

Playing With History and Fiction: Language as Medium

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New historicism is the literary-critical variant of postmodern historicism and forms a theoretical alliance with it. Postmodern historicism speaks of a historiography which is aware of the discrepancy present between the interpretation of the past and the 'past' itself. In the awareness of this discrepancy, contemporary postmodern historiography draws close parallels with the tenets of the new historicist agenda. The interpretative imagination is ignored by the traditional historicists. The interpretative imagination cannot be free from the capacity to 'construct' or 'make' history. Words are vested with meaning to decipher worlds. But meaning is arbitrary. In attempting to interpret the past, the historian lives within it (the past) and outside it. But in both positions, communication between the past and the historian remains mobilized. However, the coherence present in the historian's discourse does not equal or reflect the coherence of the past. Language in the historian's discourse 'gives' coherence to the past and in no way mirrors that coherence. In this paper, I seek to focus on the new historicist notion that the literary text and the historical text are products of the interpretative imagination with reference to two texts: Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*.

Underlying the postmodern notion of the historical process, the past is "dead"; it can only be referred to in representations. But the arbitrary nature of language makes it difficult to mirror the past. It is through language that the imagination 're'-constructs the past. The real of the past cannot be reduced to a single monolith. So historical writing does not or cannot refer to the actual reality of the past because history mediates through language. Language plays a major role in the articulation of social practices. Society is a product of ideology and situated in culture which is akin to the literary text in its endless play of signs and difference in meaning.

In sharing this common denominator of language as a medium, new historicism further gains currency as a literary – critical variant of postmodern historicism. New historicists follow the method of "thick description", a concept which rests on the semiotic conception of language. New historicists agree with the notion of the centrality of language and its opaqueness. But they conceive of cultures as symbolic webs of significance. Moreover, the new historicists see texts as part of the complex symbolic negotiations and reject the notion of the autonomy of texts.

The poststructuralist notion that semiotics is constructed within linguistics makes an ideological progression into new historicism. But new historicism sees textual meaning as contained and conditioned not merely within linguistic signs but within cultural ideological systems. Non-linguistic objects as well are vested with meaning only through language. Language as a symbolic code refers to the world. However the word and the world are categorically different.

History is a linguistic construct couched and reconstructed within the socio-cultural codes. Similarly a literary text is a cultural and social product whose efforts to see the past are conditioned by linguistic limits. History in the postmodern world is problematized and its truth and objectivity are called into question. The arbitrary relationship between words and worlds and the inevitability of cultural relativism problematize the capacity of history to mirror reality. Further, history becomes mere distortion when it employs metaphors to describe events since metaphors describe the relative quality of an event.

Literature as a text is only one variant among other social practices involved in the production of meaning. The cultural nature of language makes it impossible for meaning to be contained within the structures of the text. Literature is an active agent in the construction of a culture's reality as well as in the participation of its historical processes. Literature is in itself an ideological product of the culture and shaped by it. Literature constructs a culture's reality by using a language that reflects the moral, political and social concerns of that culture. Meaning is conferred upon a historical 'event' by the linguistic energy enforced by the author. The possibility/availability of multiple interpretations to a single historical event attests to the arbitrary nature of language.

The arbitrary relationship between the word (signifier) and the concept (signified) corresponds to the arbitrariness between texts and their meanings. In laying emphasis upon this arbitrariness, the same event can be perceived in multiple ways depending upon different cultures and the same word can hold different meaning depending upon different truth conditions.

Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor reflect the cultural ideology of the time in their fiction and acknowledge the necessity to read literature and history as social and political constructs. Set against the backdrop of pre-independent freedom struggle and post-independent India, their two significant works of fiction-Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* clearly echo the historic repetitions that were taking place during this period. While Rushdie seeks to reconstruct the past by fictionalizing established historical versions Tharoor discovers the gaps, the ruptures that facilitate the dominance of the structures of power.

Different interpretations of the same historical event by historians reveal the social and political codes that decide their versions of the past. Rushdie and Tharoor reveal their historical consciousness in their representation of the partition, the emergency and other historical events. Rushdie's perspective of the partition as a metaphor is not unaware of its political effects. In *Midnight's Children*; the disintegration of the protagonist is accompanied by the disintegration of language under the pressure of the political climate upon the author's mind. The metaphor of the perforated sheet further heightens the impact of being "partitioned". Rushdie maintains that fictions of nation can lead to ethnic violence and that the "truth" becomes a product of rhetoric. Rushdie's self-conscious narrator encourages the skeptic reader to reconsider the valid interpretation of an ideologically based history. Rushdie is aware of history as too complex a reality to stand objective representation "But there are cracks and gaps [...] Admitting defeat I am forced to record that I cannot remember for sure" (MC 461). The impress of the Indian cultural climate is reflected in the thematic and formal aspects of Rushdie's fiction. Rushdie's choice of the events – independence, partition and the emergency-events in which his understanding is informed by the conflict between social freedom and political threat determines the shape of the narrative.

In *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) Tharoor recasts Indian history as fairytale and democracy as cartoon. The novel subverts the "modern myths" of Indian independence and the narrative of democracy. Tharoor sees in variant narratives multiple interpretations of reality. Tharoor's ingenuity lies in revealing how the methodology of the ancient epic can replay the political system of modern India. This implicates that the process of history-making and the process of fiction-making are not separate but structurally and functionally at play. Tharoor combines the creativity of fiction and the scholarship of factual information to identify the historical figures like Gandhi, Nehru and Mountbatten with their mythological counterparts. In employing such a technique, Tharoor vests the

objectivity of factual history with a potential for fictional probability. He juxtaposes the two narratives (the indigenous epic and the imperial myth) to foreground history as a highly transformative discourse ever open to reinterpretation. Tharoor's open-ended narrative re-opens the narratives of fiction and history and the metaphorical description affirms the endless possibilities of meaning "...the essence of the tale lay in the telling..." (TGIN 162).

Both Tharoor and Rushdie represent partition as a metaphor to validate the reconstruction of the past as only a fractured perception within the limits of social, political and cultural codes. Metaphorical description of events in the literary text as in the history text is induced by personal prejudices as well as the socio-cultural and political ideology of the present. The "truth" of the past can be proved in history only by relying upon linguistic evidences of the present. Metaphorical descriptions allow the either/or premise upon which the history and the literary texts pursue the truth.

Rushdie and Tharoor as writers are shaped by the ideology of their time and so is their language premised on the ideology of the present. Both history and fiction are essentially linguistic re-constructions since they use language to describe the past. Moreover language is itself a product of ideology and ideology provides for the personal perspectives of individuals of any particular period. The language of any official record conforms to the accepted ideology of the specific period. Rushdie and Tharoor reconstruct the partition in texts informed by the contemporary contexts of communalism and nationalism. The open-ended nature of their novels corresponds to the ruptures and gaps in official versions of history.

The language of the people of the partition sounds different in our context. We, at the present moment experience communal riots which are only a consequence of the partition. The partition of the past could be called the cause of a communal riot of the present but the reverse does not hold. A communal riot today can help illuminate the impact of the partition. Hence the partition cannot be lived; it can only be reconstructed through a vocabulary that exerts pressure on the interpretative imagination, a vocabulary that is alien to the present since the past is a foreign country and a country of the mind.

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