

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE FICTIONAL WORLDS IN MALCOLM BRADBURY'S *DOCTOR CRIMINALE*

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Article info

Article Received: 11/01/2023

Article Accepted: 09/02/2023

Published online:20/02/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.1.114](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.1.114)

Abstract

Malcolm Bradbury 's novel *Doctor Criminale* portrays a journalist's search for a philosopher. It takes place in the postmodern world which is characterised by multiplicity and pluralism. It is difficult to distinguish the real from the fictional in this world. The text of the novel itself refers to so many other texts thereby creating a situation in which it is difficult to decipher the meaning. The novel covers literary events that reveal the developments in the field of literary theory. The search for the philosopher itself becomes one that involves deconstruction. The philosopher is an author of several texts and there are also texts that refer to him. The contradictions in his personality reflect the ideological crisis as well as the historical conflict of this age. He displays an excess of signs which resists interpretation. However, he is a philosopher who has recognised the nothingness that underlies it.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Multiplicity, Postmodern, Excess, Deconstruction, Reality, Fiction, Text.

Postmodern fiction exhibits intertextuality to a great degree. It exhibits a multiplicity of historical, personal, political, and aesthetic codes. Very often the world of fiction intersects through the world of reality blurring the borders between them. Christopher Nash explains the nature of intertextuality in *World Postmodern Fiction*: "Intertextual indeterminacy pivots on the concept that all utterances, all signs, are texts whose meanings—produced by the reader are merely 'nodes' in the total text, the network of the language of signs in operation in human experience" (150). The unstable relationship between the signs creates a situation in which it is difficult to point out which is the right meaning. They are in a state of flux and their identities are displaced. Excess become a characteristic of such texts which move towards an exhaustion of possibilities. No text can exist free

from history, and this results in another kind of intertextuality since history itself is a text. Television and cinema also function as inner worlds within the fictional world of the literary text. Thus fiction also tends to reflect the world of hyperreality. The narrative in the total text is affected by the information explosion that has taken over culture. The excess of data creates anarchy within the text, and the literary work becomes a collage like the cultural environment from which it has been generated. The postmodern text in fact exposes the strategies that went into its making. Patricia Waugh points out in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* that such fiction concerns itself with "a parodic, playful, excessive, or deceptively naïve style of writing" (2). Metafiction responds to "the sense of oppression by the endless systems and structures of present day society—with

its technologies, bureaucracies, ideologies, institutions and traditions—is the construction of a playworld which consists of similar endless systems and structures"(Waugh 38). Metafictional strategies problematise reality through the subversion of such systems and structures. The chaotic condition of culture has contributed to the indeterminacy that characterises literature. Deconstruction has theorized the instability that is a property of all written texts.

Malcolm Bradbury's *Doctor Criminale* is a work that incorporates this chaotic literary world. It is concerned with the quest of a journalist for an elusive philosopher. It is one that intersects with literary texts as well as literary events. Thereby it functions as a satire on the intellectual environment of this period. The novel opens with the Booker Prize ceremony which is an event dominated by media people, publishers, bankers, businessmen, and politicians. Bradbury has pointed out in *The Modern British Novel*: "...there was no better indicator of the way the spirit of British fiction was changing in style, mood and generation, at the start of the Eighties than the Booker Prize for Fiction"(416). The writer gets lost and becomes insignificant in this glamorous space. The entire event is turned into a television show by the cameras held by the representatives of the media. The expressions "technological fiction"(Criminale 1) and "mad fiction of economic reality"(Criminale 12) have been aptly used to refer to these events.

"The Barolo Congress on Literature and Power"becomes a site for the display of the pluralism in the field of literature and literary theory. American Postmodernists and feminists, British multi-ethnic writers, French and South Californian academics, Eastern European dissident writers, Japanese writers, Black African writers, and theoretical critics from Yale are present there. Among the delegates are also the President of the Indian Writer's Union, a Nobel Prize winner from a small North African country, and a literary editor from Paris doing work in the field of semiotics. The conference is chaired by Professor Monza, who is an Italian experimental novelist and the guest of honour is Doctor Bazlo Criminale himself. It is a conference that on one hand balances the West and

the East and literature and power on the other. Such a Congress reflects a world which has become a global village or more precisely a high-tech international conglomerate. Richard Ruland and Bradbury have pointed out in *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*: "We live in an age of rapid communication and vast, indeed parodic, cultural assimilation, where the boundaries of nation are no longer the boundaries of taste, perception, or ideas"(XVIII). Such an intellectual climate has resulted in the generation of a plethora of critical theories. This proliferation of theories creates a situation where there is a lot of confusion in the academic circles.

