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THE HISTORICAL NOVEL: RE-CREATING PAST REALITIES THROUGH FICTION “A BOOK A DAY KEEPS REALITY AWAY”

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Abstract

Fiction and reality are two terms that seem to be in continuous opposition. Although the two worlds appear disparate, fiction and reality are linked together in more ways than thought. A literary text opens up a means to access reality; often it is a reflection of a reality we claim to exist. This paper, thus, explores how selected contemporary historical novels creatively (re-) construct alternative realities of WWII events as opposed to an assumed fixed reality presented in the grand narratives of history. The novels seek to retrieve the mini-narratives of long lost, subdued and/or marginalized stories of minor participants in those events that constitute the grand narratives of history. As such, these novels become the voice of the silenced, and discursively/collectively establish a subgenre that acts as a tool of (narrative/fictional) empowerment.

Keywords

WWII fiction, lost and unknown mini-narratives, grand narrative, Euro-centric vision, marginalized geographical locations, unknown massacres, hidden histories

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1. INTRODUCTION

Fiction and reality are two terms that seem to be in continuous opposition. Although the two worlds appear disparate, fiction and reality are linked together in more ways than thought. A literary text opens up a means to access reality; often it is a reflection of a reality we claim to exist. Recent scholarship has opened up new theories regarding the relationship between reality and fiction as “contemporary interdisciplinarity is part and parcel of new cognitive strategies transcending the traditional territorial division” as stated by Dolezel (1998, p.785). Thus, the dichotomy between reality and fiction is being questioned in contemporary scholarship, and the relationship between fiction and reality is perceived in a different light than viewed before.

Wolfgang Iser (1975) in an article entitled “The Reality of Fiction” explains that literature is generally regarded as fictitious writing and that the very term ‘fiction’ signifies that the words on the printed page are not meant to reflect any given reality in the empirical world, but are to represent something which is not given. He states that as mentioned above, fiction and reality “have always been classified as pure opposites, and so a good deal of confusion arises when one seeks to define the ‘reality’ of literature” (p.1). Iser further explicates:

...the basic and misleading assumption is that fiction is an antonym of reality. In view of the tangled web of definitions resulting from this juxtaposition, the time has surely come to cut the thread altogether and replace ontological arguments with functional, for what is important to readers, critics, and authors is what literature does and not what it means. (p.1)

As such, Iser (1975) proposes that it is about time fiction and reality stop being regarded as two opposite terms; instead “if fiction and reality are to be linked, it must be in terms not of opposition but of communication, for the one is not the mere opposite of the other –fiction is a means of telling us something about reality” (Iser, 1975, p.1). Taking Iser’s argument into account, literature is thus to be viewed through its function and the effect it leaves on the reader. Arguably, literature opens up a new reality to the reader; a reality that may encompass a new possible world that the literary text evokes in the reader’s mind. In other words, the power of fiction is the way it transforms into a new reality, a new possible world in the mind of the reader to the extent that there is no longer a division between the actual reality and the possible one. Dolezel (1998) explains “the whole system of logic has been reformulated on the assumption that our actual world is surrounded by an infinity of other possible worlds,” and “the universe of discourse is not restricted to the actual world, but spreads over uncountable possible, nonactualized

worlds" (p.787). Dolezel further states that according to contemporary thinking, "possible worlds do not await discovery in some remote or transcendent depository but are constructed by the creative activities of human mind and hands" (p.787). He explains:

Possible-worlds semantics insists that fictional worlds are not imitations or representations of the actual world (realia) but sovereign realms of possibilia; as such, they establish diverse relationships to the actual world, situate themselves at a closer or further distance from reality. They range from realistic worlds closely resembling the actual world to those violating its laws – fantastic worlds. (p.788)

In this sense, fiction's ability to create other possible worlds gives it enormous power in the way it can become a new reality to the reader and writer alike whether it is a replica of the actual world or a diversion from it. Moreover, according to Dolezel (1998) "fictional worlds of literature are a specific kind of possible worlds. They are artifacts produced by textual poiesis [which is the activity of bringing something into being that did not exist before] and preserved and circulating in the medium of fictional texts"(p.787). He further contends that all possible worlds are constructs of human productive activities, so the fictional worlds of literature are also products of textual poiesis (p.789). Thus, by writing a text, explicates Dolezel, the author creates a fictional world that had not existed before the act of writing, and like most human activity, textual poiesis occurs in the actual world. However, the constructs of fictional realms show properties, structures, and modes of existence that are independent of the purposes, structures, and existence of the actual world. As such, Dolezel explains that possible-worlds semantics offers a vision of literature as a perennial creation of "fictional landscapes," "fostering the plurality of the worlds" (p. 789-790).

Consequently, creating new fictitious realities is possible through the power of imagination combined with an observant eye to intricate details happening around in real life. Fiction, in this sense, merges everyday details and crafts them into new possible worlds of time, place and characters via imagination. These new worlds offer the reader new purposes and functions as juxtaposed to the actual world.

