Decolonising The Past: Can historical fiction contest the knowledge constructed in colonial historiography?

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Research Topic or Area of Study:

This IS will examine the ability of historical fiction to alter perceived epistemic injustice in colonial historiography.

Rationale for Choice of Topic (e.g. potential contribution of study to existing knowledge / research):

Colonial historiography has long enjoyed discursive dominance in interpreting the history of the Orient (Asia). Many who subscribe to competing historiographies (i.e. nationalist, subaltern) have sought to alter the epistemic injustices they perceive in colonial historiography, through scholarly means. There currently exists scant evaluation of fiction's ability to do the same.

To answer this question, I propose to focus the evaluation on historical fiction. As a genre, historical fiction is unique: in engaging directly with the past, it foregrounds the fact that history "is not a set of immovable past achievements but a discourse, open...to reinterpretation" (Slemon, 1988); unbound by the conventions of historiography, it has the freedom of experimenting with form. Assessment of historical fiction's ability to alter perceived epistemic injustice in colonial historiography can yield interesting insights into how historical knowledge is constructed as a discourse and fiction's role in shaping our historical knowledge.

Proposed Title of Independent Study:

Decolonising the Past: Can historical fiction alter perceived epistemic injustice in colonial historiography?

Synopsis of Independent Study:
[State clearly the objective(s) and scope of your research or area of study, and identify any potential problems or limitations]

Objectives
  1) To examine the perceived epistemic injustices in colonial historiography;
  2) To evaluate the ability of historical fiction to alter these epistemic injustices;
  3) To assess the epistemic implications of such reconstruction on postcolonial historiography;
  4) To discuss the value of narrativity in shaping our understanding of history.

Focus

India will be used as the case study to answer the central question, due to wealth of literature on British India and postcolonial India. This study will use Edward Said's concept of Orientalism as the primary lens of analysis. Beyond the accuracy of historical knowledge, the analysis will focus more on determining the dominant ideas within the historiography that has endured throughout the British Raj. In evaluating the ability of historical fiction to subvert these epistemic injustices, this study will analyse the content, form and narrative strategies of several works set in India, such as *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Widely-read works will be chosen.

Literature Review (i.e. an overview of the current state of research and knowledge in this area of study):

The epistemic injustices in colonial historiography have been explicated by a range of scholars: Said (1978) found problematic the definition of the Orient solely in opposition to the West; Spivak (1983) highlighted the unfair treatment of the Orientals as inert objects of knowledge to be represented, never as autonomous agents; and Inden (1986) pointed out the prevalent essentialisation of the Orient's identity in the colonial account of history.

Processes of both "artistic and literary decolonisation" (Tiffin, 1987) are central to the postcolonial resistance of colonial discourse. Yet, the role of fiction in rewriting history thus far has paled in comparison to the efforts of historians who have contested colonial interpretations of India's history with their own historiographies (Chakrabarty, 2000). However, White argued that history is in itself a narrative, with the elements of interpretation and imagination (1973). If historical discourse is not static and can be created, can fiction then play an active role in the rewriting and reclaiming of a country's history?

By evaluating historical fiction's ability to overcome the binary opposition in the East-West construct, return agency to the colonised and prove mistaken the essential truths that colonial historiography has put forth (Prakash, 1990), a conclusion of whether it can resist, challenge or perhaps, even alter colonial historiography can be arrived at.

Methodology (if applicable):
[State clearly which, if any, qualitative and/or quantitative methods will be used]

Selected literature will be analysed, in accordance with the objectives of research.

Candidate's Signature:		Date: 4 February 2016
Teacher's Name:	Signature:	Date:

"The possibility exists for fiction to function in truth."

Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*[1]

1. Introduction

Colonial historiography refers to European historical writing which "interprets the colonised and recounts 'events' of the imperial/colonial dialectic within the terms of its own epistemology and ontology".[2] It has long enjoyed discursive dominance in constructing the history of the Orient due to its hegemonic position in knowledge creation and dissemination. Although textual resistance is recognised to be central to the postcolonial reorganisation of knowledge, the epistemic value of fiction in contesting colonial historical discourse has been scantly evaluated. In particular, historical fiction is unique as a genre: it engages directly with the past, yet is unbound by the conventions of historiography.

