

Postcolonial Realities: Women Writing History*

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Women, traditionally termed ahistoric, bring a new awareness to their treatment of history. Rejecting the hegemony of male projections, they cross over to occupy a centrality ordinarily withheld from them. Their work not merely reflects the difference between colonial and postcolonial contexts but also reflects a feminization of history. For the purposes of this paper I propose to examine Qurratalain Haider's *Aag Ka Darya (The River of Fire)*,¹ 1970, Krishna Sobti's *Zindagi Nama (Life Story)*,² 1979 and Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*,³ 1985, against the backdrop of Bankim Chandra's *Anand Math*⁴(1982) and the Hindu nationalism of the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century manifestations of nationalism were essentially Hindu, they presented a Hindu India, marginalizing the Islamic presence. This Hindu India was in some measure engaged in transforming itself from the 'other' to a replica of the West. The religious reform movements were, as G.P. Deshpande has pointed out, a process of turning Hinduism into a rational, disciplined and organised religion. It not only emerged as a definable category, it also got semitized in the process.⁵ Partha Chatterjee provides an additional angle by describing this process as anti-colonial nationalism⁶ whereby the nationalists created their own 'domain of sovereignty' by maintaining a division between the inner and the outer spaces, and between the material and the spiritual, whereby the inner areas were protected. This was a dichotomy between the public and the private. Hindu nationalism was at one level a response to the charge of being an effeminate culture and Bankim Chandra's work suggested a new framework of political culture, as Nandy has pointed out in *The Intimate Enemy*. It 'projected into the Hindu past, into a lost golden age of Hinduism, the qualities of Christianity which seemingly gave Christians their strength'.⁷ This was further developed by religious thinkers like Swami Vivekanand and Swami Dayanand Saraswati. Even Gandhi, though he moved away from the masculine image of control and order⁸ could not get rid of the need to go to the past, to the concept of *Ramrajya*¹⁹ which is a backward looking utopia.

As contrasted with this, the postcolonial versions have sustained their imagination by reviewing reality in a different manner; they have obliterated the boundaries between inner and outer domains, have widened spaces to include both public and private and have moved away from the elitist and

exclusive stands of the earlier writers.

To signify the traditional divisions between the male and the female, I would like to borrow the framework suggested by Donna Wilshire in 'The Uses of Myth, Image and the Female Body in Revisioning Knowledge'¹⁰ which is

Knowledge (accepted wisdom) / Ignorance (the occult and taboo)
 higher (up) / lower (down)
 good, positive / negative, bad
 mind (ideas), head, spirit / body (flesh), womb (blood),
 Nature (Earth)
 reason (the rational) / emotion and feelings (the irrational)
 cool / hot
 order / chaos
 control / letting-be, allowing, spontaneity
 objective (outside, 'out there') / subjective (inside, immanent)
 goals / process
 light / darkness
 written text, Logos / oral tradition, enactment, myth
 Apollo as sky-sun / Sophia as earth cave-moon
 public sphere / private sphere
 seeing, detached / listening attached
 secular / holy and sacred
 linear / cyclical
 permanence, ideal (fixed) forms / change, fluctuations, evolution
 'changeless and immortal' / process ephemerals (performance)
 hard / soft
 independent, individual, isolated / dependent, social, interconnected, shared
 dualistic / whole
 Male / Female

These divisions cannot be treated as rigid or absolute ones, but in the main – nature, chaos, the irrational, the shared interconnected life, the changing, fluctuating social tradition, the passivity, the darkness, the hidden recesses, the rites and rituals, oral tradition, these surface in these narratives which bring to history a new dimension, an account of personal, everyday communal lives.

Haider's *Aag ka Darya* literally meaning the *River of Fire* evokes the rich significance of the purificatory rites associated with fire in most cultures. Fire, like water, is a symbol of transformation and regeneration, it is indicative of the power to destroy evil and representative of the heat associated with life, vitality and fecundity. It projects an image of fluidity, trial and energy – and includes the dual worlds of passion as well as spiritual strength.¹¹

Water and fire are archetypal symbols of destruction, cleansing and regeneration and in the narrative which follows both the continuities and the

discontinuities of history are projected – undermining the single-vision or the specificity of history.

