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European Fashion Figures in American Biofictions

Abstract

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This paper analyzes the specific type of American biographical fictions dealing with the presentation of the lives of various famous European persons from different time periods. The past few decades note a growing trend of writing and publishing biofictions. A curious aspect of this trend is the appearance of biofictions written by American authors that tell the story of artists, actors, actresses, presidents, scientists, writers etc. originating from Europe. By definition, biofictions underline the connection between fiction, biography, and autobiography by developing texts that are “both self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 2003: 5). The process of creating such texts involves various adoptions of facts, fictional characters, literary works and practices, themes and subjects, which are re-ordered in a constantly changing world of doubling, mirror reflections and perspectives. In this way a unique concept of the times and places on another continent are created from American cultural stand. This paper particularly examines the biofiction narratives on fashion and European fashion designers with international fame.

Key words: American biofictions, European figures, fashion

The biographical fiction as a hybrid genre of life-writing uses life stories as plot lines underlining different aspects of the time and period of the people turned characters. The past few decades saw a rise in the writing, publishing and translation of biofictions all over the world turning it into one of the most popular literary genres. Postmodern biofictions encompass a wide range of terms to denote the genre play such as “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 2003), “literary biography” (Benton 2009), “autobiographical” and “autofiction” (Saunders 2010:7) or “fictional biography”, “biofiction”, “fictional metabiography”, “the biographical novel” and “biographical fiction”. (In Viljoen 2013:155). The study of biofictions analyzes the narrative techniques used by the different writers to create new genre forms in life-writing. These forms are usually closely connected to the processes of hybridization, bending of boundaries and blending of characteristics. In other words, these narratives exhibit a unique the genre play that has become an inherent feature of postmodern writing, often

associated with specific forms of textuality. Generally speaking, contemporary self-reflexive historiographic metafiction subverts the view of history as a coherent inscription of unified subjectivity. The questions of how the issues of narrative representation, textuality, subjectivity and ideology are dealt with in the postmodern combinations of fiction, non-fiction and history are the center of biofiction investigation. The complex creative process often involves intertextuality, intertextual parody, palimpsest, borrowing or plagiarism in an ever-expanding intertextual network.

A particular case of biofiction writing can be noted with the appearance of international and transcontinental biofiction featuring authors from one country writing and representing public figures from other countries in the world. This occurrence exhibits unique perspectives and development in terms of cross-cultural themes and ideas represented as a narrative incorporating both fact and fiction. Since the represented figures are usually of international claim, they are the subject of writing by different authors originating from different countries and cultures. This allows for a comparative study of the global and transcultural outlook in the various narratives dealing with the same subject.

There has been a surge of interlacing life-writing narratives about European fashion industry in recent years. The life stories of Christian Dior, Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel, Carl Lagerfeld have been the subject of various biofictional accounts by different authors. A selection of these involves an Australian author Natasha Lester with her *The Paris Secret* (2020), the German author under the pseudonym Agnes Gabriel with *Merci Monsieur Dior* (2020), then the works about Coco Chanel by the American author Christopher Gortner *Mademoiselle Chanel: A Novel* (2015) and the German author Michelle Marley's *Mademoiselle Coco and the Scent of Love* (2018). The first two authors represent internationally and intercontinentally marked narrative due to the different cultural background of the authors with their subject. Lester, as Australian has lived and worked in Paris.... adopting the French cultural heritage through the intercultural contact in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Another product of intercultural and international investigation is Gabriel's biofiction. In line of these narratives are the concurrent accounts of Coco Chanel's life by both American and German authors. Lester's *The Paris Secret* combines fact and fiction drawing on the life of Dior while interweaving a personal story about the WWII. In Marley's book another aspect of the creative life of the designer is connected with a personal account of a young woman turned muse. The life of the other fashion icon in this selection, Coco Chanel is exquisitely told in the biofiction of the American Gortner. Like Paula McLain and Therese Ann Fowler's biofictions about Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald

respectively, Gortner makes use of the fact and fiction duality to portray both the inner and outer world of a stunning woman of strength, determination, passion and artistic vision. The German author Marly tells about of Coco and her persona through the story about the invention of the famous Chanel 5 perfume, thus forming another compelling narrative combining fact and fiction of a particular era and a famous persona.

Another type of American imprint on European fashion figures are *Paradise Now – The Extraordinary Life of Karl Lagerfeld* (2023) by William Middleton and Jerry Oppenheimer's *Front Row: Anna Wintour: The Cool Life and Hot Times of Vogue's Editor in Chief* (2007). These two biographical accounts are also called “investigative biography” and “cultural biography” respectively. Author of numerous biographical accounts of famous personages such as Bill Clinton, Rock Hudson, Martha Stewart, Barbara Walters, Ethel Kennedy, Jerry Seinfeld and the Hilton family. Oppenheimer's unauthorized biography reveals first time accounts about Vintour's life such as Anna's "silver spoon" childhood spent craving time with her father, her rebellious teen years in London, obsessed with fashion, night-clubbing and dating roguish men and her curious marriage to a brilliant child psychiatrist, her role as a mother, and the shocking scandal that led to divorce when she had an affair with a married man among others. Similarly, Middleton, who has lived and worked in Paris and knew Lagerfeld himself puts to the forefront accounts and details of the fashion icon's personal and professional life. These two accounts are culturally colored in its essence. Combining interpretation of fashion trends globally and by telling the life stories of the trend setters comprises the compelling narrative of transcultural and global outlook. The life events have been selected through the prism of the 21<sup>st</sup> perspective and the authors' own personal and professional experiences.

The above narratives are examples of interculturality and their inherent biopreservational techniques. This type of textuality inherent to biofiction is a

process of biofictional preservation, or “biopreservation”. I use the term “biopreservation” to refer to the “literary” preservation of one's Introduction 5 life, and “bio” to refer to the facts of one's life. Biopreservation can be viewed as an experiment with different postmodern modes and techniques of writing, as a play with generic characteristics. Similar to the process of biopreservation in biochemical laboratories, in the process of literary creation, the authors decide which facts from the biography of their subjects and which traits of their characters they want to preserve and then choose what “literary” “preservatives” to use to create the fictional stories. The end product is a

biofiction that illustrates a new vision of the past times. Thus, the term metaphorically refers to the scientific process of biopreservation denoting the unique genre play in postmodern rewriting of the lives of historical figures. (Krsteva 2023:4-5)

The choices the authors made in telling the stories all follow the typical textual creation though biopreservation. As a result, unique accounts are made about the same historical figures all underlining and accentuating different meanings and ideas.

The importance of this type of biofictions is multifaced. First, they pose a specific contribution to world literature. The interchangeable narratives and plot lines across cultures and countries open up a new chapter in world literature, world themes, ideas and understanding. Delving into one both foreign and world subject from different perspectives shows interchangeability and narrative comparison and contrast both for the readers and in literary studies. A reader can get a unique chance to take a look in the same fact and fiction stories told from different angles and perspectives bearing the cultural heritage of the author. Secondly, while embarking on uniquely creative life-writing journeys the biofictions about the fashion figures in Europe pose another significant contribution to the legacy of the worldwide fashion industry. As such the narratives further draw attention and pose questions on the past, the present and the future in this area by re-telling the life stories of the key figures that shaped the fashion world of today. In this way, biofictions can be seen as agents of changes and transformation.

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