This essay hence investigates historical fiction as a source of historical knowledge, from the postcolonial perspective. It will begin by discussing the parallels between postmodern historiography and historical fiction and by questioning the distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction'. The case study of India will then be used to compare the construction of historical knowledge in British historiography and Indian historical fiction respectively. The following section will evaluate this case study to understand the epistemic implications of fictional reconstruction on postcolonial historiography, in order

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[1] Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 193.
[2] Helen Tiffin, "Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23.1 (1988): 180.

to arrive at a conclusion on whether historical fiction can contest the knowledge constructed in colonial historiography.

2. Postmodern Historiography Versus Historical Fiction

History consists of both fact and interpretation — objective "facts of the past"[3] that only become 'history' with the subjective interpretation of historians. The mistake is to assume that the interpretation of facts is objective. Postcolonial self-interpretation thus seeks to dislodge colonial historiography by challenging the universalist claims of its interpretation. Postmodernist narrative strategies have been used to a large extent: at the fundamental level, the very act of revising history casts doubt on the objective categories of historical discourse itself and seeks to expose their formations as culture-specific rather than universal, as per the postmodernist tradition; on a larger scale, postcolonial writers embrace the end of univocal metanarratives [4] alongside the proliferation of heterogeneous, local narratives.

The postmodernist conceptualisation of history as a 'discourse'[5] challenges the claims of an objective historical consciousness and thereby colonial historiography's claims to authority. In the Foucauldian sense, a discourse is a system of possibility for knowledge[6] that is produced by those in power — one 'fictions' history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true; one can also 'fiction' a politics not yet in existence on

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[3] E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1987), 10.
[4] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington & Brian Massami (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
[5] Hayden White, *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
[6] Mark Philip, "Michel Foucault," in *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences,* ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 69.

the basis of such historical truth.[7] Viewed in this manner, colonial historiography simply becomes one of many discursive attempts to constitute the Orient, a changeable socio-political construction, rather than a fixed and essential 'truth'.[8]

Hayden White further argues that colonial historiography can be perceived as a "fictive" construction.[9] Other postmodernist historians such as Schama have similarly contended that history is at its core an imaginative endeavour, where multiple histories can exist — each an invention.[10] With the erosion of claims to objectivity by western epistemology, Slemon argues for opening historical interpretation up to the "transformative power of imaginative revision".[11] Can this "imaginative revision" be achieved by historical fiction?

3. Construction of Historical Knowledge in Colonial Historiography

This section will analyse the key characteristics of the historical knowledge constructed in British colonial historiography, built upon the concept of the past as fixed, absolute and a single truthful picture. The three main characteristics identified will also be the primary areas of contestation for postcolonial Indian writers.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* will be used as the fundamental lens of analysis. According to Said, orientalism generated authoritative and essentialising statements about the Orient that defined its identity in relation to the Occident and entrenched its backwardness; the dominant narratives and self-legitimising institutional practices

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[7] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 193.
[8] Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32.2 (1990).
[9] White, *Metahistory*, 1-2.
[10] Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations Book* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).
[11] Stephen Slemon, "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23.1 (1988): 159.

subsequently marginalised the Orientals as makers of history. Many Indian historians and postcolonial thinkers have further developed these criticisms of colonial historiography.

3.1. Essentialising the Indian Identity

The first major characteristic of colonial historiography is the prevalent essentialising of the Orient's identity, which configured India in irreducible essences such as religiosity, spirituality, sensuousness and tradition and purported to convey unchanging truths about the Indian people.[12] This represented the diversity of India in a homogenizing narrative.

The foundational text in colonial historiography is James Mill's *History of British Rule* (1818), which laid the cornerstone for a utilitarian essentialisation of Indian history. Mill divided the diverse Indian history into essentialist categories of religion, creating the tripartite division of India's past into the Hindu, the Muslim and the British periods. This reductive periodisation reflected the grand narrative of "emancipation", a linear progression of history from one condition to another[13], which allowed Mill to emphasise India's progression from religious obscurantism and inherent political incapacity to civilisation under British rule.

3.2. Establishing the Binary East-West Opposition

The centrality of the next characteristic, the binary opposition drawn between the East and the West, to the colonial discourse was built upon the essentialisation of the Indian

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[12] Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India," *Modern Asian Studies* 20.3 (1986): 401-446.

