CHAPTER I:

Relocating 1857: The event and the perspectives

From the Sepoy Mutiny to the first war of Indian Independence — the events of 1857 have been read in various lights from time to time and though academically often ascribed to history, the 1857 Uprising now seems to have permeated such disciplinarian classifications by virtue of the representations in various personified forms such as fiction, poetry, painting and films, in India as well as England.

The very first personalized and detailed records of the events of 1857 are probably those which survive in the diaries and letters of the people of both the countries and though they may be considered to be important specimens of historical evidence yet the very presence of the I/eye narrator which assigns a subject-position to the perspective offered, opens them up for literary criticism as well, as Ketaki Kushari Dyson observes — "A diary can take us straight into the workshop of history, into the why and how of the birth of a prejudice" (Das, 35).

If history as a discipline records the events of the past and is based on reality, then the Uprising of 1857 which has continued to inspire various forms of representation even after 150 years of the actual event is certainly a different kind of history and calls for a re-reading of the multifarious representations which have attempted a repeated
Historicization of the same event from multiple angles over decades unlike the other historical events, such as the Battle of Plassey or the Tamil Nadu Vellore Mutiny et al.

Since the very term representation implies being re-presented, it may be assumed that representation of one particular event from time to time by various people in various languages and forms, especially with the watershed of the independence of India, is not merely coincidental and probably the reasons behind the pre-1947 and post-1947 representations of the Uprising of 1857 are not the same.

In *Philosophy of History*, M.C Lemon identifies two kinds of approaches to history – Speculative and Analytic, and states that Speculative Philosophy of History stems from the impulse to make sense of history, to find meaning in it or at least an intelligible pattern. According to him, at the heart of this impulse is the desire to predict the future, and in many cases, to shape it. This view is of particular importance with respect to the Uprising of 1857. When Marx and Engels described the uprising as a ‘National revolt’, it was a time when India was still divided into several kingdoms and was recognized as ‘India’ only by the colonizers for the purpose of administration. It still lacked the realization of itself as a single united nation. However, when V.D. Savarkar chose to describe the same event as the ‘First war of Indian Independence’ in a book named the same in 1909, the reasons were most certainly quite different.

With the end of the Uprising, ended the age of the East India Company and began the age of the British Crown. Having recognized the geographical advantage of Delhi the British
were at this phase considering a shift in their colonial capital from Calcutta to Delhi. The ceremonial Delhi Durbar or Imperial Durbar had already been held twice, i.e., in 1877 and 1903, and it would be at the next Delhi Durbar in 1911 that Delhi would be declared the new capital of the colonial India – a decision to be maintained later by the Government of independent India, as well, thereby assigning a central position to Delhi in nationalist history. Moreover, the country had now arrived at a position to comprehend itself as a single united nation with the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. This implies a strong nationalist agenda behind Savarkar’s use of the ‘First War of Indian Independence’, unlike Marx and Engels’ identification of the revolt as the fruition of the theory of revolution.

Though both the above texts are tagged as history, one might see clearly the difference of understanding and the need to rediscover, re-read and re-interpret history in order to shape the present and the future. It is here that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s assertion may be recollected – “…the narrativizations of history are structural or textured like what is called literature” and further, the difference between history and literature is “a difference in degree rather than in kind” (Spivak, 243). It is at this juncture that history and literature become complementary to one another in order to re-create the reverberations of an event which has gradually come to form the basis of a nation’s sense of nationalism beyond the pages of written records, by virtue of a continuous osmosis between fact, myth and memory through various literary representations.
Seen in this light, all that has been written, filmed or represented in any form, against the backdrop of the rising of 1857, ranging from diaries, autobiographies, biographies, factual documents, letters, novels, paintings and photographs to comics and films are all “narrativizations of history”. On a close study they not only provide an interesting contrast between the shifting perspectives of the colonizer and the colonized through the representations of 1857 in English and the Indian languages respectively, but also reveal a logical pattern behind the same, and in the process help to comprehend the national need to celebrate 150 years of the 1857 Uprising. Nevertheless, such a study would necessitate a continuous journey from history/historiography to literature, and vice-versa because the events of 1857 have now come to form the roots of the Indian national identity and an integral part of the collective subconscious of the nation in this era of a global diaspora. Since the representations of 1857 depend on the effect of the real in order to authenticate themselves, therefore the need arises to evaluate these representations with respect to the real, i.e. the historic. To compartmentalize history and literature in this context would be almost to deny all links between the real and the represented, because a representation of an event being a reading of that event as a text is more often than not, ideologically motivated.

