Chapter 5

Conclusion

While examining how the multifaceted past is re-staged in postmodern times using literary writings, one realises the intricacies involved in the determination of an unswerving and consistent version of the same which is undoubtedly a complex phenomenon. ‘Past’ with its manifold discourses like the one existing between history and hagiography makes itself hard to be retrieved. Even when the narratives are retold and restaged in contemporary times by exploring all the possibilities, a similar dilemma surrounds us in our understanding of these historical figures. However by employing critical thought and techniques, the contemporary readers are better exposed to the dialectical interplay that characterises such personalities and events. Approaching the historical-hagiographical narratives in a dialectical mode has helped in the simultaneous appreciation of the marginalised or ignored versions of the past with all their underlying contradictions and ambiguities. Though the alternative narrative forms are at times in absolute opposition, yet there are points of convergence too. There is a continuous war of recognition that goes on between these two versions of the past and neither of the two is able to surpass the other rather these are parallel modes of study and record. And it is due to the presence of dialectics that the events in past narratives are re-examined and become questionable. Strategies employed by contemporary dramatists bring in a split between the recorded past and its understanding in the present times which gets more critical and evaluative.

Within such blurring boundaries, the use of literature and literary techniques like those of restaging has enhanced our view of the otherwise misted up history considerably approaching the dialectical relationship marking these life histories. A reciprocal relationship between history and literature has long been noticed in various writings and genre forms and here it is prudently handled by our modern Indian dramatists who by questioning the existing versions throw fresh light on some key regional or national figures of our Indian past. Challenging the traditional, linear view of history, the contemporary literary writings here focus on disparities and disruptions, realising the need to study history with its polyphonic voices. By drawing attention towards some of
the problems of historical representation and providing a systematic critique to the dominant texts, literary writings have proved helpful in demonstrating the dilemma of the writer in his attempt to account for a concrete image of the past. Such representations as attempted wide and large in postmodernist phase reflect better upon the dialectical and contesting notions as the playwrights of my study too, effectively harness both aspects of the past — history and hagiography, supplementing it with elements of fictionality as valuable dramatic techniques. All the three playwrights of this study emphasise on how in any act of restaging/restructuring the past, an appreciation of the people’s version – the unofficial hagiography along with the official documented histories is indispensable. And this dialectical interplay gets duly represented in a literary mode of writing and staging where equal space is provided to alternate histories. Literature as an important form of discourse helps in exposing the role of operating ideologies that preoccupies any historian or writer. Through literary means, the texuality of historical accounts and historicity of hagiographical texts are made discernible. It acts as an effective medium in enhancing this dialectical study of history-hagiography divide and quite successfully brings out a dialogic interaction between the two, further enlightening its readers or viewers on the importance of re-narrativization and restaging in contemporary times. Employment of the new historicist’s technique has further improvised our understanding, enabling the incorporation of both the narratives forms and placing the two as contexts where neither of them is superseding the other. The theory helps us in positioning the texts as site of ideological contestation or negotiations that would uncover the politics of culture and power play in the recording of history. Using this approach one can notice how any text be it history, ought to be subjected to re-evaluations as it consciously or unconsciously make representations embedded in particular time, place, thought belief and ideology, in turn becoming specific to that particular writer or historian.

While the contemporary Indian drama reworks on the legends of our Indian past it displays a more acknowledged and less biased representation where the role of alternative histories are fully acknowledged. Instead of making a chronological linear representation, the literary dramatists aim at integrating the dominant and the marginal likewise through specific juxtapositions in their attempt to reach a clearer picture of the same past. Characters too are constructed by the playwrights in dialectical terms as living
contradictions or split figures, thus sharpening the antithesis and attempting to reach a dependable synthesis. Throughout the reading there is a chain of contradictions. The image of a hero/villain, good/bad, saint/satan coexists simultaneously and neither of them is stamped as authentic by the playwrights. They rather leave their evaluations open ended allowing its receptors to discern upon the binaries. Modern Indian drama seems to negotiate the pressure of both the traditions (history and hagiography) as neither of these two versions of past is able to overhaul the other.

