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Novelists as Cultural Historians: Defining and Deciding the Nature and

Function of Historical Novels

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Abstract:

Literature performs a variety of tasks, and thus it is difficult to decide its functions. However, it also invites all the relevant interpretation of the text braced with logical appropriation. In the same line of argument, the novels of Manubhai Pancholi and Amitav Ghosh, are of mercurial nature. The moment reader feels to categories it as historical novels, they (novel) rise against the hypothesis. Thus, this paper tends to focus on the nature and function of historical fiction and cultural historiography that are prevalent in the fiction of the said authors.

Keywords: Cultural Historian, Historical Fiction and Cultural History.



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One of the functions of novelists is to offer background of his characters. When he locates his plot, he offers complete worldview of the locality. However, many novelists make it implicit. In *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, Defoe has made it very explicit. He dedicated the first part of his first chapter to introduce milieu of Crusoe, whereas in *Hard Times* Dickens made it implicit. Question may arise as to ‘why do novelists need to offer background to his character?’ They, perhaps, want their readers to contextualize their novel sensibly. A character in the novel as an individual is a part of an organic whole: society within which he takes actions. Therefore, it becomes imperative for a novelist to depict him with all his associations. His association may include his relationship with his kinsmen, way of life, background of his family, profession and professional image, importance in his family and state that he hails from, economical state, methods of dealing with family and social issues, political awareness and many more. In short it includes everything that defines his persona.

In literary studies, it is called culture. Culture includes everything that a character does. Therefore, characters’ background can naturally be considered as cultural background. There has to be some differences between ‘background’ and ‘cultural background’. The latter is an inclusive term. It includes everything that a man does to give meaning to the life. Starting from his birth it studies every minute action that a man takes. The former may be understood in fragments like educational background, family background etc. The later can be interpretative whereas the former is informative. It means both are supplementary to one another for information is to be interpreted. Thus, a novelist does offer a cultural background to his characters.



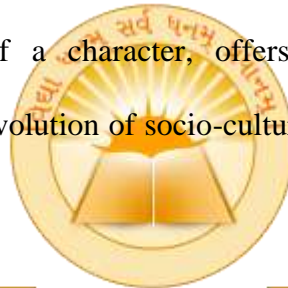
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Many novelists also offer interpretations of milieu of their characters. It may include the evolutionary stages of their social codes and conducts, evolution of political ideologies recurrent in the contemporary politics and many more. Novelists like, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Salaman Rushdie, William Faulkner, William Golding, for instance, go to an extent to offer cultural interpretations of what their characters do during the course of the novel. The way character grows up in bildungsroman, in the same way his milieu grows up too. Actually, it is reciprocal process for characters too influence milieu. Thus, a novelist, by default, narrates and interprets changing social conducts and ways of the world. In doing so he, very consciously, prepares a history of cultural practices in his novel. Frequently it so happens that his oeuvre, if written in continuum, depicts a cultural history of a particular region. Thus, if a novelist depicts cultural background of a character, offers detailed descriptions and interpretations of a character and shows evolution of socio-cultural practices, it can be called 'cultural history'.



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Such conclusion may raise three fundamental questions: 1. Are not all histories' cultural history'? 2. Can't there be an independent 'Cultural Historian'? 3. Why to tag novelist as 'cultural historian'?

The answer to the first question can be another question 'Is not biology science?' History, as perceived by common psyche, is a chronological record of the events took place in the past. To be more precise, it is chronicle record of the past. Historians put dates on the left side of a page and an event took place on that day on the right side. They also narrate the connections with the events. They also create narratives which are primarily cause-effect narratives. In their book called *Concise History of Modern India* (2006) Barbara Metcalf and

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Thomas Metcalf, scholars at University of California, for instance, talk about Jallianwalla Bagh massacre “In the Punjab city of Amritsar, the general commanding the local garrison, Reginald Dyer, took it upon himself on 13 April 1919 to disperse by force an illegal, though peaceable, crowd gathered in the enclosed Jallianwalla Bagh. Drawing up his Gurkha troops at the entrance, he fired until some 370 trapped protestors lay dead and over 1,000 wounded.” (Metcalf P-168) The passage quoted above records Dyer, April 13, 1919, Jallianwalla Bagh and some numbers of wounded and dead people. This is what historians do. On the other hand, you have someone called Rakhshanda Jalil who is Indian’ literary historian’ publishes a book called *Jallianwalla Bagh: Literary Responses in Prose and Poetry* (2019) wherein she accounts authors like Saadat Hasan Manto, Mulk Raj Anand, Krishna Chander, Abdullah Hussein, Bhisham Sahni, Ghulam Abbas, subadhra Kumari Chauhan, Sarojini Naidu, Sohan Singh Misha, Muhammad Iqbal, Josh Malihabadi, Nanak Singh. These are the authors who have written poems and novels on Jallianwalla Bagh. There are more than ‘just’ numbers in these authors’ works about the same incident. In some of the works you may find families mourning the empty seats in their kitchen. Now let us rethink about the question raised above: Are not all history cultural histories? A sensible reader gets the answer.