The novel opens with one Gautam Nilamber, a Brahmachari, finding himself distracted by two young girls, a princess and her companions – Nirmala and Champak. Historically the novel traverses through the Buddhist period, the Maurya Empire, the slave dynasty, the Afghans and the Moghuls, the Company rule, the British and the post-independence period. Geographically it covers Patliputra, Bengal, Lucknow, Varanasi, Delhi, England and Pakistan. In human terms, in every age there is a Gautam Nilamber, a Champa, a Kamaludin, a Hari Shankar, a Sujata. These archetypal figures move from age to age, changing roles, religions and places. Champa remains perpetually elusive, unobtainable and a dream – whether as a woman married to another man, a prostitute, a street beggar, a person involved in an emotional entanglement – the Hindu Champa becomes a Muslim Champa Ahmed – thus crossing the religious barriers moving towards opening out of identities, freeing them from structures which are confining. Sujata, who is married to Kamaludin in one role, is the Indian mistress of the British Officer Cyril Ashley in another role. There is, in all this, a certain repetitive quality which emphasizes the timelessness of historical processes.

Early in the novel the first Gautam and the first Hari Shankar are engaged in a conversation about the processes of time. Gautam sits down to write and says:

“I am going to write the second chapter of my book.” Hari Shankar inquires who is going to write the final chapter? To which Gautam responds: “All history is an unfathomable ocean and in this ocean we are all floating like leaves. Before me, upto the present whatever I have learnt, is that not my responsibility?”¹² (translation mine.)

Ages are marked not by passage of time but by a change in the power relations. Every victory or defeat marks a new age. War does not only bring death and destruction, but also a sense of togetherness.¹³ Wars push the past into oblivion; new rulers replace old ones, Kamaludin, an Islamic scholar, continues his search for knowledge amongst Hindu priests. Abul Mansur Kamaludin is astonished at the dark recesses of India's past and considers the task of writing its history an impossibility.¹⁴ The novel acquires an epic dimension; the past resurrects itself over and over again; realities change, intermarriages take place, identities are transformed, and new streams become part of the existing ones.

Violence and non-violence, war and peace, the need to fight or not to fight wars are questions which crop up repeatedly. Scholars turn farmers, priests turn against the Bhakti movement which brings the masses together. But while the earlier immigrants and invaders had been absorbed into the Indian reality, the British introduce the element of colour and race and base

their power structure on the relationship of master and slave.¹⁵ Strangely enough Islam, with all its similarities with Christianity, is marginalised in order to play up the differences of Hinduism which is a 'multi-headed monster' to them. The Hindus worship demon-goddesses who demand sacrifices, burn their widows and worship cows and monkeys; the Muslims keep their women in *pardah* and indulge in polygamy.¹⁶

In this world of racial power structures, Gautam is a clerk and Champa a dancing girl. This is a period of schizophrenia¹⁷ and carries within it the seeds of the country's division. History, Kamal feels, is a fraud, it is only a power-game. Partition reproduces the conflicts of the *Mahabharata* with brother fighting brother. Kamal, as he reluctantly travels to Pakistan, is placed in a victim's role akin to that of women. He is stateless and homeless, a permanent refugee, and feels 'I am the dead, I am the grave-digger and I the mourner'.¹⁸

History is viewed not through cyclical patterns and archetypal characters but through folk traditions, rituals, ceremonies and marriage ties in Sobti's *Zindagi Nama*. Feminine voices, maternal images of birth and nurturing and of continuity abound. Prefacing her work with a poem, Sobti states:

History/what it is not
And history/what it is

Not that
Which is secured in
the royal archives with
date and time in the
chronicles.

But that
which flows within the
Consciousness of the people's mind
Flows, flourishes and spreads
and lives in the
ordinary people.

The historical records are irrelevant to the lives of the people and the historical processes stand reversed as people interrelate to each other irrespective of age, religion, caste or social status. The freedom which festivals and marriages provide for crossing these barriers is remarkable. Women voice their concerns in different ways, oral tradition takes over, and songs and ceremonies reflect this reality. They discuss war and peace, economic needs, the British Raj, Victoria's reign, the aggressiveness of the rulers – but discuss from a woman's point of view, they discuss it in the way it effects ordinary life. There is an earthiness about the narrative, a closeness to nature, a pride in the commonality. Folk culture is a living tradition; it knows no division, no difference of status. But there are disruptions – an awareness

of being exploited, of the threat of war, the anguish of women bearing life and men fighting wars. Enmity, revenge, murder,¹⁹ the Hindu-Muslim riots,²⁰ the loss of faith in justice, the crisis of identity²¹ and degree of anti-Brahminism,²² these and other disruptions surface all through the narrative.

