

REPRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS IN TARIQ ALI'S FICTION: A NEW HISTORICIST STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses representation of historical accounts in Tariq Ali's two novels The Book of Saladin (1998) and The Stone Woman (2000) through their close reading. These two novels are from Islam Quintet- a series of five historical novels about Muslims and their clash with the Christians in from twelfth to twenty first century. As these novels are for the much part historical; depicting political and cultural history of two different eras of Muslim (1187 and 1899); the novels have been analyzed through the New Historicist study as its theoretical perspective. New Historicist study calls for the researcher to go outside text itself to have a deeper understanding of the milieu and epoch of the time depicted in the proposed novels. Because New Historicists believe, "Representation of history is the matter of interpretation not facts and emphasis impossibility of objective analysis" (Tyson, 2006). In order to carry this out, the method of textual analysis is conducted. Textual Analysis, as McKee holds, is useful for researchers working in cultural studies (McKee, 2001).

The end of the analysis is to have a turnout of a deeper comprehension of the relationship between textual and historical depiction in the text. Furthermore by applying knowledge of historical ideas for the interpretation of a specific literary text it attempts to investigate the value and relevance of historical knowledge applied to text. The endeavor made in the paper explores that Ali's these two novels are fundamentally historical; political structures and ideological conflicts are central to the theme of the text. But not much objective interpretation, on the part of author, is observed during study. The text is the discursive production of the events laid down in history. The text supports the minority group of the time.

Keywords: Tariq Ali, New Historicism, The Stone Woman, The Book of Saladin, Interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Tariq Ali (born 21 October 1943) is a British Pakistani journalist, film maker, editor and author of many books. He has been writing and editing reviews and articles in various eminent journals, newspapers and magazines since his writing career started in 1960s. Ali's fictional work

consists of five novels that have been collectively titled as 'Islam Quintet'.

Tariq Ali's Islam Quintet is a series of five historical novels, referring different eras from European history, brilliantly depicts history of tussle between Islam and Christendom. The novels are '*Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*' (1992), '*The Book of Saladin*' (1998), '*The Stone Woman*' (2000), '*A Sultan in Palermo*' (2005) and '*Night of the Golden Butterfly*' (2010).

This paper focuses two of these five novels; *The Book of Saladin*' (1998) and *The Stone Woman* (2000).

The Book of Saladin is kind of a biographical novel which charts the life and events of a Kurdish Muslim warrior Salahuddin Ayyubi, who won the reward of being sultan of Egypt and Syria after successful recapture of Jerusalem from the crusades and its defense against subsequent invasions in 1187. The novel is set in different settings-Cairo which reveals Sultan's nature as a human through his family background and childhood memories, Damascus, which depicts many of the characters' inner stories and Sultan's preparation of war to take Jerusalem and finally Jerusalem which gives clear senses of camps, soldiers, battles and Sultan's victory to retake Jerusalem. All this helps provision of vivid pictures of the particular historical events. The memoir is dictated to a celebrated Jewish philosopher Ibn Yakub, who plays the role of narrator. The scribe Ibn Yakub has meetings with Sultan on daily basis, not only this, but for collecting the correct and solid record of Sultan's life the scribe is permitted to see sultan's closed companions including his wife and other ladies of the haram. Not only this, the scribe is permitted to go with sultan wherever he goes; hence the narration, by the scribe, is based not only on the observation by him but the solid experiences of battles with Sultan. Thus the novel communicates an adequate bulk of historical backdrops. Ali's representations of historical culture like that of 'system of caliphate', 'traditions of *harem*', 'judgments of *kadi*', and the sights of battles manifests Ali's first-hand knowledge over subject of its history.

