CHAPTER II

RE-MEMBERING HISTORY

“Facts have many facets and historical figures are complex. Everything depends on how one looks at them”. Rafiq Zakaria. (qtd. in History Fiction Interface. T.N. Dhar 70).

The present chapter Re-membering History attempts to explore how ‘History’ has been represented in the selected contemporary Indian English novels, namely, Amitav Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies (2008), Vikram Seth’s Two Lives (2005), Navtez Sarna’s The Exile (2008) and Jaishree Misra’s Rani (2007). Set in the colonial period, these novels published between 2000 and 2009 discuss the momentous historical events during the British rule in India. The chapter also attempts to examine, what is history? Definition of history, in what way contemporary history is different from the past history? What is the relationship between history and literature? Can the novel be truer than history? In what way the contemporary novelists are different from that of their predecessors in representing history and literature at different points of time. These aspects will be the main focus of this chapter, to arrive at a better understanding of history and its relationship with literature.

The word ‘history’ is derived from the Greek word ‘historia’ means inquiry, interview, and interrogation of an eyewitness and the reports of such actions. History, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary is “All events that happened in the past: a turning point in the human history.” History is a study of a continuous record of public events. It is the study of the past involving human affairs or any related things, person, place, time, or activity. It is a systematic or critical analysis and research into the
past events. For a layman, history invariably implies the history of a country—basically its political history, which deals with the names of kings, queens, monarchs and revolutionary leaders, the details pertaining to their wars and achievements at a particular point of time. In recent times, the definition and meaning of history has undergone a drastic change due to constitutional changes and the power politics behind it. However, as history is getting more and more complex and one finds it difficult to define in order to get a comprehensive idea or a definition for it. Hence, it is necessary to take into account the social, religious, political and cultural issues, expansion of geographical boundaries, trade and commerce, and economic activities of a particular period in order to define and know what history means, today:

Herodotus (484 B.C) considered as the first historian, defines history thus:

is the inquiry... so that neither what has come to be from a man in time might become faded, nor that great and wondrous deeds, those shown forth by Greeks and those by barbarians, might be without their glory; and together with all this, also through what causes they warred with each other (Italics are mine).

History is ‘great’ and ‘wondrous deeds’ of great men, and have to be preserved before they ‘fade’ from the memory of the people. As human memory is short lived, the past gets dimmed over a period of time. History has to tell the world about the great men, their wars and barbarian deeds and their causes and consequences. For Herodotus man is important, as in the case of philosophers, religious reformers, poets, playwrights, storytellers and novelists in contemporary times who have shown keen interest in history.
Thucydides (460 B.C) who comes after Herodotus emphasizes on ‘chronology and neutral point of view’ and adds to whatever Herodotus has said. Therefore, history means real events, incidents and real people documented in a chronological order. This conclusion brings one to confront with the question as to how literature represents men and events.

The idea of historical progress in the West perhaps emerged from the Bible and it has influenced the concept of human history. It was followed by creatively and organizedly written Epics, which were treated as divine histories by the people of that time. India is not an exception to this, because even today the Epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha, are treated as divine histories (which also claim to be written about true people and true events). It is pertinent to note here that the Epics offer an interesting account of events form the historic point of view and provide a useful source for history. However, this religious view gradually gave way to the secular view due to social and political influences/changes during the later centuries with the advent of the Renaissance. Before the Renaissance, history was insulated in myths, legends, folklores, panegyric songs and poetical embellishments, having handed down from generation to generation. The changed concept of history in the twentieth century proposed that, it is based on facts, is linear and objective and deals with materials that are very different from fiction.

