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GOCE DELCEV UNIVERSITY - STIP  
FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY



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**EUROPEAN FASHION FIGURES IN AMERICAN BIOFICTIONS****Marija Krsteva<sup>1</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Philology, University Goce Delcev - Stip  
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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to analyze a 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 standpoint. This paper particularly examines the biofiction narratives on fashion and European fashion designers with international fame.

**Key words:** *American biofictions, European fashion figures, factual, fictional, presentation*

**Introduction**

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), “autobiographicalization” 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 show 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.

### **American biofictions and European fashion figures**

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 renown, 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 *Mersi Monseur 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 *Madeimoslle 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 the story 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 Wintour'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.

In parallel, an ever-increasing trend of producing movies about European fashion figures is also present. For example, the 2021 star-studded movie *The House of Gucci* directed by Ridley Scott is based on the book *The House of Gucci: A Sensational Story of Murder, Madness, Glamour, and Greed* by Sara Gay Forden published 20 years earlier. The movie made a hit portraying the Gucci dynasty in the framework of crime drama. Similarly, in 2013, television film *The House of Versace* was released directed by Gina Gershon, again based on an earlier book *House of Versace: The Untold Story of Genius, Murder, and Survival* (2010) by Deborah Ball. The film follows the legacy of the talented Italian fashion designer Gianni Versace, his murder and the future of his company. The lives of Coco Chanel and Ives Saint Laurent have also been made into movies such the French 2009 and 2014 movies *Coco before Chanel* and *Saint Laurent* respectively. Both the biofictions and the biopics present the readers and the viewers with new perspectives on past biographical themes.

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 books are all examples of the blended or hybrid genre of the biofiction with the common engagement of examining the world of fashion that marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century offering a particular 21<sup>st</sup> century legacy of it in the form of novelistic writing. The new perspective often with postmodern elements, modes and techniques of writing is yet another rewriting of past within the most recent developments that are shaping the world.

“It is evident that the contemporary way of life and work have brought about multiple worldviews that have challenged tradition and society. Postmodernism reflects those changes and tries to respond to all the challenges in the social, political and philosophical world. However contradictory in its essence, postmodernism can still be put within a certain framework of diverse sets of rules and characteristics. As a key term in contemporary studies in the humanities, postmodernism has been used by media and social science to describe the spirit of the time and the major developments in culture, philosophy and politics. As a result, postmodernism has been defined in respect to different areas and disciplines.” (Krsteva 2023:20).

In the given overview of simultaneous emergence of American authors writing about European fashion figures, many layers of meanings can be discerned. First, the interest in fashion industry can be seen from a historical perspective. The life stories can shift or rediscover tendencies in the world of the fashion designers. In turn, this can have an impact on new trends in the presentation of the world of fashion. The new meanings are therefore created in the process of blending fact and fiction resulting in unique life-writing textuality. In this respect, 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”. The term “biopreservation” is used to refer to the “literary” preservation of one’s 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, single accounts are made about the same historical figures all underlining and accentuating different meanings and ideas.

When analyzing the narratives with common themes, characters and events, the biopreservation as textuality makes use of a specific textual unit call a biopreservational sequence.

“The unit of the analysis has been defined as a textual unit called a “biopreservation sequence”. This can be seen as the smallest unit of the genre play. The biopreservation sequence is a textual element that forms

part of a narrative element and consists of both factual (archived) and fictional parts. It is transformative and revolutionary, constructing, revising and appropriating different meanings and image presentations. Typically, the biopreservation sequence shapes the narrative presentations of the self, as well as the plot structure out of the predictable situations, episodes, obstacles, conflicts, resolutions, stereotypes, roles, personal qualities, motivations, goals, behavior, themes, topics, subject matter, social, cultural, psychological, professional, political, sexual and moral values, geographical and historical setting and tone available to the author and thus builds up an element of the narrator's identity." (Krsteva 2023: 10-11).

As a result, biofictions contain numerous biopreservation sequences forming a constellation of meanings all participating actively in the shaping of the image of the biographee. Moreover, a whole new world is created or renewed around the life and legacy of the people who dedicated their whole life to leaving an eternal imprint on human fashion design and industry development. Following their life stories in the biographical fictions uniquely influences the reader's views and choices in this respect. Finally, the biofictions define afresh what has already been established in past narratives.

### **Conclusion**

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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