The literature based on 1857 forms a huge corpus accommodating multiple perspectives and subject positions. In this case, texts have been selected from English literature written by the English as also by the Indians, along with texts in regional languages such as Hindi, Urdu and Bengali, including diary, poetry, play, novel, autobiography and biography. India being a multilingual country, the process of translation has been an
intrinsic part of the national identity since a long time, and therefore stands to be instrumental in generating a sense of sharedness of experiences and achievements. The Uprising of 1857 being a widely manifested event across several regions and languages, it becomes extremely important to accommodate as many translations of regional and linguistic perspectives as possible in order to arrive at a balanced understanding of the underlying pattern beneath representing 1857 from various viewpoints and from there trace the differences, if any, across the several ethnic and linguistic representations which constitute the large canvas of India as a nation, as K. Sat\-\text{chidanandan} observes in his essay entitled ‘Defining the Premises: Nativism and its Ambivalences’ – “the Nativist task of deconstructing the Indian tradition must be a part of a greater secular and egalitarian project of constructing unity at a higher and more realistic conceptual level, of heteroglossia, cultural plurality within the nation’s boundaries and intertextuality within culture.” (Paranjape, 27)

On being placed side by side, these texts written in different languages and from different viewpoints recreate the complex scenario and conditions of India during the Uprising. While texts like A Lady’s Diary of the Siege of Lucknow offer a view of the events of 1857 as survived by the wife of a colonial officer posted in India in the damp ‘Tye Khana’ of the Lucknow Residency nursing the wounded and mourning the dead, Durgadas Bandyopadhyay’s Bidrohe Bangali puts forth the 1857 rising as experienced by a Bengali working as a sepoy in the British regiments in the form an autobiography revealing the other side of the revolt where a description can be found about how the sepoys who did not support the anarchy brought in by the revolt were identified by the
others as treacherous and were threatened with death at the hands of their own comrades, if caught. The latter also brings in the scope for a different discourse altogether with regards to the Uprising of 1857 when the author writes of his experience where Bakht Khan, the rebel leader, glorified in the later studies for his role in the Rising at Bareilly, especially in Utpal Dutt’s *The Great Rebellion*, scoffs at Durgadas saying that “the English and the Bengalis are all the same…” (Bandyopadhyay, 45), thereby interrogating the very basic concept of national integrity by bringing in questions of regional loyalties and preferences.

*Hutom Penchar Naksha* by Kaliprasanna Singha, on the other hand, offers a commentary of the Uprising in the form of *Naksha* literature, largely popular in the 19th century Bengal. Here, the distance of the narrator from the revolt, especially his somewhat jocular representation of it, provides an interesting study. Being almost a social document and record of contemporary Bengal, the text introduces the scope for a new complexity in the study of the 1857 Uprising by reflecting a different picture of the 19th century Bengali society which was then going through other social challenges like the introduction of widow remarriage – changes of greater significance than the Uprising for contemporary Bengal. It, therefore, puts forth a counter-discourse to the conceptualization of the Uprising of 1857 as a national revolt.

*Dastambu* by Mirza Ghalib provides yet another view of the rising as seen by a man who lived as a pensioner of the British government owing to his family lineage and later served the last Mughal, Bahadur Shah Zafar, as his ustaad in poetry before 1857. He had
to write a pro-British account of the events of 1857 in order to survive the aftermath of the rising by proving himself loyal and devoid of any connection with the revolt whatsoever when Delhi had been recaptured by the British as substantiated by his own letters.