History in the medieval period offers many references to objective recording of important events. The travelogues of Megasthenes, Fahein, Hieun Tsang, and others were of great sites of resources. The court poets and bards of those days recorded important events in the form of inscriptions, biographies, and songs composed to eulogize their rulers for the posterity. The Muslim historiography also contributed a great deal to the
history. Unlike several other conquerors, the Muslims stayed on to make the country their home. It began from the times of the Prophet and spread considerably during the medieval times. Their historiography focused mainly on politics and military. Barani, Afifi, Srihindi, Amir Khusrau and Isami are the prominent Muslim historians. “Their histories are largely confined to the Muslims; they have written with a religious purpose, lay in serving the cause of true religion though with varying intensities” (Dhar 67). However, it was changed with the coming of the Mughals for they gave importance to new areas- social and economic experiences. “Then onwards, during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, more accurate depiction of history was made available in the form of biographies and autobiographies” (Nila Shah, 26).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, historians, in the West developed modern methods of historiography especially in France and Germany. However, history in the eighteenth century raised some valid questions and created conditions in which the individual subject and his critical reason could exercise and assert freely. The nineteenth century historians were greatly influenced by the methods of Ranke in Germany. Around 1800, well known German Philosopher and a historian, Friedrich Hegel brought Philosophy and a more secular approach to the study of history. He classifies history into three modes of representation: original, reflective and philosophical. The writers in the original mode are the ones whose “principle concern is to create a compelling picture of the past-history in itself” In the reflective mode, he includes those novels in which, “the chasm between past and the present is recognized only to be connected- history in and for, but primarily about itself finally in the
philosophical mode, “the primary concern becomes how, or if, history itself is possible-history in and for, but primarily about itself” (qtd. in Dhar 18).

Hegel is of the opinion that, history is generally a dull, sober, an uninteresting and a monotonous subject. It does not inspire people as it deals with the dead and past things. Hence, people may not find any interest in reading history because of its invalidity. Therefore, it is the duty of a historian to make it interesting, attractive and lively with descriptions, using the metaphoric language and very importantly, the historian has to use his imagination. Otherwise, the reader may not find any interest in it, and may feel that he has nothing to do with the past things. Perhaps, these words of Hegel might have influenced the novelists of the nineteenth century who adopted history for their creative purpose.

History is a process, which provides meaning, not only about the past, but also about the way we may analyze the past for the purpose to explore the socio-political meaning. To say, the historian should be a scientist, he should be aware of the complexities of human behaviour. He has to be cautious and meticulous not only in his use of historical evidences but also in his application to the accurate reading of the evidence, the concepts and findings of the behavioral sciences. W.H. Walsh, another important historian views: “The historian is not content to tell us merely what happened; he wishes to make us see why it happened too. In other words, he aims… at a reconstruction of the past, which is both intelligent and intelligible” (8). Unlike other historians, Walsh’s focus is on, why historical events occur and what are the causes behind those events. His statement implies that, a writer need not necessarily stick to the concrete reality, instead, he can go beyond that and create his own world of reality in
order to transcend different planes of social, political, economic and cultural developments of that particular period. A historian then represents and moulds these given facts and records according to his imagination. Therefore, history is not fundamentally, what the historian formulates out of these facts and documents. It is one of the possible interpretations of the past. As there are different perspectives and dimensions of history, there are different ways of interpreting and perceiving history.

Collingwood, one of the early twentieth century historians in his *Idea of History* (1946) shifts the emphasis from the act of objective recording outside the events to the subjective realm of the historian’s mind. Collingwood was the first historian to see the past events with a greater sense of complexity than as being easily understood and its verifiable phenomenon. The most influential among the twentieth century historians, E. H Carr in his seminal work, *What is History?* (1962) states, “history as a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, it is an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (Carr 35). However, history may be regarded as a record of all that has occurred within the realms of human consciousness. According to Carr, the past can be read in various ways and forms and from different perspectives. “We can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present” (28). He also says, “The historian belongs not to the past but to the present” (29).

Interestingly, it is only in the twentieth century, the act of recording of the past got problematized. It implies that a writer has not necessarily adhered to concrete reality, as there can be no ‘objective historical truth’ which is created by the historian. He can go beyond that and create his own way of finding truth and penetrate through the different planes of social, political, economic and cultural changes of the concerned period.
In the later part of twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century, this scenario changed. The professional and academic historians focused less on epics and nationalistic narratives, which often tend to glorify or romanticize the nation or individuals. A major trend has been developed in the later part of twentieth century- to treat history more as a social science rather than as an art which traditionally has been the case. In recent times, the historians as well as the novelists contest the validity and authenticity of history and insist on the need for its revision on the basis that all histories are based on the personal interpretation of sources.

