

A Historiographical Analysis of Important Indian English Fiction from Pre-partition to Post-colonial Era

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Abstract:

History is a treasure house of all that has happened in this universe, whether known or unknown. Since history records everything that has happened, it is related to different fields of human life whether political, economic, cultural, social, religious or literary. History gets reflected everywhere we try to observe closely. The background knowledge of something makes it easy for us to understand that thing. Historiography is the study of how history is written with a particular focus on its different methods, perspectives and interpretations. Historiography is both an art and science related to the act of writing or presenting history. It may also be defined as “the history of history.” It incorporates special methods and techniques for a proper study and analysis of history. The present paper is an attempt to analyze how and with what perspectives history has been recorded in important Indian English historical fiction. The researcher has tried to touch upon, in a brief analytical way, those factual historical events and incidents of India which have been incorporated into the fictional world of various Indian writers from the beginning to present.

Keywords: History, Historiography, Indian Historical Fiction, Partition to Post-colonialism.

History is a treasure house of all that has happened in this universe whether known or unknown. Since history records everything that happens, it is related to different fields of human life whether political, economic, cultural, social, religious or literary. Everything that has happened on this earth has its own history. Whatever human beings have said, done or thought, gradually shaped human history which is relational with the overall life on this planet. It is a

storehouse of the great achievements as well as failures of human race. History gets reflected everywhere we try to observe closely. The background knowledge of something makes it easy for us to understand that thing. That is why the knowledge of history is very important in the present. There is a connection between the history and its present. The views of E.H. Carr are also important in this connection where he perceives, “history as a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (30). It is this unending dialogue between the present and the past that paves way for literature to study and perceive these recorded events of history in a different way and from diverse point of views.

Historiography is the study of how history is written with a particular focus on its different methods, perspectives and interpretations. Historiography goes beyond looking at the detail of a period or event. Instead, it examines how different historians have understood and interpreted the period or event over time. Historiography is based on an assumption that history is not a concrete set of facts but an ongoing discussion about the past. Historians have always produced different theories and interpretations from the same set of facts or evidence. Historical theories and interpretations have been revised and changed over time, as values and methods change and new evidences come to light. These changes and differences are an important focus of historiography which seeks to explain not just the past but our understanding of it.

Historiography is both an art and science related to the act of writing or presenting history. It may also be defined as “the history of history.” It incorporates special methods and techniques for a proper study and analysis of history. This concept of historiography has undergone a great change from the beginning to present. Earlier it tends to be just a narrative of events and now the post-modern approaches examine and present history keeping in view various associated fields like cultural studies, diasporic conditions, magic realism and internal journey both of the individual and the society. The selection and synthesis of all such details produce a narrative that may stand the test of critical analysis. A close perusal of them helps us to obtain a profound understanding of human actions. After the 18th century, historiography gained momentum as an academic activity and came to be known as the source which can provide an interpretation of human life as a whole. Modern historians and writers of history focus on reconstructing a record of all human activities encompassing philosophy, religion, community connections, imaginative literature and above all the present of the past. Furay and

Salevouris in their *The Methods and Skills of History* (1988) define historiography as "the study of the way history has been and is written — the history of historical writing . . . When you study 'historiography' you do not study the events of the past directly, but the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians" (223).

The development of Indian English historical novel has witnessed a long journey from the beginning to present day. The genre records the key historical events, decisions, people and socio-political customs of our country step by step at different phases. The treatment of history can be seen from simply imitating the western models to evolving a different deconstructive approach that uses various post-modern techniques to break away from the canonical historical writing. Talking about these various stages through which Indian English Novel emerged, Meenakshi Mukherjee writes in her *The Twice Born Fiction* (2005) that:

Since Bengal was the first region to come in close contact with the British, the earliest Indian novels came to be written in Bengali. The first few attempts consist of sketches of contemporary Bengali society, but the new genre really became established with the historical novel form. Novel emerged at different times in different regions in India, but almost everywhere the first crop showed a preoccupation with historical romance. In fact, the full development of the Indian novel as a whole, allowing for certain oversimplification of details may be divided into three large stages; 1. Historical Romance; 2. Social or Political Realism; and 3. Psychological novels showing an introspective concern with the individual. (30)

The treatment of history in Indian English Novels is in accordance with the dominant cause of that time. In order to understand how Indian English novels have preserved a significant aspect of our history and in which way it is done, we need to analyze some representative examples of various times in Indian social, political and literary history. And for this, the researcher intends to analyze Indian Historical Novels in three different phases. They are: the Earliest Period; pre and post-independence Period and the period from 1980s to present. A perusal of this journey will help us to understand the subject matter of the fiction produced in these periods. Anand Shankar Ray, measuring the journey of Indian English novels, comments upon the various themes that were interwoven in the novels at different phases. He says that: "When Bankim wrote, the chief question was how to restore the national self-respect. In

Rabindranath's time, it was how to bridge the East and the West. In this dynamic age, it is how to identify ourselves with the common people" (Qtd. in K.R. Srinivas Iyenger, 317).

In the earliest stage of Indian English novel, the treatment of history was devoid of its realistic presentation, rather it was in the form of historical romance. There were very few novelists who ventured to write down the pre-colonial history as it should have been dealt with. Even if there were a few examples wherein we can find references related to the contemporary history of that time, they were largely steeped into romance. For example, we have S.K. Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny: The New Krishna* (1909) and S.M. Mitra's *Hindu Tales* (1919) in this regard. Here we can witness that both the novelists were not much enthusiastic in depicting history with real facts. Everything that can be taken to be historical in these earliest examples is written in the romantic tradition. T. R. Krishnaswamy's *Selma: A Tale of the Times of Old* (1916) and Umrao Bahadur's *The Unveiled Court* (1932) show the use of history, but not completely in the tradition of a historical novel.

This early phase of writing historical romance then acquired a new dimension with the awakening of Indian nationalism. The discriminatory behavior and the oppression of the British rulers infused patriotic feelings into Indian people who then began to question the so-called superiority of the Britishers, taking pride in their glorious past. With the rise of Indian Nationalism, the novelists turned to address the then current public issues in a realistic manner. Now they dealt with what was happening around them.

The novels set in the 1930s and 1940s invariably touch upon the national movement for political independence. This is inevitable because the long years of struggle and sacrifice have shaped and coloured every experience of modern India. A great national experience must surely help in maturing the novel form because an experience shared by the people at large becomes the matrix of a society and the novel flourishes best in a society that is integrated. (Mukherjee 35-36)

Indian English novel of the pre-independence India can be classified in the category of art for life's sake. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas addressed the grave concerns of Indian society like untouchability, cast and class struggle, inequality and social and political injustice. The stance of R.K. Narayan was a bit different who addressed some of the problems of Indian society in not so serious manner as the former novelists have done. Their

works showed progressive themes. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie* dealt with the issues of untouchability and class struggle respectively. In the words of H.M. William:

The most important writer in the new wave of realism that swept over Indian literature . . . was Mulk Raj Anand. As befits the aspirations of a social realist, he chose a novel as his medium, and it was the novel which was to remain dominant for Indo-Anglian writers up to the present time. Anand's early and best novels are deliberate attempts to expose the distress of the lower castes and classes of India; they are undistinguished in their plea for social change, and are motivated by intense anger and pity (*Indo-Anglican Literature* 54).

The arrival of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian sub-continent heralded a new awakening in India. His non-violence and truth stood against the tyranny of British rulers. He became the symbol of struggle to gain complete freedom. The freedom struggle of India and the role Mahatma Gandhi played in it, inspired many writers. The Gandhian ideals of simplicity, love, non-violence, truth, communal harmony and Satyagrah were incorporated in the novels of this time. R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* are replete with the projection of Indian Society in a realistic manner along with the influence of Mahatma. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly comments that the figure of historical Gandhi ". . . has been treated variously, as an idea, a myth, a symbol, a tangible reality, and a benevolent human being" (*Twice Born* 60).

