Chapter V

Conclusion

From times immemorial, people round the globe have entertained, educated and informed new generations with insights from the past, which gradually assumed authenticity as true versions of facts that once took place in some part of the world. The discourse of history grew as travel and expeditions started. Travel narratives often described the kinds of people and places they visited, and often embellished them in such a way that they fed the desire of their readers for the exotic and the strange. The narrators often assumed superiority over the narrated people in terms of culture, religion, education and sophistication. The idea of cultural relativism which denounces comparison of cultures was unknown to them.

With the proper formation of colonies, travel narratives altered their tone and they assumed a certain authority over the spaces and people they narrated. The colonizers projected their culture as superior to that of the colonized, and the latter had to succumb to the views of the colonial masters due to various reasons. Gradually, Orientalism- the practice of othering the Oriental people, looking down upon their practices, religions, culture, education, literatures, ideas – grew up in the Western world. It had its reflection on the Oriental elite as well. Instead of privileging all that was
characteristic of their national tradition, they ascribed more value to Western education, culture, religion, literature and customs which in a way boosted the colonial project of exoticizing the culture of the colonized.

History has been noted as nothing but the stories people tell to keep themselves in power. Colonial histories prove this dictum. Most of the colonial historiographers purposefully underrated and devalued the experiences and practices of the colonized. There but also existed descriptive, neutral narratives of colonial histories. But the Orientalist attitude of colonial historiographers only promoted colonial exploitation. The colonized felt inferior to the Europeans in many respects since the West was represented in such terms to the colonized, and the culture of the colonized (if at all they were admitted to have one) was portrayed to be one infested with all kinds of crudity and barbarism. Colonial historiography was not a one sided portrayal of the Orient as crude and barbaric alone but also relied on the simultaneous bringing up of its Western counterpart as the ideal and most sophisticated one. The writings of Max Muller, William Jones, Macaulay and other Orientalists back up this perspective.

One who narrates history is expected to have knowledge of history, and his narrative becomes a version. The knowledge supposedly claimed by the narrator invests the narrator with a certain power that enables him to wield authority over the people whose history is narrated. Here, the authority of the narrator derives from the knowledge s/he supposedly possesses and
expresses through the narrative. So, it is apt to say that one who narrates history has power, as s/he can include, exclude or embellish the elements that are subjected to narration.

The realization that history-making could be used as a tool for capturing power is powerful enough to motivate one without power for attaining it. Just as the Orientalists maneuvered the history of the colonized to suit their own purposes, the postcolonial literary diaspora have resorted to the same discourse for the attainment of power. Their histories are fictions just like those of the Orientalists, and serve like parallel and alternative histories, in a way invalidating the legitimacy and ‘truthfulness’ of the colonial histories in a postcolonial fashion. Besides, the diasporic concern for history and historical form of narration is in tune with postcoloniality’s penchant for restructuring colonial versions of history. A major concern of postcolonial theory is to revisit, rewrite and regain the history of their nation which colonial projects drastically disfigured and dismantled through misrepresentation.

The majority of the diasporic writers of India since the eighties and nineties sets up a contrast to the writers of the preceding times. The former evinces a cosmopolitan attitude towards their own identity, history, language, culture, values, practices and beliefs. They do not suffer from the pangs of being left in an ‘interstitial space’, or in a ‘no man’s land’ as acutely as the diaspora of the past did. On the contrary, there are many advantages
in positioning oneself on the periphery. Writers like Rushdie, Tharoor and Vikram Seth belong to that group of cosmopolitans, and their themes and concerns are influenced by postmodernity.

In the postmodern times, it is quite clear that history is not an objective account of past events. Instead, history has been conceived of as a narrative discourse which is highly subjective. Every historical narrative has an ideology that operates behind it, and it is that particular ideology that is instrumental in generating such versions of history. As a result, the possibility of a history which is completely truthful and objective is no more entertainable.

The cosmopolitan diasporic writers like Rushdie, Taroor and Seth in the effort to assert their identities in the national space of India are also engaged in ‘writing back’ to the empire and imperial constructions of history through their fictions. Although the fictions of history by the diasporic writers of India in the post independence era have certainly been in the limelight for the past many years, discussions of diasporic identity often are enmeshed in shallow sentimentality and obsessive engagement with nostalgia. Nostalgia is a byproduct of the recognition conferred upon memory of past experiences and values. Values definitely undergo alterations in the course of time, and those who succeed in confronting them constructively gain power, whereas those who obsessively cling on to the past and its values fail in catching up with the rest of society. The postmodern cosmopolitan
diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Vikram Seth have cut open new pathways in countering the literature of nostalgia and territorial obsessions. Their writings are in tune with the postmodern sensibility, and their fictions are characterized by the techniques postmodernism affords.