**History Fiction Interface:**

History, like literature, is a fusion of fact and fiction or a fusion of the real and the imaginary. One tends to question, to what extent it is history and to what extent it is fiction. The historian collects fragmented data and adds to it his own imagination to present a graphic picture of the time. History always rests upon the facts and novel on imagination. Arnold Toynbee in his seminal work *A Study of History* observes:

> History, like the drama and the novel, grew out of mythology, a primitive form of apprehension and expression in which- as in fairy tales listened to by children or in dreams dreamt by sophisticated adults, the line between fact and fiction is left undrawn (44).

It is apparent here that Toynbee’s statement clearly shows that both history and literature have a common footing vis-à-vis subject matter. Literature, also like history, documents real people, real events and real time. Toynbee compares history to a fairy tale, which arises curiosity and interest for both young and the old, which blurs the gap
between fact and fiction. Thus, early history was filled with details about myths, legends, gods and goddesses and so on. Due to the advent of renaissance, “the divine figures disappeared from the historical accounts and human beings occupied their place” (Dhar 39). Subsequently, the line between history and fiction gradually got blurred. Toynbee regards Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as a fine blend of history and fiction. Both the novelist and the historian work to offer a distinct shape to their respective disciplines. Thus, the novelist and the historian choose to learn from each other. Therefore, it is very difficult to draw a demarcation between history and literature. The best history is literature and the creation of literature needs inspiration and the practice of artistic skill.

George Lucas, another prominent scholar, comments in *The Historical Novel* (1960) which is relevant here. He observes,

A historical novel comes to life only in a specific social and ideological setting; history itself is seen as a kind of mass experience, which offers concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them (24).

Lucas visualizes that the life of humanity is a historical process. A true historical novel portrays artistically and is conditioned by social and economic development. For this, the historical novelist does not need “the re-telling of great historical events,” but has to concentrate on “the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is, that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality” (Lucas 42). History is not a
consistent/coherent body of objective knowledge which can be simply applied to a literary text in order to find what the text does or does not reflect. Thus, Lucas puts historian’s position as ‘ideal’. On the other hand, John Brannigan is of the opinion that:

Literature is a vehicle for the representation of history, and it does not contain insights into the formation of historical moments. It reveals the process and tensions by which historical change comes about. But it does not behave passively towards history; it does not, in other words, reflect history as a mirror. Literature shapes and constitutes historical change. (418).

Brannigan’s statement shows that, literary texts can have effects on the course of history, on the political and social ideas and beliefs of the time. Literature shapes and constitutes historical change. For a New historicist, the object of study is not the text but its context, not literature but its history, rather literature in history. The historian is a chronicler who adds necessary materials in constructing history with a set of facts and gives clarification for his story as evidence. Perhaps the main difference between the historical novel and the historical narrative is, the latter tries to give all the truth, while the former gives what it considers to be the basic or the vital truth about an event. The novelist, selecting those historical events, re-writes it with his imagination and comes out with a new construct. This is what David Daiches calls, ‘historical imagination’. Hayden White another significant scholar opines that,

Novelists might be dealing with only imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the process of fusing events, whether
imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the 
object of a representation is a poetic process (qtd. in Dhar 125).

The postmodern novelists view history with a new perspective essentially 
subverting and dismantling the foundations and established concepts. A postmodernists’
primary object is not just to recreate a new reality but also to destabilize or dismantle the 
concept and meanings of established fixities. Therefore, history is connected with acts of 
retrieval, re-creation, reproduction, re-membering, re-imagination of new maps and 
cultural meanings. In the process of reconstruction, ideology plays an important role. In 
this regard, Keith Jenkins also holds a similar view as Hayden White. Jenkins in his *Re-
thinking History* states:

… history per se is an ideological construct means that it is constantly 
being re-worked and re-ordered by all those who are variously affected by 
power-relationships; because the dominated as well as the dominant also 
have their own versions of the past to legitimate their practices, versions 
which have to be excluded as improper from any place on the agenda of 
the dominant discourse’ (21).

