

# An Experimental Analysis on Reading historical narrative as literary Artefact: a Metahistorical Analysis of Manu s. Pillai's Rebel Sultans

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**Abstract:** 'Isotoria', the Greek term for history defines history as an enquiry or an exploration of archives and historical evidence. But it is through the narrative part that the historical imagination of the historian is transferred. Hence the process of writing of history involves a scientific and creative procedure. The creative part of historiography is centred on the 'historical narrative' which makes the core of this study. The primary text selected for the study is Rebel Sultans authored by Manu S. Pillai. The study tries to trace the narrative strategies that enabled the author to convert historical evidence into a proper historical narrative. The theoretical framework adopted for the analysis comes from Metahistory: Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, the seminal work of the American historiographer Hayden White, published in 1973. The study analyses the process of construction of the narrative of Rebel Sultans based on the five levels of conceptualisation proposed by Hayden White such as chronicles, story, mode of emplacement, mode of argument and mode of ideology.

**Index Terms:** History, historiography, narrativity, metahistory, chronicle, historical narrative, literary artefact, objectivity, Rebel Sultans etc.

## I. INTRODUCTION

'Can history be read as a work of literature?' is a question that shakes the very foundation on which the genre of history is built upon, namely its objectivity. The objectivity of historical accounts is a much-contended statement due to the dualistic nature of historiography. History can be defined as an attempt of human beings to study one's living past from various archived sources; verbal or written. Thus, the sources are the relics or traces of some actual occurrences that happened in the past. At this stage itself there is a possibility of deduction or refraction of the actual event that might have occurred in the thought process of the historian, which contributes to the question of objectivity.

All historical researches are based on the exploration of infinite source materials from which the historian selects

facts and evidence, reconstitutes and adapts them to make a finished product, a historical narrative. This process of cognitive reflection on historical evidence exalts the status of history from a mere recording of historical facts to an elevated realm of creative writing. Furthermore, it questions the concept of the existence of a 'pure historical truth' or a 'real history'. All historical narratives are written on vivid perspectives, through which the historian adds meaning to historical narrative, and thus history becomes the historian's reconstruction of the past. Thus, the historiography of all ages reflects the prefiguration of historical facts by the historian which denotes a process of chronicling of history. It is in this regard that Hayden White argues that history is a 'poetic construct' neither scientific nor objective.

Metahistory, the concept introduced by the American historiographer Hayden White in his 1973 work Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe, marks a linguistic turn in historiography. The key factor analysed in his concept is the 'narrativity' of the historical writing, which set a methodology for analysing historical narratives. White states that "History is a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse" (2).

Rebel Sultans narrates the history of the Deccan plateau from the close of the thirteenth century to the dawn of the eighteenth century. Geographically and historically Deccan holds a prominent place in the Indian subcontinent. It was a place where many dynasties flourished, declined and disintegrated into oblivion. But these are not mere stories of palace intrigues, feuds and rivalry, as represented in many of the historical narratives. In this book, the author attempts to trace the dynamic history of the Deccan and relieves it off from the religious colouring associated with it. The present study focuses on the narrative part of the book and analyses how the author succeeds in executing his historical imagination through his narrative.

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## II. OBJECTIVE

This paper aims at analysing the narrative of the book Rebel Sultans by Manu S. Pillai based on the concept of 'metahistory' by Hayden White to understand the



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creative process involved in the narration to convert a historical narrative into a fictional narrative.

### III. HYPOTHESIS

It is possible to read the narrative structure of a historical narrative as a fictional narrative to substantiate the fact that there is no objective and scientific history.

### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study attempts to analyse how the author subconsciously plots his narrative in a way that different elements of the narrative are charged to function as particles of a literary work. The theoretical framework on which the study is conducted is the concept of metahistory, and the tool used for the analysis is the three-columns four-rows table formulated by Hayden White.

### V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies have been conducted on Hayden White's concept of metahistory. Among these studies, some critically analyse Hayden White's concept of history like Herman Paul's work, *Key Contemporary Thinkers* while some other studies refute his ideas mainly due to the formalistic methods of analysis. But this paper does not focus on an analysis of Hayden White's ideas but uses his concept as a tool to analyse the narrative of *Rebel Sultans* by Manu.S. Pillai, an author who claims that his style of historical narrative is away from the fictional mode of storytelling. There are not many analytical studies on *Rebel Sultans* except for some reviews on magazines and newspapers in print and online.

### VI. ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

By analysing the narrative strategies of the historians like Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt and the philosophers of History like Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Croce, Hayden White formulated his three-columns four-rows table of elective affinities which is shown in the following figure.