The Buenos Aires Book Fair is an event for which all the readers and writers of South America come together. The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges is used as a cultural signifier to promote this book fair. The writers and intellectuals present there, try to relate Borges to their own critical conceptions: "The British crime novelist spoke about crime and Borges, the British campus novelist-critic spoke about European experimental fiction and Borges, the Argentine writers talked

Latin American writing and Borges ..."(Criminale 268). This becomes another instance of the critical hyperactivity that distorts texts and authors through excess. Here many diverging points of view are presented, but no unified point of view is arrived at. In such circumstances only "a pluralistic, perceiver-shaped reality"(Ruland and Bradbury 418) is arrived at. The multiplicity that is seen in the matter of critical viewpoints makes Interpretation difficult. The discourses of those assembled there seem to have the nature of fiction. The book fair is also an instance of the commodification of literature. A literary work is promoted like a commodity in this venue.

The exhaustion of postmodernism is itself discussed at the conference titled "The Death of Postmodernism: New Beginnings ". The theoretical framework of postmodernism finds itself overloaded with many concepts and hence it is facing the prospect of exhaustion from overload. The conference shows a coming together of concepts like narrative indeterminacy, new history,

chaos theory and late modern depthlessness. Many postmodern writers are attending the event. A deconstructive thinker is supposed to mark his presence or absence during this occasion. It is a mega event sponsored by Mercedes and Bosch. So it is a world where literary activities are conducted by big industrial corporations with a business motive.

The novel throws light on the “age of Postmodern deconstruction, in which more energy has been put into demythologizing interpretative myths than constructing them”(Ruland and Bradbury XV). Francis Jay, who is a journalist on a quest for *Criminale*, acknowledges the importance of deconstruction:

Junior interrogators, literary commissars, we deconstructed everything: author, text, reader, language, discourse, life itself. No task was too small, no piece of writing below suspicion. We demythologized, we demystified. We dehegemonised, we decanonized. We dephallicized, we depatriarchalized; we decoded, we decanted, we defamed, we de-manned. (*Criminale* 8-9)

Jay's quest for *Criminale* itself becomes a deconstructive activity. He considers *Criminale* as a text full of obscure signs and codes. And it is Jay's duty to unravel their meaning or lack of meaning. Jay is the reader who should look for slippage and gaps. *Criminale* becomes an author as well as text for him. At the same time there is a text about *Criminale* titled “*Bazlo Criminale: Life and Thought*” (*Criminale* 285) whose author is absent. The subject of the book *Criminale* has also disappeared. Jay relates this text to the history of Europe. He looks with deconstructive skepticism at this twisted and convoluted history. Jay feels that the *Criminale* in the text is not the real *Criminale*. Nor is it the *Criminale* that suits Jay's concept of him. Jay had read the text at the beginning of his quest for *Criminale*. But when he reads it again at the end, it appears different to him. Jay, the reader, has also changed and he reads the text for what it does not say. So it becomes inevitable for him to implement the strategy of deconstruction:

Now I indeed deconstructed: read for the omissions and emissions, the obscurities and absences, the spaces and the fractures, the linguistic and ideological contradictions. I read it, in fact, as a fiction, which of course is what I should really have done in the first place. But now I read it with the benefit of alternative facts, which of course were also, as it were, fictions, to set against 'its' fiction. I had alternative authors to try out on it, alternative *Criminales* to poke into its pages. This was a text I could work on. (*Criminale* 285)

Deconstruction involves the point of view that individuals as well as the institutions or structures with which they are associated, are unstable. Everything exists among shifting cultural codes: “For deconstructors, the boundaries between any given text and that larger text we call language are always shifting”(Murfin and Ray, *The Bedford Glossary* 80). Hence a text will have a different meaning every time it is read. Thus there is no ultimate meaning for any text. Words themselves are only arbitrarily associated with things, and hence have meaning only because they differ from other words. Thus deconstructors can only “demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings, rather than being a unified, logical whole”(Murfin and Ray, *The Bedford* 75).