Literature is used as a tool of historical investigation of the past, present and the 
future. The conventional notion of history involves four major elements- facts, 
knowledge (epistemology), truthfulness and imagination. History possesses elements like 
‘story’ and a ‘report’. There are two kinds of narratives. The first one is historical 
narrative means true histories and true knowledge. The second one is a ‘fabula’ or a story 
or a fabulous (fictive) narrative- subject to distortion and susceptible to be far from truth.
In this way, history becomes a part of the story that consists the spirit of delight. Thus, the reader cannot find the difference between the two expressions of “history” and “story”. The novelist introduces history as a story of imagination that goes beyond the confines of dates and restricted events. Therefore, history has a large space and time, and appears as a timeless cycle of incidents. Thus, history becomes a story of the past and present and a story of all times, as history is a fine blend of fact and fiction - a narrative as ‘fiction is truer than history because it goes beyond the evidence and each of know from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence’ (E.M. Forster 70).

With this issue in mind, one has to study how the historical novel in India got evolved and how the Indian novelists made use of history in their narratives. Indian historiography, like the Western historiography, has its origin in myth. Indians treat the epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha as divine histories even today. As a result, the Hindu view does not distinguish between fact and fiction. The first historical work of ancient India is of course, Kalhana’s Rajatharangini (1148), a chronicle of the kings of Kashmir, the only region in India where the tradition of historiography began in the early twelfth century. Kalhana exhibits a sense of history when he says that a historian should ‘make vivid before one’s eyes picture of a bygone age’ (qtd. in Sheik Ali 304). He touches in his work on the drawbacks of feudalism, which leads to rivalries, conflicts and instability in the political structures. It is only after the arrival of the British in India, Indians learnt how to document important historical events. When the colonial masters engaged in writing imperial history, it gave rise to types of historiographies such as imperial historiography, Marxist historiography, pseudo-secularists historiography, Muslim/ communist historiography and so forth. The other group includes ‘the
nationalists and Hindu communalists’ who romanticized and glorified the past Indian culture, tradition, and Indian heritage in their works to inculcate national consciousness and national feeling among Indians during the freedom struggle. Apart from these, there are historians who try to rise above the vitiating atmosphere and struggle to pave a new path in writing ‘objective history’.

Ever since the form of the novel appeared in the eighteenth century in the West, history has been playing an important role in depicting the socio-historical events. History cannot be separated from the society, politics, economics and cultural life of a country. Every writer invariably responds to what is happening around him/her during his lifetime which makes his/her writing more authentic and reliable. Therefore, the historian as well as the novelist both documents the important events in their writings. The historian collects the past documents, which are in the form of fragments, and gives form and shape constructing history. Through his imagination, the novelist re-creates historical events by adding what is missing in history he makes it lively and an attractive story. To make it more effective and convincing, the novelist takes a bit of liberty to include episodes to the historical events. In this process, the novelist has more freedom than a historian has. The historian cannot add to what has found as ‘fact’ but the novelist can.

The early writings in India were either political or historical if not both. Obviously, the history-fiction interface or affiliation has been established considerably in the past as well as in the present century. Considering the novel as an evolving genre and thinking on history, fiction provided a tempting situation for the novelist to incorporate more and more history into his novels. In recent years, this connection has taken new form due to novel features in the modes of writing history. It could be seen with the rise
of the spirit of nationalism; a great deal of power politics has intruded into the writing of history, which has motivated the novelists to write their own versions of histories. Recent historians consider that, the early history was written from the colonizers point of view. This tendency persisted among the historians because of their affiliation with the political establishments. Therefore, rewriting and reconstructing the past has got validated. Today, historians and the novelists no longer are shy of admitting the old methods of interpreting of history in their works. At present, the novelists’ use of history in fiction is more willful/intentional, more self-conscious, more sophisticated and invariably prompted by his desire to compete with the historian on his own terms.

The writing of historical novels or the novels written based on history came into vogue in the early part of the nineteenth century in the West. The pioneer of the historical novels is Sir Walter Scott who wrote Waverley in 1814. After its success, he wrote many significant novels based on history followed by Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities, Pasternak’s Dr. Zivago, and Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace. Other noted historical novelists of the world are Balzac, W.M. Thackeray, Pushkin, Manzoni, Anatole France, George Eliot, George Orwell wrote novels based on history and continued this tradition. In due course, historical novels gained currency as a critical as well as creative category for explaining and evaluating history-fiction interface in very specific/explicit terms.