Three columns four-rows table introduced by Hayden White in *Metahistory* (29).

Mode of Emplotment	Mode of Argument	Mode of Ideology
Romantic	Formist	Anarchist
Tragic	Mechanistic	Radical
Comic	Organicist	Conservative
Satirical	Contextualist	Liberal

In the poetic act of historical imagination, White identifies four tropes of poetic language in which the historian prefigures his historical field, such as Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche and Irony. Metaphoric language is

representational; metonymic language is reductionist, the language of Synecdoche is integrative and ironic language is negational. The historian prefigures his narrative in any of these linguistic tropes to structure the plot of his story accurately (31-34).

#### i. Turning chronicle into a story

Chronicle is the arrangement of events in the temporal order of their occurrence in the historical field. Then it is organised into a story with a proper beginning, middle and end. As White states "This transformation of chronicle into a story is effected by the characterisation of some events in the chronicle in terms of inaugural motifs of others in terms of terminating motifs and of yet others in terms of transitional motifs" (5).

Manu S. Pillai casts the history of Deccan in a broad canvas of over four centuries. The temporal dimension is so vast in terms of historical events, offering the author plenty of chronicles. White posits that chronicles are open-ended; they begin when the chronicler starts recording them and continue indefinitely without any culmination. The vast temporal span of four centuries offers a wide range of chronicles from which the author must find, identify and uncover the stories lie buried in them.

*Rebel Sultans* is based mainly on the chronicles pertaining to the Sangama Dynasty, Bahmani Sultanate, Delhi Sultanate, Mughal Empire and Maratha Swaraj. The narrative is structured in such a way that the story of the rebel sultans comes in the middle of the narrative, which is a brilliant structuring of the plot that goes intact with author's presupposition of the narrative. The author has disclosed his aim of narrating the story of rebel sultans as an attempt to re-read the medieval historiography of India in which the Deccan is portrayed as a place of despotic Muslim rulers who shattered Hindu temples massively. Moreover, the history of Deccan is usually remembered in terms of the Battle of Thalikota of 1565 in which the famous Vijayanagara Empire ends and in the name of the chivalrous Shivaji. Such narrations always fail to reach to the core of Deccan and its riveting tales and vibrant heritage. Keeping them in mind, Manu S. Pillai collates all facets of the Deccan and structures the plot in such a way as to tell what Deccan's 'real' history is and the role played by Deccan sultans and how they rewrote the Indian history.

The 'rebel sultans' referred in the book are the five Muslim dynasties in the Deccan Sultanate who became independent during the declining years of the Bahmani Sultanate.

They include:



DYNASTY	FOUNDER	CAPITAL	PERIOD
The Adil Shahi Dynasty	Yusuf Adil Khan	Bijapur	1490-1686
The Nizam Shahi Dynasty	Malik Ahamed Nizam Shah I	Ahamednagar	1490-1636
The Imad Shahi Dynasty	Fatullah Imad Shah	Berar	1490-1574
The Baridi Dynasty	Quasim Barid	Bidar	1492-1619
The Qutb Shahi Dynasty	Sultan- Quli Qutb -ul- Mulik	Golconda	1518-1687

The events related to the rebel sultans come almost in the middle of the historical field the author has chosen. The selection of the appropriate chronicles and the conversion of them into a story with a discernible beginning, middle and end certainly linked with the author's prefiguration of the plot structure. Thus, White argues that the content of a narrative is as much as invented as found. The event which can be viewed as the 'inaugural motif' of the narrative of *Rebel Sultans* is Alauddin Khilji's triumph over the Yadavas of Devagiri. The terminating motif is that of Shivaji's ascension to power. Transitional motifs include the story of rebel sultans and other narrative strands that run intertwined with it. The reason for such a choice is explained by the author himself as a starting point of two entirely different power conceptions that changed the entire history of Deccan. Alauddin Khilji is the first Muslim ruler who invaded the Deccan, and he is the first to introduce many advanced cavalries in warfare. It is Khilji's invasion that marked the beginning of the annexation of Kakatiyas of Warangal, Hoysalas of Dwarasamudra and Yadavas of Devagiri. This chaotic situation in the southern peninsula later leads to the emergence of Bahmani Sultanate which is formed by a group of nobles of Muhammed bin Tughluq. Bahmani Sultanate plays a vital role in the history of Deccan as it is during these years that the Deccan comes under the foreign influences in all respects of life like culture, sculpture, fashion, art, trade and so on. The entire plateau changed drastically; this serves as a crucial transitional motif in *Rebel Sultans*. The narrative strands on the Vijayanagara empire and the Mughals also function as transitory motifs. With the decline of Bahmani Sultanate, the rebel sultans come to power. Thus, the author brilliantly positions the rebel sultans in the history of the Deccan. He selects Shivaji and the resistance of the Marathas as the terminating motif by placing Shivaji in the scenario of an already transformed history of Deccan. With Shivaji, the Deccan enters again to the new phase with his unique vision and power conception which is portrayed in hundreds of books on Shivaji. By placing him as a terminating motif, Manu S. Pillai positions him as a continuum of an already existing rich heritage of

Deccan which is absent in most other books on Deccan history.