The Stone Woman is set in 1899. The novel is reflecting on the fall of Ottoman Empire through the narrative of one of its decedents, Iskander Pasha. The story begins in 1899 in a palace, not so far from Istanbul, where Iskander Pasha, son of exiled Yusuf Pasha, is living with his family. Yusuf Pasha had been disgraced and sent into exile by the sultan in Istanbul. The story is narrated through Iskander Pasha's daughter Nilofer. The story begins when Nilofer comes back, after an exile, with her son Orhan on the command of her father. She was three years old

when they were banished to this place. The past memories enchain her and she remembers everything went in the past. Nilofer forcefully made an absence of so long time; because she fell in love with a Greek teacher. It is due to her son Orhan that she is asked to come back. On behalf of her son she makes question to her father asking him about the disgrace and exile of her grandfather. She had been listening a number of stories, very different from one another, about the reason of his exile. But now on behalf of her son she puts up this question before her father. She assumes that what she is told is merely a half-truth; whereas the versions told by others were more interesting. Three days after he told Orhan the story, he suffered a stroke and became paralyzed. The stroke affected in such a way that he could not speak and the family never heard his voice again. His commands were written in a small paper. He called his all sons and daughters to be aside him. Salman and Halil (Nilofer's brothers) also came. Halil never ceased contact with Nilofer and her husband. Salman had changed; she was thirteen when he left home. She has not seen him since 15 years. Uncle Memed and his friend baron Jakob Von Hassberg had also arrived. Memed is older brother of Nilofer's father. Iskandar pasha asks his visitors to discuss the decline. They discuss a number of reasons. Though the story has many tales inside; each character has its own different story nonetheless the novel brilliantly discloses historical account of the time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In literature, history has remained its mainstay, of which none can deny. When an investigation of literature is conducted, from Medieval to contemporary, an inescapable account of history is observed within literature for history and literature co-exists side by side. Theodore Roosevelt has written an essay titled 'History as Literature' in which he is of the view that there has been much discussion as to whether history should not henceforth be treated as a branch of science rather than of literature. As with most such discussions, much of the matter in dispute has referred merely to terminology. Moreover, as regards part of the discussion, the minds of the contestants have not met, the propositions advanced by the two sides being neither mutually incompatible nor mutually relevant. There is, however, a real basis for conflict in so far as science claims exclusive possession of the field (Roosevelt, 1913).

Since history has been an inevitable concern of literary writers; critics have sought out the method to interpret literature in terms of its history. Stephen Jay Greenblatt, an American literary critic and theorist has coined the phrase 'New Historicism' in the introduction of his study

of the Renaissance literature entitled *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (1982). Greenblatt's study of culture, Shakespeare, Renaissance and New Historicism has been frequently called as 'cultural poetics'. He investigates "mutual permeability of the literary and the historical" (Greenblatt, 2005). He argues by examples of Shakespeare and his era that the traditions of Shakespeare's literary techniques are not the result of author's genius only but the same traditions of literature were available before Shakespeare put them into practice. Hence his argument is that, as he puts it, "works of art, however intensely marked by the creative intelligence and private obsessions of individuals, are the products of collective negotiations and exchange" (Greenblatt, 1988).

New Historicists argue that if the essence of text is related to some historical event laid down in the past than its analysis is bound to history and its account. For, they believe, literature is framed and developed, one way or other, out of its time and its issues e.g. culture, society, traditions, institutions and politics. Thus new historicism can be utilized by researchers to have deeper understanding of literature with the assist of the study of it in its historical setting. In 1989, Anton Kaes in his critical work *New Historicism and the Study of German Literature*, develops the concept in to more explicit manner and holds it as,

"A critical method that perceives the literary text as a communal product rather than the expression of an author's intention; that disputes the autonomy (and isolation) of the work of art and reconnects it to its cultural context; that scrutinizes artistic production as social intervention; that consistently cross disciplinary boundaries; that draws on recent theoretical work, and nevertheless seeks historical and textual specificity" (Kaes, 1989).

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) Greenblatt observes an inevitable concern of authors to the prevailing systems social, political or psychological into their literature; thus the overall tone of the age, be it of any aspect, becomes fundamental foregrounds. He writes, "self-fashioning is in effect the Renaissance versions of these control mechanism ,the cultural systems of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment. Literature functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes" (2012:3-4).

