Chapter 1

Introduction: Rewriting History

Fiction is woven into all... I find this new reality more valid.

(John Fowles, The French Lieutenant’s Woman 86)

The word *history* has its origin in the Greek ηιστορια (historia), from the Proto-Indo-European wid-tor-, from the root weid ‘to know, to see’¹. This root is also present in the English words *wit, wise, wisdom, vision, and idea*, in the Sanskrit word *veda* and in the Slavic word *videti* and *vedati*.

The Ancient Greek word ηιστορια, historia, means “inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation”. It was in that sense that Aristotle used the word *Historia Animalium*. The term is derived from ηιστορ, hístör meaning wise man, witness, or judge. The form histořen ‘to inquire’, is an Ionic derivation, which spread first in Classical Greece and ultimately over all of Hellenistic civilization.

It was still in the Greek sense that Francis Bacon used the term in the late 16th century, when he wrote about “Natural History”. For him, historia was the knowledge of objects determined by space and time, that sort of knowledge provided by memory. The word entered the English language in
1390 with the meaning of “relation of incidents, story”. In Middle English, its meaning was “story” in general. The restriction to the meaning to “record of past events” occurred in the late 15th century. In German, French, and most Germanic and Romance languages, the same word is still used to mean both “history” and “story”. The adjectival expression “historical” is attested to from 1661, and “historic” from 1669. “Historian” in the sense of a “researcher of history” has been in use since 1531.

‘History’ has always been central to discourses concerning people and society. It had been widely apprehended as a claim of knowledge even in the so called ‘prehistoric’ times when knowledge was disseminated through oral narratives or folk art forms, though not under the rubric of ‘history’. History figured as an important adjunct of philosophy, the earliest known provenance of all epistemological categories. For the prehistoric people, all knowledge derived from history, because there was nothing else that could be depended upon for the validation of their claims but their lived experiences recollected from the past. Since philosophy has its basis in life experience, records of the past were the greatest proofs for the validation of claims regarding right and wrong. History retained its elevated status in the course of time when philosophy split up into multifarious disciplines and discourses.

Each individual constructs concepts of identity and selfhood in relation to the history into which one is born or that which one fabricates. To have a history is a matter of pride for most people, wherever they are. People also
look down upon those who do not have, or do not claim to have a history. In the Bible, detailed descriptions of the genealogies of the ‘chosen’ people are found, in the attempt to endow them with concrete identities. The gospel of St. Matthew commences with the ancestry of Jesus, and locates him in the line of Abraham who is revered by the Jewish community. It is thereby hoped that the respect conferred on Abraham would also pass on to Jesus as he is a descendant of Abraham. It is a fact that even the seemingly apolitical act of giving a self introduction is firmly rooted in notions of history. For, when one speaks of oneself, one has to locate oneself in space and time which are the most vital ingredients of history. Stuart Sim claims that “history is the equivalent of humankind’s memory” (Derrida and the End of History 3).

Gyanendra Pandey addresses history as “a sign of self consciousness” (Remembering partition 7). It could also be argued that history is a byproduct of self consciousness. In the Book of Genesis in the Bible, Adam constructs a history for himself for the first time when God asks him where he is, after he had eaten of the fruit of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden². In that specific instant he reminisces about his own existence and of the things that had happened in his life. He becomes ashamed and self conscious. He realizes his ‘nakedness’. The historian Arthur Marwick says:

[I]t is only through knowledge of its history that a society can have knowledge of itself. As a man without memory and self knowledge is a man adrift, so a society without memory (or more correctly,
without recollection) and self knowledge would be a society adrift\(^3\) (ibid 3).

The pride people take in their family names and heritage is sufficient proof to validate the importance bestowed upon history in the workaday world. The institution of British Monarchy which has no role in the actual administrative mechanism of the country only extends an icon from history which caters to the pride of the British people.

The perennial link between history and fiction would be conspicuous if one examines the development of the genre of fiction and the discourse of history over the centuries. Tej. N. Dhar says:

> Novelists used history in the initial stages as a protective cover for legitimizing their imaginative constructions, and later as material for weaving fictions. But after two centuries of mutual interaction and learning the form and content of each other, the rise of positivistic historiography turned them into dichotomous entities, history dealing with actual things and the novel with the invented. Though this schism was aggravated by historical formalism, gradually the novel became history’s duplicitous competitor due to the similarity in the nature and mode of their representational procedures”\(^4\) (“Entering History” 125).
However, it is undeniable that both history and fiction share a common ground in many respects.

It is often obfuscated that history can never be an objective, impersonal account of the past. History can be viewed as a strategic location manufactured for the construction of identity, as nothing has any significance in a historical vacuum. An entity, when it assumes/accepts a name, inscribes itself in history because even a name has political insinuations. Nothing can be understood or thought about without a relation to history. As meaning is a historical and linguistic construct, anything and everything has a historical significance. So, construction of a history becomes imperative for manufacturing and maintaining an identity.

It should not be overlooked that every re-presentation of the past has certain ideological implications. Frank Kermode says that we can “no longer assume that we have the capacity to make value-free statements about history, or suppose that there is some special dispensation whereby the signs that constitute an historical text have reference to events in the world” (The Genesis of Secrecy 108). No phenomenon is free from value judgment, and everything is coloured by one ideology or other. G. N. Devy states that “history is ideally speaking, an interrelationship between facts and narratives, between the course of history and the discourse of history” (Of Many Heroes’ 157). Nothing becomes a fact unless someone makes a statement about it. Facts are not prearranged but are made by people. And,
if facts are made by people, they can also be reconstituted or redefined. This is the logic that is central to projects of revision and rewriting of history.

Plato held history as the highest form of knowledge. Literature was considered to be radically at loggerheads with history. This traditional view of history as a compilation of facts which is accurately verifiable and re-presentable is put on trial by post-structural thinkers as well as narratologists. Narrative history can rightly be said to belong to the category of ‘grand narratives’ or ‘metanarratives’ as Jean Franco Lyotard points out5. Derrida’s criticizes Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the ‘end of history’6 which points toward the loss of privilege of the discourse of history as a comprehensive genre which is unable to put in perspective the evolution of societies in terms of their future. Fukuyama conceives of humanity and the discourse of history as in their final stage of evolution, and posits the present state of affairs as a dead end. Fukuyama’s thesis on history is in a way a rejection of the foundations of history itself, as for him history can no more re-present beyond the present. Liberal democracy is the one end to which the world was striving to, and it has been reached, and “the ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved upon” (The End of History xiii, xi). The provisional nature of all historical narratives has been clarified by Michel Foucault’s exploration of the epistemic shifts over centuries. The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972) however does not reject history but brings to light its provisional nature. Representations cannot but always be provisional as they
have their foundations in cognition which is governed by the episteme of each particular era. Hayden White, before the others, had criticized the idea of transcendental historicity:

[Historians] must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought. It may well be that the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline, to preside over the dissolution of history’s claim to autonomy among the disciplines (Tropics of Discourse 29).