After this, comes the post-partition phase in the history of India. At this juncture some of the novelists were still looking back to colonial time. Kamala Markandaya in her novel *Some Inner Fury* (1955) harks back to the historical year of 1942, the time when the freedom struggle movement was at its peak in our country. Around this factual setting, the novelist portrays the troubled relationship between an illiterate Indian woman, Mirabai, and a British Civil servant. Markandaya tries to weave their love story amid the troubled national spirit.

The other post-partition novelists like Mulk Raj Anand and Chaman Nahal narrate the horrors of partition and its impact upon people beyond religion and border. The characters in their novels are common people who were the helpless victims of this historic exodus. They remained just the passive puppets in the midst of this historic event following their lot without any choice of their own. Their lives were swept away in the whirlwind of this unfortunate historical turmoil. The impact of history can clearly be seen on their lives. Everything changed suddenly. They were uprooted and forced to undertake that horrific journey where destination

was not certain. Families were separated, people were brutally killed, women and girls were raped and children were left dumb out of panic. Whosoever or whatsoever be in the background, but these helpless common people endured what can never be expressed through words.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) presents the real picture of the partition of India. The religious harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims completely disappeared and there started a slaughter of humanity. The migration of millions of people across border is followed by extreme atrocity. Their sorrow knew no bounds. What they lost could never be recompensed. Khushwant Singh describes the helplessness of common people against such odds just in a few words when he writes: “. . .(they) did nothing but sit and sigh” (120). The deaths and displacement during the partition of India project man as the victim of time in history.

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) shows the turbulent years before and after the partition of India. The fourth part of the novel describes some of the specific historic events wherein Hosain talks about the Second World War, the formation of the Indian National Army, the agitation of 1942, communal violence, independence and finally the partition. She vividly portrays the cruel but real picture of history and its grim effect on people in India.

Manohar Malgaonkar, in the manner of Khushwant Singh, also tries to present the complete picture of India's struggle for independence and the chaos of partition in his famous novel *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964). The use of history in this celebrated novel ranges from the Civil Disobedience Movement of the early 1930s to the post-partition riots in Punjab. Bhisma Sahni's *Tamas* (1974) narrates some of the true events that the novelist himself has witnessed in the communal riots of 1947. The characters of the novel are from both Hindu and Muslim Communities. *Tamas*, like any other partition novel, records the complex web of social and religious atmosphere in which inhumanity leads people to kill each other out of hatred.

Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1977) portrays the vivid picture following the partition of India in realistic manner where the ordinary people were left helpless and sorrow stricken against a sea of troubles. Recording the wounds history of partition has inflicted upon the people, Nahal writes that: “The rest (of the women) were subjected to mass rape, at times in public places and in the presence of large gatherings. The rape was followed by other atrocities, chopping off the breasts and even death. Many of the pregnant women had their wombs torn open” (*Azadi*, 293). Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1980) is another historical novel based on the partition of India which led to religious intolerance and subsequent mass violence.

So, in this second phase, a number of Indian novels were written on Freedom struggle of India, the Role of Mahatma Gandhi and the partition of India. The journey of Indian English novel from historical romance to historic realism can be seen through a close perusal of the above-mentioned examples on these significant events of Indian history. Jasbir Jain writes in her essay “The Plural Tradition: Indian English Fiction” that gradually, “. . .the romance of the early historical novel in most Indian languages soon yielded to realism” (Qtd. in R.S. Singh, 68). Jain also believed that this realism was a necessary stage in Indian English literature which came into prominence with the demand of that time. The prominent features of this new novel include rewriting and reinvestigating history

After 1980s, Indian English literature witnessed the rise of a new type of Indian English novel which was far away from the earlier historical novels in its treatment of history in new changed global conditions. The main characteristics of this new form of novel were re-writing of history and re-statement of the past. In the words of Jasbir Jain this:

. . .new historical novel does not attempt to record details or to portray history in its external manifestations and encounters, but prefers to look at the various ways in which these events can be interpreted and explores the gaps between the appearance of what seems real and the individual's own comprehension of that reality” (*Beyond Post colonialism* 98-99).