A particular experimentation in merging fact and fiction and in creating new possible and fictional landscapes is the literary genre known as the historical novel. Nishevita J. Murthy (2014), in the preface of her book *Historicizing fiction/ Fictionalizing History*, explicates:

The historical novel remains an enduringly popular genre of writing, never ceasing to tease readers with its literary appeal that combines imagination and factualism. Since its development in the eighteenth century, the historical novel has seen several transformations and has assimilated new techniques to raise crucial questions on literary theory and criticism, fact and fiction, identity, time, history, the reading and writing of 'grand' narratives and their relationship to subcultures. (ix)

It should not then come as a surprise that the historical novel has always been a very popular genre among readers ever since its first debut. The constituents that make up this genre have opened up new ways to perceive the relationship between fact and fiction and the effect it leaves on the reader. Moreover, throughout its development, the historical novel has gone through various changes. In this sense, Murthy (2014) argues that the historical fiction has widened its "scope to encompass descriptions of the past, war narratives, counterfactual and microhistories, romance and children's fiction, metafictional narratives and pastiche" (preface, ix). He adds "literary conventions like realism, modernism and then postmodernism, have left their indelible mark on the genre, introducing thematic techniques that influence thematic approaches to the past" (preface, ix). This incessant reinvention, continues Murthy, renders the genre trans-disciplinary in the way it represents, intervenes and engages with the past (preface, ix). As such, the historical novel, in its postmodern version, has now a plurality of functions. Murthy quotes McHale who explains that the postmodern historical novel "reinterprets historical records and changes the content of history by challenging orthodox narratives of reality. The methods, conventions and norms of historical fiction" are revised and transformed. Pursuing the discussion further, McHale states that postmodern fiction violates "the constraints on "classic" historical fiction by visibly contradicting the public record of "official" history" (cited in Murthy, p.12). He explains:

...while official history is the tale of the winners, the postmodern historical novel attempts to restore the lives of the "lost groups" (the peasantry and working-class, women, minorities) to the historical record that animates historical research. (cited in Murthy, 2014, p.12)

McHale's description of the postmodern historical fiction and its functions seem to echo the exact aim of this research. This paper, thus, explores how selected contemporary historical novels creatively (re-) construct alternative realities of WWII events as opposed to an assumed fixed reality presented in the grand narratives of history. The novels seek to retrieve the mini-narratives of long lost, subdued and/or marginalized stories of minor participants in those events that constitute the grand narratives of history. As such, these novels become the voice of the silenced and discursively/collectively establish a subgenre that acts as a tool of (narrative/fictional) empowerment.

2. ANALYSIS

The novels selected for study - Captain Correlli's Mandolin (2004) by Louis De Bernieres, The Good Italian (2014) by Stephen Burke, and All the Light We Cannot See (2014) by Anthony Doerr - are each located in a marginalized geographical location and capture moments of a great crisis in history i.e. WWII.

What is quite intriguing is the fact that all the selected writers choose to set their narratives in small remote communities during a tremendous historical occurrence in WWII. The first is on the small Greek island of Cephalonia, the second in the African continent specifically in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the third in a small French village, Saint-Malo and Zollverein, a coalmining village in the outskirts of Germany. In the three novels, certain lost or excluded moments of WWII happenings and experiences along with the effects WWII had left on both the inhabitants and the fighting soldiers involved are forcibly brought to light. The horrific incidents of WWII described in the novels have not been discussed thoroughly in history books; a fact that drove all authors to give voice to those terrible circumstances in the name of those neglected and overlooked narratives of WWII.

As a result, the novels, as worded by Murthy (2014) encourage questions on the nature of the relationship between fiction and history and bring about the questions of whether fictional representation simply represent history within an imaginative framework, or whether it has the power to interrogate, critique and change (our knowledge of) reality [or history] (xi). Indeed, the selected writers creatively implement various techniques and thematic innovations in their novels to bring about those lost and unknown stories that are marginalized by the grand narratives of history. Thus, the selected historical novels question the integrity of the historical information (as we know it) and open other perspectives to have a glimpse of other possible WWII realities. These WWII realities are made possible in the realms of postmodernism that have deconstructed the way historical facts were interpreted before. "Postmodernism has challenged the objectivist tendencies of old historiography," explains Murthy (2014) and has made "the process of documenting reality increasingly fluid and undefined" (xi). Taking the aforementioned into consideration, the selected writers use postmodernist beliefs in describing and depicting past WWII moments with the aid of fiction. Consequently, the historical novel of today has provided the best coverage for their experimentation with reality and fiction. Along the same lines, Murthy (2014) further explicates:

From the literary perspective, similarly, the historical novel's focus has shifted from realism to a postmodernist flouting of realist norms, which has led to the questioning of absolute narratives, urging plurality of perspectives in fiction. These two approaches, in fiction and history, converge at the level of representation as the means of comprehending reality. (xi)

As such, each of the selected writers uses the new historical novel - which arguably is subversive in fictional and historical representation - since it allows them to take liberty in depicting history. The writers bring factual realities to build fictional plots that in turn become new possible worlds of WWII to the contemporary reader.

Thus, the three selected novels are thematically linked in two main ways: first, all the novels re-visit WWII, not to highlight its grand happenings, but to tip the scale and highlight instances of the war that involve mini-stories of ordinary people who are caught up in that grand historical occurrence. Second, the novels choose remote or new geographical locations and events during WWII that are marginalized and kept in the dark away from the grand histories known by contemporary readers.

3.1. Retrieving the Mini-Narratives of WWII

In all the selected novels, the writers try to bring about the mini-stories of the ordinary locals who are living during WWII and the way this grand occurrence has dramatically changed their lives. With those mini-stories, the writers try to satisfy the curiosity of the contemporary reader about what ordinary life was like in that period. The novels appeal to the reader's wish to experience and imagine life at that particular grand happening through the fictionalizing of historical facts. In the midst of WWII events, the writers of the selected novels devise characters that are both imaginary and real, and the stories they tell are those of the ordinary that needs to be brought to light.