What the contemporary diasporic writers do through their fictional reconstructions of Indian history is the very act of presiding over the ‘dissolution of history’s claim to autonomy’. The ‘history versus literature’ paradigm is no longer taken as valid. Fiction is expected to participate in the truth of history. Fiction and history are not exclusive domains; instead, they are complementary genres. In Ian Watson’s Chekhov’s Journey (1983) we come across the following comment which equates history with fiction:
Past events can be altered. History gets rewritten. Well, we've just found that this applies to the real world too... May be the real history of the world is changing constantly? And why? Because history is a fiction. It's a dream in the mind of humanity, forever striving...towards what? Towards perfection (174).

The comment 'history is a fiction' reveals an important insight. It also points toward the motives of writing literature. It is the writers' urge for 'perfection' that fans the fire of imagination, and subsequently leads to fictional universes. History and fiction meet and merge in their search for 'perfection'.

Myths about the past have always been a fertile ground for the making of literature since the time of oral narratives and folk songs. The elders assumed authority over new generations claiming to know the past, or the myths regarding the past which they historicized through their narratives. Any narrative of history permits the narrator to assert power over listeners or the audience. People of the past were fond of singing the exploits of the mighty warriors, kings and queens which later generations accepted as history. The old English poem Beowulf is in the form of a historical narrative epic. With the formal alterations that literary structures underwent, the manner in which history figured in them also altered in significant ways. Terms like 'historical novel', 'non-fiction novel', 'documentary fiction', fictions
of history’, history as ‘his story’, and ‘herstory’ meaning ‘her story’ with its pronounced feminist tinge, are commonplace today.

Chris Baldick defines historical novel as follows:

A novel in which the action takes place during a specific historical period well before the time of writing (often one or two generations before, sometimes several centuries) and in which some attempt is made to depict accurately the customs and mentality of the period. The central character – real or imagined – is usually subject to divided loyalties within a larger historic conflict of which the readers know the outcome (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms 99).

Baldick states that there is an effort to maintain ‘accuracy’ to history in the historical novel. The definition of historical novel provided in M. H. Abrams’ glossary is not much different from that of Baldick:

The historical novel not only takes its setting and some characters and events from history, but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and narrative. Some of the greatest historical novels also use the protagonists and actions to reveal what the author regards as the deep forces that impel the historical process (A Glossary of Literary Terms 133).
According to Stephen Greenblatt “- - - the traditional historical approach to literature, - - - finds history to lie outside the texts, to function in effect as the object to which signs in the text point” (Representing the English Renaissance viii). The traditional concept of history as a truthful and objective record of past events and happenings is challenged in contemporary times. The very idea of accuracy in any narrative has been put on trial since the advent of post-structuralism and postmodernism. There cannot be any objective, impersonal and homogenous history at all. All histories are constructed through a number of political processes like selection, omission, restructuring and reinterpretation. Fiction is historically conditioned and history is discursively structured. It is not just novelists alone who have employed the techniques of fictional representation in their narratives but historians too. Jaswant Singh’s recent book Jinnah- India- Partition- Independence (2009) puts on trial the blame traditionally ascribed to Jinnah for being instrumental in the partition of India. According to Singh’s view, Nehru and Sardar Vallabhai Pattel are more to blame than Jinnah for the partition of India. The picture of Jinnah presented by Singh is in sharp contrast to the image of the person most of the Indian people traditionally entertained. Singh’s work can be sited as an example for deconstructive restructuring of history.

There are various types of fictions that are built around themes from history. A documentary fiction “incorporates into a novel not only historical
characters and events, but also contemporary journalistic reports”, whereas a nonfiction novel “uses a variety of novelistic techniques to give a graphic rendering of recent characters and happenings, and is based not only on historical records but often on personal interviews with the chief agents” (Abrams 133). Taslima Nasreen’s Lajja (1993) is a docu-fiction focusing on the communal strife between Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992. Shashi Tharoor’s Riot represents an attempt to revive memories of the riot that followed the Babri Masjid/ Ram Janmabhoomi controversy in 1989 in Utter Pradesh. He remarked in a speech to the Carnegie Council, that while writing the novel he had benefited from an actual riot that occurred in 1989, in Khargor in Madhya Pradesh, and he was furnished with all the details of it by his classmate who was the magistrate entrusted with the job of tackling it8. He has also remarked that the plot of Riot unfolded through newspaper clippings, diary entries, interviews, transcripts, journals, scrap books, even poems written by characters- in other words using different voices, different stylistic forms for different fragments of the story9. History is the fuel of the living, impelling them in certain pathways to the future. The experiences of the past play a pivotal role in propelling the course of people’s lives in specific directions. Hence, it turns out to be imperative for those who wish to steer the course of humanity in particular ways to construct histories as it benefits their schemes. It is this truth that Tharoor has furnished in Riot through the
character Ram Charan Gupta who cooks up a biased version of history to flare up communal passions. His speech recorded in Randy Dick’s notebook proves to be highly inflammatory as it offers a history drastically communalized\textsuperscript{10}. It is such biased constructions of history that motivated “Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, an Oxbridge educated Lincoln’s Inn Lawyer, who wore Savile - Row suits, enjoyed his scotch and cigars, ate pork and barely spoke Urdu, and married a non-Muslim”, to solicit a separate space for Muslims (Tharoor, \textit{Riot} 107). But Professor Mohammed Sarwar opts for a history that can allay communal passions\textsuperscript{11}. He is a liberal historian who is turned more towards the future than to fictitious accounts of the past. However, the novel attests to the power of distorted versions of history to control and decide the course of humanity. Tharoor suggests that in India Hindus and Muslims wield “history like a battle axe against each other” (\textit{Riot} 205). The present is often a response to the experiences as well as the misunderstandings one sustains towards history.

Vikram Seth’s \textit{A Suitable Boy} (1993) with its journalistic references to the Indian political scenario and the growth and development of the Indian National Congress, evinces qualities of both a traditional category of fiction and history. It is a political fiction as well, as it traces the growth, development and decay of the Indian National Congress, exploring the characters and characteristics of various political leaders. It is also a
narrative on the harrowing experiences of conflicts generated by religious and casteist divisions.

‘Herstory’- the feminist counterpart of history- attempts to resist the patriarchal and chauvinistic portrayal of history by men and offers history from a feminist perspective providing adequate representation for women. It is largely a protest against unreasonable patriarchal attitudes in historiography and the deliberate underestimation and degradation of the contribution of women to the world. The works of writers and activists since Mary Wollstonecraft and J. S. Mill down to Bell Hooks and Judith Bennet have in fact argued for a feminist perspective in history.