Munshi Premchand’s novella entitled *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, which was later made into a film by Satyajit Ray, adds a different angle to the study of the 1857 Uprising. Without any direct reference to the annexation of Oudh, Premchand depicts the lives of two lethargic Jagirdars who devote all their time to the game of chess, and it is through their moves on the chess board and dialogues that the socio-political picture and the power play of Lucknow are gradually woven into the text, subtly and symbolically.

Literature about the events of 1857 written on the English soil bring in another dimension by representing the imagined pictures of those away in an alien land and helplessly suffering such as ‘The Defence of Lucknow’ by Alfred Tennyson and ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi 1857’ by Christina Rossetti. In the former, Tennyson celebrates the victory of the British defenders of the Lucknow Residency highly charged with national sentiments and racial pride especially in lines such as “handful of men as we were, we were English in heart and in limb/ Strong with the strength of the race to command, to obey, to endure…”, while in the latter Rossetti gives a detailed account of the tragedy of
'Justice' – *Punch*: September, 1857
Captain Skene and his wife, posted at Jhansi during the rebellion, which she later admits to be historically erratic having been penned on the basis of the “supposed facts” from India during the revolt. ²

Stephen Henry Sharman’s *Relief of Lucknow and Other Poems*, published in England soon after the Uprising in India and dedicated “to the memory of the late Major-General Sir H Havelock” adds another angle to the event, especially through its opening poem in three cantos entitled ‘The Relief of Lucknow’ written in lofty blank verse which celebrates the heroism of the British combating the Uprising in India with epical grandeur. Beginning with the invocation of the Muse who “sang/ Of Britons, who, by Indus as of old,/ Triumphant through all peril bore the Cross and ure of the society of Bengal the Sword”, Sharman draws a graphic picture of the Siege of Lucknow, the heroism and the hardships, the courageous deed of Major Havelock and concludes with England’s victory and the death of the Major General described in no less details than that of Beowulf (Sharman, 02).

In fiction, Charles Dickens’s novella entitled ‘The Perils of Certain English Prisoners’ published in *Household Words* provides a stunning example, in every way. Though based in South America and portraying the courageous fight of the English men and women there against the Pirates, one cannot overlook the intimate parallel it draws with the Siege of Lucknow while dealing with a completely different subject-matter. Dickens stated in one of his letters "I wish to avoid India itself; but I want to shadow out in what I do, the bravery of our ladies in India", and in this novella though the scene of action is
‘The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger’—*Punch*: August, 1857.
completely shifted, one can see Dickens doing what he declares in his letter through the characters of Miss Marion Maryon and Mrs Fisher and also get a close view of Dickens’s glorification of the colonizer and ruthless treatment of the colonized Other – a rare glimpse of the renowned English author of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Illustrations of marked significance are found in the Punch magazine such as the one entitled ‘Justice’ which showed the lady of justice with her sword in the air surrounded by black Indians on all sides fallen at her feet, published in September 1857, when Delhi was recaptured by the British, or the one titled ‘The British Lion’s vengeance on the Bengal Tiger’ which portrayed a huge lion fiercely pouncing upon a cornered tiger within whose paws lay the a white woman and a child, published in August 1857, anticipating fierce retribution.

Photography also plays an important role in this regard as it was then a recent phenomenon in India and promised an objective statement of facts visually. However, commercial photographers like Felice Beato re-created the evidence of crime to preserve the shock of contact, a perfect example of which can be found in Beato’s photograph of Sikandarbagh at Lucknow where the large number of corpses decently covered had to be uncovered on his insistence in order to be photographed. A study of these illustrations and photographs throw light on the way the revolt was being read, portrayed and comprehended by the common people of England in the 19th century, and thereby enables a better understanding of the 19th century English literature based on the Indian revolt of
Felice Beato’s Photograph of Sikanderbagh at Lucknow, 1857
1857. They reveal the pattern of sustaining the faith of the common people of England in the British sense of courage and justice and manufacturing public consent in the 19th century England in favor of the violence and bloodshed, well-deserved by a race which had dared to rise in mutiny against their benefactors.