In Captain Corelli's Mandolin, De Bernieres takes the reader to the island of Cephalonia, a beautiful Greek island on the Mediterranean Sea. As little is known about what happened on the island during WWII, De Bernieres feels that it is his duty to bring those events to the public through a novel. He explicates that "there are an infinite number of untold histories waiting quietly for questioning authors to pervert them into fictions, aided and abetted by characters who mysteriously turn up like ghosts, and insist that you commit them on paper" (De Bernieres, 2001, p.18). Indeed, the writer does just that by writing his best-selling novel Captain Corelli after he had visited the island while on vacation. He discovered that Cephalonia was occupied by the Italians during WWII, and the gruesome events that happened on the island fired his imagination to create a fictitious love story along the devastating war circumstances. This was made possible after De Bernieres discovered that the Islanders and the Italians had got on reasonably well. De Bernieres confesses that a tragic love story across the barricades is not entirely an original idea (2001, p.9); however, the love that the Greek heroine Pelagia shares with the Italian soldier Captain Corelli resembles the love of ordinary people whose love is sacrificed because of a stronger exterior force like WWII. As the events in the novel are unfolded and become more drastic with the occupation of the Germans, the two lovers feel the pressure of the war on their love, and they start to dream of a life after the war. In the chapter entitled "A Time of Innocence," De Bernieres describes the way the two lovers steal time to meet in the dark after curfew subjecting their lives to danger. Both would dream about a life after the war:

After the war, when we are married, shall we live in Italy? There are nice places. My father thinks I wouldn't like it, but I would. As long as I'm with you. After the war, if we have a girl, can we call her Lemoni? After the war, if we have a son, we've got to call him Iannis. After the war, I'll speak to the children in Greek, and you can speak to them in Italian, and that they'll grow bilingual. After the war I'm going to write a concerto, and I'll dedicate it to you. After the war I'm going to train to be a doctor, and I don't care if they don't let women in, I'm still going to do it... After the war I'll love you, after the war I'll love you, I'll love you forever after the war. (p. 270)

The significance of the above extract is how these two lovers remind the reader that they are like any ordinary people who dream of a peaceful future away from all bloody wars that are hindrances in the path of their love. Before the war, De Bernieres reveals that Corelli was a musician that wanted to compose and become famous, and Pelagia wanted to become a doctor. Both their dreams are forced to a halt when WWII barges unannounced into their ordinary lives. Corelli enlists in the army thinking it is a place that offered much free time, and Pelagia has to stick to chores that are not beyond the kitchen or house. Thus, De Bernieres re-imagines how the island's routine is disrupted and turned upside down when Greece is plunged into fighting in WWII and when the Italian invaders arrive. To make things worse, Nazis, who are the Italians' allies, also come to the island, and this turns the place into a big enclosed prison for the island's inhabitants as the German soldiers prove cold-hearted and cruel, unlike the Italian soldiers. In chapter 62 of the novel, De Bernieres compares the situation of the island during the Italian occupation to that of the German's. He states that of the German occupation, little is said except that it caused the islanders to love the Italians they had lost although it seldom happened that people would have any affection towards their perpetrators. There were no more Italian soldiers escaping the boring life of the garrison to work in the vines beside the Greek farmers. There were no more football matches between cheating sides. There were no more flirtations with girls by bombardiers whose chins were unshaven, and there were no more inefficient military police that caused traffic jams in the square by waving their arms and whistling at everyone at the same time (p.357). All that the islanders remember was that "the Germans were not human beings. They were automata without principles, machines finely tuned into the art of pillage and brutality, without any passion except the love of strength, and without belief except in their natural right to grind an inferior race beneath their heel" (p.358). The conditions of the island become even worse as British ships form barricades around the island; this caused Cephalonia's inhabitants to suffer from starvation and disease that take the lives of many locals. All those mentioned above are described through the stories of the protagonist Pelagia, and her father, Dr. Iannis. In one instance in the novel, De Bernieres describes the dire state Pelagia, the once so beautiful woman, degrades into because of the harsh conditions the war has imposed on the island:

The war had in any case reduced her. Her skin was translucent from lack of food, stretched tightly over bones that lent her an emaciated and soulful look that would not become fashionable for another twenty-five years. Her shapely breasts had withered a little and fallen, becoming practical pouches rather than things of beauty or objects of desire. Sometimes her gums bled, and when she ate, she chewed carefully, lest she lose a tooth. Her rich black hair had thinned and lost its resilience, and amongst it could be seen the first grey hairs that should not have appeared for at least another decade. (p. 343)

Pelagia, thus, becomes a shadow of what she once was: an attractive lady with very high ambitions. The war has not only stolen her beauty away but sucked the high-spirited soul that she had once possessed; it has left her with a smashed dream and a broken heart as she later watches Corelli leave to Italy fleeing the persecution of the Germans.

In the second selected novel, *The Good Italian*, Burke re-visits WWII in Eritrea while under the Fascist regime of Mussolini. Thus, the mini-stories retrieved by the writer are those involving the way locals' ordinary lives are disrupted because of this occupation. The marginalized Eritreans were considered followers and inferior to the Italians during their occupation. One important story that Burke brings forth in the novel is the plight of local Eritrean women under the Italians' rule, and this is exposed via the main protagonist, Aatifa. The Italians had a distorted vision of the natives, specifically concerning their view towards the women. Thus, when an Italian hired a local woman as a housekeeper, the Italian also assumed that the services she might have to offer also extended to the bedroom. When Enzo, the Italian protagonist, hired Aatifa to take care of the house, his friend Salvatore, an army official in Eritrea, encouraged him to sleep with her.

Enzo replied that he won't try that to which Salvatore insisted: "just take her," (p.52). Shocked Enzo protested, "I'm not a rapist," but his friend threw his eyes up to heaven and said, "It's not like that. She expects it. It's normal"(p.52). This was all the encouragement that Enzo needed, so the first thing he did when he returned home was to get drunk and impose himself on Aatifa, and he did have her way with her. However, it didn't go on quite well because she told him to stop and gave him a sharp push in the ribs. Still, after a few days, Aatifa did voluntarily give herself to him, and the reader is given a glimpse of her reasons. She had known when she applied for that job that something like that was going to happen as it was common knowledge what the Italians wanted from local women. In any case, she needed the money (p.61-62) desperately because she had to take care of her granddaughter and pay for her education. Thus, the money she took from the Italian was going to cover up the school fees of her granddaughter since her father was lazy and did not work.