This new novel uses postmodern techniques in writing. The novelists freely merge the historical discourse with their fictional plot, and at the same time present an alternative parallel narrative along the line of the original. This enables the readers to view and review history with a new perspective. History thus no longer remains a liner and simple factual information of past, rather it is offered for perusal in such a way that a number of interpretations emerge out. This re-writing of Indian history not only adds more meaning to the earlier known facts, but also exposes the falsehood of certain dominant ideological groups that controlled and modified history. Jasbir Jain appropriately concludes that: “the new novel shows a clear pattern of re-narration and re-vision of history through diverse modes and methods and thereby it presents a counter-discourse or counter-narrative to official historiographic discourses” (*Beyond Post colonialism* 99).

We can say that it explores history using post-modern techniques and theories. These novels of post-90s era are all inclusive mixing the traditional Indian themes with complex postmodernist themes related to diasporic conditions, post-colonial discourse, multi-cultural

setting, identity crisis born out of historic events, gender trouble, and the role of history in the lives of people. The characters hail from all strata of Indian society as well as globally dispersed communities. This helps in presenting more complex issues in the changed fast-forwarding world in which a human being or a community of people get entrapped. Indian, Indian migrants and foreign characters intermingle in the plot of this new novel. What is noteworthy of these characters is that they are not passive or submissive the way characters of the partition novels were. The characters are more complex and rounder who just do not behave like fatalists, rather they try to find answers to their present existence in the light of their past. With these novels, we can affirm, that history attained a different meaning and value.

Talking about the difference as to how the old and new Indian English novels deal with history John Thieme writes:

Earlier Partition novels, such as Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), had dealt with the physical horrors of Partition. Now, with that experience at least partially digested, it became possible to look in the rear-view mirror and consider the longer-term consequences, both communal and personal, that followed in the wake of Partition and these often-involved traumas that were as much psychic as physical (Otd. In Murari Prasad, "Foreword," i).

The chief concern of the novelists of post-90s is, how history affects the lives of their characters. These characters relate their lives against the backdrop of some past happening in order to find their true self. Through their past they reshape our view of history. They stretch our imagination to unknown and unnoticed aspects of history of which they are the part. So, it is equally important to observe and understand history through their experiences along with factual history.

Contemporary Indian English literature is the product of two kinds of writers: the first group comprising the native writers who wrote living in India; and the second group is dominated by those who migrated to other countries and wrote as Indians living outside their home country. This new tradition is set first of all by Salman Rushdie. Then the list of new contemporary novelists includes Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, V. S. Naipaul, Farrukh Dhondy, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Shashi Tharoor, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arvind Adiga, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Amit Chaudhuri, Mukul Kesavan, Vikram Chandra, Meena

Alexander, Monika Ali, Anita Rau Badami, Meera Sayal and Shauna Singh Baldwin etc. All these writers significantly contributed to the publication of new Indian English fiction. Whether they write from within or outside India, they touched those global themes that came into existence because of their colonial and post-colonial experience.

Postcolonial theory reinterprets every aspect of history from a deconstructive approach. There is reason also behind this approach. Obviously, the colonizers define and modify the history of a colony from their ideology on the grounds that the natives could not write and define their own history. This leads to a distorted picture of history in which negative and false picture of the colonized country is depicted. All this is done in order to justify their rule as a civilizing mission. So, the aims of postcolonial studies are as Frantz Fanon argues:

Finding a voice and an identity...to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonizing power will have devalued the nation's past, seeing it pre-colonial era as a pre-civilized limbo, or even as a historical void... If the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second step is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past had been devalued. (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 193)

This 'logocentric' thought of the colonizers is questioned and their false conception is answered in the rewriting of history in the fictional works of postcolonial writers at the dawn of 21st century both at home and abroad.