Genres like historical novel, documentary fiction, historical romances and herstories share history as a common denominator. For all such genres, historical incidents or instances serve as the background. But with the development of New Historicism, the conventional view of history has been drastically altered. Rani Paul Ukkan, distinguishing the old historical method of treating literature and history as text and context from New Historicism states that the latter considers them as “text and co-text (“Approaching New Historicism” 32)”. There cannot be a divide between literature and history, the imaginative and the real. She adds:

“The older Historical method stated that literature was a reflection of a particular age’s shared ‘world–view’. New Historicism deviates
from it in upholding that no age or culture has a single homogenous world–view, but is internally diverse and hence heterogeneous (32-33).

New Historicism has made the analysis of literature more rigorous and focused, severing critical practices from generalizations. The Hegelian concept of zeitgeist- ‘spirit of the age’- was discarded as a grand narrative or a totalizing claim. Jurgen Pieters in his Moments of Negotiation: New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt (2001) refers to Greenblatt’s discontent with Hegelian historicism:

Historians who concern themselves with universal processes and unchanging laws that are not considered subject to the contingent dynamics of human actions are not practicing history at all. What distinguishes his project from that of traditional historicism, he argues, is mainly the fact that ‘[New Historicism’s] concern with literary texts has been to recover as far as possible the historical circumstances of [the] original production and consumption [of texts] and to analyze the relationship between these circumstances and our own’. (100, italics original)

Pieters thus states that if any historian thought that he could “reconstruct the past from a point in time and space that was itself located outside history”, it was a “self defeating one” (100). The historian himself is
inside history, and is bound by history, and it is impossible to historicize anything while standing outside history.

Bill Ashcroft, in an interview stated that “all history is a story, a narrative”, and that “the idea of history as being a scientific recording of events” was only a “myth that was generated in nineteenth century Europe” (Varghese, 83-84). As a result of the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), the awareness of the agendas of colonial representations of colonized people and the politics behind such historicizing have become clearer. The ‘myth of scientific and objective history’ was fostered by the colonial historiographers, so that their versions of history would be accepted unquestioned, and the objectives intended through them could be accomplished without resistance. Colonial historiography, as has now been widely recognized, was a means for dominating the colonized. Since colonization, the practice of writing histories including fictional histories gathered momentum.

The power to narrate history is reckoned to be of immense significance both politically and socially. In Rushdie’s *Shame* (1983) we find the narrator’s comment:

History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of fact arise, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the
mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the
defeated leave few marks - - - [H]istory loves only those who
dominate her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement (124).

Every act of narration is the result of the will to power. In other words, the
motivation behind projects of rethinking history is toppling incumbent
sources of power and exacting authority. History construction is a
metaphorical war waged with words. G. N. Devy claims: “Every procedure of
power acquisition commenced in the West with the claim of being on the right
side of history. Similarly, the emergence of literary history as a ‘subject’ is
intimately linked with the rise of literature as a means of social domination”
(‘Of Many Heroes’ 5). It is conspicuous that the right to interpret and re-
represent history would invest one with power over history as well as its
subjects. Oral histories were massively transformed to written histories
during the colonial administration. The colonial strategy of deprecating
Indian culture was largely owing to India’s relative absence of comparative
cultural histories. The colonizers began with disparaging Indian culture as it
was the best means available to them for asserting the superiority of Western
culture. The need for a written history is asserted by Susan Oommen: “If a
people lacked written history, they were necessarily excluded from history
and therefore [were] pushed to the margins” (“The Other: of Self, Identity and
History”12). Ranajit Guha also makes a similar comment that “people
without writing are people without history and the people without history are
inferior human beings” (History at the Limit 8). The colonizers could assert power over the indigenous people because they assumed the power to narrate the natives and their culture to the natives themselves. The touchstone of comparison was the Western culture, against which the indigenous culture could not measure up. Salman Rushdie problematizes the issue of the right to narrate history in Shame (1983):

Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! . . . I know: nobody ever arrested me. Nor are they ever likely to. Poacher!

Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies? I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary conditions map out the territories?

Can only the dead speak? (28).

Rushdie is conscious here of the problematic of narrating history. First, one confronts the question as to who narrates history. The issue of the narrative voice is of prime concern in the narration of history since the practice of historicizing is reckoned to be a political engagement. The veracity and acceptability of history in the modern times are also based on the identity of the narrator. The famous essay of Kateri Damm has its title as
"Says Who: Colonialism, Identity and Defining Indigenous Literature" (1993, italics added), being aware that the speaking voice always has its politics.

The questions that Rushdie poses prompt one to consider the qualifications for narrating history. The traditional concept of history is that it is constituted by the dead, and that it is the living who construct them as histories is obfuscated. According to Rushdie, it is the living that have the right to construct histories. And when they construct them, they do it in such a way that it benefits them. Rushdie treats history as a game and he claims that it is not the participants who should judge their own performance but the observers, for, in no game such claims are entertained.

The approach to history has changed in different periods. Linda Hutcheon expatiates that the literary modernism led by Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Mann etc. had a dread of history, in her essay “Historicizing the postmodern: The Problematizing of History” (88). But in the course of time literary modernism gave way to postmodernism which has a different ethos. She states: “... [M]odernism’s ‘nightmare of history’ is precisely what postmodernism has chosen to face straight on. Artist, audience, critic - none is allowed to stand outside history, or even wish to do so” (88). Postmodern fictions are fictions of history as well. The sense of history is embedded in the narratives of postmodernism.
The diasporic writers’ engagement in fictional reconstruction of national history in the recent past is phenomenal. It is far more than the mere need for power that originates a mental disposition to rethink the history of one’s own country. It requires greater sophistication and refinement, and it is not the cup of tea of the conservative historian. One advantage that diasporic writers have over domicile writers is that they are not inside what they narrate. It capacitates them to think over and above territorial boundaries\(^\text{13}\). The power to transcend geographical boundaries was valorized by the 12th century Saxon monk Hugo of St. Victor:

The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire word is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his (quoted in Said’, “The Mind of Winter” 55).

However it would be essentialist and simplistic to make a totalizing claim that the diasporas are free from the pain of displacement, or that they are completely dissatisfied with their exilic subjectivity. Both these conditions are common among the diasporas and they are either happy or unhappy or are even both. All these attitudes are evident in Said:
For objective reasons that I had no control over, I grew up as an Arab with a Western education. Ever since I can remember, I have felt that I belonged two worlds, without being completely of either one or the other. . . Yet when I say ‘exile’ I do not mean something sad or deprived. On the contrary belonging, as it were, to both sides of the imperial divide enables you to understand them more easily (Culture and Imperialism xviii).