Later through the novel, Burke exposes another story related to Aatifa and another Italian during her childhood. She recounted her ordeal:

'When I was twelve,' she began again, 'my father sold me, my virginity, to a white man [an Italian] ... for the price of a bottle of whiskey. The man paid my father and then took me to his house and he raped me.'

.....
'I was promised in marriage to a boy in my village but when the family found out what had happened, no one would touch me. I was no longer a suitable wife. Then I found out that the man had made me pregnant. I had a child too young that it did me so much damage that I could never have another. The man did not give me any support. He denied my child was his and said I had probably been with many men.' (p.257)

Aatifa told her ordeal in a courtroom as she stood witness in a case against Enzo. His crime was having a sexual relationship with a local woman (herself), an act that had been recently banned by the direct orders of Mussolini under a Royal Decree by law number 880. After recounting her story, Aatifa got angry, shouted in the name of all Eritreans and yelled, "You [the Italians] think you are better than us. This is what your precious empire is. Some day or another, we will take our country back," she finished. Her words caused an uproar at court as many Eritreans started yelling support for her (p.257).

The above scene is but an illustration of the immense injustice that the Eritreans had suffered on the hands of the Italian Fascists who exploited the local women and treated them like commodities. Thus, those Eritrean stories are retrieved through the power of fiction and made known to the contemporary reader via those local and ordinary fictitious characters created by Burke.

The third selected novel, *All The Light We Cannot See*, is written by Pulitzer Prize winner Anthony Doerr. In this novel, Doerr interweaves the stories of Marie-Laure, a blind French girl, and Werner, an orphan who gets sucked up in Hitler Youth with a landscape of WWII always looming in the backdrop. This book explores this vivid world and is about the big and small moments that bring us together as worded by Smith (2014). Indeed, Doerr brings forth the mini-narratives of the children from both camps: the Allies and the Axis and focuses on the way WWII has disrupted their ordinary lives without reprieve. Targeting children's sufferings during WWII is arguably one reason Doerr's novel has received so much acclamation since their stories are marginalized and left out from the grand narrative of WWII.

Thus, Werner's story is that of a very bright and intelligent orphan boy living in an orphanage. His father died in a collapsing coal mine in the coal-mining town of Zollverein in Germany. Werner is a prodigy, and he is soon brought to the attention of the Nazis for his ingenuity in fixing radios. As such, he is sent to a national school that trains an elite cadre for the Third Reich. The importance of Werner's story is to highlight the fact that Hitler believed the power of the Reich and its continuity relied on the youth of the country that would make Germany invincible. The reason for that belief was how easily children are manipulated, brainwashed and exploited in times of war. Bartoletti (2005) in her book *Hitler Youth* writes that in order to cure unemployment in Germany, Hitler looked to Germany's millions of young people because he saw in them a strong army of cheap labor. He also believed that young people had a "duty to serve" and realized the numerous ways that they could serve their country by performing socially useful tasks (p.62). Therefore, Werner, like many other young boys living in the same conditions - of a power-rising Germany - has no other choice but to be involved and sucked up by circumstances far greater than him.

At Hitler Youth Academy, Doerr describes, with minute details, the harsh and ferocious methods the Nazi commandments resort to in their training of the children. The descriptions are horrific, and the contemporary reader cannot but feel shocked at the inhumane treatment of the boys who are prepared to join the front when reaching eighteen. Werner faces a moral dilemma during his stay at the school due to his witnessing of injustice. Still, Werner excels, specifically in sciences. His professor Dr. Hauptmann is amazed by Werner's extreme cleverness and uses his ingenuity in helping him develop a radio transmitter that is able to detect the hidden places of enemies. Werner succeeds in developing the transmitter, and Dr. Hauptmann is called to the front with his invention leaving behind Werner only because he is not yet eighteen. However, the deception of the Nazis goes beyond their consciousness, and soon, Werner is sent to the front on the excuse that his real birth date is wrong, and he is already eighteen instead of sixteen. His intelligence, thus, is further exploited.

As Werner is placed in a team that would roam the country looking for Russian transmitters, Doerr describes the harsh situation the young and frail Werner has to put up with along with his team of teenagers. In one disturbing instance in the novel, Werner, who has been suffering from high fever, is relaxing after he has succeeded in finding and destroying another enemy transmitter. Through Werner's exhausted body and mind, he sits with his transceiver listening to nothing when a little-redheaded girl in a maroon cape emerges from a doorway. She is six or seven years old and runs across the street to the park. She plays alone there beneath the budding trees while her mother stands in the corner and bites the tips of her fingers. As the girl is swinging, Werner feels suddenly nostalgic and homesick:

This is life, he thinks, this is why we live, to play like this when winter is finally releasing its grip. He waits for Neumann Two [a teammate] to come around the truck and say something crass, to spoil it, but he doesn't, and neither does Bernd, maybe they don't see her at all, maybe this one pure thing would escape their defilement, and the girl sings as she swings, a high song that Werner recognizes, a counting song that girls jumping rope in the alley of Children's House used to sing..... and how he would like to join her, push her higher and higher... (p.366)

Doerr depicts Werner as a vulnerable child although this young boy has witnessed atrocities committed by his team and the Nazis that are far beyond his young years. In the extract above, Werner longs to an innocent childhood that has been brutally snatched away from him reminding the reader that some of those involved in WWII were actually nothing but children who were made to grow up quickly. Later in the same scene, although feverish and weak, Werner, who has never yet failed to detect a correct enemy transmitter, tells his team about one that is hidden in a certain apartment. His teammates check the place, and as usual, kill everyone in it. This time, however, there is no transmitter. As Werner steps into the apartment, to his horror he sees:

On the floor is a woman, one arm swept backwards as if she has been refused a dance, and inside the closet, is not a radio but a child sitting at her bottom with a bullet through her head.