[13] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 315.

identity. Prakash found problematic the definition of the Orient solely in opposition to the West, contending that India was rendered into the opposite of the Occident so as to justify British conquest.[14] The terms of colonial historiography naturalised constructed values such as 'civilisation', 'humanity', 'modernity' etc., which conversely established 'savagery', 'native' and 'primitive' as their antitheses.

Elliot and Dowson's 8-volume *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians* (1867-77) portrayed the spiritual and backward Indian in direct contrast to the secular and rational British. In the Introduction, it was bluntly stated: "This history will teach the bombastic babus of India the great benefits British rule has brought them." Stanley Lane-Poole (1903) later definitively reinforced the colonialist assumption that Britain brought 'modernity' to India by changing the nomenclature of periodisation to Ancient, Medieval and Modern — this substituted 'British' with the idea of modernity. This cemented the transition narrative of India's past as one that developed from "medieval" to "modern".

3.3. Representing Natives as Inert Objects of Knowledge

Most significantly, as a history of India and its people, most colonial accounts either mention the British at greater lengths than the Indians or attribute little agency to the Indian subjects in their writing. Spivak labeled this as the unfair treatment of the Orientals as inert objects of knowledge, never as autonomous agents.[15] In colonial historiography, the native is the passive 'Other', who is merely represented and never

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[14] Prakash, *Post-Orientalist Histories*.
[15] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson et al. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

communicates his position verbally. One example would be Alexander Dow's *History of Hindostan* (1770-1772), in which he used India's (then Bengal) history as justification to the King that the natives are incapable of becoming "free" as their "religion, their institutions, their manners, the very disposition of their minds, form them for passive obedience"[16].

Guha goes a step further to declare that even historiography that "adopts the insurgent's point of view" disengages action from agency and consciousness and is thus guilty of "an act of appropriation which excludes the rebel as the conscious subject of his own history".[17]

4. Construction of Historical Knowledge in Indian Historical Fiction

Then, can historical fiction challenge colonial historiography's epistemological assumptions and how it constructed the historical knowledge of India?

Before analyzing specific written works, it must be understood that historical fiction as a genre already represents opportunities for contesting colonial historiography. In engaging directly with the past, historical fiction foregrounds the fact that history "is not a set of immovable past achievements but a discourse, open...to reinterpretation"[18]; this serves as a direct refutation to the purported immutability of colonial historiography's representations. Unbound by the conventions of historiography, it has the freedom of experimenting with form and content in history-writing.

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[16] 1: cxl-cxli
[17] Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 72-77.
[18] Slemon, "Post-Colonial Allegory", 164.

Through analyzing Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* (1945), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), the following sections will identify their main strategies of contesting the knowledge construction in colonial historiography.

4.1. Embracing Subjectivity

Indian historical fiction rejects the idea of a 'metahistory' by deliberately embracing a plurality of voices in their narratives, in order to reflect the heterogeneity of Indian history. This directly challenges the "monological idea of a unified authorial voice providing an ideally exhaustive and definitive account of a fully mastered object of knowledge"[19] that defines much of colonial historiography.

In *Midnight's Children* (1981), the narrator Saleem Sinai gives a chronicle of India that is a record of the many diverse voices seldom included in most histories of India. He includes the daily experience of "common" people in what he calls his "history" of India, such as Tai, the Kashmiri boatman; the Hummingbird, founder of the Free Island Convocation; and Picture Singh, the snake-charmer. 'Great men' such as Gandhi barely appear. Interestingly, Rushdie purposefully presents Saleem's account of history as the product of a subjective consciousness rather than universal truth. As Saleem tells Padma, his audience, memory "creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human ever trusts someone else's version

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[19] Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 36.

more than his own".[20] This serves as a forthright declaration on history's subjective nature and that Saleem's recount of events has no more authority or objectivity than any other, just like colonial historiography.

Similarly, in *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Tharoor creates a narrator, V.V., who deliberately casts doubt on the 'historical' with subjective discursive elements.[21] V.V. openly admits the subjectivity of his account of history, with its "biases, selections, omissions, distortions"[22], and implies the subjectivity of all historical accounts:

> *It is my truth, Ganapathi, just as the crusade to drive out the British reflected Gangaji's truth, and the fight to be rid of both the British and the Hindu was Karna's truth. Which philosopher would dare to establish a hierarchy among such verities?*[23]

Not only does V.V. argue for the existence of multiple historical "truths", but he also further questions how much one may "select, interpret and arrange facts of the living past before truth is jeopardized by inaccuracy"[24] — echoing the postmodern view of history encompassing a plurality of narratives and of history being as subjective as its historian.