KEY CONCEPTS

Though some details of New Historicism have been discussed above; here is a short view of it:

1. New Historicism believes literary text as a communal product. They argue literature as a result of collective and communal aspects rather than of pure author's genius.
2. They inter-relate literature to its cultural context. They argue it to be bridged to society's existing beliefs and conducts. Furthermore as it is shaped by the culture similarly it shares its participation in shaping the culture.
3. New Historicists believe that the writing of history is matter of interpretation not facts; and that well-grounded or authentic interpretations are hard to generate. They claim there exists impossibility of objective analysis in case of history's interpretation; interpretations are one way or other influenced by writers' own experiences within their own culture its why because events have causes and that the interpretation of causes varies. As a result all historical analysis is unavoidably subjective.
4. Historical production is neither linear nor progressive. It mirrors that the historical knowledge varies time to time since its publication; and that the debate between old and new emerge its nonlinearity.
5. Power is never confined to a single person or single level of society. Rather power circulates through culture through exchange.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS**Main Question**

1. How does Tariq Ali represent the history of Muslims of two different eras in proposed novels?

Sub-Questions

1. How is the literature shaped by the culture of the time and how does the literature shape the culture?
2. What doctrines of political structures and ideological conflicts does the text promote? How far it supports or undermines the structures prevailing into the literature of the text?
3. What does the text suggest about the minority group e.g. women, children or laborers?
4. How is the historical account interpreted? How far the interpretation objective and reliable?
5. What does the interpretation tell us about the interpreter?

OBJECTIVES

The present study attempts to explore how does post-colonial writer represents the past of Muslims laid down in history. The study also

explores to reveals the facts as to what does post-colonial writer suggest about the experience of marginalized groups of people who have been ignored by traditional history. The study also aims to see how does Pakistani English fiction writer promotes ideologies to reinforce or subvert the prevailing power structures. To highlight the role of post-colonial fiction in recovering the lost history of the Muslims is also one of the objectives of this paper.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Stone Woman and *The Book of Saladin* are both historical novels and cultural artifacts that give a sufficient amount of knowledge about the interaction of discourses and series of social structures prevailing in the time and place. Literary text and the background, historical one which produced that specific literature, are important in equal level. Text and historical account which helped text to come into being keep equal importance; because text and context are interdependent and constitutive. They create each other. Like society and individual identity create each other literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts (Tyson, 2006).

But both novels contrast in theme and setting. *The Stone Woman* is set in Istanbul at end of 19th century, whereas *The Book of Saladin* is set in Cairo, Damascus and Jerusalem in 12th century. Beside the contrast in their setting there is a huge contrast in their theme as well. *The Stone Woman* depicts the fall of one glorious empire of Muslims, the Ottoman Empire; whereas *The Book of Saladin* depicts the victory of Muslims in the shape of conquest of Jerusalem. Both novels brilliantly depict the historical account of tussle between Islam and Christianity between East and West in its humblest and truest manner.

THE STONE WOMAN

The Stone Woman depicts the life and culture reflecting the decay of one of the brilliant and august dynasties of Muslims known as Ottoman Empire in 19th century Turkey. Though *The Stone Woman* is for the major part fiction based; for its continuous tales of the characters and that of the fictional god like figure the stone that looks like woman and many other characters, nonetheless the background, some events and characters' perceptions over their fall reflect in a befitting manner Ali's mastery of knowledge of the cultural but not historical accounts and makes reader visit the Islamic history that is part of past now. Besides, though Ali has tried to bring the social framework and political disruption of the time on the scene, and that life in Istanbul is vividly depicted, in spite of all that,

Historical background is very weak and does not sustain a great weight. It's because the history of the decline of ottoman empire has not been given due attention and it remains in the background only and it is not the focal point as much, whereas the family and inner confessions, love stories and secrets of the characters seem the central point in the novel. The novel reveals the nature and habit of all women in family (including the female maids) when they disclose their inner issues and secrets to 'Stone Woman' e.g. how female maids suffer sexual dominancy over them of their sultans (the Circassian tells her bitter truth to stone woman about sultan's continuous sexual assaults), the life and struggles of women as daughters of aristocratic families is brilliantly and explicitly depicted (Sara's struggles to marry Suleman, Nilofer's attempts to gain a permanent peace and happiness of mind), how the rich cancel the love of the poor, tales of betrayal, all is elaborated in much details. "How we live our lives does not, unfortunately depend on us alone. Circumstances, good or bad, constantly intervene. A person close to us die. A person not so close to us carries on living. All these things affect how we live" (p.34).