Hutcheon states that what the postmodern engagement with literature and history has taught us is that “both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make systems of the past” (“Historicizing the postmodern” 89). It would not be right to privilege either history or fiction over the other. Both history and fiction being mere systems of signification constitutive of our understanding of the past, they can only be considered as two streams or methods of constructing the past. It is also true that no such discourse can claim authenticity or reliability. The unreliability of historical narratives is clarified by Mary Louise Pratt:

[L]iterature is the theoretic discourse of the historical process: It creates the non-topos where the effective operations of a society attain a formalization. Far from envisioning literature as the expression of a referential, it would be necessary to recognize here the analogue of that which for a long time mathematics has been for the exact sciences: a ‘logical’ discourse of history, the ‘fiction’ which
allows it to be thought (Quoted by P. P. Raveendran, “Presenting History” 14).

Pratt here denounces the potentiality of literature to be completely representative of the historical realities. Rather, literature and history are only aids to formalize concepts about the past. However, it is worth investigating why diasporic cosmopolitans, even when their lack of fervent nationalist consciousness is vivid, still resort to the fictional reconstruction of national histories14. There is a tension prevailing between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, as the former evidently privileges the geographical concept of the nation which Benedict Anderson qualified as ‘imagined communities’ and the latter which does not bestow any merit on the country of one’s birth.

The imperativeness of the sense of national associations embedded in human epistemology and teleology may be ascribed to be the reason for the diasporic preference of nationalist backgrounds for the construction of personal stories. It may also be the inescapability of the diasporic writers from the consciousness of nationality that causes them to narrate histories with the backdrop of actual nations. If they are true cosmopolitans, at home everywhere, why do they still rewrite/reinscribe the history of their motherland?

Before answering this question, a few other issues need to be discussed. The problem of representation is a serious issue in the writing of history. Not
all historical figures achieve a niche for themselves in written history. A problem inherent in all accounts of history is that though the events in history are often the products of the actions of many people, many of them fail to find a place in those accounts. Taj Mahal, the avowed symbol of sublime love, is said to be built by Shah Jahan, though he may not have lifted even a single stone for its construction. Here only the motivating agency gains recognition whereas all the physical effort expended for such a remarkable feat of architecture is largely disregarded. Tharoor illustrates this issue in his The Great Indian Novel (1989) through the words of Ved Vyas:

Independence was not won by a series of isolated events but by the constant, unremitting actions of thousands . . . of men and women across the land. We tend, Ganapathi, to look back on history as if it were a stage play, with scene building upon scene, our hero moving from one action to the next in his remorseless stride to the climax. Yet life is never like that. If life were a play of the noises offstage, and for that matter the sounds of the audience, would drown out the lines of principal actors. That, of course, would make for a rather poor tale; and so the recounting of history is only the order we artificially impose upon life to permit its lessons to be more clearly understood (109).
Historical narratives, literary or otherwise may not be completely truthful accounts. The narrator cannot remain as an unimpassioned observer in any discourse, but has to interpret events according to certain positions and ideological perspectives. Reality itself being textual, narratives of history too are textual, amenable to reinterpretation and revision. The absence of an absolute referent is asserted by Fredric Jameson when he writes that there can be no single, essentialized, transcendent concept of “genuine historicity” (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 67; Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism 89).

As a narrative, historiographic narratives focus on literature, history and theory - its three domains (Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism 5). Lawrence Phillips connects Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of history to Derrida’s differance, and underscores the fact that history cannot signify absolutely:

Bhabha seems to suggest that history is not made or lived as a temporal process in material space, but as the fluctuation of meaning that characterizes the signifier’s displacement along the chain of signification. This can be recognized as a temporal process, yet history, in this formulation must be analogous to the deferral of absolute signification. Since the deferral is limitless, or at best circular, history itself can never signify absolutely: have any absolute meaning (“Lost in Space” 6).

It is this absence of absolute referent that is instrumental in the emergence of new versions of history. Hence, history construction continues
as an endless chain as the Derridaen system of signification in semantics. There remains a ‘trace’ of truth in all narratives whereas none of them can claim absolute authenticity.

Another issue related to the narration of history is the question of identity. Few other words in the language would be as contentious as ‘identity’ speaking against the backdrop of the voluminous contributions already made towards discussions of identity. Besides ‘identity’ has always been inextricably bound up with geographical spaces and national territories. The physical terrain or location of a nation turns out to be of paramount import when one attempts to pigeonhole oneself as a subject that ‘belongs’ to that space. People identify themselves in connection with the name of a country, or any physical terrain, just as Indian, American, and German and so on. In this context, a major concern of diasporas is to resist issues like ‘unbelongingness’ that is often ascribed to them. The obsession with territories formerly evinced almost uniformly by expatriate, exiled and/or diasporic writers has recently been pushed aside by a cosmopolitan sensibility generated by experiences of globalization, liberalization and neocolonialism. Minoli Salgado states that writers like Salman Rushdie belong to “an intellectual and aesthetic elite of post-colonials who are variously described as Third World cosmopolitans or internationalists” (“Migration and mutability” 39).
All historical narratives are versions coloured by subjectivity and issues of identity. Any narrative on history is subjected also to an examination of the identity, politics, religion and affiliations of the narrator in the contemporary times. History is seen in the light of the experiences of particular identities, since there is not a single history for all people, and this problematizes issues of representation. But this does not mean denial of historical knowledge. The fictions of history too are versions from the perspectives of the speaking voices and cannot claim authenticity or exclusivity. Rudy Wiebe says: “The versions of history proliferate endlessly; every version being a provisional reconstruction, that it is never possible to know all the facts about anything even the smallest act. The things done vanish with their doing” (Quoted by Satya Braat Singh, “Wiebe, Paul Scott and Salman Rushdie” 145).

The language employed for the narration of history is also problematic. When one uses a language that the Western powers so long used in dominating the natives of the East, the motives behind it might be questionable. The use of English for the narration of parallel versions of history by the diasporic writers is a political one16. The term ‘fictions of history’ was coined by Bernard Bergonzi, with reference to the proliferation of fictions in the West in the sixties which reflected history. Diasporic writers from India like Rushdie, Tharoor and Seth sought for themes from history mainly among the drastic and excruciating political events like the declaration of emergency by the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi,
Pakistani and Chinese aggressions coupled with the disillusionment regarding the future of post-independence India. Independence was celebrated as a great moment by the people of India and its writers. The hopes and aspirations that propelled the freedom struggle and the nationalist movements gradually dwindled with corruption, nepotism and elitism that crept into politics and society. The texts of the Indian diasporic writers have to be assessed in this context as attempts to construct alternative histories since no version of history can claim authenticity.