The development of Indian historical novel in this new era can be seen as grounded on Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981) in the wake of postcolonial perspective. It can be taken as a crucial stage in the development of later fictional writings. John Mee remarks that it is *Midnight's Children* which, ". . . has fired the imaginative and creative potentials of the young novelists of the 1980s and 90s and engendered their innovative theme and technique" ("After Midnight," 127-141). This masterpiece created a revolution in its form, techniques, ideas of multiplicity, hybridity and multi-culturally. It is argued that the characteristics of the Indian novel in English today owed much to this masterwork of Rushdie.

So, the writers after Rushdie have frequently dealt with history as a way to deconstruct what the colonizers have done in order to establish their control structure. In this way they are redefining existing power structures and construction of history and culture. They subvert the notion of colonial history and interpret its effects on the people, culture and overall life of the

community. These novelists employ various postmodern techniques like allegory, myth, pastiche, stream of consciousness as well as surrealism, fragmented or broken narratives, flashback and magic realism to establish their way of presenting history in contrast to that of the western writers. Now their plot does not show a linear method of development, rather it rocks like a pendulum moving back and forth in time to suit what the postmodern situation has brought into being. Their chief concern is to reconstruct the concept of history. The same historical event is narrated from a variety of perspectives to emphasize plurality of truth.

Vikram Seth depicts minute details of history of India at various specific time periods in his novels like *A Suitable Boy* (1993), *the Golden Gate* (2005) and the autobiographical *Two Lives* (2005). *A Suitable Boy* presents social history of post-independent Indian society. While reading this novel, the reader finds a perfect combination of fiction and real facts. Entertainment and knowledge of history can be found at the same time and one starts comparing the events and happenings in the novel with the real history. Indeed, this novel is the outcome of Seth's deep research on history as he himself has suggested in one of his interviews. Then his autobiographical novel *Two Lives* presents factual description of World War and Nazi riots. A love story is interwoven in the backdrop of these historic events. Seth's is the approach to bridge the gap between history and fiction and he does it skillfully in his works.

Shashi Tharoor's another important work *The Riot: A Novel* (2001) narrates incidents following Babri Masjid riots. According to one critic, Shashi Tharoor is no different from a journalist while writing novel as history. He combines journalistic reports, diary entries, and related interviews to construct truth from a multiple point of view. Forming history as its base, Tharoor reexamines the past with an objective approach, and tries to convert it into historiographical meta-fiction with real historical events and characters. Shashi Tharoor himself has claimed, in an interview with Juhi Parikh, that:

. . .the themes that concern me in this novel: love and of hate; cultural collision, in particular, in this case the Hindu/Muslim collision, the American/Indian collision, and within India the collision between the English-educated elites of India and people in the rural heartland; and as well issues of the unknowability of history, the way in which identities are constructed through an imagining of history; and finally, perhaps, the unknowability of the truth. ("You Can't Feel the Country's Pulse," May 2004.)

Like Rushdie and Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh made use of history in almost all of his works. He presents history as it is seen and felt from the point of view of a common or middle-class man. Considered as a true follower of Rushdie in the writing of historical fiction, Ghosh's works portray him as a person close to the history of his nation especially the events following the partition of India. Riots, violence, roots, individual sentiments and nostalgia, freedom struggle, partition, displacement and migration of people, cultural conflicts and the impact of history are some of the themes that have been appropriately employed by Amitav Ghosh in his fictional works. Identifying the themes of Ghosh's books, Meenakshi Mukherjee writes: "Each one of Amitav Ghosh's books . . . invariably focuses on themes in history and connections across geography that have seldom been explored before, and does so with imagination supported by archival research, his narrative inventiveness matches by his luminous prose" ("Of Love, War and Empire," *The Hindu*, 1).