Indians had multiple ways of depicting the past events in the form of allegory, fables, tales, myths, folk songs, panegyric songs, eulogies and so forth. A Seminal work like Kautilya’s Arthashastra is an example for this, which depicts the history of a nation along with politics, economics, social, religious and military histories. The purpose of narrating history differs in nature and they can be considered more useful as far as
historical evidences are concerned. The main objective of writings in India during the early times had twin objectives- to derive a kind of enlightenment and entertainment. Hence, the early Indian historiography was the encroachment of kavya (poetic) onto the field of itihasa (historical writing), the substitution of aesthetic truth for historical truth in presenting history. James Mill observes: “it was only prose that could express the reality of experience; poetry is the language of passions cannot be the vehicle for truth” (qtd in *The Indian English Novel* 14). But for Indians kavyas, itihasas and puranas had purposive and goal-oriented knowledge. The early poets have glorified the patrons’ personalities or dynasties to satisfy the pride and augment the reputation of kings and national heroes. Khalana’s *Rajatarangini* (1148) a remarkable piece of historical literature is a fine example for this. The act of writing history, in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, had genuine purpose- to create a sense of patriotism, national feeling, historical and political awakening among the Indians. When the national movement was at its height, the early writers wrote novels based on historical events, romanticized and eulogized the national heroes to stir the national feeling among the people.

The success and popularity of the historical novels in the West inspired a great number of Indian writers to make use of history by incorporating social, political, and cultural events of their interest into the fictional frame of history. The colonial situation and the social, political, economic and cultural turmoil stimulated Indians’ interest about their past. The world witnessed rapid changes in the declining decades of the nineteenth century and at the turn of the subsequent century. The great historical revolutions of France, Russia and China, the collapse of Fascism, Nazism, and the subsequent two
World Wars and their consequences stimulated the writers to look at history. Very few writers have attempted to write historical novels, perhaps because writing historical novel is highly complex and problematic in the prevailing political, social, religious and cultural scenario.

The early Indian novelists attempted to write novels based on history to either recreate or reinterpret those events for different purposes in their novels. The growing connection between the novel and history has mutual bearing on their changing form and content. Thus, many recent Indian novelists in English have shown keen interest in writing novels based on important historical events. To make their works interesting and accurate, they began to add their imagination. Thus, the demarcation line between novel and history got blurred. The novelist probes into the consciousness of history and historical process that played a major role in the lives of the people in the past. This chapter attempts to understand the evolving connection between Novel and History and looks into how history has been made use of by the novelists for their creative purpose.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Indian writers turned to creative writing. They began to inculcate nationalist fervor in the minds of the Indian reading public through their writings. However, the early writers did not use the British-authored historical documents as they either caricatured or misrepresented and incongruously distorted the Indian history. The British had suppressed certain ‘facts’ by contrasting the best aspects of the English culture with the Indian culture and highlighted their contribution to the Indian society. Therefore, the British historiography was nothing but an ‘imperial historiography’. Whatever may be the reason, the British stirred historical consciousness among the Indians by documenting important historical events. However,
the early Indian writers did not try to rectify those distortions. The first generation of English educated Indians who took up the task of writing were very much sympathetic towards British, because “there was generally a feeling of gratitude among the educated class towards the British for bringing about law and order in a trouble-torn land” (Meenakshi. 2000: 51), and their socio-economic reforms. Some of them wrote parallel historical novels, as they could not get source materials for their novels. Since the novel form was new to the Indians, they used the available myths, legends and folk tales. As a result, the early historical novels remain as historical romances rather than novels. Above all, the early Indian writers intended to imbibe political consciousness and India’s past glory among the Indians through their writings.

It is evident that the Indians had a concept/sense of history. But what was absent was the historiography. Lack of social stability, the conservative attitude of Indians and above all, the multicultural situation of the Indian society- the caste, languages, the fragmented orthodox society and religiousness had kept the people in compartment, and prevented them from documenting the past events systematically as well as objectively. The complex Hindu society remained isolated and lived without any interference from other religions and cultures for several centuries. As a result, Indians did not develop history as a science or as an art as their Western counterparts did. Instead they viewed it from the religious point of view; added to it myths and legends and rendered it as ‘timeless’. Hence, history for Indians was more than a- religion (dharma), Myth and *Purana*. The reason for this might be that the majority of Indians in the early times were illiterates, orthodox and never thought of its importance and preserving it for the future
generation. Even if they had preserved, there was a possibility of foreign invaders having destroyed those documents.