The interrelationship of history and literature assumes great relevance when discussed in terms of the texts of the Indian diaspora. A. K. Singh points out that Michael Foucault, Hayden White and Louis Mink envision history as a “political act, a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (“Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy” 14). Linda Hutcheon enumerates issues like those of narrative form, intertextuality, strategies of representation, the role of language, the relation between historical fact and experiential event, the epistemological and ontological consequences of the act of rendering problematic, that which was once taken for granted by historiography and literature, as pertaining both to history and literature (A Poetics of Postmodernism xii). A historian, just like a novelist, is at liberty to include, exclude and do whatever one pleases with the historical material one possesses. The strategies a novelist adopts for his fictions are not substantially at variance with that of a historian.
History has always been a powerful tool to carve out an identity for oneself. One’s claims to identity are realized in tracing or constructing and establishing a history. Joel Kuortti holds the view that fiction is powerful enough even to destabilize political detractors. He states that “oppressive rulers can be overthrown by sheer power of fiction, because it is capable of telling the truth about, exposing, oppression” (Fictions to Live In 31). Though this sounds extreme, it expresses the strong belief he has in the potentiality of fiction. Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterji, Nayantara Saghal, Chaman Nahal, Rohinton Mistry and Mukul Kesavan have employed history for the construction of personal (hi)stories like Rushdie, Tharoor and Seth.

Postcolonial novels tend to be novels of history, because no writer can overlook the contexts which are also the co-texts for any work of literature. The term postcolonial refers to “reading and writing practices grounded in some form of colonial experience occurring outside Europe but as a consequence of European expansion into and exploitation of the other worlds” (Tiffin, “Post-Colonialism” 170). Postcolonial thought is a requirement of those countries that are victims of imperialism, so that they can recover and rediscover their own identities untainted by Eurocentric concepts and images. Such a perspective can positively counter neo-imperialistic strategies in political, economic and cultural spheres. Cultural production is the focus of attention of postcolonial thinkers, as everything in the postcolonial spaces has been influenced by the imperial politics. Yet it is significant that the
postcolonial subject as well as the postcolonials’ language is “informed by the imperial vision” (Pillai, “Post-modernism or Post-colonialism for India” 164). It is made clear by Annamaria Carusi: “Postcolonialism lays itself open to a recolonisation by its very dependence on the notion of the subject as a humanist subject and therefore inherits the limitations of the imperialist subject” (“Post, Post and Post” 84). Political liberation from imperial administrators has not insulated the postcolonial subjects from cultural and epistemological imperialism.

As Muhamed Mustafa says, postcolonial novels, by rewriting history, challenge Euro-centric history and also reject the so called ‘historical objectivity’ made by colonial masters. In Gramscian terms, history is always the handmaid of dominant ideologies, and of the ruling class. Putting on trial such ideologically determined paradigms of power relationships, postcolonial novelists can be seen to question the validity of the imperial versions of history. A propensity for remapping the cartography of the nation’s political and cultural history is a dominant concern of these novelists. What is required is a “cognitively responsible historiography” (La Capra, History and Criticism 11), involving a problematized rethinking of the nature of historical documents. It is works “that supplement reality and not works that divulge facts about reality” that is required, as Dominick La Capra argues (11).
The trajectory of the development of postmodern historicism is to be traced in the line of Michel Foucault and his avowed predecessor Friedrich Nietzsche. As Hutcheon remarks, rejecting both antiquarian nostalgia and monumentalizing universalization that denies the individuality and particularity of the past, Nietzsche argued for a critical history, one that would “bring the past to the bar of judgment, interrogate it remorselessly” (A Poetics of Postmodernism 20-21). “You can explain the past only from what is most powerful in the present” claimed Nietzsche19 (The Use and Abuse of History 40). It is this idea that Foucault took up as ‘New History’ – not a history of things, but of discourses- of the “terms, categories, and techniques through which certain things become at certain times the focus of a whole configuration of discussion and procedure” (quoted by Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism 99).

Salman Rushdie, like his protagonist Saleem Sinai in Midnight’s Children was born in Mumbai (then Bombay) in 1947 - the year India achieved political independence - but on a different date - on 19th June. After staying in Mumbai for a few years, he moved to the United Kingdom for higher education. He has also lived in Pakistan for a few months. The international experience, diasporic consciousness and cosmopolitan sensibility loom large in the writings of Rushdie. His published works are Grimus (1975), a science fiction, Midnight's Children (1980), Shame (1983), The Painter and the Pest (documentary film) (1985), The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey (1987),

Shashi Tharoor was born in London on 9th March 1956 and was educated in Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and the United States. He was the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs for a short period. He had served as the UN Under-Secretary for Communications and Public Information between June 2002 and February 2007. He is also a prolific author, columnist, journalist, human-rights advocate, humanitarian and adviser or fellow of various institutions, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Aspen Institute, and the USC Center on Public Diplomacy. He resigned from the United Nations in 2008, following his unsuccessful bid for the post of UN Secretary General.

Shashi Tharoor has written many editorials, commentaries, and short stories in Indian and Western publications. His important works are Reasons of State (1982) - a scholarly study of Indian foreign policy making, The Great


grouped as ‘fictions of history’ as Bernard Bergonzi has labelled the genre. When diasporic writers create fictional (hi)stories of the countries in which they were born, it becomes a symbolic move towards relocating themselves in the respective culture and territory from which they are temporarily distanced. The narrator in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* says:

> Rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages in a wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? I am so far gone in my desperate need for meaning, that I’m prepared to distort everything - to re-write the whole history of my times in order to place myself in a central role” (198).

It would be useful to give a general outline of the selected fictions of these writers to have an understanding of the narrative conventions and styles adopted by them. *Midnight’s Children* is “a piece of ‘fiction – faction’ by one born in India but settled abroad, who tries to recreate his homeland, mixing memory and desire, fact and fantasy, reality and vision, time and timelessness”, comments O. P. Mathur ("A Metaphor for Reality” 69). Rushdie himself remarked in an interview:
And one suspicious generalization may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back we must also do so in the knowledge - which also gives rise to profound uncertainties – means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of the mind. (“Reclaiming a City and a History” 5)

Rushdie makes use of history, myths, allegories and fantasy for the construction of his account of the protagonist Saleem Sinai and the other ‘midnight’s children’. In the novel, (hi)story is constructed through a complex strategy, with Saleem Sinai embodying a supreme moment in history. Saleem is “mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destinies indissolubly chained to those of his country” (Midnight’s Children 3). The narrator projects a prismatic vision of reality, partial, fissured and fragmented, but highly absorbing and deeply meaningful. Motivated by a fear of absurdity, he is frantically engaged in a quest for meaning, personifying a “very Indian lust for allegory” (Mathur 70).

