

HISTORY-FICTION INTERFACE: PARALLELIZING ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

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Abstract:

History is the story of humanity which in turn can be divided into anthropology, archaeology and history. History is the story of man's representation of his own story-that is to say, what people through the ages have chosen to record and write down. It is different from the past and bigger than the past. The past is just what happened but history is how the story of what happened is narrated. It gives lists, accounts, and disciplined study of past events, that are remembered or preserved of the past.

Key Words: *Anthropology, history, archaeology, bible.*

Literature reflects the era, the words in use at the time and the style of the decade. Literature and history both occur in numerous forms, from tax records and letters to full histories of whole nations and people. Writers carry the themes of the era in literature. Literature may become history and History may also become literature. The stories of World War I by Hemingway are an insight into the era and can thus be considered as a record of history and the Bible reveals historical accounts of events as a literary work. When written, literature is the present, a report of the current status. Twenty years later, the reader sees the same literature as history, reporting events at the time of writing. Thus, literature turns into history after some years.

India is an ancient land. The vast literature of India is one of the greatest fortunes of the nation and Indian literature so keenly pulsating with life never fails to reveal the history of this great nation to the readers. Almost all literatures in major Indian languages have a long tradition using history as source material. T. N. Dhar points out that in the nineteenth century the rising interest in Indian past/s, stimulated by the British presence in the subcontinent and the example of the English tradition of historical fiction, generated “a steady increase in the conscious use of history” in Indian literatures, especially novels.

History has always been a theme of Indian Writing in English. Indian English writers' involvement with History shows the deep connections between history and literature. The History-Literature Connection is fascinating as well as culturally, socially and politically significant because a *sense of the past is a light that illuminates the present and directs attention toward the possibilities of the future.* There are many dramatists, poets and non fiction writers in India who have revealed a great sense of history and have recorded history in their works.

Girish Karnad who has earned remarkable place as a playwright is a great historical dramatist. His grasp of the Indian history is quite strong and deep. There is a convincing blend of fact and fiction in his plays. Girish Karnad wrote a historical drama *Tughlaq* which has been translated into Hungarian and German. Though writing on such a subject seemed very challenging for the author the play had a tremendous success with the reading public and it achieved greater popularity on the stage. The B.B.C., London, broadcasted it in 1979 and it was presented in London by the National School of drama repertory company as part of the festival of India in 1982.

Mohammed bin Tughlaq was the most extraordinary character to come to the throne of Delhi. This 14th century Delhi Sultan was unsurpassable in religion, in calligraphy, in battle, and even in philosophy.

No other could match his capability. Tughlaq was also a man of complex and paradoxical character. Karnad's *Tughlaq* deals with this character of Mohammed-bin Tughlaq who ruled over India for about twenty six years.

Although Karnad based Tughlaq's character, administration, politics, barbarity and savagery, he made some deviations from history, which he thinks essential for dramatic purpose. Karnad ingeniously creates the atmosphere of Tughlaq's days- an atmosphere of mutual distrust, frustrated idealism, communal intolerance, religious bigotry, treachery and sedition, rampant corruption and Tughlaq's unmitigated blood thirstiness and his final disillusionment.

This historic play can be considered a political allegory. It reflects the chaos, disillusionment and prevailing corruption that followed the Nehru era in independent India. Karnad throws light on the striking similarities between the reign of Tughlaq and the rule of Nehru in the fifties and sixties. While on the one hand the play tells us about the rapid disintegration of the personality of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, on the other hand it suggests the shattering of ideals after the death of Nehru and the frustration and corruption that followed in Indian politics.

It is the play of the sixties and reflects the political mood of disillusionment which was spread over the country after the death of Nehru who was an idealist and a visionary like Tughlaq. The political chaos which Karnad depicted in *Tughlaq* reminded many readers of the Nehru era in Indian history. However, Karnad finds this similarity accidental. He says:

I did not consciously write about the Nehru era. I am always flattered when people tell me that it was about the Nehru era and equally applies to development of politics since then. But, I think, well, that is a compliment that any playwright would be thrilled to get, but it was no intended to be a contemporary play about a contemporary situation.

