

## Introduction

“... works of literature signify history indirectly via the ways in which they signify the ideologies which mediate their relations to history”.

(Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* 95.)

In studying the forms of history and fiction, one finds that there is a profound resemblance between them. In his important book, *Fictional Narrative and Truth*, L. B. Cebik has truly observed that "extensive probing into historical narrative led to the conclusion that the features of narrative that were epistemically fundamental to that form of discourse were common to both its historical and fictional instances" (qtd. in Davis 213). More than any other form of literature, the novel has thus a clear link with the genre of historical narrative.

As far as the historical novel is concerned, one finds that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were quite ripe for the production of this kind of novel. The eighteenth century English novel was full of massive use of history, because it incorporated within its fictional frame a large portion of social, political and cultural events. Henry Fielding subtitled his novels as the histories of their protagonists. Their writers, however, operated on the principles and parameters which were quite different from the postmodernist novel. The older historical novelist, in effect, used realism as the central principle of his craft. The twentieth century novel, on the other hand, not only continued this tradition, but also began to problematize history. A postmodernist revisionist novelist, for instance, does not rely upon the realistic factor only, but he also brings to focus the elements of fantasy,

surrealism, magic realism, grotesque, allegory, anachronism, and so on. In other words, the new historical novelist dismantles the traditional structures of both classic historical novel and historiography.

Like novelists, critics also began to interrogate history while discussing its connection with narrative. They soon found that narrativity is not simply confined to novels, but is a feature of history as well. In the view of many structuralists and poststructuralists, history is no more than the stories people tell themselves about what happened in the past. Such a view became common in the fictional practice of revisionist novelists. In that sense, it became common assumption that the idea of plot is part of an idea of history.

Naturally, then, the question arises in one's mind about the nature of history. It was E.H. Carr, however, who accurately defined history as "... a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (30). There are two things involved here – the actual events of the past and their record by the historian. It is the task of the historian to describe, narrate and finally interpret a given historical fact. What is thus systematically written about the past becomes historiography. The role of the narrative, however, becomes of utmost importance in describing the past. Commenting on the aim of history, on the other hand, Carr remarked : "[T]o enable man to understand the society of the past, and to increase his mastery over the present is the dual function of history" (55).

Like history, the novel is also concerned with the narrative of the past. Not all novels, but those that are engaged with the treatment of history re-tell

the past in fictional terms. They are thus fictional re-writing of history in which characters and plot interweave with the historical happenings and deeds. A novelist has a definite vision of history which he foregrounds in the fictional terms. It is not necessary, however, that he must narrate in the same way as does a historian. Just as each historian tries to define and describe history differently, so each novelist has a different and distinct perception and representation of the past. In his celebrated novel, *The Great Indian Novel*, for example, Shashi Tharoor rightly remarks: “[F]or every tale that I have told you, every perception I have conveyed there are a hundred equally valid alternatives. This is my story of the India I know with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions all mine”(419). Likewise, Milan Kundera also illumines important differences between the role of the historian and that of a novelist :

A historian tells you about events that have taken place. [...] A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is a realm of human possibilities, [...] Novelists draw up the map of existence by discovering this or that human possibility. [...]

If a writer considers a historical situation a fresh and revealing possibility of human world, he will want to describe it as it is. Still fidelity to historical reality is a secondary matter as regards the value of the novel. The novelist is neither historian nor prophet : he is an explorer of existence. (42,44)

A novelist's function, however, of re-writing the historical content issues from his understanding that what an official historian offers is never adequate for knowing the past. He includes, therefore, the imaginary but

human dimension of history. Furthermore, different writers of fiction have their own purpose of re-telling history. No two novelists have therefore a similar version, though they may have employed the similar method or mode. This happens due to their aim of revisioning history with their own distinct purpose. Jonathan Culler, however, dwells on the difficulty of distinguishing narrative discourse from the story. Although narratives - fictional as well as non-fictional - induce one into presuming the primacy of story over discourse, it is only through discourse that the story is available to the reader. He, therefore, concludes :

The founding narratives are powerful and effective and that is all that counts, [...] but it seems important also to preserve a critical awareness of the way in which groups, as a way of constructing an identity, produce fantasies of a lurid past, and ask what sort of signifying purposes or demands determine these stories. [...] Another strategy [...] is to construct a different story, a competing narrative of origins that would produce a different identity. (5-12)

