) :707-720. Print
- Daniel, Hartman. *Intertextuality: The New Critical Idiom*. New York :Routledge. 2008. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Print.
- Finnley, Nicol. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. England: Cambridge University Press. 2009. Print.
- Forer, Jonathann Safran. *Everything Is Illuminated*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Foucault, Michael. *Discipline and Punish*. London: Routledge. 1997. Print.
- - - . *Archeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Hamilton, Paul. *Historicism*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Han, J. & Wang, Z. (2014). "Postmodern Strategies in Saul L Foer's Major Novels." *Advances in Literary Study* 2.4(2007) :134-139. Print.
- Hutcheon, L. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction*. New York: 2004. Print.
- Jakson, Ellam. *Saul L Foer's Everything is Illuminated: A Reader's Guide*. London, England: Continuum. 2006. Print.
- Rayan, Angelo. "To Make a Novel: The Construction of a Critical Readership in Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*." *Studies in the Novel* 41.5(2009):88-105. Print.
- Seturman, Daniel. *The English Novel: An Introduction*. Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing. 2010. Print.

Veese, H. Aram. *The Newhistoricism*. New York :Routledge, 1989. Print.

Webster, Roger. "The Modernism of Saul L Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*."

Modern Fiction Studies 56.3(2005): 473-495.Print.