Saleem Sinai is one of the ‘midnight’s children’ born between 12 midnight and 1 am on the night of August 15, 1947, the hour of the birth of free India.
Of the total 1001 children born during that magical hour, 420 die and 581 survive up to 1967. These imaginary beings meet and discuss in the parliament of Saleem’s mind, holding a ‘Midnight’s Children’s Conference’. This multi headed monster, speaking in the myriad tongues of Babel is a metaphor for the Indian society, “the very essence of multiplicity”, (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 247) divergent ways of looking at things.

*Midnight’s Children* is a first person narrative conveying the innermost thoughts and emotions of Saleem Sinai. It communicates directly to the reader and is influenced by the stream of consciousness technique. Underscoring the unreliability of any historical or biographical account, Rushdie departs liberally from actual figures and data in the narration of the novel. At the same time he also sustains a sense of reality by using actual names of political personalities, names of politically significant places and by referring to events that steered the course of Indian politics in the past years. The ‘midnight’s children’ “represent the nation’s psyche” (Mathur 70), “everything that is antiquated and retrogressive in our myth ridden nation” (*Midnight’s Children* 240). Saleem’s “long beaked nose” which “performs the function of a stethoscope” is a symbol of the “power to observe reality” (Mathur, “A Metaphor for Reality 70). Rushdie presents “Saleem Sinai as India and India as Saleem Sinai” (Mathur 70). The disfiguring birthmarks on his face are the result of “the holocaust of the partition” (71).
As Mathur has commented, “Saleem’s growth also mirrors the development of free India (73). His “life covers the period from the independence movement to the lifting of the emergency” (73). As Mathur has catalogued, the events covered by the novel are:

[T]he agitation against the Rowlett Bill, the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre, the formation of the Indian National Army, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, communal riots, the dawn of independence, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu Succession Act, the closing of the Suez Canal, the submission of the report of the States Reorganization Commission, language riots, the elections of 1957 and 1962, Chinese aggression, the Nanavati Case, the theft of Hazart Bal, the liberation of Goa, the death of Nehru, the Kutch War, the India – Pakistan War of 1965, the Bangladesh War and the imposition and the lifting of the emergency(73-74).

Owing to Saleem’s short sojourn in Pakistan, some events of that country also have been brought to attention such as the Presidency of Yahya Khan, elections of 1970.

Rushdie uses the framework of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi history for the telling of his story/history, though he does not pretend it to be the only version possible. Assuming the freedom of a diasporic writer Rushdie says: “In a country where truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally
ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case” (*Midnight’s Children* 389). Rushdie’s feeling of repression by the political and religious regimes also finds its reflection in this comment. Imposing a certain reality over all other possibilities is nevertheless Fascism, and negation of imagination and artistic freedom. The world is not imitated in Rushdie’s fiction. Instead, he constructs versions of the world through fiction because Rushdie is presented with “an infinity of alternative realities”, and “an equally infinite number of falsenesses, unrealities and lies (*Midnight’s Children* 389). “My India was just that: ‘My’ India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions”, acknowledges Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* (10).

It’s hard to master history as one has to know all the possible options in the course of an event, different possibilities for something to take place. Rushdie denounces the possibility of an actual history which is true in every detail. It is impossible as there is no ‘real’ truth other than the truths that are constructed. Keatsian ‘negative capability’ demanding poets to be content with ‘half-knowledge’, is comparable to Rushdie’s resignation to the absence of an absolute history. *Midnight’s Children* offers only glimpses of reality as through a ‘perforated sheet’, a major trope employed in the narrative. Govind N. Sharma says:

Rushdie introduces us to several artists in his novel who, like the implied author, have been infected by the ‘Indian disease, this urge
to encapsulate the whole of reality’, but all of them lead unhappy lives and come to a sad end. There is Lifafa Das with his peep show endeavouring to ‘envelop’, as his very name indicates, ‘the whole world’, the victim of an obsession with inclusiveness. There is Nadir Khan the poet with his friend the painter whose canvases grow larger and larger every day. We see Saleem’s Uncle Hanif, the ‘arch-disciple of naturalism’, whose main ambition is to make a film about ‘the Ordinary Life of a Pickle factory’, the apostle of perfectionism who ‘was determined never to lay down a hand until he completed a thirteen - card sequence in hearts’. And then there is Picture Singh of the Magician’s Ghetto, who, in his exclusive claim to the title of the ‘Most Charming Man in the World’ overreaches himself and drops dead just as Hanif had done by committing suicide. Rushdie’s message is very plain: the quest for absolute objectivity and inclusiveness is a chimera, an impossible dream (“The Writer as Historical Witness” 228).

Midnight’s Children is called the first Indian Bildungsroman of epic proportions, and it has its major roots in oral narratives (Ralph J. Crane, Inventing India 171). The protagonist Saleem is inextricably chained to the wheel of history, and his existence is defined by the course of Indian history thirty two years before and after his birth. His characterization legitimizes the postmodernist belief that an individual is constructed by history, and also
paradoxically creates history. The sense of timelessness is denounced for concrete details in the novel regarding his birth:

I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won’t do, there’s no getting away from the date: I was born on Doctor Narlikar’s Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters too. Well then: at night. No, it’s important to be more...on the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India’s arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world (Midnight’s Children 3).

The fairy tale opening ‘once upon a time’ is rejected by the narrator at the outset of the novel, as the protagonist has to be etched in history in a concrete manner. Saleem’s historic tryst with destiny is predicted by Nehru in his congratulatory letter:

Dear Baby Saleem,

My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India, which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own (Midnight’s Children 143).
Almost everything in the novel is given a personal as well as historical dimension. Saleem is telling history as well as *his* story. His fictional autobiography is the history of the nation. He considers himself a historian: “It is possible, even probable, that I am only the first historian to write the story of my undeniably exceptional life-and-times” (354). The ‘life-and-times’ convention of Lawrence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759 – 67) is closely followed here.

Historical events round the world are interspersed among the life situations of the characters in the novel. Saleem’s grandfather Adam Aziz happens to be a witness of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre on 13 April 1919. The wound it impresses on his body does not fade until after his death, bearing testimony to the power of memory, the greatest tool for the making of history.

