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Fact, Romance and Fiction: Textual Strategies of Writing History

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Abstract

Technologies available to narrativize historical accounts from details culled from source materials into a form according to the predilections of the writers and the interests of the readers may be classified as fact-driven, romanticisation of history and historical fiction. This paper reads texts by Stephen Greenblatt, William Dalrymple and Salman Rushdie to illustrate this point.

Keywords: historical writing, historiography, fact-driven historical writing, romanticised history, historical fiction

The writing of history, a.k.a. historiography, entails the selection from authentic source materials of details which are then synthesised into a narrative. As Gayatri Spivak observed, "The production of historical accounts is the discursive narrativization of events." The diverse linguistic strategies that used for creating a narrative fall into three distinct approaches: Fact-driven Historical Writing, Romanticised History and Historical Fiction.

Fact-driven historical writing is rooted in empirical evidence and focuses on verifiable facts. Projecting to create an objective and accurate record of events, this kind of writing relies on primary sources such as official documents, letters, newspapers, and physical artifacts, archives, and data. The writers tend to be neutral and aim for a clear, factual recounting with no eye for emotional embellishment or personal interpretation. They present events in a structured, timeline-based manner, with analysis of causes, consequences, and context. The narrative aims at an accurate reconstruction of events to enable the reader to draw their own conclusions.

Romanticised History presents the raw facts of history in a way that enhances their emotional or symbolic significance. Focusing on grand narratives, it idealizes the past to evoke strong feelings of nostalgia, heroism or national pride. It dramatizes historical events emphasizing heroism, idealism or tragedy and uses selective portrayal of grand

moments while downplaying the more complex, messy, or problematic aspects. It indulges in symbolism and myth-making, and can serve as a tool for political or cultural cohesion.

Historical Fiction, which blends real historical events, figures and settings with fictional elements, is more fictional than historical. It reimagines the past in a narrative form. The writers explore history using imagination and creativity to fil the gaps when historical facts might be incomplete or unknown. Plausible fictional characters, invented dialogues and speculative scenarios traverse the historical framework. The reader is treated to an immersive experience in the historical period through sensory details and the emotional experiences of characters. Personal, emotional and social dimensions of history are emphasised with giving voice to marginalised and silenced individuals and groups. While the narrative entertains, educates and provokes thought about the experiences of people in historical periods, it can also explore themes like power, identity and change.

The three approaches can be illustrated by visiting Stephen Greenblatt's in *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, William Dalrymple's *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-century India* and Salman Rushdie's *Victory City.*

Stephen Greenblatt reads Shakespeare's texts alongside known biographical details to demonstrate how the texts reflect the writer's social and economic circumstances. Shakespeare, the son of a commoner father and an aristocratic mother, aspired to promote himself socially. His early life in Stratford-upon-Avon shaped his worldview, creativity, and eventual literary success. Greenblatt suggests that the tension in Elizabethan England between public and private life, and the intersection of power, religion and social class played a role in shaping Shakespeare's work. His early exposure to theatre while still in Stratford, his education and his family's financial struggles, all have contributed to the themes of ambition, power and social dynamics in his plays. But Shakespeare was a master of distancing. His roots were rural and he had a sympathetic understanding of country customs but he also showed that they were no longer his native element:

Shakespeare was anything but indifferent to being counted as a gentleman. But his concern for his station in life, his longing for social success, and his fascination with the lives of aristocrats and monarchs did not entail the erasure of the world from which he came.

This can be discerned in scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*.

Greenblatt says that Shakespeare helped his father in his glover's business, as indicated by the references to gloves, skins and leather in his plays:

> *... Romeo longs to be a glove on Juliet's hand, so that he could touch her cheek. The peddler in The Winter's Tale has scented gloves in his pack "as sweet as damask roses" [...] "Is not parchment," asks Hamlet, "made of sheepskins?" "Ay, my lord," replies Horatio, "and of calf-skins too" [...] The officer in The Comedy of Errors wears a calf-skin uniform—he resembles "a bass viol in a case of leather" [...] Petruchio, in The Taming of the Shrew, has a bridle made of sheep's leather; the cobbler in Julius Caesar resoles shoes made of neat's leather; tinkers, according to The Winter's Tale, carry sow-skin bags. When Shakespeare wanted to convey the fantastical world of the fairies in A Midsummer Night's Dream, he played with miniaturized versions of this trade: the "enamelled skin" shed by snakes is "wide enough to wrap a fairy in," and the Fairy Queen's followers war with bats "for their leathern wings / To make my small elves coats...."*

