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Historicity of Creative Literature: A Study

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Abstract

Creative writers author many works depicting history while silhouetting it against some plot. Here it is very pertinent that historical facts should not be trivialized, also popular version with some biases should not be pressed into service during fictional account. The need to safeguard the historical sacredness of facts is very important since political leaders pander to popular history to whip up hatred. This is all the more important since vested interests are inclined to appropriate history by projecting their own version. Such subversion if accepted poisons the minds of the gullible sections of society. They feel that their forefathers had been wronged and therefore, seek to avenge the real or imagined perpetrators' progeny in the present. In the subcontinent, all the vested interests cutting across the barriers of religions have been responsible for the mayhem caused over the decades by "the so-called injustice" (my emphasis). Such prejudicial histories must be contested and the fallacious arguments be dismantled in light of looming threat to the survival of minorities in particular. Writing history over the last few centuries has become a muddled area as historians have got themselves entangled in the cobweb of promoting parochial interests. While throwing light on depiction of history and the pitfalls involved when it is foregrounded to some story, anecdotes etc., the paper descants upon locating the positioning of veiled historians in creative writing while touching upon the issue of partition in particular. A few Indian novels were taken for the study.

Keywords: Historicity, Communal, Colonialism, Minorities, Bias, Religion, Class.

> "History is a sacred kind of writing, because truth is essential to it, and where truth is, there God himself is, so far as truth is concerned". - Miguel de Cervantes

Taken from the novel of Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* (2001) the quote underscores the sanctimonious role of history and the need to safeguard the historical sacredness of

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facts. This is all the more important since vested interests are inclined to appropriate history by projecting its own version. Such subversion if accepted poisons the minds of the gullible sections of society. They felt that their forefathers had been wronged and therefore, seek to avenge the real or imagined perpetrators' progeny in the present. In the subcontinent, all the vested interests cutting across the barriers of religions have been responsible for the mayhem caused over the decades by "the so-called injustice" (my emphasis). Such prejudicial histories must be contested and the fallacious arguments be dismantled in light of looming threat to the survival of minorities in particular. Writing history over the last few centuries has become a muddled area as historians have got themselves entangled in the cobweb of promoting parochial interests. While throwing light on depiction of history and the pitfalls involved when it is foregrounded to some story, anecdotes etc., the paper descants upon locating the positioning of veiled historians in creative writing while touching upon the issue of partition in particular.

In his article, "Distortion of History a Terror of Different Nature" (2018), historian K. M. Shrimali remarks that history is a discipline of rationality and should be written keeping in mind evidence either written or unwritten manifest in coins, sculpture. He adumbrates:

> There are ways of understanding mythology... Not everything which is part of mythology is history... But you don't enter into arguments, you try to bully people. That's not the way to write history. History is a discipline of reason and cannot be written with fabricated truths, imagination or myth-making". (*Hindustan Times*, 21 November 2018, p.8).

It stands to reason that people with some political ideology cannot represent truth. They marshal many a fact to buttress up distorted picture of some fact. With little pretentions about history they seek to thrust their idea, mostly without our being aware of it.

There are evidently some theoreticians who characterize historicity as a dimension of all natural phenomena that take place in space and time. Other scholars, on the other hand, characterize it as an attribute reserved to certain human phenomena by which we are located in specific concrete temporal and historical circumstances. These historians whatever be their methods, invalidate canonical scriptures.

The manipulated historical facts were used in the propaganda and consequently the very survival of some sections in the subcontinent was under constant threat. Any monolithic view of history overriding plurality and diversity of culture is illogical once one develops a view panoramic and all-encompassing. Many forces are at work in the making of both history and literature since the representation of truth is a verbal construct in which meaning is achieved by reference from words to words, not to things.

Literature is not simply a product of history it also creates history. The literary text is an integral part of wider cultural, political, social and economic dispensation. In other words, works on literature do not come into existence autonomously. The works of literature are associated with social, cultural, economic, historical and political

factors. It is these factors that help in the understanding of the genius, form and content. The novels dealing with the partition of the subcontinent are triggered off by events invested with historical importance. Hence, a historical perspective of them will help understand the communal dynamics among different communities. The historical perspective is intended to cover the tumultuous decades, which witnessed the rise of nationalism and the growth of communalism.

The partition of India in 1947 compels one to search for the larger meanings. Many of those who lived through the traumas were unable to comprehend how the subcontinent built around certain common symbols and shared ideals were so easily fragmented. They could scarcely understand why the edifice of a united and secular India was destroyed by religious fanaticism.