Her moon eyes are open and moist and her mouth is stretched in an oval of surprise and it is the girl from the swings, and she cannot be over seven years old. (p.398)

The scene comes as a shock to Werner and the reader alike. Doerr's description intentionally brings about the brutal way innocent people like helpless women and children are killed in wars. The reader's empathy is derived from the fact that this same little girl, who is killed mercilessly, was a source of joy to Werner just a few hours earlier, and because of his blunder, he has allowed for such an atrocity to happen. Werner cannot process the scene as:

[He] waits for the child to blink. Blink, he thinks, blink, blink, blink. Already Volkheimer is closing the closet door, though it won't close all the way because the girl's foot is sticking out of it, and Bernd is covering the woman on the bed with a blanket, and how could Neumann Two not have known, but of course he didn't, because that is how things are with Neumann Two, with everybody in this unit, in this army, in this world, they do as their told, they get scared, they move about with only themselves in mind. Name me someone who does not. (p.398)

Werner soothes himself with these thoughts, but throughout the book, the scene of the little girl shot in the head with eyes moist with tears will haunt him to his doom.

The other Protagonist in the novel, Marie-Laure, on the other side of the war, also pays a dear price due to WWII. Marie, the blind girl, finds herself, along with her father, fleeing the only hometown she has ever known and memorized street by street. With the Nazis invading France, Marie and her father leave their house and their lives in Paris and set off to Saint-Malo, a fortified city at the coast of Brittany. They seek Marie's great uncle Etienne and live in his house for a while. Marie's life turns into havoc, and the war adds to her suffering when her beloved father, who used to be the chief locksmith at the Museum of Natural Science, is kidnapped by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp. The only news she receives from him is occasional letters smuggled to her. She has to cope with the idea that her father will not be with her anymore, and her plight resembles that of many people who had lost someone special to German concentration camps during WWII. Her situation is even harder because she is but a blind little girl trying to survive all alone in that vicious war especially when Saint-Malo is also invaded by the Germans, and then bombarded by American artillery. "When I stood in that town nine years ago," explains Doerr (2014) in an interview with Maria Franklin on Idaho Public Television, "and tried to imagine the bombardment and looking at the photograph of it, [I thought] what did disabled people do? What did seniors do in this situation? What would a blind child be hearing and feeling?" Doerr asks himself these questions; therefore, he puts himself in the shoes of Marie and tries to re-imagine and re-create her suffering during the bombardments of Saint-Malo. In one instance in the novel, Marie is left alone in her uncle's mansion as the American artillery bombs and incinerates the city. With all the scary noises coming from outside, Marie curls into a ball beneath her bed as bits of timber, plastic, brick, and glass cascade onto the floor and the mattress above her head:

'Papa Papa Papa Papa,' Marie-Laure is saying, but her body seems to have detached itself from her voice, and her words make a faraway, desolate cadence. The notion occurs to her that the ground beneath Saint-Malo has been knitted together all along by the root structure of an immense tree, located at the center of the city, in a square no one ever walked her to, and the massive tree has been uprooted by the hand of God and the granite is coming with it, heaps and clumps and clods of stones pulling away as the trunk comes up, followed by the fat tendrils of roots—the root structure like another tree turned upside down and shoved into the soil ... (p.96)

Helpless, scared, and all alone, Marie tries to comprehend the frightening and horrific sounds coming from outside and shaking the whole town. Her mind paints images of the happenings outside that seem too nightmarish to be true. A few minutes later, the world settles, and from outside comes a light tinkling sound that might be fragments of glass falling into the streets. It sounds both beautiful and strange, as though gemstones were raining from the sky (p.96). Marie thinks "wherever her great-uncle is, could he have survived this? Could anyone? Has she?" (p.96) Then she hears:

... a sound like wind in tall grass, only hungrier. It pulls at the curtains, at the delicate parts
inside her ears.
She smells smoke and knows. Fire. The glass has shattered out of her bedroom window, and
what she hears is the sound of something burning beyond the shutters. Something huge. The
neighborhood. The entire town.
The wall, floor, and underside of her bed remain cool. The house is not yet in flames. But for
how long?
Calm yourself, she thinks. Concentrate on filling your lungs, draining them. Filling them again.
She stays under the bed. She says, 'Ce n'est pas la realite'. (96-97)

In the above scene, Doerr's intricate descriptions move the reader by the vulnerability of Marie and the idea that she is battling alone in circumstances far greater and harsher than her young years. Hearing the sounds of shells and mortars screeching by mingling with the smell of the burning city, Marie wishes that all this is not reality but a nightmare she might wake up from to find herself surrounded by people she loves.

3.2. Geographical Location and Hidden Histories

Another critical point that the three selected writers commonly share is the setting they choose for their novels or the geographical location each of their novels highlights. One main argument in this paper is the power of the historical novel to re-create past instances and bring them back to the reader. In this sense, the three selected writers in their novels take the contemporary reader to new geographical location in which WWII occurs, places that were marginalized from the grand narratives.

