

Treatment of History in Select Contemporary Indian English Novels

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Abstract

History and fiction share one trait in common and that is recording of events past, incidence, personalities, movements, etc. the difference between history and fiction is that history takes an objective view of the events whereas fiction takes a creative sweep. Both chronicle formation, development and evolution of nations in their own way. History fiction interface therefore becomes a virgin track to till for the Indian English novelist. Shashi Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Geeta Mahta in *Raj* (1988) and Kiran Nagarkar in *Cuckold* (1997) explore this interface in their unique ways. Tharoor tries to atone himself with his present retrospectively with the help of history. Geeta Mehta tries to coalate east –west encounter along with cultural issues, historical facts and fantasy, realism and socio-political features at the time of independence. Kiran Nagarkar tries to achieve a transformation in the history or the lack of it.

Keywords- History, Fiction, Indian English Novel, History-Fiction Interface, East-West Encounter

History Fiction interface has always intrigued the novelists and the critics of fiction. History lends itself to multiple interpretations depending upon the perspective of these schools of historiography. Romila Thapar observes in her book *The Past and the Prejudice* –“If we

know not where we come from where shall we go?” Therefore, the study of history not only goes on to mound a nation’s collective conscience but also ignites creative writings like novels. Indian English Novel is molded a lot by the history which offers it a kaleidoscopic interface.

Noted fiction writer and critic Salman Rushdie observes in *Imaginary Homelands*:

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. (25)

In observing so Rushdie was endorsing what Michael Foucault had to forebode more than a decade earlier about the common belief and practice regarding history:

The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and retracing the past as a patient continuous development must be systematically dismantled...History becomes “effective” to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being. (153-154)

History as literary artifact in the novel gets transformed from a chronicle to a literary discourse. It implies a device according to which the historian explains events by exhibiting them as the expressions of past thinking on the part of self-conscious purposive agents-thinking that the historian must imaginatively reconstruct or re-enact in his own mind rather than by showing the events to be instances of general uniformities or regularities that are established by induction.

The truth of memory is obviously in sharp contrast to what is perceived in the real life. It requires a consolidation of all intellectual and poetic processes to seek and illumine the obscure truth.

In this paper the treatment of history in selected Indian English novels shall be analyzed with a view to explore the history-fiction interface. The novels selected for this study are: Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989); Geeta Mahta's *Raj* (1988) and Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* (1997).

Shashi Tharoor's *Great Indian Novel*, the title of which is a modern rendering of the ancient Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, has been inspired by a sense of earnestness and indignation as a result of general corrosion of values and norms in the post-partition India. M. K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan observe in *Indian English Literature 1980-2000; A Critical Survey* that:

Tharoor finds uncanny correspondences between the chief characters and events in the three thousand year old epic and the leading political figure and developments in modern Indian history. These correspondences are not mechanically worked out; they are suitably modified, sometimes hinted at rather than fully spelt out; and on occasion they are given an ironic spirit of self-mockery, which is so characteristic of post-modernism. (47-48)

Divided into eighteen books on the pattern of the *Mahabharata*, *The Great Indian Novel* takes on the entire subcontinent beginning with India under the British in the late 19th/ early 20th century down to India in the post emergency period. It covers all the major political and historical events of the 20th century. The history-fiction interface is such that Bhīma the son of Ganga, as he is in the epic *Mahabharata*, becomes Gangadutta, a Gandhi-like figure in *The Great Indian Novel*. Gandhi's salt march of actual modern history is parodied as Mango-march. Duryodhana the mischievous son of King Dhrishtra in the epic is unsexed into a woman.

The novelist appears to have been most dismayed by the starkest phase in the history of free India that is the emergency enforced in the year 1975. The novel crystallizes such a trauma into an existential crisis to be mitigated through the decoding of simultaneous occurrences and incidences of the distant Indian past. Tharoor marks a landmark by the replacement of a "peace meal, convenient, multi-form structure of fantasy by an elaborate, integrated corpus of myth." Tharoor appeals to the collective consciousness of the Indians who have imbibed the myth as history irrespective of their religious affiliation. It is this appeal to the collective consciousness which marks out Tharoor as a master craftsman as far as his art of fiction writing in *The Great Indian Novel* is concerned.