The second question even demands more focus. In 1870s and 80s a Swiss scholar Jacob Burchhardt stemmed up as cultural historian. He studied history of Renaissance. Cultural evolution of a political territory interested him. In 1860 he published a book called *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien (The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy)*. The book established him as ‘cultural historian’. After Burchhardt, there is conspiratorial silence in the field till 1945 when Will Dura came up with *The Story of Civilization*. Both these scholars



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drafted evolution of civilization which is in stark contradiction to what we call 'history'.

They talked much more than just dates.

History interprets dates where as cultural history describes culture and its evolution. Thus, it augments approaches of anthropology and history. It does so to interpret popular cultural traditions and cultural implications of historical experiences. It is much more than a political record book. It studies the record and narrative interpretation of incidents occurred in the past which may consist of events in its continuum (something started in the past and has shaped the present and would also affect the future) with special context with a culture. Cultural history minutes and construes past events concerning human beings from end to end the socio-cultural, and political surroundings of or involving creativity and manners that a particular tribe promotes. Jayob Burchhardt (1818-1897) promoted and established it, cultural history, an individual discipline. It accumulates and analyses the past events of human society. It does so by keeping various ways of living constituted by certain group of communes under consideration. Ceremony, inter-class or cast correspondence, caste system and its practices, for instance, are subject of studies and analysis for cultural studies. In a history book that is mentioned above, one may not find Barbara and Thomas Metcalf considering all the traits of a cultural history in his *Concise History of Modern India*. However, there is not an exclusive book available on the nature and function or rise, development and future scope in cultural history either. It is just a concept which is inferred from some 'distinct' book on history of certain civilization in particular or civilization in general. One thing becomes clear here that historian and cultural historian are two different vocations and we unfortunately have a few 'cultural historians' available in our intellectual tradition.



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Who can be, then, considered as cultural historians? The answer to this question has already been discussed in the beginning. One may find aggregation of the traits of cultural evolution and their interpretation in the historical novels. In other forms of literature, author does not get enough scope to address the history in the same narrative that history utilizes. Novels provides with the space to create counter narrative (cultural history) to the main stream history which is why some novelists do exactly write cultural history.

While making clear-cut distinction between history and cultural history, one might have consideration given below:

(A) 'Only' historian falls prey to the tickling clock. That is to say that only historian is afraid of refraining himself from the specific period that they have selected. For him, including anything beyond disciplinary term of history, per se, is like extra marital affair – an ethical dilemma.

(B) Conversely, a cultural historian is rather more committed to trans-disciplinarity of history – a love for everybody irrespective of gender and relationship.

(C) Spectrum of history, for cultural historian, does not only focus on accounts – 'time and space' but also the very spirit that holds them together. For example:

- Comparative historiography
- Mentions dubious accounts of history (oral, fictional, personal diaries etc.)
- Common people find their space in it

(D) Pure historian miserably falls vulnerable to political identity.

(E) Custodian of cultural history is culture itself.

(F) Cultural history is less vulnerable, more democratic and sufficiently inclusive.



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It might have cleared the doubts on what, why and how of Cultural History. Now let us spare some space for who is cultural historian and who is cultural historiographer?

‘Cultural historian is one who writes and studies cultural history’ cannot be an adequate definition of cultural historian. Reason number 1) for who studies history ‘history’ is available in a certain form to him/her and 2) one who writes history has resources (newspapers, national repositories, political activists etc) available to aggregate and interpret. Cultural historian, thus, have to study customs, rituals, habits, social institutions, belief systems, code of conducts of the group of people under consideration. He has to consider anthropological graph of human evolution, physiological preoccupations of the commune, behavioral science, human correspondence with the nature, science behind religious rituals, intra-commune correspondence and many more. So, if at all it can be defined, Cultural historian can be defined as ‘cultural historian is a person who studies anthropological, psychological, social, religious practices and epistemological preoccupations and interprets and writes the current cultural practices of a commune under consideration.’

The fundamental difference lies in the interpretation of the aggregated data. Both historian and cultural historian operate the facts independently. One tends to prepare a report and the former tends to offer narrative. One is interested in ‘who did what?’ and the former is interested in ‘why was done what was done?’ cultural historian selects a mercurial form of fiction. He writes ‘story’ on the basis of factual data. ‘Story’ itself says ‘something which has not yet happened.’ However, the facts used in the historical fiction cannot be overlooked. Thus, no one can oppose it on the basis of ‘misrepresentation’ or ‘manipulation’ of the facts, because it is just a ‘story’. On the other hand, it cannot be neglected as just a fictional



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representation of an event for it supplements the factual data. Thus, cultural historians stand out and appeals more than just a 'historical' account.

Novelists, like Darshak and Amitav, can thus be considered as cultural novelists. They do not just narrate a story, nor do they write historical record, nor do they talk only of cultural evolution of a commune, they offer an exceptional blend of all three that too in appealing narrative, i.e., novel. It would be a fresh search, through this hypothesis, that a reader senses unique blend of history and culture in the form of novel. It is also imperative, here, to account some best practices in 'cultural history'.

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