In Captain Corelli's Mandolin, De Bernieres brings about one very disturbing WWII atrocity that the Nazis committed against the Italians who were their supposed allies. During his vacation in Cephalonia, De Bernieres learns of a vicious massacre committed against the Italian soldiers on the Greek Island. De Bernieres (2001) states that his book takes place against a background that history has chosen to forget. "There is almost no literature about the massacre of the Italians" he explains, "[and] I still don't know precisely how the Nazis disposed of the Italian corpses, nor does anyone know exactly how many lives were lost" (p. 15-16). This has propelled De Bernieres to re-imagine and re-visit the whole incident via fictionalizing the historical facts and writing a book. He writes in an article in The Sunday Telegraph that he had heard of the German massacre of the Italian garrison on the island during the war, shortly after the Italians had deposed Mussolini and joined the Allied cause. "I knew," explains De Bernieres, "almost by instinct that there was a book waiting to be written" (2001, p. 9). As such, De Bernieres in the chapter entitled "Paralysis" re-imagines the dilemma and paralysis General Gandin, the highest ranking Italian officer on the island at that time, found himself in the days after the surrender of the Italian troops to the Allies in Rome and Sicily. De Bernieres writes that General Gandin was not used to taking decisions; he only received commands from higher-ranking officers, and the fact that all Italy was in havoc left him helpless. He didn't know what to do when news from home reflected the amount of chaos the Italians found themselves in. Rome issued contradictory orders, and from Athens came illegal orders. The General chose the easiest path; he chose inaction especially when the Nazis on the island of Cephalonia promised that the Italian troops would be allowed to leave unharmed to their homeland if they surrendered their weapons to the Germans. Believing that he would spare the blood of his troops, General Gandin gave in to the Nazi's demands.

De Bernieres describes Gandin's situation, "It was foolish hope and the desperate need to spare the blood of the hapless men he loved. He took a sightless road and shortly condemned them to a grizzly doom, failing to see in the Nazi promises so thick a mask of falsehood that by trusting them he condemned his beautiful youngsters [to their doom] (p.297). De Bernieres also re-creates and re-imagines what the Italian troops might have felt during that critical time. He writes that the Italian troops on Cephalonia listened to the radio and charted the course of the Allied progress in their homeland while the Germans boiled with anger causing ice in the air between the two allies (p.294). Sensing something fishy going on, Corelli, the Italian Captain discussed the situation with Pelagia:

'It's going to be a complete mess. There's no chance the British are coming. They're going straight for Rome. No one will save us unless we save ourselves. All the boys think we should disarm the Germans now, whilst their garrison is small. We sent deputations to Gandin, but he doesn't do anything. He says we should trust them.'

'Don't you trust them then?'

'I'm not stupid. And Gandin is one of those officers who has risen to the top by obeying orders. He doesn't know how to give them. He's just another of our typical donkey generals who's got no brains and no balls.'

'Come inside,' she said, 'my father's out and we can have a cuddle. He's got a lot of tuberculosis to deal with these days.'
'A cuddle would only make me feel sad, koritsimou. My mind is just a blank that's filled with worry.' (p.294)

The fear of some kind of treachery from the Germans became the sole thought roaming in the Italians' minds. Although Corelli cherished those stolen moments of love with his beloved, he was too distracted by the new circumstances to feel anything beautiful. He couldn't help feeling extremely worried, knowing that the Germans would retaliate for what they had considered a betrayal from the Italians for their surrender to the Allies. His fears were in place because a couple of nights later, the Italian warships in the harbours of the island slipped anchor and fled home without telling anyone they were leaving and without taking with them a single Italian evacuee. Ironically, the fleeing ships took with them their formidable firepower and left only the damp and sulfurous stench of cowardice and burning coal. The German soldiers sneered, and Corelli's men smelled treachery (p.300). A few days later, the Acqui Division that was on the Greek island was butchered mercilessly by the Nazis as retaliation for the Italians withdrawal from WWII.

In the novel, De Bernieres revisits and re-imagines the whole massacre including intricate details of the horrid and brutal act. He gives an account of the presumed number of the dead Italian soldiers, "Nobody knows the exact number of the Italian dead that lay upon the earth of Cephallonia. At least four thousand were massacred and possibly nine thousand. Was it 288,000 kilos of butchered human meat, or 648,000? Was it 18,752 liters of bright young blood, or 42, 192? The evidence was lost in flame" (p.326-327). The numbers given are staggering that the reader might feel that De Bernieres has exaggerated them. Besides, the Germans at that time did a perfect job of concealing most of the evidence regarding their vicious crime and De-Bernieres re-creates the scene:

...the Germans competed with historical truth, destroying the evidence, displaying abundant knowledge of their guilt by converting flesh to smoke. They ran truckload after truckload of fuel. Soldiers hacked down olives a thousand years old about heaps of lolling corpses so high that it became impossible to stack them higher. Contemptuously they pointed to individual dead, saying, 'This one pissed himself,' or 'this one stinks of shit,' but few could laugh. Abdominal slime and blood found their way onto their hands and uniforms, a sweet and sticky smell of fresh meat affected their heads like drink. (p.327)

The above scene pictures the heartless Germans in the act of disposing of the bodies of those they had butchered in cold blood. De Bernieres' description and choice of words reflect the ugliness and inhumane deed the Nazis were committing. The contemporary reader cannot help but flinch at the vile descriptions. It is also worth noting that this same massacre was unknown to De Bernieres as it is unknown to most contemporary readers. This is because this kind of news about WWII is not considered mainstream to be circulated mainly because it is set in a marginalized part of the world and because it involves the 'losers' of WWII. Thus, De Bernieres uses the historical information he gathers and re-visits the scene in an attempt to bring that ugly moment back to life. The historical records also show that the massacre is one of the most hideous atrocities in the history of WWII, and today, because many scholars are digging up hidden histories, there are memorial grounds set in Cephalonia commemorating those dead Italian soldiers. The grounds are open for visitors from around the world who have known about the massacre from De Bernieres' novel.