Although the rulers and the conquerors of different faiths established kingdoms and empires in India over the centuries, the mass of the people lived together, sharing their joys and sorrows largely unmindful of tensions and rivalries at the top. Thus, Hindu-Muslim relations during the first of millennium of Muslim rule in India can be studied in the light of two different methods pursued by the Muslim rulers: one is the assimilation or the accommodation of Hindu culture; and the other is of confrontation and liquidation. The Mughal Emperor Akbar – the grandson of Babur who had established the Mughal Empire – has been acclaimed as 'Benevolence' personified, for he was the one who initiated the former type. Being a statesman, he saw the necessity of accommodation between Hinduism and Islam for the stability and prosperity of the country. He married Hindu women, raised some Hindus to the highest position, and eventually proclaimed himself as the spiritual leader of the world. His new religion, Din-i-Ilahi, was intended to strike a harmonious chord between Hinduism and Islam. It is mentioned in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988) that the Emperor Akbar "invited Zarathushtra (Parsi) scholar to his darbar". He even expressed his wish "to become a Parsi if he could" (40), which speaks volumes of his religious tolerance. However, not all Muslim rulers evinced the same attitude towards people belonging to other religions. His grandson, for instance, did not follow the policy of religious tolerance. He attempted to make his empire a *dal-al-Islam*, an abode of Islam. Aurangzeb's rule was characterized by reimposition of the *jizya* (a tax imposed on non-Muslims when they tonsure their heads), replacement of Hindu officials by Muslims and the like. In the novel Collective narcissism (or group narcissism) a tendency to exaggerate the positive image and importance of a group the individual belongs, can be traced among Parses. However, it does not pose problems for any group.

It is also true that Maratha and Sikh rulers raised their banner of revolt against Aurangzeb because in trying to organize his government on Islamic lines, the Emperor was acting against their interests. However, the policy of tolerance was followed in the states that sprang up during the decline of Mughals. Rulers like Safdar Jang gave free land grants to Hindus. Mohammed Sarwar in *Riot* says that Hanumangarhi, the most important Hindu temple in today's Ayodhya was constructed with the revenue obtained from "the land provided to a Hindu abbot" (183) the Muslim Nawab. To cite a few more cases, the first Dewan of Haidar Ali was a Hindu. The Sikh ruler, Ranjit

Singh had two Prime Ministers, one a Muslim and the other a Dogra Hindu. Akbar Shaw, father of Bahadur Shaw-II, used to tell his ministers: "If you Mussulmans are to me like one eye, truly the Hindus are dear to me like the other eye" (Peter Heehs 152).

Some of the Sufi saints sought to bring about religious synthesis between Hindus and Muslims. These mystic saints were away from establishment and mainstream Islam. They were not as keen to comprehend God through intellect as through devotion. Thus, Muslim Sufis and Hindu Bhaktaswere quite close to each other. At times these Sufis tried to adopt local idiom in the propagation of their tenets. They tried to minimize linguistic differences. Sheikh Mohammad, a noted Sufi saint from Deccan, developed a glossary of Vedanta and Tasawwuf.

Communal antagonism appeared as a consequence of the emergence of modern politics that marked a sharp break with the politics of the medieval or pre-1857 period. There were cases of Hindu-Muslim or Sikh-Muslim riots before the period. The internecine quarrels between the Sikh gurus and some Mughals illustrate this aspect. It is pertinent to observe that these quarrels were more of a religious nature and hardly of any political motivation.

This persisted during the early phase of western interventions as the East India Company's prime interest was trade. The 'Great Uprising' of 1857 saw Hindus and Muslims rally spontaneously around the decrepit throne of Bahadur Shah Zafar, 'their' Emperor in Delhi. Hindus and Muslims fought together during the Revolt of 1857 against the British. Much of the strength of the Revolt lay in Hindu-Muslim unity.

No foreign power can rule any country without the support of at least a section of indigenous population, and the British were busy modeling their educational and administrative policies with an intention to woo Hindus, keeping Muslims in the chilly wilderness of suspicion and negligence. A wounded Muslim community hung back, resentful and unable to come to terms with new social, economic and political realities and with the change in laws and language that became the new instruments of governance and preferment.

They showed remarkable propensity to ethnocentric behaviour and involved judging other groups relative to the preconceptions of their own ethnic group or culture, especially regarding language, behaviour, customs, and religion. But around 1875 there was a reversal of British policy. The time had come to set right the balance as Hindu nationalism was gaining momentum. One of the first steps the British took to rally the Muslims was to patronize the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College of Sayyid Ahmed Khan. This institution provided the impulse for the Aligarh movement, which not only fostered a Muslim cultural renaissance, but also encouraged the sense of Muslim separatism

The British could survive largely due to their successful playing off one community against the other. This is clearly shown in Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1987) where Richard confides to his wife, Lizza: "When people are fighting among themselves the ruler is safe" (145). The history of British rule in India offers many examples of this strategy of divide and rule. In the twentieth century alone there were

the partition of Bengal, the engineering of the Muslim deputation, the wrecking of the Unity Conference of 1932, and many other acts. The motive behind their special favour to Muslim League was, what a retiring British Secretary of State called' "a predominant bias in British officialdom in India in favour of the Muslim community" (Peter Heehs 155).