Such revision of history in terms of the narrative is most overtly exemplified in the writings of Nayantara Sahgal, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry and Qurratulain Hyder. The choice of these five novelists is dictated, however, by the consideration of illustrating variety in the treatment of history rather than by personal preference. Since it is outside the scope of this study to include all the major Indian English novelists, only passing references to their works have been made and it is focused therefore upon the select five novelists. The present dissertation hence aims at examining their novels within the paradigms of contemporary theory. The

focus is laid on the nature of the narrative – both in history and fiction. It has been attempted to examine how the content of a historical text is determined by the manner in which it is presented. In their attempts at telling or narrating historical facts, both history and fiction are governed and controlled by narrative laws. Examined thus, historical data become subordinated to the question/quest of narrative. Writing of history or revisionist fiction have much to do with the telling of stories instead of mere historical details. While the first section of Chapter One discusses this problematic of the narrative, the second section draws appropriate examples from diverse literatures to reinforce the hypothesis made in the first part. It has been attempted to cogently argue how different authors look at history and use it in their fictional texts and by what modes and methods they re-tell history.

Taking their cue from the western models, the Indian English novelists also began to take fresh interest in history. Prior to post-independence, there was a trend of writing the historical fiction. Its emphasis, however, was laid much more upon romance rather than history. Few novelists, as will be seen in Chapter One, were seriously committed to postcolonial representation of history. At best, even if there were a few cursory references to contemporary events, these were mostly veiled under romance. Subsequent writers, however, dealt with the colonial and postcolonial history in their novels. Their writings duly interwove history with fiction and showed the socio-political realities of pre-and post-independence India. Most of these writers treated the real historical figures of Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, among others, and displayed their close knowledge of the country's freedom struggle as well as the horrible

trauma of partition. Their earlier writings, however, fall within the category of the classic historical novel with realism and romance as the two dominant modes.

In the post-80s, there emerged a new kind of Indian English novel that was marked by its visible departures and divergences from the earlier one. Re-writing of history and re-statement of the past became prominent features of the new novel. Jasbir Jain rightly observes that "...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" (98-99). In other words, it tends to become postmodernist revisionist writing. Here the novelists not only blend historical discourse with their fictional narratives, but also fabricate an alternative subversive narrative in parallel to official version. Such re-vised historical narratives appear in the writings of numerous Indian writers of the post-eighties period. In fact, in the 90s too, this situation continued and as Viney Kirpal has pointed out, "[A] majority of the novels... reflect an urgency to re-write received Indian history and expose the untruths of political versions" (57). In short, 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.

Since the 1960s, narrative has come to dominate the literary scenario all over the world. Literary and cultural theory have increasingly claimed cultural centrality for narrative. Stories, the argument goes, are the main way

people make sense of things, whether in thinking of their lives as a progression leading somewhere or in telling themselves what is happening in the world. The model for historical intelligibility is, in a similar way, a literary narrative. Historians do not produce explanations that are like the predictive explanations of science: they can not show that when x and y occur, z will necessarily happen. What they do, rather, is to show how one thing led to another, how the First World War *came* to break out, not why it *had* to happen. The model for historical explanation is just the logic of stories: the way a story shows how something came to happen, connecting the initial situation, the development, and the outcome in a way that makes sense.

One makes sense of events through possible stories. Philosophers of history, therefore, argue that the historical explanation follows not the logic of scientific causality but the logic of narrative: to understand the French Revolution is to grasp a narrative showing how one event led to another. In this sense, narrative structures are all-pervasive in both historical and fictional discourses. Frank Kermode notes that when one says a ticking clock goes 'tick-tock', one gives the noise a fictional structure, differentiating between two physically identical sounds, to make *tick* a beginning and *tock* an end. "The clock's *tick-tock*", he observes, "I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form. ..." (Kermode 45)

Jacques Derrida has made the reader aware of how all writing *per se* is mediated, supplemented and always a 'copy' of the supposed 'origin' or 'original'. Derrida has critiqued the common-sense assumptions of 'reality' by stressing its 'given' and 'assumed' nature. Jonathan Culler rightly observes that

Derrida's theory points out "...that our common-sense notion of reality as something present, and of the original as something that was once present, proves untenable : [because] experience is always mediated by signs and the 'original' is produced as an effect of signs, of supplements" (12). Michel Foucault, likewise, has been influential as the inventor of new historical objects, such as 'sex', 'punishment', and 'madness' which people had not previously thought of as having a history. His works, however, treat such things as "... historical constructions and thus encourage us to look at how the discursive practices of a period, including literature, may have shaped things, we take for granted" (Culler 9).