However, this attitude changed soon after the Indian literary renaissance took place at the dawn of the nineteenth century. The British established three western-model universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras where their influence had already been concentrated. The British initiated a systematic documentation of history through the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal which was established in 1784. Consequently, writing history began in India during the British period by the first generation of English educated elites. The early Indian English novelists tried to capture the Indian reality in their own way and narrated important historical events from Indian perspective. As a result, a new Indian novel emerged in English that dealt with historical, personal, imaginary events and characters to give expression in their writings. Sensitive to history, the early novelists set their novels in the backdrop of historical events and mixed historical facts with fiction. In fact, they contributed much to the Indian consciousness of history through historical themes.

Contemporary Indian English novelists understood that the British recorded historical events were complex, paradoxical, riddled, biased, fractured and prejudiced. The present professional and academic historians agree that history needs to be rewritten constantly thinking that the historical perspectives change from generation to generation. There was a strong parallelism between the depiction of India by the British and by the Indians. This parallelism appears quite obvious in the fashion in which the Indian and the British writers view the same events. Sometimes the writer does not directly involve with the history/politics and sometimes he views objectively or as an outsider. For instance,
the mutiny of 1857 jolted the English out of their self-complacency and for a number of English novelists; it was just a mutiny of the disgruntled sepoys. But for the Indian novelists, it was a first war of Indian independence.

It is said that, ‘history will always be written from the winners point of view’. It is a fact that, the British authored documents on historical events were deliberately distorted to justify their rule. Thus, the Indian national heroes and the people who fought in the freedom struggle remained without proper recognition. Historical fiction, viewed in this light, has greater capacity in finding the truth. Both the historian and the novelist probe into the past to reveal this truth. But their approach may differ in tone and technique, as the former would follow the chronology of the events while the latter would rethink and re/interpret the past from different perspectives, depending on the changes in the received data of history. Hayden White observes, “Facts do not speak for themselves, but it is the historian who speaks on their behalf” (qtd. in T.N. Dhar 21). Historians often fail to document the circumstances that influence the morals, manners, culture, customs and other things of the people of the time but the litterateur, on the other hand, attempts to find out such gaps and fissures in history and fill these gaps with lively events with his/her literary imagination. The selected four novels in this chapter examine these aspects discussed above.

It appears that the early Indian novelists must have been influenced by the Western novelists’ and attempted to write novels using the available historical Indian source materials. The first writer to write historical novel in India is Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who wrote only one novel in his mother tongue, Bengali titled Raja Singha (1881). Kylas Chunder Dutt’s A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945 (1935)
Palaksha 93

and Sushee Chundeer Dutt’s *The Republic of Orissa: a Page from the Annals of the 20th Century* (1845) are the two earliest-known attempts at producing historical novels in English. They were short piece of narrative fiction followed by *The Young Zamindar* (1883) and *Shunkur: A Tale of Indian Mutiny 1857* (1885) by Sushee Cunder Dutt. The other historical novels are, Lal Behari Day’s *The history of a Bengali Raiyat* (1874), Mirza Moorad Alee Beg’s *Lalun the Begum, or The Battle of Panipat* (1884), T. Ramakrishna’s *Padmini* (1903), and *A Dive for Death* (1911), Jogendra Singh’s *Nur Jahan: The Romance of an Indian Queen* (1909), *Nasrin: An Indian Medley* (1911), S.K. Ghosh’s *1001 Indian Nights* (1906), and A.S. P. Ayyer’s *Baladitya* (1930) and other less important historical romances were published. As Indian Nationalism had come to assert itself openly in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Indian writers began to write novels based on historical incidents seriously. K.S. Rammurthy is of the opinion that:

Bankim Chandra and Kylas Chunder Dutt were the pioneers of not only Bengali historical novel but also the historical novel in India. The historical novels, even with all their shortcomings, set the pace for the growth of that genre in all the Indian languages and in English (229).