Beside characters, the culture has been given due mention in *The Stone Woman*. This is obvious at a number of places in the novel; the family members meet every evening in a cool atmosphere to discussed religion, literature, politics by discussing ideas of Bismarck , Machiavelli, Hegel, Auguste Comte with the aim of pondering over and reflecting as to how the Empire can be constructed into a secular state. Halil reflects on decline in one of the meetings, "We failed to renew ourselves, Ata. And this is price we have to pay. We allowed the clergy too much power in determining the future of this state. Istanbul could have been the capital of invention and modernity like Cordoba and Baghdad in the old days, but these wretched beards that establish the laws of our state were frightened of losing their monopoly of power and knowledge" (p.52). A wonderful aspect of cultural implication in the novel is the application of the blend of different cultures together at the same platform with such an amazing harmony that the novels seems more social and cultural rather than historical. The members in the family are mixture of different religions and races; like there are Greeks, Jews, Turks, Armenian, Syrians and Sufis—thus without question. It depicts a fine diverse, and co-mingled society and help reader observe family tolerance towards varied religious, cultural, sexual, or even atheistic beliefs.

As compared to the depiction of characters and culture, the historical account is less elaborated, except certain comments and

dialogues of characters on the decline e.g. Halil makes a thought provoking speech during family discussion over downfall. "I was aware of the fact, but the price we paid for our retreat into the past was heavy one. We sealed of the empire from a crucially important technological advance. The Ulema (religious scholars) may they roast in hell, opposed modernization on principle.....It is an outrage that we kept the printing press at a distance to prevent the spread of knowledge" (p.52). Not only the printing press but even the clocks and certain other things related to the way of modernization were not been favored by the sultan and religious authorities. Hence, Halil further comments, "I think our decline is well deserved" (p.52). The rejection was justified by them on very stupid and useless ground as viewed by Ali. All this interpretation, whether cultural or historical, is not reliable in the text. For, on the one hand characters lead a life that is very much broad; a kind of liberal life in excess. Not only this rather they lead very secular life. And on the other hand decline of the Ottoman Empire is shown to have been resulted from fundamentalism, lack of unity and religious extremism. Iskander Pasha's brother Mehmed and his gay partner, a German Baron, have an open relationship; Iskander marries Sara, a Jew, Nilofer is not Iskander's daughter but he doesn't mind it because he is a man for whom 'blood relations don't matter in the least' even Iskander loves Sara's daughter Nilofer as much as any of his biological children. And even he does not want to meet his own child from a woman he had affair during his visits to France. Nilofer's brother marries a Christian in Cairo; another one marries a Shia Muslim. Nilofer falls in love with school teacher Dmitri but when the love cools down she wants to leave him and wants to get married to Selim the family barber's son. Also, in the course of the story, when Iskander Pasha recovers from stroke, he thanks August Comt  and not Allah. All this depicted account of much secular and liberal life by Muslim aristocratic family cannot be wholly reliable. For on the other side to Ali's views the Muslims loses Ottoman Empire on the basis of weak passion, religious fundamentalism and rejection of modernized aspect into life. A former tutor says in the novel 'Your Ottoman Empire is like a drunken prostitute, neither knowing nor caring who will take her next. Do I exaggerate, Memed'? (p.81)

The text is wonderfully narrated, that takes reader to the era of Ottoman Empire's decadence in Turkey; in spite of that historical account seems faint. Much of the historical account seems yet to be elaborated. Besides, Ali undermines the structures that lead to the decline of Muslims in Turkey. Salman Pasha's sarcastic comments and questions regarding

bitter truths of their ancestors to old Petrossian give a clear view of how Ali interprets the history. His interpretation is certainly not objective. A striking contrast between people of the liberal culture and their political framework is noticed. His details on women characters, their struggles in lives, mental and emotional state of the characters and a view of self-loving and pleasure seeking sultans, all this makes the text more like tales within text that are tragic love stories rather than a solid and sound historical novel. We see from twenty five chapters only three to five have been attributed to history; which shows the history seems lacking strength in *The Stone Woman*.