In the preceding chapters, all the three figures of past – Mirabai, Tipu Sultan and M.K.Gandhi are seen oscillating between the war of opposites – the historical and the hagiographical, unable to emerge out of the impasse. Where we find narratives appraising and sanctifying them, similar accounts exist degrading them or simply refuting the other’s claim. Analysed in chapter 2, the life history of Mirabai, the renowned saint-poetress and Rajput princess, too remains a complexity in times gone by and even today. Existence of multiple versions for a particular event, be it her date of birth, her marital alliance, her childhood, her manner of death or her association to Raidas; has all baffled its readers making them reach no conclusive picture and rather keep floating in the misty stories. In his restaging of the historical-hagiographical Mira, the playwright has proceeded from a simple, worldly Mira towards a more concretised and hagiographical one (lost in her love for Krishna). His presentation is such as intended to depict her gradual transformation from an ordinary human being to an extraordinary one connected to god but in this depiction the playwright does not overlook the critical renderings on her life. Most hagiographical accounts narrating her life story avoid noticing her human emotions and desires, that she initially is said to have possessed and simply assume her to be in love with the divine.

Her deep longing for love, initially for her husband Rana and later for Krishna seems to free her from the masculine pretensions and moral hegemony. And that it was her later subjugation to the divine which liberates her from the corrosive power relations of human sexuality and societal norms. She is depicted to have developed into a revolutionary not by attacking the social order and official religion but by ignoring them because she was not a conscious revolutionary rather was shrouded in the mystic communion with her lord. Her later rejection of her earthly marriage, honour of family,
bonds of kinship came as a rejection of the whole social order within which she was enmeshed. The series of oppositions to hierarchy are both made possible and undone by the fact that as a female subject Mira takes recourse to highest point that is god by harnessing her moral power. Points out Sangari that in rejecting the powerful group, Mira “rejects the public and historical memory of the state’ in favour of a ‘personal narrative of love and salvation” (126). Her love for the divine unites the transcendental and the mundane which as Das seems to suggest became an interesting feature of her hagiographical configurations.

In reassessing Mira’s legendary life story we locate that there is an attempt to enslave her mind and body putting a restraint on the beginnings of self discovery and resistance by several characters in her life as Uda and Rana who rebuke her for straying from aristocratic norms and customs. However, Mira boldly questions the rationalist criteria by which knowledge and power have been hegemonized within the existing norms of patriarchal society and follow her hearts’ desires. Reviewing our observation, the portrait of historical Mira emerges very different from the traditional one. As a rebel Mira defied archetypal discourses of the times, yet she is seen as the most obedient and harmless figure of devotion. What is the reason for these paradoxical pictures of Mira? The answer lies in the lack of an authentic historical proof of her life and the struggle involved. The ideological assertion and cultural formation attributed to Mira vary with the writers. Since there is no record, the history of Mira is inverted and conveniently becomes hagiography. Constraints of linear history do not bind the Mira tradition which is a continuously changing one and the disjuncture allow us entry into a changing social process.

Though unlike Mira’s, the historical accounts on the life of Tipu Sultan and Gandhi are relatively less remote and vague in their specifications of time, still the combat between the historical-hagiographical forces continues bewildering its readers and leaving them with no particular thought belief. In view of the historical importance of these figures of India, whose worthiness often becomes a matter of contention and is questioned more sharply in contemporary times, H.S.Shivapraksh (in chapter 3) has effectively staged Tipu’s life story with his own acknowledged version of his past that also suitably fits in several other thoughts and ideological beliefs. Using his dramatic
techniques, the playwright has demonstrated a restaging of Tipu's life story which can be observed as a reworking of the conventional by integrating the dominant and marginalised versions. The playwright has duly acknowledged elements of Tipu's past by bringing in Tipu's spirit of nationalism, his love for freedom from foreign yoke, the zeal of a reformer, his French associations, plotting of conspiracies by British as well as by his own men, and his death – issues held quite in variance. The study reveals how the dramatist constantly negotiates among Tipu's divergent images, struggling hard to emerge from the conflicting beliefs and from the dialectic existing between the tragedy of a heroic warrior and the king held in critical light by many.