20th century Indian literature against the backdrop of the 1857 revolt shows a marked difference in perspective, such as in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* where the protagonist of the story is a devout Hindu Brahmin who later discovers himself to be the son of an Irishman serving as a soldier in the colonial army, thereby problematizing the issues of birth, identity and nationality. Similarly, in her poem entitled 'Jhansi ki Rani', Subhadra Kumari Chauhan creates an epical image of Rani Lakshmibai perhaps for the first time, describing her birth, her marriage, her devotion towards her duties as a wife, as a queen, her courageous fight against the British and her glorious martyrdom. The poem is also quintessential in its repeated reference to the wandering minstrels of Bundelkhand who are said to be the real narrators of the story of the legendary Rani Lakshmibai, because in this way the poem highlights the role of the common masses in the uprising of 1857 as it is still shown to be vividly present in the psyche of the common people. When studied with an eye towards the socio-political currents of that age, a distinct line of reason emerges gradually.

It would be worthwhile to remember at this juncture that the centenary of the 1857 Uprising was celebrated by the Government of India with great splendor in 1957. A huge number of books were published to commemorate the Uprising of 1857, one of them
being R.C. Majumdar’s *The Sepoy Mutiny and Revolt of 1857*, which was initially meant to be published by the Indian government. In his essay entitled ‘Contesting 1857’, Ronojoy Sen writes that the book “ran into trouble” after Majumdar “had a falling out with the board of editors” when “a Congressman wanted the proposed work to establish that in 1857 an organized attempt was made by the natural leaders of India to combine themselves in to a single command with the sole object of driving out the British power from India that a single, unified politically free and sovereign state may be established”, which was in every sense “a direct rebuttal of Savarkar” who “constructs an elaborate mythology around these ‘patriots’.” (Majumdar, 16)

Probably, for a country which had attained independence and lived through the trauma and pain of partition just a decade back, it was important to seek and consolidate its identity through a historical event of seemingly national significance, and 1857 undoubtedly provided the best instance to serve the purpose, especially with its famous cry “khalk khuda ki, mulk Badshah ka, hukum subahdar sipahi Bahadur ka”, i.e., ‘the world is God’s, the country is the Emperor’s, the rule or order is that of the soldiers’, which complemented the notion of an ideal democracy in transferring the power of rule onto the soldiers, who in the post-independence context come to be read as the representatives of the common masses and thereby strengthened the nationalist discourse. Amartya Sen observes in *The Argumentative Indian* that the “colonial undermining of self-confidence had the effect of driving many Indians to look for sources of dignity and pride in some special achievements in which there was less powerful opposition – and also less competition – from the Imperial West…” (Sen,79). The influence of the political
recognition, assimilation and celebration of the Uprising of 1857 as an integral part of the newly formed democratic nation can, perhaps, be seen clearly in the way the Uprising came to be represented henceforth in literature as well as films.

Production of films based on the revolt of 1857 began as early as 1953 with Sohrab Modi's *Jhansi ki Rani*, which however, was a major failure at the box-office despite its technical grandeur and expertise. The reason behind this was probably the fact that it was released before time could traditionalize and institutionalize the ethos of nationalism in the re-invention of the uprising of 1857, which took place with the commemoration of the centenary of the revolt of 1857 by the Government of India in 1957.