Criminale himself is an excess of signs and this contributes to his obscurity. Thus *Criminale*'s personality has been problematised in the novel. There is no way to ascertain whether the facts concerning *Criminale*'s life constitute reality or fiction. This shows the nature of contemporary reality: “Contemporary reality, in particular, is continually being reappraised and resynthesised. It is no longer experienced as an ordered and fixed hierarchy, but as a web of interrelating, multiple realities”(Waugh 51). The code and possibilities are innumerable, and hence the tools for interpretation look upon history and fiction as discourses. In fact both of them derive their major claim to truth from this identity. The text about *Criminale* attempts to hide the negative aspects of his life and character. The text not only deals with *Criminale*'s life also with European history. The tragedies of Hiroshima and

the Holocaust, the collapse of old philosophies and the birth of new ones, the dreams of anti-fascist Utopias, the wonders of technology, and economics, and the death of the proletarian dream and the rise of the bourgeois and the multinationals become codes in the text. Jay as a reader loses his way among the anarchy of data. The text seems to offer a number of clues which in fact only lead to redundancy. A situation is seen here where "the avalanche of its information represents that anarchic aspect of totality which makes it untotalizable"(Nash 218).

The inconsistent, irreconcilable, and contradictory aspects of Criminale's personality reflect the culture of this age. The text shows the appearance and disappearance of people as well as ideologies. At one time, Criminale had a relationship with Pia who was an anti-Nazi as well as a Marxist. But they later separate over ideological disagreement. Criminale's books were banned in Marxist countries, but printed in the West. Some historical events related to Hungary, consisting of Imre Nagy's democratic reform government, the Russian invasion, the mass arrests, and the imprisonment of Nagy have been left out. Criminale's ideological position is obscure regarding these matters. His presence or absence as far as the historical context is concerned is also not made clear in the text. At the same time, the text contains information about Criminale's social and intellectual life. He is portrayed as a world traveller and detached philosopher. The text does not provide enough information about Criminale's love life. Gertla is presented in a plurality of roles like that of the loyal wife, the intellectual help meet, the supporters, and the brave companion. Then Sepulchra appears in the text in the perfunctory role of a wife. The traces of the other women in Criminale's life are not there in the text. Thus it is a text with many fissures and gaps, and hence an apt one on which to practice the strategies of deconstruction. The dares given in it are not based on accurate information. Realities are constituted as fictions in this text which is ambiguous as well as discontinuous. Even historical events assume the status of fiction. There is an excess of historical material in the text as the details of Criminale's life

centre round the facts as well as fictions of history. Hutcheon has analysed this aspect:"... the problematic concept of historical knowledge and the semiotic notion of language as a social contract is reinscribed in the metafictionally self-conscious and self-regulating signifying system of literature"(99).

Jay belongs to the generation that acknowledges the death of the author. Roland Barthes has elaborated on this aspect."Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred"(Lodge, *Modern Criticism* 170-71).The text that relates to the life of Criminale, is characterised by an author who is absent. Jay feels that the problems of the text can be solved only if he finds the absent author. Jay suspects a number of people including Criminale of being the author of the book. However Jay's search for the author is bound to be futile, if we take into account the concept projected by Barthes: "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing....In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered* ..."(Lodge 171). The book comes from the time that history is being rewritten. Marxism is becoming obsolete, and glasnost and perestroika are acquiring prominence. As a result, philosophers are acquiring new masks.

The disappearance of the author coincides with the reduction of the philosopher to a theoretical nothing. He becomes one who has only ideas and theories that are unstable and hence changes according to the times. Criminale admits that the philosopher is a mere pawn in the hands of history. The author has only a nominal role in the creation of the text, since he is also a product of history. Historical events lead to the creation of new texts or the re-writing of old texts:"Postmodern Fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological"(Hutcheon 110). However it is wrong to call a philosopher a betrayer

just because he misunderstood history and wrote something fallacious. One cannot take back what has already been put into writing. This is Criminale's justification for his ideological transition. The problematisation of the author with regard to the text should be understood in this context. The novel provides some instances of texts which show uncertainty in the matter of the author. Jay points towards literary history and says that it is alleged that Dante Alighieri's assistant wrote *Divine Comedy* and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's pupil wrote *Faust*. It is said that Sepulchra wrote some of Criminale's works like "*Homeless: A Tale of the Modern Age*" (Criminale 244). All such controversies point towards the concept of the death of the author. According to Jay, the author is absent at all levels of the text.

