The Stories People Tell: Reading (Hi)Stories Of The Indian Diaspora

Abstract

Introduction

It was Bernard Bergonzi who first labelled the trend in fiction writing in 1970’s which focused on history as ‘fictions of history’. Writing of History is now recognized as an incessant process which can be manipulated in terms of the politics of the speaking voice and the shifts in perspectives defined by socio-cultural milieus. The fictionality of history and the historicity of fiction are much discussed today. Salman Rushde’s *Midnights Children* (1981) Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), and Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* (1993) set examples for the fictionalization of history. They put on trial the authenticity of canonical histories. The contesting parallel histories endorse the Foucauldian notion that power is ‘exercised’ and not ‘possessed’. Just as ‘erasure’ in the Derridaen scheme reveals ‘traces’ of ‘signified(s)’, which assert the existence of a figure, competing histories succeed only in bringing out the constructedness of histories, each version of history being an erasure of the contested version, which in turn is also an assertion of the traces of history the contested text accommodates. These three expatriate writers with their conspicuous cosmopolitan whereabouts parodically revive histories which contribute to the corpus of historiographic metafiction, a genre which exhibits various attributes of postmodernism as Mark Currie and Linda Hutcheon point out.
Some of the colonial historiographers attempted to legitimize the colonial interventions as redemptive and civilizing, whereas a few remained indifferent to the imperialist motives of the colonizers. However it is found that colonization has served as a springboard for the launching of new histories. The exuberance of alternative histories with their contrasting and even comical versions necessitates the employment of their dialogic potential for a marked visibility.

Investigation of the strategies employed by imperialism for the construction of colonial histories could be facilitated by the use of the tools of New Historicism as New Historicism is concerned with the way ‘discursive practices’ operate in society. Such a reading of fictions of history would also clarify that they are characterized by certain features of postmodernism.

**Objectives of the Study**

1. To investigate how postcolonial theory puts colonial histories in perspective and to bring out the politics and strategies that operated in colonial historiography.

2. To explore the relevance of geographical territories and the sense of nostalgia in the construction of identity among the post-independence cosmopolitan diasporic writers of India.

3. To explore how the chosen Indian diasporic writers, viz, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Vikram Seth employ post-independence Indian history in their chosen works for the construction of personal and alternative fictions of history.
4. To trace the postmodern features in the (hi)stories of the diaspora and analyze the chosen works in the light of the principles of New Historicism.

Hypothesis

Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Shashi Tharoor- three expatriate Indian writers- employ the post-independence history of India for the narration of their personal stories. Their attitude to the colonial history of India is ambivalent as they use similar techniques and tools employed by the colonial historiographers for the narration of their tales. They often adhere to the official versions of history and also depart liberally from them. Their fictions of history evince a sensibility unique to the diaspora heavily coloured by globalization, neo-colonialism and postmodernism. Rather than nostalgia and nationalism they privilege cosmopolitanism and internationalism.

Relevance of the study

Discussions on diasporas are often enmeshed in shallow sentimentality and excessive sense of nationalist sentiment. The present study aims to diverge from this beaten track. (Hi)stories of the diaspora engage in challenging the canonical versions of history. After independence there has been an unprecedented growth in ‘history industry’, and writers have been exploring history from diverse vantage points. Rather than sticking to nationalist politics alone, they also negotiate issues of power, gender, allegiances, language, and modes of narration and representation which call for thorough investigation. The writers selected for study have made
remarkable contribution to the genre of fictions of history, and the plurality of the issues their works address is exacting. The strategies of the colonial historiographers are used also by the diasporic writers for the construction of parallel (hi)stories.

**Methodology**

Earlier researches in the field of historiographic metafictions and studies about the works of the chosen authors have informed the study. Works on the writers selected, interviews and speeches both published and telecast, articles from the internet etc. have constituted the material for the study. The politics and strategies behind the making of colonial histories were discussed through an intense analysis of a representative chunk of postcolonial theory. This has served as an introduction to the subsequent studies and findings. The chosen fictions of history have been read in postcolonial and New Historicist perspectives, bringing out the tropes from history, the problems and politics of language and representation and the impact of the programmatic fictionalization of historic events. Reading colonial histories along with the novels have brought out the degree to which these texts adhere to and differ from the colonial versions of history. An analysis of this kind has also brought to light the various features of postmodernism these texts share.