The question of viewpoint is further problematized by novels such as John Master's *Nighrunners of Bengal* as Rodney Savage journeys through a sense of loss and betrayal, almost at the verge of losing human warmth and feelings after the Bhowani garrison is destroyed by the sepoys at the outbreak of the mutiny. He is restored to humanity by Caroline Langford and at the end has to fight against his own former regiment. The novel depicts the character of a queen of a state called Kishenganj, who raised her voice against the British and joined in the Uprising as a rebel leader after having tried to seduce Rodney Savage physically into an assurance about her son's inheritance of the kingdom, the king being dead. This portrayal has been later read as a loose reference to Rani Lakhmibai of Jhansi. An almost contemporary novel by Mahasweta Devi entitled *Jhansir Rani* or *The Queen of Jhansi* brings out a biographical account of the life of the warrior queen of Jhansi, thereby continuing the trend of historical fiction based on the lives of the
heroes of the 1857 rising – Rani Lakshmibai, in particular; and on being read side by side
with Nightrunners of Bengal, they reveal the nature of complexity and heterogeneity
embedded in the narratives of the representation of the Uprising of 1857.

Utpal Dutt’s play entitled The Great Rebellion, on the other hand, portrays the revolt of
1857 as no less than a class struggle and Bakht Khan as the proletariat protagonist. The
sepoys are made to represent almost a class of tragic heroes going on with the rebellion
for days at a stretch without any supplies of food or basic requirements and they
gradually come to realize “…our real enemy is not the English but our own princes and
moneylenders.” However, that does not take them off the path of duty as this discourse is
refuted almost immediately by the counter-discourse when a fellow sepoy replies – “…in
the freedom struggle you see only struggle and not the freedom”. (Dutt, 191) The play is
unique in its application of the Communist ideology to the rising. Moreover, the
application of the dialogic mode to the process of representation brings in a continuous
debate between different opinions and ideologies, thereby making it instrumental in the
study of representations of 1857. Various characters introduce various subtleties and
viewpoints, such as the dancer Waziran who claims that the Uprising is not completely a
men’s affair, as she tells Nawab Ali, the sowar “…you think this war is your personal
affair? Peasants, weavers, fishermen, blacksmiths – all have joined the war along with
their wives.” (Dutt, 183) Beginning with the rising of the sepoys, it enables the text to
accommodate various angles of the Uprising as the scene of action shifts from the
battlefield to the Mughal court and the various camps.
In *Ghalib – The Man, The Times*, Pavan K. Varma puts forth in the form of a biography the anguish of a man who lived through the revolt of 1857, only to reminisce the memories of the fond friends who were all killed when the city was recaptured and was compelled to write a pro-British text like *Dastambu* to keep himself alive in the changed circumstances. Varma, however, adds in defense of Ghalib – “People with much less at stake had made the compromise with the inevitable. It would be unfair, therefore, to judge him in hindsight, against the inflexible criterion of modern patriotism.” (Varma, 222) The book brings in a different angle in the detailed description of the day to day events of Delhi during the Uprising and the reactions of one of the most creative minds of 19th century India towards the same – emotionally charged by the continuous violence, bloodshed and sense of loss, but at the same time practical enough to survive the altered circumstances. It, therefore, acts as a significant supplement which enables one to fathom Ghalib’s depiction of the Uprising in *Dastambu*.

The texts of the 21st century based on the Uprising of 1857, once again show a distinct shift in the narrative viewpoint from those of the earlier century. With the gradual dissolution of the cartographic boundaries and the emergence of a strong global diaspora, the nationalist dimension of the Uprising of 1857 stands to be re-inspected by various authors and scholars in their re-reading of the event, which now vacillate between two extremes. The focus now seems to have shifted from direct emphasis on the nationalist nature of the Uprising of 1857 to a glorification of the Uprising through hero-worship. Individuals become important and the tendency to locate the seeds of heroism in the day to day lives of the individuals which finally led them to sacrifice their lives for their
nation predominates. Such glorification of individual heroism and through it the
celebration of the individual’s choice of national pride and respect as more important
than one’s own existence, may be read as complementary to the socio-political need of
ideologically consolidating the roots of one of the largest successful democracies of the
world in the common people on whom it depends for its sustenance, as it came to
complete fifty years of political independence. However, though the thrust is on the
depiction of the patriotic sentiment of the individual, more often than not, these
representations describe in great detail the violence and bloodshed on both sides, thereby
accommodating an objective view of the course of events and creating a civilizational
bridge of basic humanity across the two completely different cultures being reflected,
probably to comply with the contemporary neo-colonial state of affairs and also to cater
to a trans-national readership.