Postcolonial theory and writing "...has become an attempt to intervene in the construction of culture and knowledge, and, for intellectuals who come from post-colonial societies, to write their way back into a history others have written" (Culler 130-31). While it is important not to subsume the colonial condition into an undifferentiated set of experiences, there are nonetheless certain thematic parallels which much postcolonial literature, from Africa to New guinea, shares in common. Writing from different countries and cultures, the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'o novel *A Grain of Wheat* and the Indian Raja Rao in his novel *Kanthapura* both express the simultaneous pain and triumph involved in the struggle for independence.

The novels written by postcolonial novelists show that these writers are perennially interested in the colonial history of their countries. For example, the major works of Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott, Naipaul, Ngugi, and Wole Soyinka deal with the colonial experience in their novels and therefore



they resist the colonial masternarratives of their erstwhile colonizers. Many of them have employed the literary forms and techniques of the colonial power's own language and so used allegory, disrupted narrative flow, magic realism, irony, and so on to create alternative views of the colonial situation. This appropriation demonstrates the ability of postcolonial writers to use the tools of metropolitan language – the language emanating from the colonial centre, the metropolis – against itself. The strategic application of this alteration, however, lies not only in the appropriation of these literary techniques themselves, but in the way they are self-consciously used to demonstrate alternative and oppositional *ideological* principles, as well as to expose dubious and biased ones. Rushdie exemplifies this cleverly crafted appropriation in many of his novels, notably in *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, as does Arundhati Roy in her novel *The God of Small Things*.

The New Historicism and its method for the fruitful study of postcolonial and subaltern novels may briefly be noted. New Historicist method makes use of rereading historical narratives by juxtaposing different kinds of texts. For instance, a standard New Historicist essay will begin by reading an explorer's journal, an account of an exorcist, or perhaps some gossip from the court of Elizabeth I. This will be read as thoroughly as any work of literature. This will then be linked with other excerpts from quite different texts. Then the new historicist will move to a literary example, usually a small passage or a scene from a novel or a play. There will be no attempts at a complete or "closed" reading of the text. Rather, the strategy will be to link together,

somewhat loosely, a whole series of apparently unrelated details. From these readings, the New Historicist will then attempt to generalize the workings of a society.

New Historicists thus look for a more dynamic relationship between texts and their societies. If a society could be shown to form texts, then one could also show that texts in turn reshaped the society from which they came. For New Historicists understand well what Marshall McLuhan said – the medium is the message. If they wished to write about the forms of power, they sought also to show the power of literary forms to reshape the world. This strategy of thick description and the local reading of power relations could be seen, therefore, in subaltern studies and postcolonial approaches more generally. For example, New Historicist's study of Renaissance England offered profound insight into the complex workings of Elizabethan age. The England under Elizabeth I, they study, was as beset by chaos, by enemies within and without, as the contemporary world. How could anyone effectively rule such turmoil ? Their explanations, however, projected Elizabeth I as a cunning constructor of images of herself and her kingdom, purveying fictions of splendour as well as propaganda to her people. Underneath the theatrical charisma, however, her regime was harsh and oppressive. Rebellion might be attempted but effectively it was rendered impossible. For New Historicists, Renaissance writers were thus trapped in subtle webs of power politics. The contemporary revisionist writers, however, do unearth the powerful fault-lines lying beneath the bygone era. And the New Historicist critic can also undermine the symbolics of power operating within the narrative structures of official historiography.

In view of such a New Historicist approach, postmodernist revisionist fiction becomes a kind of history. In fact, it is made of plural 'histories' rather than a 'history'. Unlike the traditional history, it is not just a mere account of the past, but rather a history of the present. For example, thinkers and critics like Nietzsche, Foucault, Ricoeur, Hayden White, among others, insisted upon the value of 'archaeology' and 'genealogy' of historical thought rather than the conventional history. Foucault, for example, laid stress on the importance of 'genealogy' and commented that it is a "...history of the present" (qtd. in Gutting 50). As a traditional discipline, history has an avowed goal to pursue truth, but this 'truth' itself has been constructed and narrativised by the historian. Nietzsche, therefore, brought the entire domain of 'truth' within the domain of narrative and defined it as a "... mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms..." (878).