What the playwright intends to stage is resignation and acceptance of one's fate that becomes frozen in time. He has brought deeper and more sustained insight into the task of probing the nature and consequence of the encounter between history with its conflicting ideological accounts and hagiography with its folkloric images and legend making, both combined here in the character of 'Tipu Sultan'. The division is born out of two divergent pulls of his identity – history and hagiography, both asserting their authenticity within the same soul and spirit. At times in the play one might feel that the playwright empathises with this figure by depicting Tipu fighting like his religious predecessors giving cognizance to the sentiments of several of Tipu's patriots who called him a martyr. In his projection, Shivaprakash suggests of his inclination towards Tipu's hagographical image when he intends to stage the hero's martyrdom along with his patriotic leanings. But avoiding any biases for narrative accounts, his play allots equal space to opposing ideological and conflicting versions. Several historical beliefs such as Tipu tormenting the prisoners of war, his undue interference in matters of Coorg and Malabar, Tranvancore, etc are also paid attention to. The conflicting and irreconcilable views held by the British, Indian/native and French historians make it quite hard to retrieve his past accurately and form a clearer picture of it.

The degree of variation that we observe in Tipu's historical-hagiographical accounts is significant where one exemplify his heroic traits while the other emphasise on his brute, insensitive personality calling him no hero. The confusion and dilemma becomes even greater when both these types of accounts claim for being authentic and factual. It is probably this predicament that even bothered the playwright who goes in for
restaging of Tipu’s historical past by contributing in a creative/critical mode towards the deep, weighty divisions existing in contemporary India, questioning time and again the heroic and nationalist image of Tipu Sultan. And it is for this purpose that he brings in strategically the two opposite yet complementary modes of discourses relating to his past history. His efforts in recreating Tipu’s persona by allowing the historical and the hagiographical play a parallel role in this reconstruction has certainly proved helpful in understanding and analysing Tipu’s history more clearly if not completely. By challenging the customary or conventional notions and exploring the neglected ones, he has successfully combined alternative histories in a dialectical frame.

Shivaprakash’s creative attempt at demystifying the figure and revealing a different personality that keeps constantly vacillating between the two opposites of a martyr and villain contributes significantly to the existing range of interpretations and sensitizing its readers/audiences to varied versions – especially the ones that have long been neglected. With the abundance of accounts seen quite inconsistent, no real image can be drawn keeping its receptors in a perplexed state. Where we find accounts that poise his image with ill feelings, similar accounts with equal claim appear deifying and sanctifying him. Even a microscopic reading of these accounts does not lead to an authentic version that can be relied upon. Due to such reason it seems that the figure would keep oscillating between these two divergent images.

Unlike the hagiographical account of Mira which is often difficult to date as many accounts even remain incomplete, in case of Gandhi tradition, there is comparatively larger body of historical information available, against which one can compare the hagiographical notes. But because Gandhi’s persona has been defied to such a high pedestal and revered highly in hagiographical writings, his life history too, besides the availability of data remains a complexity and provides no single image. The corpus of Gandhi’s works and accounts on his historical being are largely established against which one can examine his life stories and legendary tales. But after looking at such accounts, its multiplicity and intricacy becomes evident due to which we are again troubled by the question of textual authenticity. Though, sifting the historical from the hagiographical seems a hard task as the two images are quite analogous in understanding the figure of Gandhi, Partap Sharma (in chapter 4) has nevertheless exposed us to such formations
taking place and making aware of the politics of historical-hagiographical constructions. The consistent reconstruction of Gandhi’s conflicting persona renders a new revealing every time, thereby suspending his personality to be seized in one particular way. The study takes note of several remarks, events and instances that has frequently deplored his persona and an equal number of such remarks that deify his figure. Covering sections of history, the dramatist depicts some of the ideological differences that existed between Gandhi and several of his contemporaries like Nehru, Tilak and Jinnah besides the British. In addition to this, noticing the segment of hagiographical accounts existing on him, the playwright gives them due venture by bringing in instances such as his spirit of nationalism, his mass campaigns, his attitude to help the needy and the subaltern, and his philosophical leanings. The dramatist avoids making any biased or predisposed attempt at Gandhi’s past, conveying matters relating to his appreciation, and his failings simultaneously.