It would also be worthwhile to observe that in the process of re-exploring the lives of the
martyrs for signs of heroism lies the urge to convince the people that their heroic deeds
were not the result of any circumstantial impulse or compulsion but an inherent part of
their character, right from the beginning, as in the case of Rani Lakshmibai, and more
recently, Mangal Pandey. In *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen observes that “…the
unquestioning acceptance of a social identity may not always have traditionalist
implications. It can also involve a radical reorientation in identity which could then be
sold as a piece of alleged “discovery” without reasoned choice.” (Sen, 09) This kind of
probe, however, dislocates the heroes of history from subjects to objects of
narrativization, which is, nevertheless, an integral part of the process of iconization.
William Dalrymple’s *The Last Mughal* examines, as stated on the front cover, “the fall of a dynasty. Delhi. 1857” and in doing so, gradually obliterates the existence of Bahadur Shah Zafar – the poet and the individual, the sensitive and creative human being who was used to regular insults in the form of restricted allowances by the alien government while bearing the burden of the royal crown, and at the age of 82, was compelled by the circumstances to submit to the will of the rebel sepoys, who much like the British, were interested in the royal seal and crown and not the individual. Dalrymple’s view of Zafar as only the last Mughal miniaturizes the existence of a journey which began in the royal chambers of one of the mightiest empires of India and ended in exile in an alien land, unknown and unattended. Read side by side with Pramod K Nayar’s *The Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar* the book reveals the portrait of an individual born to suffer helplessly the impact of pre-destined roles and images.

Rani Lakshmibai, however, seems to be the favorite subject for this kind of portrayal. Fictional works of various kinds in English have been alluding to her, directly or indirectly, right from the very beginning, probably more so, because being a warrior woman has always aroused the curiosity and interest of English authors and readers alike in the Oriental queen who took up the sword and preferred the dangerous battlefield to the serenity of the palace. A reference of this kind is found in *The Nightrunners of Bengal* as mentioned before. At the turn of the century, Rani Lakshmibai emerges as an icon all the more important as a dutiful queen, a dedicated wife and a courageous mother fighting for the right of her adopted son – a woman who took up a challenge against the East India
Company in order to save the dignity of her marital kingdom and the rights of her adopted son Damodar Rao against Dalhousie’s Doctrine of Lapse, especially in the context of a country where the nation is itself conceived as ‘mother’.

Two recent representations of the life of Rani Lakshmibai include Jaishree Misra’s *Rani* and Tapti Roy’s *Raj of the Rani*. While Misra explores the Rani’s life in the form of a historical novel between shifting time frames of past, present and future – the present being the post-Uprising period in England where Robert Ellis reads about the deeds of Rani Lakshmibai, Roy presents a detailed biographical account of the life of the Rani based on a comprehensive study of various regional and linguistic records. The difference between the two perspectives is indeed interesting.

Misra’s book excels in her attempt to read into a woman’s life, mystified historically, but never looked upon as a human individual, a 19th century woman with her own dreams and desires. It narrates the story of “…a girl who was to become queen and a young British officer destined to wrest her land from her. A land they had both grown to love and would both come to lose.” (Misra 05), and attains the climax of deviation from the normal trend of representation of the Rani of Jhansi in voicing the thoughts of the newly widowed queen as “…she told herself that she had no reason at all to feel guilty in enjoying the pleasure of a man’s admiring glance” and further, “she was determined not to feel guilty, having instructed herself many times since her husband’s funeral to take the meagre delights that may now come to her, newly freed of the shackles that had been cast on her by matrimony and by Gangadhar’s illness” (Misra 208, 216). Such
observations add to the significance of the text, especially from the point of view of gender studies – a comparatively recent approach in the study of literature, worldwide.