In *The Good Italian*, Burke also takes the contemporary reader to the marginalized African continent and describes the happenings in both Eritrea and Ethiopia during WWII. One major point that the contemporary reader does not know about is an atrocity committed by the Italian Fascists against the Ethiopians in the second Italo-Ethiopian war. Historically, Italy had tried to invade Ethiopia once, but it was shocked by the Ethiopians' valor and strength, and so the Italians had one of the worst defeats in history. However, after about twenty years, at the outskirts of WWII, the Fascists colonized Ethiopia's neighbor Eritrea, which gave them a strategic position on the African continent due to its port on the Red Sea. As such, Mussolini decided to annex Ethiopia and avenge the Italians' loss against the Ethiopians in the past. Northfield (2015) from the Historical Novel Society states that the political situation is volatile specifically when Mussolini has decided that Ethiopia would be a valuable addition to this colonial empire, and all the war material, such as soldiers and weapons, are being channeled through Eritrea and its harbor in particular. Thus, Yared (2017) explains the attack from the Italians prompted Emperor Haile Selassie I to recruit and mobilize the army of the Ethiopian Empire.

His troops, however, were armed with mostly bows and spears, a few outdated rifles and no combat training, so the Ethiopian nation was poorly prepared for the second Italian invasion (blackpast.org, 2017).

To ensure the Fascists victory over the 'savage' lot, Mussolini issued an authorization of using illegal chemical weapons against the Ethiopians; hence, the Italian troops made substantial use of mustard gas, in both artillery and aerial bombardments. Despite signing the Geneva Protocol in 1925, the Italian troops deployed about 300 to 500 tons of mustard gas during the war. The use of Mustard gas was not only restricted to the battlefield but was also used upon the civilians in an attempt to terrorize the local population. The Fascists also carried out gas attacks on Red Cross camps and ambulances (New World Encyclopedia, 2015).

Taking this historical account, Burke re-imagines and fictionalizes it in the novel through the eyes of Salvatore, an Italian officer who was leading the Italian troops to fight the Ethiopians. The moment the Italian airplanes throw the huge canisters with the mustard gas over the Ethiopian soldiers is brought to life again as the Burke re-creates the scene:

Salvatore saw the [Ethiopian] riders getting increasingly uneasy, probably expecting that bombs were about to land in their midst. When the canisters all exploded a hundred of feet above them in mid-air, doing no damage whatsoever, a cheer went up from the Ethiopian soldiers. The explosions had left a massive layer of liquid that had formed in a split second after the detonation. This seemed to be suspended, weightless and floating in the air. As quickly as it had formed, the liquid fell like a light summer shower on the infantry and cavalry below. The men looked at each other, laughing as if wondering why the Italians had chosen to throw water on them. (p.191)

However, the real agony begins as soon as the liquid burns the Ethiopians bodies and Burke writes:

Then almost immediately the laughter ceased. Cries erupted from every direction as the men's skin and throats began to burn, even through the wetness of their clothes. Some tried to rub themselves dry or tear off their tunics in a desperate bid to escape the pain. It was not pleasant to watch, but Salvatore did not look away once. The burning did not discriminate between animal and man, and many horses and camels collapsed or threw their riders. One in ten was destined to leave the battlefield alive, but death did not come quickly for them. Most endured several minutes of agony, until asphyxiation finally took them, the end coming as a release. (p.191)

The scenes above re-create the horrid atrocity committed by the Fascists in an attempt to secure the result of a war they knew they would be losing for the second time. Mussolini's permission to use a deadly and banned chemical weapon on the helpless Ethiopian troops is but further evidence of his inhumanity. Ironically, Burke also captures a moment when those in power and authority, like Mussolini, manipulate the public into believing in the honorable and just cause of waging war on Ethiopia via the power of propaganda. This is shown after the Italians won over the Ethiopians and took their land. In one instance in the novel, Enzo, the protagonist, entered a cinema for a matinee screening:

As always the feature was preceded by a newsreel and this one was, naturally, all about Italy's triumph. It showed a huge crowd gathered in the Piazza Venezia in Rome as Mussolini declared victory. Thousands upon thousands of men were there, not soldiers, but ordinary people, a sea of smiling, cheering faces. Enzo was delighted and proud to see many of his fellow Italians back home excited about events in this part of the world. 'The Duce was called back to the microphone by the crowd, time after time,' said the voice-over, which was even more jaunty than usual. 'And he told them that what they had won with blood, they would now have to fertilise with work.' (p.195-196)

The Duce moves the mob by making them believe that they had won Ethiopia by the power and bloodshed of their troops. Thus, the ordinary people, like Enzo, are deceived again by the noble and just causes of civilizing a "savage" lot. In a historical note written by Burke at the end of the novel, he states that in 1996 the Italian Minister of Defence acknowledged in parliament that Italian forces had used chemical weapons in the Italo-Ethiopian war (p.312). This is another acknowledgment of some of the many hidden atrocities and stories that are lost and silenced in the folds of grand histories.

In *All The Light We Cannot See*, Doerr takes the reader to explore WWII events in Saint-Malo, France, which is a new geographical location to the contemporary reader. Doerr writes that he first saw Saint-Malo while he was on book tour in France. It is a ghostly, imperious walled city in Brittany, surrounded by emerald green sea on all four sides. As he walked on the cobbled lanes, he felt he was walking through a city plucked from imagination. However, "Saint-Malo was almost entirely destroyed by American artillery in 1944, in the final months of World War II, and was painstakingly put back together, block by granite block, in the late 1940s and early 1950s". What had really fascinated Doerr is the fact that the place could thoroughly hide its incineration and that his country was

responsible for that incineration (scribner.com, 2014). In another interview with Jill Owns (2014), Doerr states that he had never seen anything like the city of Saint-Malo which was built as a fortification, and yet it had a really gorgeous setting. There were tunnels underneath the city, and lots of corsairs (who were state-sanctioned pirates) had mansions there. They had fortified cellars where they would keep all their loot, with these grand old chimneys. Later, as he was talking to his editor, Doerr exclaimed how the city was very old. To his surprise, his editor replied that Americans had destroyed this city in 1944, about 88% of it, and the citizens had to rebuild the entire thing. In the same interview, Doerr explains, "...the act of erasure, that such event can be covered over by this painstaking rebuilding of a town, that idiot tourists like me wouldn't even notice that this place was destroyed" (Powells.com).