Saleem’s birth is announced at the moment of the Declaration of Freedom, when Nehru is talking to the nation about the birth of the nation:

...At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India awakes to life and freedom... And beneath the roar of the monster there are two more yells, cries, bellows, the howls of children arriving in the world, their unavailing protests mingling with the din of independence which hangs saffron and green in the night sky- ‘A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we
step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance’. While in a room with saffron -and -green carpet Ahmed Sinai is still clutching a chair when Dr Narlikar enters to inform him: ‘On the stroke of midnight, Sinai brother, your Begum Sahiba gave birth to a large, healthy child: a son!’ (135)

Saleem knows that if he should find a place in history for himself, he has to make it seem that he was instrumental in the occurrences that determined the course of history. Saleem’s son, who is not his son, is born on 25th June 1975, the day the Emergency was declared. The day Nadir Khan leaves Mumtaz Aziz so that she can marry Ahmed Sinai, the bomb is dropped on Hiroshima: “Oh yes: something else was happening in the world that day. A weapon such as the world has never seen was being dropped on yellow people in Japan” (67). Linda Hutcheon sites the case of Saleem Sinai, who tells that he personally caused the death of Nehru or the language riots of India (A Poetics of Postmodernism 94). In John Fowles’ postmodern historiographic metafiction The French Lieutenant’s Woman (1969) there is a similar reference to the death of the character Ernestina22. Fowles states: "She was born in 1846. And she died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland (235)". Connecting the lives of characters to world politics, these novels assume global dimensions, and can rightly be called world novels. This is a postmodern trait as well, that they are at liberty to depart liberally from the
canonical histories for purely personal purposes. Narrators position themselves in purely strategic locations which afford better opportunities for political manipulations.

Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is a fictional work that takes the story of the Mahabharatha, the epic of Indian mythology, and recasts and resets it in the context of the Indian independence movement. Tharoor expatiates on the theme of the novel: “*The Great Indian Novel* is an attempt to retell the political history of 20th century India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the Mahabharatha” (Yoking Myth to History 5). Figures from Indian history are transformed into characters from mythology, and the mythical story is retold as a history of Indian independence and subsequent history, up through the 1980’s. It is presented as if it is narrated from a purely personal perspective by Ved Vyas to his scribe Ganapathi, just as the great Mahabharatha was narrated by Vyasa. *The Great Indian Novel* has been acclaimed to be the novel that ushered in postmodernism to Indian literary scenario by some critics.

The phrase ‘great Indian novel’ is a rough translation of the word “mahabharatha”. Figures from history and characters from the Mahabharatha can be directly correlated to characters in the book. Ved Vyas the narrator is C. Rajagopalachari; Ganga Dutta is Bhishma of Mahabharatha and Gandhi of modern India. Nehru is presented through Dhritarashtra; Lady Georgiana Drewpad is Lady Mountbatten; Pandu is
Subhash Chandra Bose; Yudhistir is Morarji Desai; Priya Dhuryodhani is Indira Gandhi; Muhammed Ali Karna is Muhammed Ali Jinnah; Jayaprakash Drona is Jayaprakash Narayan and Draupadi Mokrasi is democracy. Tharoor has used devices like allegorization, to defamiliarize contemporary political events in the novel. K. Ayyappa apniniker says that the superimposition of the political events of the 20th century on the basic structure of the Mahabharatha is made plausible by variations in stylistic levels and tones24 (14).

The places in the novel too are identifiable with historical places. Laslut is Lahore; Gelabin is Bengal; Manimir is Kashmir and Karnistan is Pakistan. The Great Mango March in the novel really stands for Gandhi’s Great Salt March. The novel ends with the comment of the narrator telling his scribe that he had narrated the entire story from “a completely mistaken perspective”, which reminds readers of the multiple versions and perspectives that history affords.

Tharoor’s Riot also is a historiographic narrative. He selects “bits from history and present-day communal consciousness and weaves them together with bits from his lucrative imagination to create a quilt that is intellectually provocative and emotionally charged”, says Eliza Joseph (Contextualizing History 89). Mahabharatha has always been of interest to the Western mind, and the context had been exploited by the colonial translators. Tharoor, through his novel, has successfully utilized the interest evinced by the West
in the Mahabharatha. He also attempts to write back to the West through the narrative. If the West entertained exoticized notions about India, the same exoticism has been used as the bait by Tharoor to catch the attention of both the colonial powers as well as the postcolonial educated people to his narrative of power.

Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* (1993), a third person narrative in the traditional mode, captures Indian society in transition, fashioning its new ways out of the old. ‘A saga of modern India’, its principal thematic concern is the quest for a suitable boy on the part of Rupa Mehra, the *mater familias* of the Mehra family, for her younger daughter Lata. “You too will marry a boy I choose” is the key sentence in the novel and that lays bare its thematic concerns. It is post independence India that attains centrality as the narrative inquires into the question of nationality and the future of the nation. Seth reconstructs India between the two poles of history and fiction. It is a huge novel with more than 8 lakh words in 478 sections of 19 parts and 1347 pages. He author himself states that it is a wrist-spraining and purse-straining novel, in the preface to the novel - “A Word of Thanks”.

The novel deals with four large families such as the Mehras, the Chatterjis, the Khans and the Kapoors. Mrs Rupa Mehra, daughter of Dr. Kishen Chand Seth, was married to the late railway officer Raghubir Mehra, who left her with four children. The elder daughter Savitha is married to Pran Kapoor, a lecturer of English in Brahmpur University. He is the son of
Mahesh Kapoor, an idealistic minister of Revenue of Poorva Pradesh. Arun, Rupa Mehra’s son, works in a multinational country, and is married to Meenakshi from the Chatterji family. Varun, Rupa Mehra’s younger son who is constantly belittled by Arun his elder brother, however becomes an IAS Officer. Lata, comes across a Muslim student named Kabir Durrani, and falls in love with him. Rupa Mehra, forcefully moves Lata to Calcutta and looks for a suitable boy for her with the help of her son Arun. They get closer to the family of Meenakshi, who are steeped in English style of living, and are mostly advocates and judges by profession.

