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## Staging Micro History Through Visual Arts: A Postmodern Reading of Philip Kazan's Historical Fiction *Painter of Souls*

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### Abstract:

This paper intends to focus on painting as a visual art and tries to highlight the outcome of such an art. An analysis of the paintings of Fra Lippo Lippi, a fifteenth century Italian painter, would be undertaken in order to prove the realistic nature of his paintings. By substituting the common man/woman's face for that of a religious icon, his paintings undermine power structures, hegemony and hierarchies that come into play. As a consequence it is the lives of these common people that come to the forefront. Questions associated with representation, response of people to art that protests against power structures and postmodern art would be discussed. I would predominantly use Michel Foucault's concept of power to address power with regard to grand structures like religion, God, religious icons and friars. Microhistories would also be discussed as against these metanarratives.

Key Words: Micro history, power, postmodern art, religion, representation

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Michel Foucault, one of the most influential philosophers, describes power and its various structures in his significant work, *History of Sexuality*.

...power is not an institution , and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.(93)

In addition, he puts forth some propositions, out of which I consider this to be apt for the paper:

One must suppose rather that the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide – ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole. These then form a general line of force that traverses the local oppositions and links them together; to be sure, they also bring about redistributions, realignments, homogenizations, serial arrangements, and convergences of the force relations. Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations.(94)

If this proposition is applied, religion as an institution of power comes into play in *Painter of Souls*. As it is a historical novel, the author has depicted the life of a historical character called Fra Filippo Lippi who lived in Italy during the fifteenth century. His father was a butcher and he joined the Carmelite Friars during his early years of life. He had the talent and the gift to paint and as a friar was always in a constant dilemma whether or not to engage in his passion. He chooses to continue with his art and friars and fathers like it and even appreciate it. They also suggest that he becomes the assistant to a famous painter. So the whole novel is about his art, his indulgence in it and the end results. While the biographical details of Filippo is true, the models for his paintings are fictional elements.

So the rest of the paper, would look at his art and how it engages with discourses of power. Because it does so, I would like to give it the name, postmodern art. As he is a

Carmelite friar, he is expected to paint the figures of religious icons. So religion as an institution is something that believes in hierarchy, reverence towards God which indirectly determines the notions of power, authority and subjugation that underlie and underpin it. Even if it is the depiction of religious figures in art form there is always the notion of power and authority that comes along with it. Anything that reverses tradition or resists it, will strictly be seen as abominable. And that is what Fra Lippo Lippi does in the novel.

Fra Filippo Lippi, in an act of resisting the power structures of religion, treats common men/women as the model for painting religious figures. Examples abound in the novel to bear testimony to this point. Lippi paints a woman nursing her baby in all her simplicity, as a replica of Mother Mary with her baby. (Kazan 65). In Kazan's words,

...Filippo recognises the signs of rough living in the chapped skin of her face, in the shadows under her eyes. ...The woman has gone back to study the pigeons. Maybe she is a little soft in the head. Maybe hunger – hers and the child's – has loosened her wits. He draws her face, tilted up, eyes unfocused, mouth a little open, the little girl's fist reaching up for a strand of her hair. (65 66)

In her, the painter saw Mother Mary. Though for many it would seem to be a disrespectful act, the painter is content with the art that has been produced. Even the friars, who are responsible for passing on the power, hierarchy tradition appreciate the painting

One important point that needs to be mentioned here is the fact that the author blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. He uses historical facts and eminent personalities but mixes it with fictional elements, or rather, characters. This is what postmodern history is all about. Linda Hutcheon, an influential postmodern theorist calls it 'Historiographic metafiction'.

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common – sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. This kind of postmodern fiction also refuses the relegation of the extratextual past to the domain of historiography in the name of the autonomy of art. (93)

There are instances where the distinction between fact and fiction gets blurred and they both intersect. When Filippo is asked to paint the figure of saint Albert he gives the saint the body and face of his father, Tommaso di Lippo, butcher of the parish of San Frediano (Kazan 95). A butcher's figure for a saint would be abominable but the author's talent lies in the fact that he is using the historical fact (Filippo's father was a butcher in real life) to subvert the power of Saint Albert (fictional representation of Saint Albert's painting being given the figure of Tommaso) engaging in a powerful play with representation and appropriateness of art. This brings us to the question of postmodern art.

...the familiar humanist separation of art and life no longer holds.

Postmodernist contradictory art still instals that order, but it then uses it to demystify our everyday processes of structuring chaos, of imparting or assigning meaning. (Hutcheon 7)...Postmodern art similarly asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity that have been the basic premise of bourgeois liberalism (Hutcheon13)

Thus the distinction between fact and fiction, art and life, center and margin fades away. In Fra Filippo Lippi's own words,

What good is it if we don't see the Virgin as one of us? And Christ, and the saints? Everyone has heard the scriptures. They've seen the stories painted in church. But don't you think that those stories don't involve us?... We look at them, but they don't touch us. We don't see ourselves there. All those stories are for us, but they aren't about us. (Kazan 85)

It is this that he aims in his paintings. In addition, this leads to the subversion of power, the force and hegemonic effects as 'Foucault' calls it. Furthermore, this gives way to the creation of microhistories.