The basic purpose of postmodernist fictional narrative is, thus, to bring out the deeper structures of power behind the so-called truth and expose its "mobile army". Exercising its power and authority, the "official" version of history suppresses the other "voices" that try to make themselves heard. The revisionist history written by the novelist, however, attempts to restore those suppressed voices that are subaltern, marginalized and minorities and impart them a legitimate narrative space.

In Chapter Two, for instance, an attempt has been made to show that Sahgal's novels reveal deep narrative interest in the re-writing of officially tailored "history". By fusing the lifestories of her characters, mostly women, with the socio-political history of India, Sahgal constructs her own version of

history. This version expresses her continual pre-occupation with women's emancipation vis-a-vis the constraints of patriarchy. She relates the narrative of resisting colonialism and its ideology with the narrative of resisting power-structures of male-dominated society. Sahgal thus makes her intervention with the domain of history by questioning and challenging the "received" versions. She interrogates the official versions, because she finds that behind them there are deeper structures of patriarchy which curtail women's freedom and stifle their voice.

Rushdie, as will be seen in Chapter Three, presents alternative histories vis-a-vis official history and shows that the writing of history is a question/quest of narrative that might be as much valid for a novelist as it is for the historian. He projects his revisionist agenda in order to deconstruct and subvert the politician's version, because he believes that the so-called political version is responsible for human division and chaos in the world. Rushdie's writings assume provocative effects because they resist the repressive and hegemonic politics embedded in the political and religious masternarratives. Through his fictional texts, therefore, he explodes and exposes such traditionally established discourses and thereby re-invents and re-inscribes his own alternative views of history.

Amitav Ghosh, on the other hand, as will be seen in Chapter Four, attempts to depict national and cultural issues by historicising the multiple space of Indian diaspora. In his fictional and non-fictional writings, he dismantles and demystifies the rigid notions of nationalism that enclose people into narrow spaces. By telling alternate diasporic stories, he seems to

fill in the lacunae of the nationalist history of India. In revising historical knowledge of the past, Ghosh has adroitly underlined the multi-cultural diasporic space which is after all linked with postcolonial realities of the present world.

Unlike Rushdie and Ghosh, as will be seen in Chapter Five, Mistry does not celebrate such a multiple space of diaspora, though himself a diasporic writer, but tends to focalize his writing on the Parsi culture. Mistry's fictional works attempt to revision the cultural history of the Parsis by re-locating and re-possessing their past. At the same time he also portrays the marginalized and dislocated Parsi and other minorities' characters and thereby evokes contemporary Indian reality. Being a doubly-dislocated novelist, Mistry is concerned with the feelings of loss and exile and hence he often returns to themes of his native homeland and his own community. In short, Mistry's writing is an attempt at re-inventing Parsi ethos by coming to terms with their past.

Qurratulain Hyder's writings, as will be seen in Chapter Six, articulate an encounter between Hindu-Muslim relations in the context of the partition of India. Hyder mourns the fact of how the partition brought about a real loss in the rich syncretic culture of the country. Furthermore, Hyder links this historical betrayal of partition with women's betrayal and mingles the two strands appropriately. Unlike Sahgal's women characters, Hyder's female protagonists are not sufficiently endowed with feminist agency, but remain centrally feminine despite their rebellion against the unjust order. Given this critique, nonetheless, Hyder's fictive narratives importantly emphasize common victimization process operating at both historical and inter-personal levels.

Fictional writings of these five novelists, as will be seen in Conclusion, obtain narrative significance by the way they re-tell history in postmodernist, New historicist and postcolonialist terms. Their textual praxis have been supported by extending discussion about the other novelists of the world literature in view of recent theory and praxis in the global terms. Although they are quite different in their own writer-specific modes, yet they all display a common characteristic of re-telling historical narratives of their nations or communities. Finally, hypothesis is established that in their revisionist novels, these writers at once both problematize and make sense of their historical narratives.

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