The mythical structure of *The Great Indian Novel* also underlines the continuance of the historical process. It exhibits what T S Eliot calls in the "Tradition and the Individual Talent" as the "presentness of the past" and the "pastness of the present". Resonating T S Eliot's concept of time, the novelist perceives of simultaneous existence and order with the mythical characters and setting. Examining the process of meaning in myth, we get a structure, which, as a system of codes, contains a reality independent of the conception. In the novel the modern editions of the Kurukshetra such as the emergency of 1975, the novelist is concerned and protective about values that can obviate the climatic event. Preservation of values is, according to him, to uphold Dharma which is a total cosmic responsibility, including God's, a universal justice far more inclusive, wider and profounder than any western equivalent such as duty according to Betty Heimann.

The next novel under consideration for history fiction interface exploration is Geeta Mehta's (1943). Mehta is one of the well-known figures in Indian English Fiction and Movie. Her contribution is although

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quantitatively less but quality wise it is significant because of her handling of subject matter and form as a diasporic writer she dedicated her literary works towards Indian culture and society. Her first work is *Karma Cola*; marketing the mystic east published in 1979 and this first book is a series of interconnected essays weaving Mehta's impressions of India's mysticism. Her first novel *Raj* published in 1989 is a thorough and colourful historical story that follows the progression of a young woman born into Indian nobility under the British Raj. *Raj* is a groundbreaking amalgamation of history and fiction. Mehta's *Raj* largely with east west encounter and the effects after such conflicts on the mind and life of the people. Mehta not only showed physical and materialistic changes but she also delves deep into the psyche of the characters in this novel and how their actions and attitudes are moulded. More or less and directly and indirectly characters both of the east and west influence one another which are a historical phenomenon. The twains influence not only one another's action but also their attitudes which design their destinies, in the moulding of which the milieu also matters. There is constant clash when east meets west and west meets east which is shown through the characters like Maharaja JaiSingh, Maharaja Victor and Tikka.

Geeta Mehta's *Raj* begins from pre-independence and ends after independence. It deals with the socio-political scenario of India along with Indian culture and its mixing with the western culture which sometimes results into chaos and dissatisfaction. East and west when they meet create awkward situation, discomfiture and the one culture is affected by the other to a large extent. When the British created colonies in Indian and ruled over it, the East came into contact with the west and this encounter dismantled the lives of many. It shook the roots of Indian lives which lie into its

culture. In the novel *Raj* Geeta Mehta does what the Heideggerian existentialism (being-in-the-world), which characterizes the post-modernist precepts of history, considers "a historical situation a fresh and revealing possibility of the human world".(Kundra:1992). With that again, event or situation are not studied as a byproduct of pre-destined human interaction or set of events which occurred previously and forms history. The governing motive is how to explore man's being in an event or situation with all wisdom and imagination, variously and differently to seek the closest proximity to the absolute reality about that event or situation. Clearly, the more history becomes an experiential exercise, the more it admits of new meanings and new cultural prospects for human life. Novelty and experience is the mainstay of postmodernist human consciousness. It pervades the literary corpus as well. History and literature share today the identical philosophy in as much as they purvey the world with same subjective urge and cultural candour.

In the novel *Raj* "the disjunction between the British and Indian positions in the response to a particular event comes out clearly..." (51). When the Chand Mahal's interior is changed according to the life style of the west it was too much changed to feel the familiar atmosphere of her own culture. She is shocked knowing that the English men use bath tub to wash themselves and the chair without handle is used to do their business. Jaya fears "that Tikka could be taught anything by people who barged in dirty water and had stiff legs" (56). This shows that when two cultures come across, they become means of creating laughter for other ones. East west encounter does not take place merely between the people of east and west rather if a person of east has been transformed into western culture then it would occur between him and other Indians also. Such is the case of Jaya and prince Pratap. Jaya after

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being married to Pratap, faces the confrontation and discomfort because her husband is completely anglophile and detests Indian mores and practices. Jaya when at Sirpur finds a different atmosphere as if she is in an alien country. She feels not in the state of her own country:

Jaya was ashamed to be so unworldly among the voluptuous women of her husband's kingdom, with their fashionably bobbed hair and the sequins glittering suggestively through thin chiffon saris (183)

The meetings of Jaya and Pratap give impression as if persons of two cultures are meeting. They do not look similar from a single point of view rather show glaring contrast in their opinion, culture and eating habits where Jaya eats pan from her pan casket, Pratap eats quail and fish with fork and knife. There are all their cultural differences. On seeing Jaya wearing "ivory bangles and heavy anklets" Pratap says: wash all that nonsense off your hands and feet. And change out of these Christmas decorations" (189). Jaya being embarrassed by seeing her husband's delicate, manicured nails in comparison to her hands tried not to show her hands: "... seeing the graceful fingers with their nails. Jaya hid her own hands in the folds of her long skirt" (190). Jaya is surprised "at the bits of meat floating in the clear brown liquid" (190) and Pratap's telling her about beef eating as it was not allowed in her eastern culture. The achievement of Jaya in form of knowing languages like Sanskrit and Sirpur languages is of no use for Pratap getting his appreciation as she does not know French, Italian and Spanish. These cultural clashes within the family are an integral part of the Indian historical interface which goes on to mould the fiction writing in the works like *Raj*.

In the third novel under scrutiny for treatment of history, Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold*

has been appreciated both in India and in Germany as it also appeared in German translation. Kiran Nagarkar is one of India's best known authors in Germany. Nagarkar's works have been widely translated in German and make a colourful complex and in many ways a complicated society tangible to our senses. His celebrated book is *Cuckold* or *Ravan and Eddie*.

Nagarkar's *Cuckold* is the narrative of Maharaj Kumar, the son of Rana Sanga of the Rajput Kingdom of Mewar and the husband of Meera Bai. About Bhoj Raj (Maharaj Kumar), "we know nothing but the fact that he was born, married and died" (132). Since history gives us no more information about Maharaj Kumar, the novel stands as a counterpart to history. But Nagarkar says:

I am writing a novel, not history. I was willing to invent geography and climate, start revolts and epidemics, improvise anecdotes and economic conditions and fiddle with dates. As luck would have it I didn't get a chance to play around too much except in the case of the main protagonist...(145)

Also history has portrayed Mira Bai as a saintly figure, but Nagarkar shows us the varying shades of this princess- she is scheming, crafty, imperfect, in short, not entirely saint like, as she is commonly perceived to be. Set in the early 16th century in the Rajput kingdom of Mewar which is in conflict with Delhi, Gujarat and Malwa, the novel portrays another conflict- the prince rivalry with Lord Krishna with whom his wife Mira (referred to as green eyes) is in love. The price on their wedding night forces himself on to Mira resulting in the breaking of his penis, a symbolic emasculation of one who fights against God, and a confirmation of the fact that Meera since she is in love with the Divine Krishna is also herself divine. She stopped the flow of blood from the prince's member

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thereby pointing to the fact that she is the enemy and also the healer. This further problematizes the mythical-historical and the pure saintly status of Mira Bai. Nagarkar offers Mira as a human being rather than the stereotypical woman.

Maharaja Kumar's character may be absent from historical records, but Nagarkar fully fleshes him out as an ambitious politician, strategist, statesman and a private individual. Nagarkar's efforts do not lead to a bridging of the gap left by the absence of the prince from historical descriptions and insuring a continuum rather the figure of the prince in the process of being fleshed out disturbs and disrupts the continuity that might have been hoped for. Bhoj Raj comes across as an anachronistic figure-trapped in a time which is not his own. He is a modernist present in a world which seems pre-modern to him. This is exemplified by the reasons that Medini Rai gives for choosing him for assistance in the war- "they tell me that you are an unreasonable man." That if it was possible, you would like to win a war without losing a single one of your soldiers....that you have no qualms in attacking an enemy from the rear and in the dark. They say you walk all times with your tail between your legs and will retreat at the slightest pretext.

It may be concluded safely that Tharoor tries to atone himself with his present retrospectively with the help of history. Geeta Mehta tries to collate east-west encounter along with cultural issues, historical facts and fantasy, realism and socio-political features at the time of independence. Kiran Nagarkar tries to achieve a transformation in the history or the lack of it.

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