ABSTRACT

This thesis is an investigation into the engagement with and representation of history in the works of a number of Indian English writers of the 1980 and 90s as well as a couple of very recent writers. It applies strands of colonial and postcolonial debates, ideas from postmodern literary theory and philosophy of history, and a sense of historical context to a few selected novels: Midnight’s Children by Salman Rushdie, The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh, The Trotter-Nama by I. Allan Sealy, The Great Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor, Such a Long Journey by Rohinton Mistry, Looking Through Glass by Mukul Kesavan, Rich Like Us by Nayantara Sahgal, Red Earth and Pouring Rain by Vikram Chandra, What the Body Remembers by Shauna Singh Baldwin, and The Point of Return by Siddhartha Deb. The study begins from the premise that these novels are characterized by an oppositional and contestatory attitude towards colonial as well as nationalist discourses. An attempt has, thus, been made to explore how, through a critical and revisionist engagement with colonial and nationalist historiography, these novels try to capture and invent a new reality of postcolonial Indian nation. Through new methodological and philosophical interventions into the notions of history and historical representations, they attempt to address the issue of socio-political marginality, and provide new insights for historiography.

The introductory chapter starts by offering a broad survey of the kind of historiographic representation that has been dominant in colonial and postcolonial India. The chapter attempts to situate the texts selected for the present study in historical context by exploring the genesis and development of historical consciousness in Indian novels from the time of its colonial advent to the modern times, and the changes in attitude and perspectives among the writers of fiction in English regarding fictional engagement of history, even as Indian historiography goes through paradigmatic shifts from a contestation of colonial historiography to nationalist self-assertion, and from being an essential part of nation-building to the ‘prose of insurgencies’ of the Subaltern School. The chapter also presents some terminological explanations, rational for the selection of the texts and brief chapter summaries.

Chapter One, “History and Narratives”, presents a discussion on the philosophical and methodological issues related to history-fiction interface as evident in the novels. History-
fiction interface and narrativization of history intervene significantly in the discourse of history by foregrounding the question of the interrelationships between narrativity and historiography. It is argued that these novels, in their problematizing of the dominant notions of historiography and in their search for lost, suppressed, marginalized histories of India, serve, in more ways than one, as supplementary and corrective to imperial, colonial, neocolonial, nationalist historiography. While Rushdie, Ghosh and Deb utilize the power of memory to create a radically individual narrative that is meant to supplant a dominant, hegemonic conception of history, their forms are different. Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie, The Great Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor, The Trotter-Nama by I. Allan Sealy and Looking Through Glass by Mukul Kesavan employ a post-modern fictive strategy and magicrealism. In Ghosh and Deb's narrativization of history also we find, as in Rushdie, an overwhelming profusion of events, memories and places. Mistry, Baldwin and Sahgal write more or less in the realist form and prove that realism can also be effectively used to re-write and subvert dominant historiography. In some cases, like Red Earth and Pouring Rain, The Great Indian Novel, by obliterating the line between myth and history, the novelist exposes the falsity of the conventional fact/fiction opposition and thus acquires the status of an itihaskar. Towards the later part of the chapter, I further discuss the issue of history-fiction interface by revealing the ways fictional history fills the silence in academic historiography surrounding unrepresented and unrepresentable traumatic history such as the Partition. Narrativizations of history in these novels not only problematize the traditional concept of fiction and history but also work out alternative strategies to narrativize the history of India.

Chapter Two, "History and Nation", argues that the picture of the nation that emergesthrough the revisionist narrativization of history, is not celebratory as in its moment of birth but subversive and elegiac, one that is different than what nationalist or colonialist wish or present it to be. The chapter is structured around three distinct thematic concerns common to these texts. First of all, it looks into the disenchantment and the sense of betrayal with the nation and nationalism in these texts, a disenchantment that was the result of socio-political and intellectual currents of the particular historical time in which they were written. Secondly, it is argued that the derivativeness of the concept of nationalism as well as the continuation of the legacy of colonialism by the postcolonial elite were the causes of consequent failure of the nation-state in delivering the promise of freedom and liberty.
Rushdie, Tharoor, Sahgal, and Mistry go on charting the failure of the nation and lament the rotting away of all the promises and expectations of a nascent republic betrayed by the ruling elites. Novels like *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh, *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin, and *The Point of Return* by Siddhartha Deb reveal how the Partition, the very moment of the birth of the nation, destroyed one of the most revered foundations of the nation: that is, the idea of a stable community, the feeling of shared heritage and belonging. It is observed that these novels are not as overwhelmingly about nation-building or celebration like the earlier nationalist novels but about nation-mourning. Finally, I read these texts as counter-narratives to the national narratives in that, in place of a singular, unitary nation, they introduce the idea of a nation which is characterized by multiplicity and heterogeneity. By providing space of enunciation to the margins of the nation, these novels counter the ideas of authenticity, purity of national identity inherent in nationalist construction of India.

The picture of the nation, riddled with violence, cracks and fissures, is best represented in corporeal terms by the writers. The corporeal representation of history and nation is examined in Chapter Three, “History and Body”. This chapter examines how Indian English novels represent history, mostly disruptive and traumatic history of the sub-continent is represented through the ‘body’. First, the chapter explores body images in terms of Bakhtin’s grotesque realism. If the alternative historiography of these texts point to the vibrant possibilities of histories against the fixed, monological, and totalizing History, opening up spaces for different discourses, this new structure and meaning of historiography goes hand in hand with grotesque realism. The excessive, carnivalesque bodies signify the teeming plurality and the fluidity of Indian identity which, like the bodies of Saleem, Justin and Mik Trotter in *The Trotter-Nama*, and Sanjay in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, remain uncontained and uncontainable in fixed form. Next to grotesque realism, I will explore politics of visibility, as well as the depiction of wounding, sickness, markings, scars, torture, and disabilities in the bodies to show how the violent effects of history are seen on the individual bodies. The broken, fissured, scarred bodies in these texts can be read as commentaries on the state (condition, health, corruption, cruelty, injustice) of the body politic. Bodies in these novels are inscribed with historical conflicts and paradoxes, and as such they are crucial for comprehending the visions of history that the writers attempt to represent.
Chapter Four, "History and Politics of Representation", examines the historical, linguistic, ideological and locational factors of the postcolonial condition, and their ramifications in the project of re/writing of or re/narrating history and the nation. A major part of the chapter deals with the politics of reception and consumption vis-à-vis the engagement of history in these texts. This chapter takes into account the role of the market and publishing industry, as well as the Western academy in the dissemination of these texts as the most authentic national documents of postcolonial India. It looks at the various possible and common criticisms directed against these writers in their attempts at engaging history: elitism, postcolonial exoticization, and falling prey to the ‘packaging’ game of globalized market force. It analyses the ways in which representation of history has been done and most importantly, how and if the writers have managed to avoid the many pitfalls that such narrative representations are often prone to.

The concluding chapter notes the crucial role and significance of history in postcolonial India, and argues that there is an ascendancy of historical debates in Indian public life, which is further given impetus by discourse of globalization and the rise of fundamentalism in Indian political life. It is observed that in fictional writings also the historical enterprise and engagement with history and nation remain insistent. The relevance of literary re-writing of history in providing much needed balance in understanding our times in wider perspective is underlined. My conclusion argues that the novels under the present study depict the continuing problems and maladies afflicting the democratic ethos in postcolonial India. The chapter concludes with some brief observations regarding the changing facets of fictional representation of history in a few very recent novels which are characterized by a more diffused kind of approach to history in comparison to the writers discussed in the present study.