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[20] Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 166.
[21] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), 92.
[22] Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 1989), 373.
[23] Tharoor, *The Great Indian Nove*l, 164.
[24] Ibid.

Such narratives call attention to the contingency of history by exposing its creation by a subjective consciousness. Through implying that there are only truths in the plural, and never one single truth, Indian historical fiction manages to undermine colonial historiography's claim to authority and objectivity and establishes native accounts of history on an equal footing as colonial historiography.

4.2.   Subverting the Linear Model of History

Beyond embracing subjectivity, Indian historical fiction also challenges the conventions of narrative, structurally subverting the "teleology, closure and causality of narrative"[25]. Often, works make a conscious effort to utilise traditional narrative forms and Indian cultural formulations such as myths, fables, allegories and religious tales. This de-naturalising of colonial conventions of writing serves a greater purpose — challenging the linearity of history and putting forth an alternative model of plural, interrupted histories; or making use of the linear model of history to create an alternative 'grand narrative'.

Both *Midnight's Children* and *Kanthapura* draw upon the oral narrative tradition as a mode of storytelling, for different purposes. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem often breaks the frame of his narrative to question the stability of his version of events. As Rushdie describes it, "An oral narrative does not go from the beginning to the middle to the end."[26] Saleem's account of history follows this technique of looping from the present back to the past and of building a tale within a tale, which is characteristic of the oral narrative tradition of *Kuttiyattam*, a form of Sanskrit theatre. Throughout the novel,

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[25] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), 60.
[26] Salman Rushdie, "*Midnight's Children* and *Shame,*" *Kunapipi*, 7.1 (1985): 7.

Saleem is dismissive of Padma's demands that he tell a sequential narrative by restricting himself to "the narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line"[27]. This suggests his conviction that linear narratives cannot accommodate a history of India. Furthermore, when Saleem notices an error in the chronology of his narrative regarding Gandhi's death, he simply proclaims, "In my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time". This is a total devaluation of the significance of chronology to a historical narrative. Srivastava deems the linear, chronological narrative a tendency of the Western philosophy of history.[28] In challenging the chronology of historical accounts, Saleem is, in fact, subverting the Western epistemology of history as a linear progression from one condition to the next.

On the other hand, *Kanthapura* (1938) makes use of the grand narratives of Indian religious and mythological epics to predict the triumph of pro-Independence figures, contesting the colonial use of the 'grand narrative of emancipation'. The novel follows the oral tradition of *Sthala Purana*, a form of legendary history, and patterns itself on an ancient Sanskrit epic, *Ramayana*, and the journey of the deity Rama. By using *Harikatha* (religious myth) as an allegory for India's independence struggle, Gandhi is portrayed as Rama who eventually triumphs against his enemies, the main driver and central actor in history. India's national struggle is also the fulfilment of the Gandhian dream of the *ram-rajya*[29]. Hence, *Kanthapura* uses narrative linearity not to conform to the colonial metanarrative, but to present India's own metanarrative of progress through

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[27] Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 150.
[28] Aruna Srivastava, '"The Empire Writes Back": Language and History in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*,' in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Postcolonialism and Postmodernism*, ed. Ian Adam et al. (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 73.
[29] A state of ideal governance harkening back to the god-king Rama.

its mythopoeic traditions and return the agency and attribute progress to Indian characters.

4.3. Abrogating the Colonial Centre

Other than embracing subjectivity and subverting the linear model of history, Indian historical fiction also challenges colonial historiography with another approach — abrogating the imperial centre. This can be achieved by rejecting the essentialist colonial assumptions of the norm, or by rejecting the colonial control over the means of knowledge creation and dissemination.[30]

The Great Indian Novel abrogates the metropolitan centre by repudiating the values central to its historiography, such as progress, modernity and reason. On the first page of the novel, V.V. states: "India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay".[31] V.V. describes India's independence struggle, burgeoning nationalism and increasing political modernity in the twilight of the British Empire as "a cathartic process of regeneration, another stage in this endless cycle"[32]. As he reiterates, India's modernity had dawned long before the British had arrived in the Golden Ages of the Mauryas, the Guptas and the Mughals and is embedded in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Against the cyclical rise and fall of the Indian civilisation, the novel rejects colonial historiography's claim to progress or modernity.