Doctor Criminale is a text that exhibits intertextuality at various levels. In this context, one should examine Hutcheon's concept:

...intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself. A literary work can no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance.(126)

While on his quest in search of Criminale, Jay has to undertake a railway journey from Vienna to Budapest. At that time he reads Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* which contains a similar journey by a young man named Hans Castorp. The novel also contains a portrait of a philosopher called Naphta. This philosopher is modeled on Georg Lukacs, who in turn has a great influence over Criminale. Castorp's journey takes place in a world that is about to change completely. He acquires a new point of view from this journey:

...he is going far, from north to south, work to leisure, Puritan and Prussian order to disorder, culture to nature, and from the world of normal health to the world of disease and death....His train trip is taking him out of the flatlands and into the

uplands, out of the normal world of time into a new kind of time, out of daily duties into a place of abstract thought, and out of mediocrity into self-knowledge.(Bradbury, *The Modern World: Ten Great Writers* 104)

It is a novel that explores the conflict of ideas that underlies that particular historical period. Jay's journey in search of Doctor Criminale is marked by the conflicts of yet another age. The novel refers to a series of texts published in 1889 which played a role in ushering in the modern world. Henry Bergson's *Time and Free Will* contains revolutionary ideas about human consciousness and its experience of time. This text separates historical time from the time that is related to the consciousness. This text influenced Marcel Proust and can also be related to the thoughts of Sigmund Freud. *The Twilight of the False Gods* by Nietzsche laid the foundation of the modern. His thoughts bordered on fatalism and nihilism and leaned towards the concept of destruction of entire races. Adolph Hitler was inspired by this sort of philosophising with a hammer. Modernism was brought to a climax by James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*:

Finnegan's Wake was the book that spoke abstractly to the great Modernist task both of breaking down an old language and myth, and constructing a new and self-made one that made the art of fiction the art of language itself. To that we owe much, including a good many new literary experiments, and much of our modern linguistic anxiety.(Bradbury, *The Modern World* 176)

These texts represent a period of radical changes. They are all related to a turbulent period in history.

The present novel is set in a different age but which is also one witnessing great changes:"...modernism's 'nightmare of history' is precisely what postmodernism has chosen to face straight on"(Hutcheon 88). The postmodern age is again one of political or cultural upheaval. The events that mark the text of its history are the end of the Cold War, the toppling of the Berlin Wall, the fall of Marxism the rise of glasnost and perestroika, the Yugoslavian conflict, and the Gulf Crisis. Thus it

is evident that the text of *Doctor Criminale* which is set in the postmodern world makes an attempt to relate itself with certain key texts of modernism. However the intersection of modernist thought in a postmodern text, contributes to Intertextual indeterminacy.

Das Kapital is mentioned in the novel in the light of the collapse of Marxism. It is a text that contrasts with the postmodern market centred world. *The Communist Manifesto* is discussed by Criminale in a speech at the Barolo Congress: "150 years ago *The Communist Manifesto* appeared, and the first sentence read, you all remember, 'A spectre haunts Europe—the spectre of Communism.' Well, no more I think. But what spectre *does* haunt Europe, or the rest of the world? The spectre that haunts us is the spectre of too much and too little" (Criminale 149). Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is mentioned giving emphasis to its status as the first modern re-interpretation of history. The book shows that to all historical epochs, there is a finite cycle.

Christopher Nash has pointed out: "Intertextualist fiction' is genuinely pluralistic in its orientation, with reference to utterances outside it and to material within it" (152). Thus the works which are supposed to be written by Criminale find mention in the novel. There is a historical drama called "*The Behind Martin Luther*" (Criminale 24) which can be called an epic spectacle. It is a work that has provoked comparison between Criminale and Bertolt Brecht. "*Homeless: A Tale of the Modern Age*" (Criminale 24) is a novella that has been praised by Graham Greene. Greene called it the the finest single work of the latter half of this century. "*Goethe: The German Shakespeare*" (Criminale 24-25), his three-volume biography of the writer, gives a coherent picture of Goethe and relates him to history. Criminale's text argues that the German Reich has its foundations in the thoughts of Goethe. Criminale has also to his credit a work about economic theory called "*Is Money Necessary?*" (Criminale 25). This text made an impact in Russia where money has little value. "*The Psychopathology of the Postmodern Masses*" (Criminale 25) probes into the dark side of the human mind that is conditioned by this society. Criminale's works also

include vast illustrated tomes on Graeco-Roman civilization and small paperback works on Marxist philosophy. The multiple points of view of the postmodern world get reflected in the body of Criminale's work.