Postmodernism, as Lyotard puts it, is "incredulity towards metanarrative".(Thompson 107). Structures of power are also known as 'metanarratives'. It is usual practice to depict structures of power and authority as they are grand or metanarratives. But it is something impactful and extraordinary to portray microhistories. So what are the microhistories that the painter brings forth in the novel? The mother with the baby, his own father, his friend and many others.

People would not have taken much care to notice this woman with her baby. But even if they did, some would have sympathised and empathised with her. Again, some others would have seen her with a lustful eye and a heart full of desire. But Fra Filippo Lippi, goes on to affix her in his paintings so that the whole world has an opportunity to see her.

Likewise, many wouldn't have noticed his father and even if they did, would have undermined his position because of his profession. Also, for one more saint called Saint Ambrose, what happens is this: "The saint's stern, bearded face he models on an old man he had used to see every day in Florence, sweeping the steps of San Frediano,.."(Kazan 97).

In an attempt to bring his mother out of her illness, he paints Mother Mary and the angel Gabriel modelled after his own sister Leonarda and his friend, Albertino. His sister Leonarda has always had a difficult time with her mother in addition to financial difficulties. So when Filippo paints, I feel that it is an act of liberation that liberates both Leonarda and her mother from the state they are in.

What is the difference between the great miracles and the small ones? Filippo has been chewing this over as he paints. Here on the wall, Narda is not quite smiling – Filippo has not seen his sister smile, not exactly, for more years than he can count. But the face in the painting is about to: its muscles have rediscovered this forgotten talent, happiness is rising, and the great realisation, that with the news she is hearing comes the weight of the universe, has not yet struck home. Filippo is discovering that paint and brush can be merciful. He wants to lift a burden from Narda, not add a new one. (Kazan 214)

It is very interesting and inevitable that Albertino needs to be discussed at this juncture. Albertino's mother is a prostitute and he engages in all kind of acts like stealing and other ways of mischief. However, one act of his, changed his life forever. Being in a drunken state and having lost all his money, he flings horse shit at Mother Mary's statue and everybody sees it. (Kazan 184) It is considered as blasphemy and Albertino is executed for his deed (Kazan 193). After his execution, Filippo paints a rose on the face of Mother Mary where Albertino had thrown the dirt (204). This led people believe that Mother Mary has forgiven Albertino. (Kazan 203). So art can be for other purposes too, if not only for staging microhistories.

The second instance is where, he paints angel Gabriel, the face of Albertino.

The Angel Gabriel has a broken nose and a missing earlobe. He stands with the awkwardness of someone who only finds themselves in fine company when something has gone wrong, but this time he is delivering good news, not waiting to be scolded, so his almost girlish mouth, strangely out of place below that crooked nose, is trying hard not to smile. The hand that grips the rigid stem of the lily is white, and perhaps that is also why the angel is smiling, because the boy whose face Filippo has borrowed for Gabriel belongs to Albertino, whose hands had never been clean. (Kazan 214)

So, Kazan through Filippo has staged microhistories and histories of people unacceptable by religion, law and people.

The question also is about the response of people to such a kind of art. The first time when he paints the young woman it is the Prior who thinks it is the Madonna (Kazan 84). Cosimo de Medici the historical ruler of Florence praises and lauds the work of Lippi (Kazan 232). At the same time, Lippi says some people might hate it, because it depicts pain and suffering (Kazan 249).

This being said, can religion and art converge? When he asks if he can be a painter as well as a friar, the prior says,

So yes, you can be a friar and a painter. You, Fra Filippo. This has fallen to you, of all the friars in this convent, of all the Carmelites in Italy. ...It is a vocation that has come to you from God', he continues. And it is God whom you will serve with your gift. God, and the Order of Mount Carmel. If you accept this gift, and this burden (Kazan 158-59)

Even now, the prior commands him to follow God but Filippo's role is to subvert power structures in order to see the beauty behind everything. As discussed already, this is postmodern art in its simplest form. It is not God, or religious figures or the authority at the Carmelite chapel that get painted, but common men and women whose microhistories are staged through Fra Filippo Lippi's paintings.

Postmodern painters, with their new interest in a pluralist viewpoint, often reject the single viewpoint and the unified perspectives of the Renaissance, because the principal purpose of such conventions was to unify the world around a single center: the viewer (Dunning 333)

Also its similarities with the post modern novel:

As the postmodern novel is no longer obliged to maintain a single voice or point of view, neither is the postmodern painting obliged to maintain a single point of view-or viewpoint. Painters no longer feel obliged,... to adjust each area, stroke by stroke, until it is carefully resolved into homogenous conformity with the over-all illusionistic "voice" of the painting (Dunning 336)

So the center no longer holds and through Fra Lippo Lippi's paintings there is a reversal in the power/powerless, center/margin positions because in Filippo's words: "art is required for everything. ...life itself is art" (Kazan 163).

Thus, *The Painter of Souls*, through the depiction of Fra Filippo Lippi's paintings has staged microhistories, an act which is worthy of praise and appreciation.

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