It is love and marriage that relate these diverse families. Rupa’s son Arun’s marriage relates them to the Chatterjis, and Rupa’s daughter Savitha’s marriage to Pran brings them closer to the Kapoors. The Kapoors are related to the Tandons by the marriage of Veena, Mahesh Kapoor’s daughter, to Kedarnath Tandon. The Tandons are reputed businessmen of Lahore who moved to Brahmpur in the wake of partition, to set up their shoe business in Mistri Mandi. The Tandons come across Haresh Khanna, an attractive graduate from St. Stephens College with higher education from Britain in shoe making. Being informed of Haresh by the Tandons and the Kapoors, Rupa Mehra explores possibilities of Lata’s marriage to Haresh. Inspite of the stiff resistance from Arun, Rupa Mehra succeeds in initiating a correspondence between Haresh and Lata, and finally gets them married.
Mann Kapoor, the younger son of Mahesh Kapoor is an interesting character. He is handsome, prodigal, passionate and indulgent, and marks a sharp contrast to his brother Pran Kapoor and his father Mahesh Kapoor. A bisexual, he seems to have homosexual relationship with his childhood friend Firoz, the second son of the Nawab of Baitar. He is also in love with Saeeda Bai, a courtesan who is older to him. She was the mistress of the Nawab of Baitar, and Tasneem was born of this relationship, but in public life, Saeeda treats Tasneem as her younger sister. Unaware of the fact that Tasneem is his father’s daughter, Firoz falls in love with Tasneem. Mann mistakes Firoz to be his rival, and feels that Saeeda Bai is deceiving him. He becomes violent and seriously wounds Firoz with a fruit knife in the ensuing tussle. Mann surrenders in a police station in Benares. However, Firoz saves Mann giving statement that he himself had fallen over a knife, resulting in the injury. It saves Mann but it destroys Mahesh Kapoor’s political career. In spite of Nehru’s canvassing for him, he fails the election to Waris Khan, a servant of the Nawab of Baitar.

Rasheed, Tasneem’s tutor, is engaged by Saeeda Bai to teach Mann Urdu. Rasheed was the son of a traditional zamindar of Debaria village, and was an idealistic youth with leftist leanings in spite of his traditional upbringing. He continued his studies in Brahmpur University along with his Arabic and Islamic education. He is very much attached to people and their sufferings, especially to their ploughman Kachheru, in whose favour he transfers his
property despite his family’s strong resistance. Rasheed is disinherited from his family, and in the pain of solitude, he commits suicide.

Other relevant episodes in the novel are also related to the theme of love in its different shades. Lata has a brief period of romance with Kabir, friendship with Amit, and finally marries Haresh. When Lata was staying with her aunt, her uncle Mr. Sahgal approached her with lust, and that disturbed Lata deep in her heart.

The novel’s story, though dealing with the lives and personal concerns of a number of people, is inseparably intertwined with the political events that directed the course of Indian history. Narrating the stories of newly independent India, covering a period from 26 January 1950 to July 1952, the era Seth describes is vibrant with the stories of the declining zamindary system, the country sides plagued with famines, of artists, musicians and courtesans like Saeeda Bai who faces loss of patronage with the abolition of the zamindary system, of religious frenzy and communal disharmony, of higher education, of Kumbha Mela and of the transformation of political power structure through the first general election. The novel also records the disillusionment the people of villages underwent, after the euphoria of the achievement of freedom. Conflicts between the leftists and the rightists within the Congress party, rise of communal forces despite Nehru’s secular stance, resignation of some Congress party leaders and formation of new political parties are also, registered in the novel.
Besides, the places mentioned in the novel are mostly identifiable with historical locations. The Hindi speaking imaginary state Poorva Pradesh with its imaginary capital of Brahmpur closely resembles Lucknow, Agra, Allahabad and Old Delhi. Barsat Mahal is the Taj Mahal, and its Jatavas engaged in shoe industry are those of Agra. The Sangham of Brahmpur and its Kumbha Mela are taken from Allahabad, and the Brahmpur University near Monkey Bridge is Lucknow University, and Nabi Ganj adjacent to it is Hazrath Ganj of Lucknow.

The people that populate the novel are historical and most of them are given fictional identities. Only the character of Nehru is retained as such, and his personality is delineated with great care and sensitivity. Pandit S. S. Sharma, the first chief minister of Poorva Pradesh is identifiable with Pandit Govind Vallabh Pant, Mahesh Kapoor may be L. N. Aggrawal. Scattered here and there are references to historical/political personalities such as Purushottamdas Tandon, Narendra Dev, Acharya Kripalani, Ram manohar Lohia, Rai Ahmed Kidwai, Maulana Azad, Jinnah, Liyakat Ali Khan, Ambedkar, T. Prakasam, Sardar Patel and Kamala Nehru, which give the novel a historical tinge. Gandhi’s presence is also felt in the novel though he does not figure as a character (A.K. Singh 18).

A Suitable Boy reveals the history making power of literature. But Seth’s novel stops short of ‘making’ history, as his use of historical material is journalistic. A fine mixture of myths, memories and history constitute the
basic structure of the novel. Alberta Fabris Grube says: “Even if the main theme of the book is actually a love story, this is so enmeshed in a panoramic view of certain aspects of Indian life that it could be compared to an historical novel of our times, although for some critics it is only ‘a proficient blockbuster novel that seeks (and inevitably fails) to encapsulate a deliberately exoticized India’” (“Vikram Seth” 295-6).
Notes

1 The etymological analysis attempted here is mostly drawn from *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed. Clarendon Press, 1989), Dr. Ernest’s *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Co, 1971), Robert K Barnhart ed. *Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (H.W. Wilson Co. 1988) and also from Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History) which have highly researched entries for the term ‘history’. However, only those details that appertain to this study are retained, and some unnecessary data have been omitted.

2 *The Holy Bible*. Genesis, Chapter 3.


4 The similarity between the forms of fiction and history has been instrumental in making fiction a powerful tool in the hands of diasporic writers. Their fictions assume power enough to compete canonical versions of history as shall be seen in the subsequent pages.


7 *Jinnah- India- Partition- Independence* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2009). The ideas expressed here are also based on an interview that Karan Thapar did with Jaswant Singh for the television programme ‘Devil’s Advocate’ that was broadcast over CNN-IBN on 16 August 2009.
Information about this speech can be collected from http://www.cceia.org/resources/transcripts/695.html, where Shashi Tharoor talks to Joanne J. Myers (November 28, 2001).


Randy Dicks is a character in the novel. Another character of Riot.


However, it does not mean that the capacity to think above geographical boundaries requires one to be physically outside it.

Diasporic writers like Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen, Tharoor etc. are frequently found to be disturbing the nationalist sentiments of the conservative and the orthodox. Rushdie's works like Midnights Children, Satanic Verses, Shame, Nasreen's Lajja, are examples.


Through Glass (Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd, 1995) etc. which have themes steeped in a sense of history.

18 Mustafa in his study of Gita Metha’s Raj (Delhi: Ballantine Books, 1991) expatiates how postcolonial writers rewrite history to counter the imperial versions of history. See Bibliography.


21 “- - - Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason-Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration”. See http://www.mrbauld.com/negcap.html


23 Sujatha makes this claim in “The Makers of Imaginary Homelands” (p. 110), but I do not personally subscribe to it. Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children may deserve that honour, and various critics have made this claim. S. Chakravarty however has made the moderate opinion that Tharoor’s novel is an example of postmodernism. See the page no 199.

24 Ayyappa Paniker in his essay “Reminiscential and Subversive” justifies the use of political and mythical elements in Tharoor’s novel.