There are also several texts which are supposed to contain information about Criminale. These texts have been mentioned to further problematise the line that divides a fictional character from a real-life personality: "In fact if you want to find out more about him as I did you only need turn to the small volume on him (by Roger Scruton) in the *Modern Masters* series, edited by Frank Kermode, published by Fontana Books. Here he appears in the list between Chomsky and Derrida..." (Criminale 26). Here he is compared to Marx, Nietzsche, Lukacs, Gorky, Goethe, Rosa Luxemburg and Adam Smith. *The Dictionary of Modern Thought, Modern Hermeneutics, Critical Practice* and *Ramparts* magazine all provide information about his nationality and ideology that contradict each other. This contradictory information contributes to the Intertextual indeterminacy of the novel.

Bradbury has also made a part of the fictional world of *Doctor Criminale*, the character Mensonge from his work *My Strange Quest for Mensonge. Structuralism's Hidden Hero*. He is supposed to attend a conference on the death of postmodernism. McHale has analysed this device in *Postmodernist Fiction*: "There are a number of ways of foregrounding...intertextual space and integrating it in the text's structure, but none is more effective than the device of 'borrowing' a character from another text—'transworld identity,' Umberto Eco has called this, the transfiguration of characters from one fictional universe to another" (qtd. In Rose 263)).

The proliferation of intertextual references creates a condition of anarchy in the novel. It becomes a labyrinth of signs that lead nowhere: "What makes for indeterminacy—in this in — some— respects 'positive, constructive 'notion of indeterminacy—is a function of the multiplicity of relations between signs" (Nash 151). Charles Jencks has pointed out that "where there are too many

texts there is no author” (qtd. In Rose 265). The postmodern culture that is submerged in excess is responsible for such a scenario.

This is an age that has seen the evolution of the work of literature into a commodity at the market place. The commodification of literature has turned novelists into celebrities. Their status as writers depends on their value in the market. Criminale is a successful writer according to the standards of this market-oriented literary world. His books have good sales in places as distant as New York, Budapest, Moscow and Stuttgart. According to the statistics his books are supposed to sell more than those of Lenin in Russia Confucius in China, and Jacqueline Susann in the United States. Criminale writes in German or English and his works are translated into other languages. His books appear in western hardback as well as in East European bindings. Though Criminale became rich through royalties, his ideological position led to many of them banned in Russia.

Criminale’s ideas regarding literature are expressed in the novel. He expressed the view that literature should remain literature, and not politics or journalism. He was of the view that there was no proper relationship between literature and power. He had a deep insight into the workings of power and art as his words make clear: “Power manages and art deceives. Power seeks a monologue and art is a dialogue” (Criminale 147). Criminale is able to detect the opposition in this relation. He criticises many writers for falling victim to the charms of ideology. Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre fell under the influence of fascist ideologies for a period, whereas Georg Lukacs blindly adhered to Communism. Criminale does not reject ideology since he knows about its ability to guide people. He is a philosopher who exists with an awareness of the death of the subject, the loss of the great metanarratives, the disappearance of the self, the depthlessness of history, the slippage of the referent, the culture of pastiche, and the departure of reality. According to Criminale, the postmodern condition is “something more than post-technological situation, a phenomenon of late capitalism, a loss of narratives or whatever the interpreters called it” (Criminale 323).

Hence Criminale is recognised as the Great Thinker of the Age of Glasnost. He has tried to interpret the problems that underlie thought in his age and this manifests itself as a crisis in his writing. Criminale’s irony itself is a product of the gap between thought and historical need. He writes about the chaos that manifests itself in the realm of culture. He has no certainties to hold on to and he concentrates on nothingness. He is supposed to have had debates with philosophers like Marx, Nietzsche, Adorno, and Heidegger. He has interpreted phenomenology, techno-centrism, history, and above all modernity in his own way. Such intense and persistent intellectual endeavours made him fit for the title “The Philosopher King” (Criminale 25). However Criminale is aware of the pitiable condition of the postmodern philosopher who is “jet-lagged, culture-shocked, stuffed with too much in-flight food and too much vacant in-flight entertainment, mind disordered, body gross, thoughts hectic and hypertense, spirits dislodged from space and time, baggageless, without normal possessions” (Criminale 23). He is a philosopher who has perceived the nothingness that underlies the material excess of capitalist culture. Hence he deconstructed his own glorified image by stating that he is just a container for this nothingness. In a way he has exhausted himself through an excess of intellectual activity. Moreover he is in the paradoxical situation of being a philosopher in a post-philosophical age which is under the all pervasive influence of hyperreality. It has become difficult to distinguish between the real and the fictional as is revealed in Criminale’s statement: “Life is a movie, death is a plot ending, no stories are real. And even the philosophers think in unrealities, they describe a world of no ethics, no humanism, no self” (Criminale 330).

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Autobiography

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