## ii. Emplotment in *Rebel Sultans*

Following Northrop Frye's concept of archetypal criticism (*Anatomy of Criticism*), White identifies four types of plot structures such as Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire in historical narratives. Romance is explained as a drama of self-identification symbolised through the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, victory over it and final liberation from it. Satire, the precise opposite of romance, reveals the inadequacy of the human consciousness and will in overcoming death, which brings out the apprehension that man is a captive of the world than a master of it. Thus, it presupposes the inadequacy of the visions of the world represented in Romance, Tragedy and Comedy in an ironic mode. Tragedy and Comedy suggest the possibility of at least partial liberation from the fall and offers occasional reconciliation. In comedy, the temporary triumph of man over the forces is symbolically celebrated in festive occasions which the comic writer uses as the terminating event of his narration. In Tragedy, reconciliation is much more sombre, and festive occasions are false and illusionary (7-11).

The narrative of *Rebel Sultans* is structured as a Romance. A romantic view of the era is so prominent in the narration which overpowers even the unpleasant realities of that age. In the narration, history of Deccan becomes a metaphor for chivalry, secularism, cultural exchange, riches and so on. The author captures the uniqueness of that age through the identification of heroic characters of Deccan, irrespective of their gender, religion and race. The author narrates the stories of historical figures of Deccan elegantly that otherwise found only in footnotes of historiographic texts.

Among the various heroic characters introduced by the author, some stand out with their greatness like Hasan Gangu, Firoz Shah, Ahamed Shah, Ibrahim Adil Shah, Chand Bibi, Malik Ambar. Pillai presents Hasan Gangu (1347-58) as the 'Akbar of the Deccan', who abolished the Jiziah for non-Muslims generations before Akbar. It was during the time of Firoz Shah (1397-1422) that Deccan witnessed a continuous influx of people from foreign lands who transformed Deccan into a sophisticated region of art and culture. Ahamed Shah (1422-36) placed his capital Bidar on the international map with his brilliant economic policies. With its improved techniques on silk and velvet production, goods from Deccan travelled widely across the world. But in history, he is represented mostly as an iconoclast. Rejecting such views, the author romanticizes his hero by



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stating that “while contingencies of battle involved the demolishing of temples in enemy territory in order to delegitimize the authority of the kings who patronized and were duty-bound to protect these shrines, it should be noted that Ahmed Shah was no unrestrained iconoclast” (Pillai 57).

The author's narration of the period of Ibrahim Adil Shah (1580-1627) who is known as ‘son of Saraswathi and Ganapathi’ provides a romantic view of the Deccan region. The time of his reign witnessed the flowering of local culture which transformed the city of Bijapur considerably. Art reached its zenith and consumption of luxury goods reached their peak during this period. The chronicler Ferishta spent years writing Gulshan -i- Ibrahim in the palace. Ibrahim's composition Kitab -i-Nouras offers the world the rich syncretism of the period. In a similar tone, Pillai narrates the story of Chand Bibi who fought valiantly against the Mughals and Malik Ambar, the Ethiopian warlord who also fought against the Mughals in defence of Ahmednagar. Referring to Malik Amber's role in Deccan history, Pillai states that in history no other instance is there where an Abyssinian slave reaches such eminence.

These are some instances where the romantic texture of the plot raises to the maximum with vivid description. The romantic description of Deccan and its heroes certainly evokes thoughts about the figures who ended up in the short end of medieval Indian historiography and about a region which played a significant role in drawing off much of the energy of the Mughals.

### iii. Mode of argument in *Rebel Sultans*

The argument provides an explanation of what happens in the historical narrative. Four types of arguments identified by White in *Metahistory* are Formist, Organicist, Mechanist and Contextualistic. In Formist argument, which is the mode of argument of Romantic historian, is characterised by its generalisation which is more ‘dispersive’ in the analysis that results in lack of integration. Organicist mode of argument is more integrative than formist in which the historian depicts a consolidation of individual events into an integrated event whose importance is greater than individual components. The Mechanist argument tends towards abstraction. They seek casual laws that determine the outcomes of the process discovered in the historical field. Contextualists proceed by isolating some events of the historical field and picks out the threads to connect with other events of the historical space to answer the reasons for their occurrence (15-20).