THE BOOK OF SALADIN

The book of Saladin is a novel about sultan Salahuddin Ayyubi his Arabic name (westernized as Saladin) the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty and the Sultan of Egypt and Syria. He is well known as the liberator of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the holy city for Muslims, was attacked and brutally occupied by the First Crusade in 1099, which lead to the killing of its all Muslims and Jewish residents in a terrible manner. Islam, then at the height of its civilization, was shocked at the acts of the barbarian acts from Europe. Almost after a century Saladin rose to power with a historical overview of his crusade to recapture Jerusalem from the Christian, or 'Franj', invaders. Saladin tells his scribe Isaac Ibn Yakub (who is appointed by his majesty to pen down Sultan's memoir), "The only story that really moved me as a child was that of al-Kadisiya. The cruelty of the barbarians was like a poison that makes men mute. Al-Kadisiya was never absent from our world of make-believe. We used to climb on our horses and pretend we were riding to drive the Franj out of al-Kadisiya" (p.24).

Tariq Ali rewrites Eurocentric history by focusing on the historical figure Salah al-Din and views the Crusades from a non-Christian point of view but by providing a Jewish narrator neither Christian nor Muslim and the events he witnessed and observed and experienced with court from Cairo to Damascus and ultimately to Palestine. In the Explanatory Note to the novel Ali says it is an issue for a writer when he writes fictional account of a historical figure; for it is difficult to judge whether to give correct account or the other way round. He believes that correct and actual record should not be ignored in preference of a good story. For him loyalty to historical facts and events should not be compromised even in the case of crusades, where Christian and Muslim chronicles often provided different interpretation of what actually happened (Ali, 1998). Ali clearly mentions in the explanatory note to the novel that principle

male characters are historical personages whereas some other like Shadi, narrator and female characters are fictional.

The story of *The Book of Saladin* as compared to *The Stone Woman* holds itself more faithful to the historical account. The tone is quite positive that leads the story as the story of enlightened and glorious civilization of the history of Muslims. Here Ali exposes tussle between Christian, Muslim and Jewish civilizations more truly. But the text does not seem to focus really on the history of crusades and recapture rather the culture seems to be the important touchstone. Lives in harem, judgments of Sheikhs, depiction of festivals, views of camps, quarters and soldiers, all is well told, exceptionally persuasive and wonderfully marched, in its historical depiction. Again that culture is not valid reliable for the representation of women and their too much intellectual capabilities and their liberal life is not much talked about subject in history while Ali himself says in explanatory note to the novel, "Women are a subject on which medieval history is usually silent. Salahuddin, we are told, had sixteen sons, but nothing has been written about their sisters or mothers" (Ali, 1998). Again, their interpretation would be a kind of individual and subjective interpretation. Tariq Ali's discourse on Muslim women through this novel of Islam Quintet is very much obviously positive. He accounts Muslim women with high homage and recognition. He tries to document that in western perception Muslim woman is unfortunately viewed through narrow window. He has depicted women of full spirit, confidence and leaning towards reason rather than traditions or common belief in terms of their religion. Beside they are not fundamentalist or stereotypes women. Their rational criticism of religion is eye opening. They are not suppressed by their male counterparts in the novel. They live according to their own conscience. There may not be any place of doubt on their natural ability. They are educated and skilled. They are not repressed. They are not exploited or harassed. Jamila's discourse on various matters repeatedly proclaims that they are exceptionally intellectual.

Tariq Ali does support defense of one's culture and civilization and the structures and ideologies adopted for that are secular and liberal. Through the text the researcher comes to know the interpreter as the liberal not fundamentalist. He does not support illegal, violent, or other extreme actions. He advocates unorthodox and rational views of religion and politics. He undermines women and other minority's lack of participation in state affairs. He believes in women's mental strength, reason and power of handling things rationally.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed Tariq Ali's representation of historical accounts in *The Book of Saladin* (1998) and *The Stone Woman* (2000). The data was discussed under theoretical framework of New Historicist criticism. The research technique was Textual analysis. The ultimate findings that this paper receives are summarized in this concluding portion of the paper. Tariq Ali's discourse on historical events through these novels of Islam Quintet is explicit. He accounts history for the greater part on the basis of subjective interpretation. The literature is framed by the culture of the time and aids forming the culture of its eras. Ali's open commentary on the political structures of the Muslims as a nation state referring the time of the text aids inspect some ground realities behind the collapse in *The Stone Woman* and regain of their power or conquest in *The Book of Saladin*. Though ideological conflicts between the two great races, Islam and Christendom, are disclosed with great vitality and strength; yet the historical background is very faint. The interpretation of history and culture is not much reliable in both novels. In spite of all that the text is appealing and remarkably persuasive.

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