Karnad's play looks at the past sympathetically, evoking the complex feelings that are associated with India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who died the year that this historical drama was written.

Karnad's play throws light on the mistrust that was emerging amongst Hindus and Muslims in the sixties. In the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq the Muslims called the Hindus bloody infidels. The Hindus on their part never trusted the Muslims even when they were prospering and exempted from taxes. This attitude is expressed by a Hindu in the play, "We didn't want an exemption. Look, when a Sultan kicks me in the teeth and says, 'pau up, you hindu dog'. I am happy. I know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being, well that makes me nervous".

The young Muslim reacts sharply to this statement and calls the Hindu an 'ungrateful wretch'. The orthodox Muslim cautions the young Muslim, "Beware of the Hindu who embraces you, before you know what, he'll turn Islam into another caste and call the prophet an incarnation of his god." The situation between the Hindus and the Muslims in the reign of Tughlaq worsened despite all his efforts to bring about the communal harmony. Such a situation prevailed in the post-independence India. Mahatma Gandhi who was an idealist made his best efforts to bring Hindus and Muslims together. Nehru also made such efforts but both failed miserably. As a Prime Minister, Nehru wanted to unite the two but he failed. There were Hindu-Muslim riots and deep rooted suspicion. Gandhi became a victim of this mistrust between the two.

India, the play says, is a country with so many different types of people that 'the Azams' are bound to benefit from whatever whichever government does, but 'the Azizs' are bound to undergo greater suffering under irrational despots, and the schemes hatched by the smarter members of the population. Tughlaqs or Nehrus remain blind to the effect of their policies on their people.

The double facedness of Muhammed very much resembles the two faces of the politicians of today. The craftiness of Tughlaq is parallel in the arch trickery and meanness adopted by those in power to wipe out the opposition and also that of the opposition to throw out the rulers in India after independence and also in the eighties, the longing to rule by all means is as true as it was during the reign of Tughlaq. The rulers and politicians of our democracy adopted subtle methods which remain unseen by common eyes. In

this, the rulers of the twentieth century are in no way different from the monarch of fourteenth century India.

In *Tughlaq*, Karnad puts forward some of the historical facts: the burning of Kanpur, the revolt of the Nawab of Avadh, Fakr-ud-din's revolt in Bengal, the uprising in Deccan and in Malabar. Ehsansha's declaration of independence and Bahal-ud-din Gashtasps gathering of the army against the sultan, the revolt of Ain-ul-Mulk and Shihab-ud-din. All these incidents look like similar fissiparous tendencies in India today. The people in the south wanted a linguistic state, it was given to them, in the North the Punjabis demanding Khalistan are vocal from without and within and have been the cause of the murder of Indira Gandhi.

Tughlaq is an idealist and fails on politics. What Karnad shows in Tughlaq is that the idealist and his idealism do not go hand in hand with a politician and his politics. His idealism does not pay because he is impulsive. The idealist politician is a misnomer in any age. There are many idealists today who have to face challenges which they try to curb down in their own crafty manner. They are trying to make history not only in their statecraft but by producing lasting results. In this the attempt of Tughlaq failed. He could not produce any lasting results. Hence he was called mad. His idealism had become a mockery. Every act, sane or foolish, he wanted to justify. This is done by our modern rulers also. Even wars which cost innumerable lives and cause greatest of havoc are justified. Nobody calls these rulers mad as the historians called Tughlaq, though they are no less mad than Tughlaq.

The play thus very substantially captures the Nehruvian era and the many ideological planning by government when people were dying of starvation and thereafter their ruined failing. The lurking threat to the new nation state-India for its survival, its political failure in diplomacy, and many political murders in the Indian sub-continent, and strike for division of many Indian states etc., are the appropriate parallelism with their contradictions and irony.

Among the novelists who have used history as their theme is Shashi Tharoor who has said of his writing: "I am a student of history and I am ... concerned with the recording of history. ... My work is ... conscious about the various ways that history can be told and recorded." (Tharoor in *Kanaganayakam* 1995, 121.)