Another significant thing is that the diasporic cosmopolitan writers of India have used English language for the narration of their personal versions of Indian history. English being the language that has been inherited from the British who colonized India for centuries, the legitimacy regarding the use of their language for the fictional reconstruction of Indian history ought to face questioning. English language is spoken only by less than five percent of the people of India, but English plays a central role in the administrative machinery of the state. Ability to use the language effectively aids one to mount the social ladder. Besides, when one appropriates a language that was formerly used by the colonial powers for the subjectification of the colonized people, it becomes a writing back. It can be said that the use of English language by the postcolonial diasporic cosmopolitan writers supplements the postcolonial project of ‘writing back to the empire’.

The contemporary diasporic writers bring to light the fact that the definition and characteristics of diasporas provided by Khachig Tololyan are hardly sufficient to address them. The advancements in the field of science and technology have bridged the gap that had been there between countries
and cultures, to a great extent. Geopolitical boundaries that earlier separated people to a large extent have become ineffective in the age of internet assisted live video chat, video phones, and other telecommunication facilities. In fact, people even can virtually cater to the physical needs of a person who physically exists in another country today. Therefore, the contexts that fashioned nationalist sentiments and provincialism have largely disappeared in the postmodern period.

The concern for territories also has become less significant except in terms of defense. Colonization was a territorial project, whereas postcolonial theory has virtually lost its insistence on territory. Deterritorialization projects have to be reckoned in terms of a psychological dimension and not on a territorial plane alone. The diasporic writers have been spatially displaced, but it has its advantages as well. Not all diasporas are the result of coercive ouster. Some people deliberately court displacement for the sheer need of financial advancement and power. Edward Said and various Indian diasporic writers have confessed both about the advantages as well as disadvantages of exile.

The search for roots has become less fashionable for the cosmopolitan diaspora. Rather than going in search for roots, they are oriented towards the future. Their searches for roots have strayed into a new dimension, that of creating fictional roots rather than actual roots. It is this creation of fictional roots that have materialized into the making of fictional histories as far as
the diasporic cosmopolitan writers are concerned. Roots being essential element in the construction of identity, these writers fashion fictional national histories and provide themselves with an unavoidable niche in that history, either by assigning themselves a slot in such histories, or by assuming the power for constructing such a history. By both ways, they attain power.

Nostalgia has turned out to be a characteristic of the past. The displacement experienced by the diasporic writers of the contemporary times has become a cause for celebration. That is why Rushdie and other prominent diasporic writers can be seen to celebrate their migrancy. Besides, if the diasporic writers return to their homeland, or continue to stay abroad, the reason behind their decision often is power. Acceptance, material wellbeing, and recognition as intellectuals are the motivating factors for their return or stay. Nationalism and nostalgia have been commoditized by the diaspora. Since the sense of nostalgia itself has become a nostalgia for the postmodern people, the diasporic writers have found a good market for it in fictional histories.

Another reason for the diasporic reconstruction of histories is the opportunity it offers for construction of identity. It is imperative for everyone to have a history, and that is what the postcolonial diasporic cosmopolitans attempt to construct through their fictions. Rushdie, Tharoor and Seth have constructed personal national histories, and have thereby constructed
national identities for themselves. It is also significant that such history making practices accommodate a contradiction that is there between cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

The diasporic histories can be better understood if the principles of New Historicism are employed in their analyses. Every historical moment is informed by the ‘episteme’ generated by that particular era, and its products also will be a reflection of that particular episteme. The inescapability of literature to break free from the concerns of the time of their production can be understood once the literary as well as non literary works of that period are analyzed. Postmodernity rejects all sorts of ‘grand narratives’, all homogenous histories. Histories are being rewritten, revised and reconstructed according to changing perceptions and political positions of the narrators.

Memory is a ‘grand narrative’ the loss of which modernism lamented. But postmodernism celebrates the veiling of memory by fantasy and magic realism. Postmodern literature is characterized by self conscious narrators, language games, Intertextuality, magic realism and so on. Realism has been left out since reality itself has been realized to be purely textual. Postmodern techniques inform the novels of the cosmopolitan Indian diaspora. Rushdie, Tharoor and Seth have produced their literature in the postmodernism times, and ipso facto, cannot escape its influences.
History therefore is ‘his story’ as well as ‘history’. People tell such stories to keep themselves in power. The postmodern, postcolonial diasporic cosmopolitan writers of India have employed more or less the same strategies that the colonial historiographers used for their historical narratives. The times have changed, and so have the methods. History making is an incessant process. No version of history is final. Every version accommodates elements that call for newer versions and hence the construction of fictional (hi)stories by the cosmopolitan literary diaspora.