Ayyar’s *Baladitya: A Historical Romance of Ancient India* (1930) was the first Indian English historical novel to be published followed by K.S. Venkataramani’s *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan the Patriot* (1932). However, the early historical novels did not impress much because; they lacked the breadth, the vision and seriousness of purpose. Thus, they remained as historical romances rather than historical novels proper. They “are pseudo-historical novels or novels in which the story is loosely or obscurely related to some historical event or character” (K.S.Rammurthy 19). Despite their shortcomings,
they set the trend for the growth of historical novel in all Indian languages and in English. “The novels may not deserve to be called historical novels of the first order but none of them makes for either bad history or bad novel” (K.S. Rammurthy 259). Most of the early writers who wrote historical novels, wrote in their mother tongue, later they were translated into English. As gifted writers, both Bankim and Romesh with good English background, found English language as natural and suited for their creative expression. However, they switched over to their mother tongue, Bengali, because, they were staunch nationalists. Indian historical novel may be said to have come of age with the publication of Manohar Malgonkar’s *Devil’s Wind: Nana Saheb’s Story* (1972) the first historical novel of post independent India. It is a story of Dhondu Pant Nana Saheb, the adopted son of Peshwa of Maharastra, who plays a significant role in the Indian Revolt of 1857. The novelist tells the story of the revolt from the Indian point of view as if it is Nana Saheb’s autobiography. Before this, many writers have written fictitious historical novels such as *A Private Life of an Indian Prince* by Mulk Raj Anand and *The Princess* by Manohar Malgoankar.

The Indian historical novels assumed a change in theme and narrative strategies after 1980s. The writers of the period went back to history. Unlike their predecessor who wrote about the greatness and glory of the ancient Indian civilization and culture, the contemporary Indian novelists wrote history from different dimensions and perspectives. Due to the impact of the social and political changes, the novelists started looking at the things from the relativistic perspective. In other words, they were skeptical about recorded historical materials. They resorted to historical events that affected the lives of the individuals. In a way, they attempted to shed light on the untold or hidden stories of
history, especially the suppressed class- the subalterns. The writers strongly believed that the colonizers constructed history from their own perspective to defend their rule. They resort to history with the purpose of finding its relevance to contemporaneity, to demythisize the present personalities, to satirize, to allegorize, to give voice to the voiceless in the past, to record the unrecorded, to interrogate the concept of nation, nationalism and finally to present their point of view.

The postcolonial/contemporary novelists often revisit history and contest its existing interpretations. The novelists often fuse fact with fiction to re-examine the earlier happenings, incidents, views and assumptions. As their major concern is being the nature of reality that existed during the colonial period, the novelists concentrate on the political and social happenings with a view to contest the academic or the accepted versions about them. In the process of writing, they use the historical facts and references to persons and places to subvert the earlier discourses. As a result, history is viewed as it is based on facts, linear, objective and deals with material that is different from that of fiction. The new historicists contest the traditional concept of history as casual, linear and closed. The post-modern novelists deconstruct the traditionally established/constructed norms and contest them to arrive at the ‘truth.’ Theorists like Michel Foucault and Hayden White opine that since history, when made up by the historian, is necessarily a political act, the empirical and objective narration of historical material should be discarded, as ‘real’ life can never be truthfully represented (1987: X). Foucault rejects history on the ground that, “for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and conscious development must be systematically dismantled.” (History and Genealogy 153).
The selected novels of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*, Vikram Seth’s *Two Lives*, Navtez Sarna’s *The Exile* and Jaishree Misra’s *Rani* render microscopic details of a particular time span of history of India as well as Germany, reflecting and manifesting turbulence period of the colonial regime. These novels are exceptional in the handling of the issues regarding history and historiography. Their narratives unfold in layers, a fusion of private lives and public events, linked together in a thematic unity. Further, their works reveal that they share certain common features such as the impact of colonization on the common people as well as on the rulers. Their struggles to be free from the imperial repercussions and their increasing awareness and the urgency to confront them have been expressed candidly through their writings.

**The Colonial History of India:**

It is apt to know about the colonial history before going into the historical novels in detail. The European colonialism made an indelible impact on the history of India. The chapter *Re-membering History* attempts to seek a critical overview of Colonialism of the West, especially, the British forces on South-Asian countries. “Historically, colonialism dates back to five hundred years or so to the days of European mercantile expansion, Columbus’s landing in America and the exploration of the coast of Africa’s the Cape of Good Hope” (Elleke Boehmer 6). The history of the world for the past few centuries has been profoundly shaped by colonial interests- exploring and exploiting the South-Asian, African, and other underdeveloped countries for wealth by the Western colonizers. The Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French and English had made South Asian countries especially, Indian subcontinent, a colony for their free trade and exploited the natural resources of these countries, in the guise of ‘Civilizing Mission’. The last two centuries
(from 1757 to 1947), have witnessed both the moment of greatest expansion of that Empire and its demise. The period also witnessed unprecedented dominance of the world trade and communication systems by European powers.