Indians are proud of two things: the great epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and the freedom movement. Shashi Tharoor has done a luminous job by mixing these two together in his novel, *The Great Indian Novel*. He takes the story of the *Mahabharata* and blends it with Indian history, going back three generations. The phrase "great Indian novel" is a pun, roughly translating "Mahabharata" (*maha* "great"; *Bharata* "India"). It is a satirical novel, a fictional work that takes the story of the *Mahabharata*, and recasts and resets it in the context of the Indian Independence Movement. Figures from Indian history are transformed into characters from mythology, and the mythical story of India is retold as a history of Indian independence and subsequent history, up through the 1980s.

The *Mahabharata* is an epic tale describing the historical dynastic struggle over the throne of the kingdom of Hastinapur between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two branches of the heirs of the king Shantanu. In this novel, Tharoor recasts the story of the nascent Indian democracy as a struggle between groups and individuals closely related by their personal and political histories. The *Mahabharata*, which is not a novel but an epic poem, can be understood, according to Tharoor, to represent Hinduism's greatest literary achievement and thus serves as an appropriate paradigm in which to frame a retelling of recent Indian history.

A significant characteristic of Tharoor's version of the story is the emphasis on the older generations (e.g., Bhishma, Dhritarashtra, and Pandu) and the resulting de-emphasis on the actions of the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

It starts off with the bad tempered narrator, Ved Vyaas looking for a writer and he finds none another Ganapathi (similar to Lord Ganesha in many aspects). He narrates the tale of everything he has seen in his

life, starting from his birth. Satyawati, being seduced by the Brahmin Parashar gave birth to Vvji and then what follows is the epic tale of the *Mahabharata* coupled with Indian history. Each famous Indian freedom fighter is given a role from the *Mahabharata* hence leading to a dual role. For example, Gangaji, who is actually Bhishma is Gandhi (pretty obvious), Dhritarashtra is Nehru, Vidura is Vallabhai Patel, Pandu is Subhash Chandra Bose, Karna is a vague impression of Jinnah, Priya Duryodhani (Duryodhan) is Indira Gandhi and so on. These are the obvious allusions. But the question most people are left to wonder is that what do the five Pandavas represent? They represent the five pillars of democracy whereas Drapudi represents the ideal of democracy (D.Mokراسي). From the birth of the characters, to their whereabouts and their deaths, the book is exact and not lacking in detail and accuracy. Even the minute events of Shakuni's dice game, Duryodhana's attempt to kill the Pandavas by leading them to the Lakshgraha, Drona's impact in the Mahabharata, Krishna's wise words, Arjun's marriage to Krishna's sister find a mention in the book.

There are 18 chapters, just like the *Mahabharata* has 18 books and the war of Kurukshetra goes on for 18 days. The book covers every epic event in Indian history, from Gandhi's Dandi March, the Jallianwallah Bagh Massacre, Subhash Chandra Bose's agitations, to Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency, The Indo-Pak and Indo-China wars etc. The book also hints at various conspiracy theories.

This well-researched *The Great Indian Novel* connects modern India with its ancient past, its traditions, cultural heritage and recording of history. It also emphasizes and highlights Indian tradition in the telling of Indian history and thus brings something of Indian heritage to Western readers. Indian history is told here not only from an Indian perspective but by utilising India's cultural heritage in its structure and form. The use and recycling of Indian mythopoeic traditions to write the country's modern histories counters the Western historiographical ideas of linear time and progress that have usually been employed in the historiography of twentieth-century India, for while the events of the *Mahabharata* took place in the remote past, they still have a contemporary relevance; the figures of the epic are archetypes that can be rediscovered in, say, twentieth-century Indian history, as *The Great Indian Novel* demonstrates. It is almost as if history repeats itself, for even though the historical contexts change, the basic structures remain the same or at least occur repeatedly.

Revision is the lifeblood of historical scholarship. History is a continuing dialogue between the present and the past. There is no single, eternal, and immutable "truth" about past events and their meaning. The unending quest of historians for understanding the past that is, revisionism" is what makes history vital and meaningful. Indian Literature in English also has been doing this re-visioning of history. Indian writers in English go one step further to historians. They just don't stop with re-visioning or rewriting history but they depict beautifully the parallelism between the ancient and contemporary history.

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