It can be seen that the English rulers decided to put themselves between the Hindus and Muslims to create a communal triangle of which they would remain the base. In other words, they began to encourage communal and separatist tendencies in Indian politics. For this purpose they decided to come out as the champions of the Muslims. It is not without reason Col. Bharucha, Parsis' leader in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, squarely blames the British for all the problems because they are "past masters of intrigue. It suits them to have Indians all fight" (152). The British watched the two communities to fight between themselves because it was easier to rule a house that was hopelessly divided. Paul Scott in his novel *The Jewel in the Crown* (1963) also examines the British responsibility for communal antagonism. In the novel, Scott's Brigadier Reid and Sir George Malcolm are appreciative of the advantages of dividing the subjects. In Reid's assessments, Hindu-Muslim unity is to be "counted as a bad sign since it is suggested as alliance against the English" (312).

The Muslims were also convinced that there was the age-old enmity between Hindus and themselves. The Hindus were dangerous because they were *kafirs*. As long as "he does not profess the right religion he will remain our enemy. To kill a kafir brings merit" (168) runs the argument of a Muslim in Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*. The group shared psychosis, a psychiatric syndrome in which symptoms of a delusional belief dictates people's group behaviour. It is tantamount to viral phenomena in which objects or patterns that are able to replicate themselves or convert other objects into copies of themselves when these objects are exposed to them, thus causing much rancour and animosity among the counterparts.

The separatist tendencies among a section of the educated Muslims and the big *nawabs* and landlords reached a climax when the All-India Muslim League was founded to become the first platform of Muslim interests. It preached that the interests of the Muslims were different from those of the Hindus. Thus the Muslim League's political activities were directed not against the foreign rulers but against Hindus and the National Congress. It was thus played into the hands of the British who announced that they would protect and advance the political rights and interests of Mussalmans in India.

None of the ominous implications of the British to safeguard Muslim's rights was lost upon the Viceroy, Lord Minto, who was instrumental in Minto-Morley Reforms. The real purpose of the Reforms was to divide the nationalist ranks and check the developing unity among Indians by promoting communal issues.

The League's success in obtaining concessions from the government encouraged Hindu fundamentalists to establish an organization seeking the interests of their own community. An All-India Hindu Organization, the Hindu Mahasabha, took form during the second decade of the 20th century. Initially, there was not much difference

between the sentiments of the Indian National Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha; both wanted *Swaraj* and self-rule and both wanted India to remain undivided. The only difference was that the Congress was prepared to make considerable concessions keep India undivided and the Mahasabha was opposed to any such concessions. With the spread of communal riots in the country, many affluent Hindus began to fall in line with the Mahasabha's stand. The result was an increase in communal tensions. Thus it caused deep fear and distrust in the minds of the Muslims. Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the best proponents of secularism, has rightly reflected in *Discovery of India* (2001): "To some extent this fear is justified, or is at least understandable in a minority community … special responsibility does attach to the Hindus in India both because they are the majority community and because economically and educationally they are more advanced. The Mahasabha, instead of discharging the responsibility, has acted in a manner, which has undoubtedly increased the communalism of the Muslims, and made them distrust all the more … One communalism does not end the other, each feeds on the other and both fatten" (158). It is important that supremacism, an ideology that holds that a particular sect of people is superior to others, does no good to any community. Hindu organizations were harping on the theme of Muslims' ungodly nature and their antagonistic ways. In Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*, for instance, Vanaprasthanji chants a couplet in order to prevail upon the audience about "the sins of the Muslims in the land" (Sahni 59). In their bid to confront the villainous Muslims they adopt such measures like using stick and other deadly weapons which adversely heighten communal consciousness.

As can be seen from the dialogues and mores of people sandwiched in historical situation, they have become very impulsive and personal. In the depiction of characters, writers should be meticulous not to give credence to myths. As can be seen some characters in the novels rant and rave for nothing for the historical wrongs.

To conclude, historiography or determining the historicity of a particular milieu is the terrain of historians. While dealing with a specific topic historians study the topic in question employing pertinent particular sources, techniques, and theoretical approaches. The sources of historical data are simply items that do not speak for themselves; they are ambiguous, incomplete, sometimes contradictory to the already known and confusing. To develop a sensible and acceptable scenario, the historians have to interpret each individual piece of evidence and then assemble the entire mass of information into a single coherent and truthful story. This is indeed an arduous journey. This method of constructing history will most a times be affected by a historian's personal attributes among them biasness construction of history is always a contested area. When creative writers seek to silhouette historical area it is bound to create many problems. In fact, in historical analysis and comparative mythology, on many occasions, creative fiction get enmeshed consciously or otherwise in parallelomania, a phenomenon where authors perceive apparent similarities and construct parallels and analogies allegedly without historical basis. To guard against personal prejudices, it may be suggested that the writers should impose some confines within which they can cultivate their creative art.

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