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is 'truly a Nobel man in a free state,' says David Pryce-Jones. Naipaul's extensive travelling in India and Africa has enriched his experience and understanding of culture and history. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001. Most of his works deal with the pangs of migration, identity crisis, nostalgia, and longing for belongingness etc. The Nobel Prize committee acknowledged his contribution "for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories" (Nobel Prize Committee).

Rohinton Mistry is one among contemporary Indian English writers who has the tag of being double diaspora. Being a Parsi, first his roots are in Persia. What his journey, from there to India and from India to Canada, has made him can be seen in his works. Commenting about his unique experience, Silvia Albertazzi writes: "first of all, he tries to show the uniqueness of the Parsi community by focusing on their way of living and their cultural heritage. Then, he stresses the diasporic nature of Parsi social and historical experience, seeking the justification and the sense of his own story of migration in the perspective of the Parsi 'double displacement'" (*A Companion to Indian Fiction in English*, 276-277). He presents various important historical events in India and shows the interrelationship between the marginalized and majority communities along with a sense of alienation. The plot of his novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) is set in the times of Indo-Pak War and the birth of Bangladesh as a nation. *A Fine Balance* (1995) records the changes that have taken place in Indian Society from independence to

Emergency years. The Epilogue: 1984 narrates the assassination of the Prime Minister leading to mass killing of the Sikhs. Mistry narrates his fiction amid the real history of our country to show its effect on the characters and society.

Mukul Kesavan's *Through the Looking Glass* (1995) is a remarkable example of historiographical fiction that narrates the history during the final years of freedom struggle of India. Kesavan tries to dismantle the factual linear history in order to open up the possibility of seeing time just as a series of events in sharp contrast to the chronology of history. Traveling back into the time allows the novelist to create a link between existing facts of history with its possible present interpretations. Kesavan, like many of his contemporaries, remains, what A.N. Prasad calls, 'much beholden to history and nurtures his writing with history' (*Indian Writing in English*, 83).

There are some contemporary female novelists also who treat history as one of the recurrent themes in their works. Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1990) presents a character named Draupadi who has never visited India and subsequently feels wretched and guilty for being disconnected with her own history. Kiran Nagerkar's *Cuckold* (1997) talks about the legendary characters like Mira Bai and her husband Maharaj Bhoj. The background is a significant period of Indian history when Babar won the throne of Delhi. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) presents a historical record of the events of the 1940s. Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999) belongs to the genre of partition novels. Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) concerns the lives of two women Madhu and Savitribai who have lost their son and daughter respectively in riots after the demolition of Babri Masjid. The Ayodhya incident also appears in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002). Nayantara Sahgal's *Lesser Breeds* (2003) has freedom movement as their backdrop.

As the concept of History has changed and developed from the classical linear to the postmodern deconstructive one, the status of this new literary history has matured and it has acquired new dimensions of meaning. The truth regarding the history is now no more one sided and complete in itself. The established canons of conventional historiography are under the scan of revaluation and are sought to be rewritten in the light of poststructuralist approaches. But what marks the necessary difference between these old and new approaches of historiography is that, in place of strictly following the closed linear factual details of history, it attempts to provide parallel structures with ever-widening and open reconstructive possibilities to view history.

Factual history is freed from the then dominant ideology and is open to more liberal possible relative meanings. These writers with postmodern approach undertake a journey back to history but not just in a taken for granted manner to accept and represent it as it is, rather with a critical outlook reshaping the whole previous historical knowledge and its role, meaning and value. Theirs is an attempt to, "...rewrite history from the perspectives of groups of people that have been excluded from the making and writing of history. They do not merely foreground groups about which official historiography tends to remain silent, but also allot them more power than they actually possessed" (Wesseling, 162).

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