Partap Sharma has successfully portrayed the two conflicting yet coexisting selves of Gandhi in a corresponding mode. His effective way of presenting Gandhi’s defied self as Mahatma through his inner voice (shadow) has greatly helped his way. By allowing the two dialectical selves of Gandhi reason out and argue on stage, he wisely brings to light some relevant historical-hagiographical issues that form Gandhi’s past. Revealing how the two selves never really agreed with each other’s thoughts and ideological beliefs, we are again sensitized to the dialectical existence of his personality. Noticing such divergent pictures, projected with equal vehemence baffles the readers, making the retrieval of a concrete image almost impossible. Hereby we realise how his persona so entangled between opposing accounts shall remain oscillating between the historical Mohandas and the hagiographical Mahatma. Sharma’s work has definitely proved to be a work of genius using his innovative way where the image constantly oscillates between a capricious saint and a scheming politician. By depicting a constant conflict that goes on in the play between his two characters (Mohan and Mahatma), the playwright effectively highlights the concern of contemporary writers and thinkers who find Gandhi’s real past lost between his contradictory/paradoxical images. As the play ends with Mohan’s death but Mahatama talking of his existence beyond time, the playwright seems to suggest on Gandhi’s hagiographical image that will live on with the historical Mohan forever and
can hardly be separated. He himself seems to hint at the duality and the conflict that might go on forever without choosing any one of the two portrayals or emphasising upon any particular construction thereby leaving it upon his viewers to discern.

Thus, all the three representations of Mira, Tipu Sultan and Gandhi begin with questions on history, reasoning out some of its elements and gradually creating enough space to fit in the people’s version using individual dramatic techniques. All the three figures of past are seen moving from the historical towards the hagiographical though in varying degrees and different veins. Where the hagiographical belief on Mira’s life story takes a stronger grip, the degree reduces in context of Tipu. And further in case of Gandhi too, the Mahatma in the end seems to have overpowered the historical Mohan to some extent. All the three playwrights suggest the importance of hagiographical version which has long remained unnoticed by official histories and does contain in itself significant meanings on the lives of this figure. Reading some historical-hagiographical accounts on these figures (as noted in preceding chapters) has helped us in locating the adherences and deviations that a playwright makes in his act of restaging. Also the accounts help us in making out the degree of conflict that encompass these figures.

The evocation of such national figures is an inevitable effect of restaging of the historical past and reflects on the long conceptualised but newly actualised national history. As against Modern Indian drama, the conventional category of historical drama failed to incorporate such complexity and multiplicity and focussed rather on one narrative form. Modern Indian drama thereby offers opportunity to explore the people’s version of their past along with the documented recognised ones. The two opposite yet conciliatory forms of narrations are brought closer on a single platform by the contemporary literary dramatists in order to harmonise them for an effective understanding of the past. The use of literary with the historical or the hagiographical helps in restructuring the past that further provides some alternate possibilities to the dominant ideology and to the so called authentic accounts. The emerging arena of modern Indian ‘historical’ drama thus proves itself quite functional in balancing and countering the claims of institutional as well as non-institutional histories, by providing an alternative source of historical knowledge for those trapped within the dominant narratives.