The discovery that Doerr made that night about the history of Saint-Malo and the ignorance he felt not knowing this marginalized historical truth propelled him to write a novel to uncover this historical finding to the contemporary reader. As such, Doerr re-imagines the events that took place in Saint-Malo during the German occupation in WWII and the bombings of the Americans two months after D-Day landings. Those moments are brought back to life again in the novel. Historically, most of the French countries were liberated two months after D-Day; however, Saint-Malo remained a strong strategical point for the Germans. However, in the last days before the surrender of the Germans in Saint-Malo, they were involved in "the rounding up of all the men between 16 and 60 in the city for internment at the Fort National, an historic fort on an islet near the castle, only accessible at low tide" explains Philip Beck (1981). Doerr intentionally brings this account of the hostages and places a fictitious character who is Uncle Etienne, Marie-Laure's great uncle amongst them. Three instances in the novel highlight the innocent civilians' suffering at the hands of both the Nazis and the Allies. Doerr re-creates the way Americans and Germans were bombing each other as:

Anti-air batteries flash on the outer islands, and the big German guns inside the old city send another round of shells howling over the sea, and three hundred and eighty Frenchmen imprisoned on an island fortress called National, a quarter mile of the beach, huddle in moonlit courtyard peering up. (p.11)

Unfortunately, states Beck (1981), the fort was in the line of fire between the Americans coming from the east and the fortified island known as Le Grand Bey, so inevitably a shell eventually fell in the midst of the several hundred French hostages killing or mortally wounding 18 (The Journal of Historical Review). This historical fact is also re-created in the novel, and Doerr writes:

Around four o'clock, an American field howitzer, two miles away, lets fly a single improperly ranged shell. It sails over the city walls and bursts against the northern parapet of Fort National, where three hundred and eighty Frenchmen are being held against their will with minimal cover. Nine are killed instantly. One of them still clutching the hand of bridge he was playing when the shell struck. (All The Light, p.375)

Doerr, as usual, plays on the feelings of the reader when he depicts the injustice committed during WWII against the innocent civilians. Doerr also makes use of the fact that Allies did not really know the real number of German troops occupying Saint-Malo, and that was why the Americans bombarded and burned the city so ferociously. According to Berke (1981), "if the attacking U.S. forces had not believed a false report that there were thousands of Germans within the city, it might have been saved" from burning. They had actually ignored the advice of two citizens who got to their lines and insisted that there were less than 100 Germans "in the city, together with hundreds of civilians who could not get out because the Germans had closed the gates. The Americans attacked with tanks on 14 August and, to their undoubted surprise, found the burning city almost empty" explains Berke (1981). Doerr re-creates the bombardments on the city and their severity:

A demonic horde. Upended sacks of beans. A hundred broken rosaries. There are a thousand metaphors and all of them are inadequate: forty bombs per aircraft, four hundred and eighty altogether, seventy-two thousand pounds of explosives. An avalanche descends onto the city. A hurricane. Teacups drift off shelves. Paintings slip off nails. In another quarter second, the sirens are inaudible. Everything is inaudible. The roar becomes loud enough to separate membranes in the middle ear. (All the Light, p.16)

The American artillery created enormous destruction to Saint-Malo, and the amount of bombs released was unbelievable that no metaphor can describe it to the contemporary reader. Historically, the Americans tried to accuse the Germans of burning of the city, but the evidence was all against the Americans. Berke (1981) explains that the underground fortress continued to fight until August 17 when Von Aulock [a German high ranking officer] surrendered. He was subsequently accused of "the barbaric act of burning the corsairs' city," but after an

examination of the ruins including the remains of incendiary shells and the questioning of witnesses, he was vindicated (Berke, 1981). Although Doerr is American, he still makes sure that this hidden historical fact is brought back to light in the novel. Doerr once stated in an interview with Paul Peppis (2014) that to him, fiction is a good way to explore curiosities. It actually teaches people something about the human condition that makes one less lonely and isolated (Oregon Humanities Center). In this sense, exposing some of the past realities of WWII feeds the curiosity of the contemporary reader to learn more about a past that is now forgotten or lost and which somehow seems to resonate to our very present.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As such, De Bernieres, Stephen Burke, and Anthony Doerr, in their novels, focus on silent and marginalized countries and their civilians during WWII and set with a force to retrieve some of their lost stories. The first writer picks a remote Greek Island, Cephalonia, during the Italian occupation while the second chooses Eritrea and Ethiopia, also under the Italians rule during Second World War. The third writer focuses on two small communities in Germany and France that are also overlooked by historians. All three writers take it on their accounts the responsibility of exposing horrific historical accounts kept deliberately away from public consciousness. Thus, by rejecting the "grand narratives" of WWII, the selected writers retrieve those "mini-narratives" and give them a voice and the right to be represented.

All in all, the historical novel of today with its plethora of functions has become a tool of empowerment to contemporary novelists who are finding it a means to re-write, re-visit and re-imagine history. Because the genre is and has always been a very popular and widely celebrated genre for the public, it has gained the power to open up doors to whole new past realities and dimensions we did not imagine or know existed.

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