Roy's observations, on the other hand, maintain parity with the biographical accounts of Rani Lakshmibai’s life available so far from various resources. In the Preface to *Raj of the Rani*, she writes “Lakshmibai died because her personality was too large for the contemporary British officials to contend with and trust. She became the victim of the very indomitable spirit that made her immortal” (Roy, xix). Her narrative moves around the various legends related to the life of Manu as she grew up to assume the role of Rani Lakshmibai, provides a detailed picture of the socio-political condition of Jhansi during the rule of Gangadhar Rao and traces the development of Manu into a responsible wife and queen as she proceeds to take upon herself the responsibility to save Jhansi from the final British take-over after the death of her husband and son.

If experience is read as text and opinion as critical analysis, then 'acculturation' remains not just a process, but rather, a rigorous textual training of the subject, depending upon the subject-position where s/he is located by virtue of birth and growth, thereby giving rise to a mindset, which is the critical apparatus of the individual, a few angles of which are historically imbibed and operate almost through reflex depending upon this collective sense of history. As a result of sustained glorification, the revolt of 1857 has now come to form an integral part of the consciousness of Indianness, where almost the entire population looks upon this historical event as the 'First War of Indian Independence'. Since few people take interest in reading historical fiction and even fewer venture into the
realms of history/historiography for forming their opinions, it is therefore important to study side by side with the representation of 1857 in various literary genres, the representation of 1857 in popular culture, i.e. films.

The next film to hit the screen on this subject was Satyajit Ray's Shatranj Ke Khiladi (1977). This film, depicting in two parallel narratives the story of two chess-playing Jagirdars and Dalhousie's take-over of Awadh, brought in subtly a touch of the nationalist sentiment in its depiction of the latter, though the historicity of the storyline in depicting the normal everyday life of the inhabitants of Awadh and the Jagirdars as deeply absorbed in the game of chess at a time of such great crisis, has remained a matter of controversy. Ray, however, takes the creative license of a director in bringing in and connecting the annexation of Oudh as a thread parallel to the story of the Jagirdars, unlike the actual novel by Munshi Premchand, on which the film claims to be based. When read against the backdrop of the Uprising which it represents and the Indian audience it catered to after its release especially during the emergency, this creative dimension opens up interesting areas of exploration.

Shyam Benegal’s Junoon (1979), on the other hand, portrays the subjective sufferings on both sides – Indian, as well as, English, against the backdrop of 1857. Naseeruddin Shah, who plays Sarfaraz in the film, voices the actual historical background as a sepoy directly involved in the uprising. Resistance, in this film, is probably for the first time, seen to be operative on both the sides – in Mariam’s refusal of Javed Khan’s proposal to marry her daughter Ruth even under such adverse circumstances, as well as Javed Khan’s
refusal to join the Uprising entirely despite repeated rebukes from Sarfaraaz. The issue is further problematized by using the ‘pigeon’ motif repeatedly. Amidst the historicized context of the Uprising of 1857, Junoon attempts a humanization of the racial identities by narrating a story of human forbearance across the binaries of nationality and colour.

Ketan Mehta’s Mangal Pandey: The Rising, however, has a different story to tell. Based on the life of the courageous sepoy Mangal Pandey who first raised his voice against the British, this film breathes into history commercial necessities of 21st century mainstream Bollywood cinema and blends the two into a charismatic totality of the first Nationalist Movement. The uniqueness of Ketan Mehta’s film lies in the way in which it portrays the participation and involvement of the loka or the common people in the revolt of 1857, as they eulogize the life of Mangal Pandey amidst their day to day activities, punning on the word Mangal which signifies not just the heroic sepoy but also the auspicious awakening of the consciousness of the masses and thereby declares the dawn of the first war of Indian independence.