Men travel to different parts of the country and move out to different parts of the world. Women, who stay at home, do not like war – in this the Indian peasant women relate to Queen Victoria, who like them had borne children and had contained aggression. Through the annals of war, women unfold the past and explore its multi-layered reality. Past wars, past rebellions forecast the downfall of the British. There is a deep-rooted rejection of foreign rule: 'God is dead, the angels have perished, and there is foreign rule'. One must pick up arms. Prayer needs to be substituted by action.

The focus, in these narratives, shifts from the recording of history to exploring historical processes and analysing their repetitive patterns. There is a felt-need to reject idealism and to convert passive situations into active ones. Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* explores history in order to analyse power structures. It questions the idealism and the projection of a lost glory. It is a move away from nostalgia which inhabited the nineteenth century Hindu nationalism. *Nostos* meaning 'return' was a backward-looking indulgence – a longing to return to a past time or to irrecoverable circumstances – was also an attempt to authenticate past structure to establish an authority. It was an exercise in narcissism and an attempt to escape responsibility.

Rich Like Us opens in the mid-seventies, at the time of the onset of the Emergency when it has ceased to matter who is the ruler and who the ruled. It is merely a question as to who exercises power. The opening chapter is about the closing of options, of narrowing of choices, and the closing-in of the present. The past is dead or dying like Ram, the patriarch who lies paralysed because of the stroke he had suffered as a result of his son Dev's efforts to defraud him. The past is on the way out – but the survivors are not those who fight but those who go under, like Dev, who is willing to do so in his business and political dealings.

But everyone is not like Dev. There is Sonali who finds herself demoted and dislocated because of her decision not to sign a contract which she feels is not sound. She is pushed into illness and through illness a willed state of amnesia, an excuse for withdrawal. She is unable to discard the value-structure she has inherited, but the harsh reality around her pushes her into questioning about the past. Sonali's father Keshav Ranade had not been able to withstand the domineering aggressiveness of the world around him and had retreated into a little private world of memories, opting out of the mainstream. The Emergency had clearly divided men into two kinds – those who were helpless and those who were ruthless. If a parallel motif of feminism was not there in the novel, one would be inclined to think that the journey from 'Mahatma to Madam' is an unnatural one not only in terms of ideology and modalities of power, but also in terms of gender, as if a

matriarchal takeover of a traditionally patriarchal role had upset the balance. But this obviously is not the case. The explanations perhaps lie elsewhere – in the political and the historical structures. History can be falsified in ways more subtle than forgery. The British with their professed liberalism falsified the historical impulse as much as the Indians with their myth of the golden past. History may also be directed by the private obsession of individuals and their inner compulsions.

Sonali finds herself in line with other victims – Rose who had accepted her husband's first marriage, and Mona his second; she is like her great grandmother who had submitted to death unable to withstand social and economic pressures. Going through her father's papers she finds a manuscript written by her grandfather in 1915 recording the memories of his childhood, writing about Swami Vivekanand, and the reforms related to Hinduism and going back to the eighteen twenties and the newspaper cuttings related to the period. And this social history is related to personal history – the death of his mother who had committed *sati* or been pushed into it.²³

Sonali realises that history is made up of conflicts and confrontations, not of single-coloured myths. She realises how naive 'the caste-iron idealism' of her childhood had been. She feels 'I should have been differently taught, told how casual we are about cruelty, depravity. I had grown to adulthood nourished on monumental lies'.²⁴

The question which is asked over and over again is 'what has gone wrong?' Several answers are posited: men are cowards, economic divisions have won, the upper classes have betrayed the country, the civil services have succumbed to political pressures. Western concepts have overlaid our value system. The problems of the present are blamed on colonialism. There is plenty that is wrong with the past. The rot has not set in now, it has been there all along with nobody paying attention to it.