In *Rebel Sultans*, the author justifies his plot structure through a Formist argument which follows an elective affinity with the plot structure of a Romance. As stated by White, Formist argument is more ‘dispersive’ than

integrative. In *Rebel Sultans*, uniqueness of different agents and acts are explained in a way that the reader can easily identify a Deccan way of life. The author focuses on the historical characters of the Deccan and their response to the contexts. From such responses, the readers elicit the uniqueness of the Deccan. It may not always be positive, it includes negatives also, but that too contributes to the uniqueness of the Deccan. What the author portrays before the readers is that of the picture of a vibrant Deccan with its riches, cultural appropriation, chivalrous rulers and its weakness or inability to join against their common enemies. As in an ideal mode of Formist argument, the narration in *Rebel Sultans* tends towards generalisations than abstractions.

### iv. Ideology in *Rebel Sultans*

According to White “Ideological dimensions of a historical account reflect the ethical element in the historian's assumption of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and implications that can be drawn from the study of past events for the understanding of the present ones” (24). He identifies four modes of ideological positions such as Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism and Liberalism. White stresses the fact that all these terms lack the political colouring associated with them. Conservatives prefer a natural rhythm of changes and are sceptical of forced changes in society. Radicals and Anarchists believe in cataclysmic transformations in society. Liberals are in between conservatives and radicals and prefer gradual changes in society (23-25).

In Hayden White's concept of elective affinities, the plot of Romance goes accordant with the Anarchist ideology. It is to be noted that White does not rule out the possibility of other combinations, rather he identifies such inconsistent combinations in the works of great historians. The “dialectical tension” that comes out of such combinations culminates in the brilliance of their works. Deviating from Anarchism, which is the possible combination suggested by White, the ideology that the author chooses in *Rebel Sultans* for the explanation of the narrative seems to be liberal. As previously mentioned, the term ‘liberal’ lacks all political tones associated with it. Instead, it represents the nature of historical knowledge presented in his work. Selection of such an ideology justifies the purpose with which the author conceived this book. He aims to liberate the Deccan from the shadow of religious fanaticism and to give representation to the historical figures before Shivaji.

In the description of the arrival of Islam in the Deccan by the tenth century,

Manu S. Pillai holds a liberal secular view that it was a peaceful process unlike that of the north. Though he critically attacks historians who viewed Deccan through a religious lens, he does not possess a tone of anarchism. He says “This is not to say that the early encounters were amicable. Muslims injected new technologies in arms and cavalry warfare and an unfamiliar conception of power into the subcontinent, and no battle was ever a painless communion”(26).

The author elucidates how ‘Battle of Talikota’ is represented as a culturally disruptive act of Muslim monarchs to annihilate a Hindu kingdom, neglecting the fact that Ramaraya of Vijayanagar was once a Qutb Shahi officer and the king of Golkonda lived seven years in Vijayanagar. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Telugu poem *Ramavacakamu* degrades Deccan sultans as inferior men, at the same time elevates Mughals to the levels of divinities. The author cites this as evidence for stressing the fact that everything that happened in the Deccan was not in the name of any religion. In Indian historiography, the same religious aura is given for Sivaji as a Hindu warrior who restored the nobility of the mass defending them from the evil designs of Muslim invaders. But citing evidence, the author stresses that Sivaji’s actions are led by genuine empathy with common folk who have been suffering due to the severe famine of 1630 and Mughal invasions. In his liberal tone, the author argues that what Sivaji stood for is that the rejection of an existing system of power built on Islamic ideals, “but it does not appear to be a mark of hatred for that religion itself” (Pillai 213).

Though the mode of ideology that is consistent with plot structure of Romance is Anarchism as per White’s quadruple tetrad, from the analysis of the vantage point chosen by the author in his narration of *Rebel Sultans*, it is apparent that Pillai takes on a liberal ideology in his narration than an anarchist one.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The concept of realism that every historian strives to achieve in their historical narration is the factor that determines the strategy of historical narratives. The realistic narration is based on the historian’s perspectives on the nature of history he is dealing with. But the moral and aesthetic grounds on which the historian narrates history must refrain him from narrating ill-researched and propagandistic history. The narration of history is flexible and positive in many ways which are evident in Manu S. Pillai’s narration of *Rebel Sultans*. From the analysis of the narrative of *Rebel Sultans* based on the metahistorical framework provided by Hayden White, it may be concluded that the author attempts to achieve his mode of realistic narration through a Romantic employment, Formist argument and Liberal ideology.

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