Another rather interesting instance in this context is the Assamese film entitled Maniram Dewan by Sarbeswar Chakraborty which received the Presidential Silver award in 1963. The film is based on the life of Maniram Dewan who is said to be the first martyr in the first war of Indian independence from Assam, which was then a part of undivided Bengal. However, unlike the other martyrs of 1857, Maniram Dewan has remained largely regionalized and unexplored.
In the Indian context, *Amar Chitra Katha*, the popular illustrated classic meant for familiarizing children with the diverse historical background of India constitutes yet another important medium of representation with regards to the revolt of 1857. Dealing with multiple topics ranging from the Vedas to the freedom fighters and visionaries of India, it forms a bulk of popular children’s literature quite characteristically encouraging hero worship and is rendered all the more significant in the study of representations of the revolt of 1857 due to the illustrations which continue to leave a lasting impact on the minds of the children over generations. With reference to 1857, important issues of *Amar Chitra Katha* include two titles, namely – *Rani of Jhansi* and *Mangal Pandey*.

On a detailed study one may find that in these representations, simplified for the benefit of the young readers, there are various deviations from recorded history. For instance, in *Jhansi ki Rani*, when the English seek shelter from Lakshmibai within the fort of Jhansi, she refuses to help them. However, later documentations of the history of Jhansi reveal that Rani Lakshmibai did grant refuge to the English, especially the women and children during the Uprising until she was compelled to give them up for the security of her own state at the insistence of the rebel sepoys who had reached Jhansi on their way to Delhi. Similarly, Rani’s decision to fight for Jhansi is linked up with the Uprising of the sepoys at Meerut as a gesture of solidarity. Historical record, however, shows that Lakshmibai was till the very end expecting the British officials to understand the situation of Jhansi and thereby, grant the rights of the ruler to her soon, Damodar Rao, and that is the very reason why she chose to give shelter to the Englishmen and women during the rebellion,
i.e. in order to strengthen the reputation of Jhansi and renew the links it had had with the East India Company during the reign of her husband, Gangadhar Rao.

The idea, however, is not to nullify the significance of the Uprising, because though spreading over a huge geographical area and fired by different regional issues in each place be it Kanpur, Lucknow, Delhi or Jhansi, and though taking place before the people of India could recognize it as a unified nation, the uprising cannot be dismissed as a series of completely scattered regional outbursts either. While it is true that the sense of an integrated India had not emerged amongst the common people as yet, at the same time this is also true that a sense of a common identity among the states cannot be ruled out completely since the British had been administering the various states as a single unit from its capital in Calcutta since 1772. While the sepoys and local rulers in various states had different agendas on their list, their primary motive was the same, i.e. to attain freedom from foreign rule, and this was perhaps the first time in the history of India that people from various regions were heading towards Delhi and identifying the Mughal emperor as the common alternative for the British rule.

However, an element of what Noam Chomsky calls “engineering consent” can also be seen in the repeated use of the uprising of 1857 as a part of the nationalist agenda, even 150 years down the lane, especially when the representations of the event conceal and highlight selective areas of history in their attempt to universalize the impact of the regional into the collective conscious of the national (Chomsky, 53). Time yields perspectives. When these texts are arranged against the background of the socio-cultural
and political milieu of India in its journey post-independence – i.e., the birth of the nation, the consolidation of nationalistic feelings, the need for a national identity and the development of a sense of Indianess in the context of the 21st century diaspora springing from a particular event of Nationalist history – they reveal a different totality and enable one to understand the reason and dynamics behind the changing representations of the events of 1857, thereby justifying the need to celebrate 150 years of the ‘First War of Indian Independence’.

Notes:

1. Derived from the common Mughal term *durbar*, Delhi Durbar meant the court of Delhi and referred to the mass assembly at the Coronation Park, Delhi to commemorate the coronation of a King and Queen of UK. It was attended by George V in 1911.

2. The poem was first published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), and the footnote was added by Rossetti in 1875.

3. The first photographic societies were established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras in the 1850s.

4. “The great pile of bodies had been decently covered over before the photographer could take them, but he insisted on having them uncovered to be photographed before they were finally disposed of (Pinney 128) – *The Coming of Photography in India*. 

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