These fictional engagements with history are, in their very approach, different from the fictional engagements of the past. *Anand Math*, a novel which has made deep inroads into the Indian consciousness, is different. It does not project a cultural homogeneity but a split; it does not project family and social life but instead a polarised view of reality – an either/or situation. Masculinity is identified with asceticism, a single-minded all-absorbing nationalism.

The opening of the novel is marked by drought and famine, by the barrenness of nature and the helplessness of man. People flee in search of food – but their journeys are through abandoned villages and dark jungles. The space they occupy is on the margins of civilization and later the scene shifts to enclosures like the *math*, the monastery/abbey which is a totally masculine world but which is at the same time a 'private' space, not a public one. Women exist in supportive roles – Kalyani who conveniently lapses into an absent-death, Shanti who projects herself into male disguises and roles, and the Mother Country which sustains. Wifhood is backgrounded, while

the maternal aspects are highlighted. The members of this brotherhood are *santans*, and in this role they are located in childhood.

The men slip from the high ideal set for them and are required to perform penance for these failures. Their journey to perfection is incomplete and is in some way connected with their failure to attain freedom. The story has an element of romanticization which seeks to highlight the virtues of abstinence and self-control, the need to make oneself equal to the aspired ideals.

Anand Math has ideological implications and projects a way of life, which if adopted, could counteract foreign rule. It seeks to adapt Hinduism to a militant brotherhood and in doing so seeks help from the romance of religion and supra-knowledge. It is part of the process of Indianisation of Western ideals of rationality and order and inducting them into Indian culture. If one were to concede that a historical novel is a way of looking at national and cultural histories, then one needs to accept that *Anand Math* to that extent is the product of a colonial situation. Both Ronald Inden (*Imagining India*)²⁵ and John McGuire (*The Making of a Colonial Mind*)²⁶ have traced the development of Hindu nationalism to colonial roots. Arabinda Poddar in the *Renaissance in Bengal* has also worked this out. He quotes Bipin Chandra Pal who said: 'In the name of India we loved Europe, and therefore we fed our fancy not upon Indian but European culture . . . Our patriotism was not composed of our love for our own history, our own literature, our own arts and industries'.

The enclosures of space, the surrounding darkness, the self-absorbing narcissism signify the 'female' jungle of the European imagination, the positions of the effeminate and the emasculated. There is an inbuilt contradiction in this projection of history where fullness of life is not possible.

The historical consciousness as reflected in the work of Haider, Sobti and Sahgal cannot be treated as a monolithic structure for there are differences in their approaches. However, they have this in common that their characters occupy social spaces – homes and streets, offices and workplaces, and cross barriers of religion and culture. These characters do not reject emotions or emotional ties. These writers reverse the argument of nineteenth century historiography by rejecting nostalgia in their concern with the past. Even myth is perceived as archetypal life – not as myth in the sense of a single dominant vision. Nostalgia and myth are rejected as these structures are confining ones. Kamaludin, Champa, Sujata in *Aag Ka Dariya*, the broken families in *Zindagi Nama*, Sonali, her father, her great grandmother, Rose – they are situated as victims and are the dislocated – the permanently homeless. But these characters refuse to treat themselves as victims, instead they turn to analysis of victimization. The novels are engaged in exploring the past, and in exploring the multi-dimensional reality. Even when they look inwards, the outside is not necessarily used as a sounding board. There is a refusal to turn oneself into the convenient 'Other'. It is, as Ashis Nandy has

pointed out in *The Intimate Enemy*, while describing the uncolonized mind – ‘the ordinary Indian has no reason to see himself as counterplayer or an antithesis of the Western man’.²⁷ These writers, by incorporating the voices which are not usually recorded, by reflecting the plurality of the female experience and by disintegrating the narrative method, impart a certain fluidity to the structure. These narratives do not have any protagonists in the ordinary sense of the word. The protagonists are life and culture; the protagonist, if there is need to define in the singular, is India.

The process of feminization implies several things: an earthiness, a will to face reality, a concern with the nurturing of life; and in itself this historical consciousness is non-exclusive and non-elitist. This is the postcolonial imagination stepping outside colonial constructs in its engagement with the present and the past.

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