If his father's entrepreneurial energy and ambition marked Shakespeare's early years, the decline of financial and social standing shaped his adolescence. Shakespeare's inability to complete his education finds resonance in *As You Like It*. Orlando complains to his wicked brother: "My father charged you in his will to give me good education" but "You have trained me like a peasant, obscuring and hiding from me all gentleman-like qualities" At the same

time, nothing in Shakespeare's works suggests any sentimental feeling about school. In fact, Shakespeare makes Jaques in the same play speak of "the whining schoolboy with his satchel / And shining morning face, creeping like snail / Unwillingly to school". The tedium of rote learning is recalled in the scene of Latin instruction in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The obscene punning in the passage is the playwright's recollection of his psychic relief from it.

According to Greenblatt, there is textual evidence that Shakespeare brooded over the cause, particularly drunkenness, of his father's failure in business. Hamlet tells Horatio that there is "some vicious mole of nature" in men that ruins what would be an admirable life. Hamlet is disgusted with heavy drinking, the Danish national custom, "More honoured in the breach than the observance". Shakespeare "was also fascinated by the delicious foolishness, the exuberant cracking of jests, the amiable nonsense, the indifference to decorum, the flashes of insight, the magical erasure of the cares of the world." He depicts the disastrous consequences of alcohol but does not advocate temperance. In *Twelfth Night,* Sir Toby Belch puts the puritanical Malvolio down:

Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?"

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the drunken rulers of the world dance "the Egyptian bacchanals". Shakespeare's greatest representation of drunkenness is Sir John Falstaff whose motto is represented in his call, "Give me a cup of sack."

The plays and poems offer 'tantalizing hints' of possible occupations Shakespeare might have followed. Legal situations and terms are used accurately in scenes where one would least expect them. In *Venus and Adonis*, the goddess in love with the beautiful young huntsman pleads for another kiss:

Pure lips, sweet seals in my soft lips imprinted
What bargains may I make still to be sealing?
To sell myself I can be well contented,
So thou wilt buy, and pay, and use good dealing;
Which purchase if thou make, for fear of slips
Set thy seal manual on my wax-red lips.
(lines 511–16)

The image of the imprint in wax represents not only the imagined kiss but also the hard impact on the poet's imagination of the work he did in the office of a local attorney who handled minor lawsuits, title searches, etc.

Shakespeare seems to have experienced a profound sense of longing for professional and personal advancement—a "dream of restoration" to something greater. His act of completing his father's application for a coat of arms, Greenblatt says, was "an act of prudential, self-interested generosity" by which he "was conferring gentle status on himself and his children." Shakespeare who had played gentlemen onstage wanted to carry off the part outside the playhouse as well:

He could legally wear outside of the theater the kinds of clothes he had been wearing onstage. For a man singularly alert to the social hierarchy […] the prospect of this privilege must have seemed sweet. He would sign his last will and testament "William Shakespeare, of Stratford upon Avon in the county of Warwick, gentleman.

William Dalrymple's *White Mughals* tells the story of the love affair in early nineteenth-century Hyderabad of James Achilles Kirkpatrick, the British Resident who converted into Islam and married Khair-un-Nissa Begum, a noblewoman of royal descent. The book has been projected as a work of social history that talks about the warm relations that existed between the British and some Indians. Dalrymple—who calls the 18th and early 19th centuries, when one in three British men in India was married to an Indian woman, a period of unexpected and unplanned mingling of peoples, cultures and ideas—documents the inter-ethnic liaisons between British officers and Indian women, and the geo-political context of India. He draws, with a novelist's skills, the picture of sexual attitudes and social etiquette, and unravels the racist and dismissive attitude among the British ruling class towards mixed race offspring.

During the last years of the 18th century, the British were expanding inland after consolidating

their presence in the coastal "presidencies" of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Their intrigues extended their influence over the state of Hyderabad, pacified the Marathas in western India and undermined the power of Tipu Sultan in the south. But "far more intriguing and still largely unwritten" is the story of "the Indian conquest of the European imagination". Kirkpatrick who had gone out to India to make his name in the subjection of a nation finds that it was he who was conquered, not by an army but by Khair un-Nissa. However, the marriage was not recorded and so not legally valid; he described the offspring of the relationship in his will as his "natural" children, a euphemism for illegitimate children that a father recognized as his own offspring.