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[30] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 37-38.
[31] Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*, 1.
[32] Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*, 245.

In *The English Teacher* (1945), the colonial language is rejected explicitly. Krishnan, the narrator, becomes aware of the English language as a medium for colonial dominance in the spreading of its knowledge claims. Throughout the novel, he grapples with his job as an English teacher at Albert Mission College and finally comes to terms with the English language, naming it as "a whole century of false education" which had "reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture...but efficient clerks for all your business and administrative offices." Krishnan hence decides to resign from his teaching post. Such revelations and the outright highlighting of English as a tool for controlling the knowledge of natives question the very foundations of colonial epistemology.

5. Evaluation of Case Study & Further Discussion

Understanding the strategies that Indian historical fiction employs to contest the historical knowledge constructed by colonial historiography, the success of these strategies may now be considered, in view of their epistemic implications. By using postmodern narrative strategies, Indian historical fiction highlights the subjectivity of history in perspective, form and the language medium, thereby challenging colonial historiography's claim to "objectivity, neutrality...and transparency of representation".[33]

Firstly, embracing subjectivity in narrative perspectives purposefully fictionalises history, which implies that history is also a form of fiction.[34] Secondly, subverting the linear form of historical narration emphasises how the linear model of history constructed in colonial historiography is in itself a subjective act. As Srivastava points out, historical events

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[33] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 92.
[34] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 96.

have no intrinsic structure, but only one imposed by an ideologically conditioned historian.[35] Thus, the structuring of history in colonial historiography under a grand narrative becomes an ideological act, designed to support political and moral systems. Since history is not teleological and conclusive, this strategy suggests that colonial historiography does not objectively represent the past. Thirdly, the abrogating of the colonial centre, by rejecting essentialist colonial values and highlighting the centralism of language to the metropole, shows its historiography to be culturally relative rather than universalist. Together, the three strategies blur the traditional line between two different fields of knowledge, history and fiction. They challenge that history even has a truth claim, by implying that history is constructed as in the case of colonial historiography and by showing history to be constituted of "discourses, human constructs, signifying systems"[36], just like fiction. Hence, Indian historical fiction successfully problematizes the concept of historical knowledge.

Since historical fiction can contest the knowledge constructed in colonial historiography, are there then no epistemic differences between history and fiction?

This essay argues that an important distinction must still be drawn between history and fiction. Postcolonial historical fiction seeks not to redeem or annihilate history, meaning that the focus is not on proving historical facts in colonial historiography wrong or on actively producing new historical facts. Instead, it seeks to call into question the purported objectivity of dominant historiographies by displacing 'history' as a concept —

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[35] Srivastava, *Language and History*, 63.
[36] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 93.

its fixity and certainty — which "[opens] up the past to imaginative revision". [37] As such, historical fiction, even pieces with great fidelity to historical fact, can at most dislodge dominant interpretations of the past. As Collingwood suggests, in history, the subjective and the objective are complementary[38]. While historical fiction capitalises on and draws attention to the subjective, it cannot replace the subjective nor can it be divorced from facts. Historical fiction, while able to challenge the knowledge constructed in colonial historiography, cannot replace history as a field of knowledge. Instead, it can be a "valuable adjunct to the work of historians"[39].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, historical fiction can contest the knowledge constructed in colonial historiography by challenging its essentialist, teleological and imperialist assumptions in perspective, form and the language medium. However, historical fiction has its epistemic limitations, as it seeks not to uncover historical facts but to challenge interpretations. It hence cannot construct meaningful historical knowledge, but can serve to inform historical inquiry by exploring the limitations of subjectivity in the light of historical facts. Ultimately, historical fiction can at best play a supplementary role to knowledge construction in history.

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[37] Slemon, "Post-Colonial Allegory", 165.
[38] R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 215.
[39] Richard Slotkin, "Fiction for the Purposes of History," *Rethinking History* 9:2 (2005): 222.

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