**Chapter 1**

Storytelling has been an integral part in the development of cultures round the world. 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 records of facts that once took place in some part of the world. These stories evolve from the desire of people to attach themselves to a tradition, culture or nationality, and they gradually become symbolic gestures in the acquisition of power. Stories could be manipulated by their narrators, and it is evident in the manner in which the colonizers narrated (hi)stories of the Orient which facilitated projects of colonization. The discourse of history developed as travel and expeditions started. Travel narrators often described the kinds of people and places they visited, and often embellished their stories in such a way that they fed the desire of the readers for the exotic and the strange. The narrators often assumed superiority over the narrated people in terms of cultural sophistication. The notion of cultural relativism which denounces the practice of comparing cultures was not in vogue. History is no more considered a truthful and disinterested record of the past. Instead, historiography is a powerful weapon to legitimate, normalize and justify the positions assumed by powerful agents in all social phenomena. The post-independence cosmopolitan diasporic writers from India have used fiction as a medium to rewrite history in such a way that it provides them with a sense of identity and belongingness and hence power. The narrative tactics formerly used by the colonial powers in asserting power over the people of the Orient have been taken up by the diasporic writers for their personal ends. They construct alternative and parallel histories against the
canonical histories and thereby reveal that all history is fiction. Their (hi)stories afford them a niche in history, as history is a narrative.

Chapter II

With the proper establishment of colonies, the tone of travel narratives altered, 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 invariably to the views of the colonial masters. Gradually, Orientalism- the practice of ‘othering’ the people of the East, looking down upon their practices, religions, culture, education, literatures, and ideas – grew up in the Western world. It had its influence 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.

As Paul Hamilton notes, 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 deliberately underrated and devalued the experiences and practices of the colonized. But there also existed descriptive, comparatively neutral narratives of colonial histories. But the Orientalist attitude of colonial historiographers largely promoted and justified 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 as one infested with all kinds of crudities and barbarism. Colonial historiography was not a one sided portrayal of the Orient as crude and barbaric alone but also relied on the simultaneous invocation of its Western counterpart as the ideal and the most sophisticated one. The writings of Max Muller, William Jones, Macaulay and other Orientalists backed up this perspective.

The narrator's knowledge of history invests him/her with a certain power that enables him to wield authority over the people whose history he is narrating. But all narratives are versions, and the narrator's power enables him to include, exclude or embellish the elements that are subjected to narration.

The realization that history-writing could be used as a tool for empowerment is strong enough to motivate one without power to attain it. Just as the Orientalists manipulated 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 (hi)stories, in a way invalidating the legitimacy and 'truthfulness' of the colonial histories in a postcolonial manner. Besides, the diasporic concern for history and historical form of narration is in tune with postcolonialism’s penchant for restructuring colonial versions of history. A major concern of postcolonial theory is to revisit, rewrite and regain the history of
nations which colonial projects drastically disfigured and dismantled through misrepresentation.

Chapter III

Majority of the diasporic writers of India since the eighties and nineties set up a marked contrast with their predecessors. The former evince 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.

The cosmopolitan diasporic writers like Rushdie, Tharoor 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 are often 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 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.

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 their concerns. The advancements in the field of science and technology have bridged the gap that had existed among countries and cultures, to a great extent. Geopolitical boundaries that earlier separated people have become ineffective to a large extent in the age of internet assisted live video chat, videophones and other telecommunication facilities. In fact, people can even virtually cater to the physical needs of a person who exists in another country today. Therefore, the contexts that fashioned nationalist sentiments and provincialism have largely diminished 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. Decolonization 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 this displacement has its advantages as well. Not all diasporas have been created by coercive ouster. Some people deliberately court displacement for the sheer need of financial advancement
and power. Edward Said and various Indian diasporic writers have discussed both
the advantages as well as the 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 search for roots has 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. History being essential in the construction of
identity, these writers fashion fictional national histories and etch for themselves
certain niches, either by assigning themselves a slot in such histories, or by
assuming the power for constructing them. 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 celebrating their migrancy. Besides, if the diasporic writers return to their
homeland, or continue to stay abroad, the reason behind their decision is often
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 the 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-writing practices also accommodate a contradiction between cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

Chapter IV

The diasporic histories can be better understood if the principles of New Historicism are employed in their analysis. Every historical moment is informed by the ‘epistemes’ generated by that particular era, and its products also will reflect that particular episteme. The inability of literature to break free from the concerns of the time of their production can be understood once the literary as well as the 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 the changing perceptions and political positions of the narrators.

Another significant thing is that the diasporic cosmopolitan writers of India have used English language for the narration of their personal (hi)stories. English being the language inherited from the British who colonized India for centuries, the legitimacy of the use of English for the fictional reconstruction of Indian history
ought to be interrogated. English is spoken by less than five percent of the people of India, but the language plays a central role in the administrative machinery of the state. Ability to use the language effectively aids one to climb 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 selection of English language is also determined by the global market. Texts have commodity value and they would enjoy a better market if they are in English.

Memory is a ‘grand narrative’ the loss of which modernism lamented. But postmodernism celebrates the veiling of memory by fantasy and magical realism. Postmodern literature is characterized by self conscious narrators, language games, intertextuality and magical realism. 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.

Conclusion

(Hi)story therefore is ‘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 once 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 continuing emergence of fictional (hi)stories by the cosmopolitan literary diaspora.
Select Bibliography


Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in