White Mughals is the tragic tale of a passionate love affair that crossed all cultural, religious and political barriers of the time. But more than the story of secret assignations, court intrigue, harem politics, and religious and family disputes, the book unearths a slew of colourful figures like "Hindoo Stuart', who travelled with his own team of Brahmins to maintain his temple of idols, and who spent many years trying to persuade the memsahibs of Calcutta to adopt the sari; and like Sir David Ochterlony, who took all thirteen of his wives out for evening promenades, each on the back of her own elephant.

Through an exotic love story set against a background of shifting alliances and the manoeuvring of the great powers, Dalrymple tries to unravel the legacy of the British Empire, which he defines more in terms of exchange and negotiation than dominance and subjugation. He oversimplifies the complex interactions between the British and the Mughal elites and paints a romanticized picture without addressing the power dynamics at play or the exploitative nature of these relationships. The focus on the personal stories, human qualities and cultural integration of British men falling in love with Indian women brushes over the colonial context and the oppressive British imperialist programme these men were part of. Thus, Dalrymple straddles two worlds—those of the academic white man who exoticizes the land he studies and of the Indophile who plunges into his narrative sympathetically. He makes a surreptitious attempt to satisfy his diverse audiences in India and abroad.

Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* chronicles the 50-year history of Vijayanagar Empire. The book which begins with the two hundred- and forty-seven-year-old "blind poet, miracle worker, and prophetess Pampa Kampana" completing on the last day of her life "her immense narrative poem about Bisnaga and buried it in a clay pot sealed with wax in the heart of the ruined Royal Enclosure, as a message to the future" unravels Pampa Kampana's life and that of the fantastic stories that we have come across in myths and legends. Along with this is a chronicle of the Bisnaga empire which lasted two-and-a-half centuries. Pampa Kampana, the enduring presence from the beginning to the end of the empire, is the creator, partner and witness of the origin, development, transformation and destruction of Bisnaga. She is witness to the life and death of the kings who were her husbands, her lovers and five generations of children.

The novel is constructed in the form of the reading, translation and interpretation of the buried epic, *Jayaparajaya*, whose narrator is at once the story-teller and the interpreter. The plot is one in which the past, present and future coalesce, with fact and fiction, and history and fantasy mingling with one another.

The novel begins with the widows of the ruler of a tiny kingdom, which has been defeated by the northern Sultans in an insignificant battle, walking into the pyre that they themselves have lit on the banks of a river. The nine-year-old Pampa Kampana stands watching with tears in her eyes:

Into the fire they marched and the stench of their death made Pampa feel like retching and then to her horror her own mother Radha Kampana gently detached her hand and very slowly but with absolute conviction walked forward to join the bonfire of the dead, without even saying goodbye.

She realises then that her childhood is over and that she has been conferred with a divine blessing—that would change everything, would be the cause of the rise and fall of Bisnaga and would enable the

creation of fantastic things. She becomes the queen of Hukka, the shepherd whom she instals as the first king of Bisnaga; then the queen of his brother Bukka, and simultaneously is the mistress of Domingo Nunes, a Portuguese trader. She is also the great-grandmother who has lived 247 years and who foresees that her great-granddaughter will deliver a still-born child.

The novel is divided into twenty-two chapters grouped under four sections called Birth, Exile, Glory and Fall. The narrative technology—reminiscent of the epics with the forging of stories which are recollections of memory with stories with other stories—opens the lines to political interpretations and reveals philosophical insights. The factual history of Vijayanagar gets trans-substantiated into artifact in Rushdie's imagination. Problems of history and philosophy are examined in the novel through a long array of characters belonging to several generations. The chief themes of the novel including history, power, femaleness, liberty and conflict are deployed in the early pages of the book and the subsequent chapters deal with the treatment given to them. Issues of environment, religious conversion, nexus between religion and power, and nuances of man-woman relationship are also dealt with in the book.

Victory City is rooted in history but it is not history; it is a work of fiction that uses history as a canvas to explore timeless themes like the nature of power, the role of women in history, and the cyclical nature of civilization.

This paper does not make a value judgment and say that one kind of historical writing is superior to the others but would like to state that each of them is the product of different circumstances and differing perspectives dictated by writers' predilections and the readers' expectations.

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