The term Colonialism involves the consolidation of imperial power, “the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods…” (Ania Loomba 8). It is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation of resources, and the attempt to govern the people of the land, often by force. Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one country over another country. One of the difficulties in defining colonialism is that it is hard to distinguish it from imperialism. Generally, these two concepts are treated as synonyms. Like colonialism, Imperialism also involves political and economic control over a dependent territory. Elleke Boehmer is of the opinion:

Colonialism involves the consolidation of imperial power, and is maintained in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and an attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, often by force (2).

The etymology of the two terms, however, provides some clues about their differences. Colonialism usually involved the transfer of population to a new territory, where the arrivals lived as permanent settlers while maintaining political allegiance to their country of origin. Whereas, Imperialism draws attention to the fashion in which one country exercises power over another, whether it is through settlement, sovereignty, or indirect mechanisms of control.
Indian subcontinent was a centre for trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth Century even before British came to India. (Before this, India was not a single entity; it included Sri Lanka, Burma, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal etc. It is an amalgam of several identities based on religion, language, region, class and caste. It became India only after 1947). The quest for wealth and power brought Europeans to the Indian shores in 1498. The first European power to arrive in India was the Macedonian army of Alexander the Great in 327-326 B.C. Later, Roman sailors who reached India via Red Sea and Arabian Sea carried trade between India and the Roman Empire, followed by Portuguese, Dutch, French, Spain and others. The British were not the first European power to arrive in the Indian subcontinent, nor were they the last to leave- both of those ‘honours’ go to the Portuguese, because they came first and left in 1961. However, they never sought trading settlements or occupying territory in India for a long time.

India was known for its natural resources, spices and gold that attracted Europeans as well as Muslim invaders. (The Muslim invaders invaded India since eleventh century just to rob the wealth and for conversion of other faiths into Islam). The material greed and expansion of empires were the main catalyst for the European exploration. This search for the wealth and prosperity of India led to the accidental ‘discovery’ of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492. A few years later, near the end of fifteenth century, Portuguese sailor Vasco da Gama became the first European to re-establish direct trade links with India through Calicut, in Kerala, by then it was one of the major trading ports of the eastern world. The trading rivalries brought other European powers to India.
The British established the East India Company in 1600. “The English East India Company was founded by Queen Elizabeth of England on 31 December 1600, as a Joint Stock Company of London merchants uniting to combat Dutch competition in eastern trade” (Megnad Desai 37). In the beginning, colonization of territories was not in the European colonial agenda. The situations in most of these places offered an opportunity to the colonizers and in many cases colonization became a political and commercial necessity. Depending on the situation, the process of colonization followed different patterns and strategies. In the Indian subcontinent, it was through the agency of the East India Company that trade links got established firmly. P.J. Marshall argues that, “... the growth of territorial empire in India was neither planned nor directed from Britain” (Qtd in Rediscovery of India 37). The Company officials ignored and threw all the trade ethics to the wind and the policy directives they had signed earlier.

The British, by their diabolic politics, policies and schemes, gained control over people as well as natural resources. Trade and profit continued to be the main focus of British rule in India, resulting in far-reaching changes. Another significant contribution of the British to India is that, they created a national consciousness and unity among the Indians. This political consciousness brought Indians together to fight the foreign rule. As K.M. Panikkar puts it:

The most notable achievement of British rule was the unification of India. British rule may be said to have given substance to the idea of a national state which India had inherited from the Mughals. A conscious process of unification was set afoot, the object of which was not merely to secure the effective exercise of British authority in Indian States, but weld the whole
of India into one country, Railway, posts and telegraphs, currency, salt administration-these were external forms through which this unity was achieved (qtd. in *Rediscovery of India* 11).

Among the Indians, there was a debate surrounding on socio-economic reforms introduced by the British. The Indian masses believed that the British were the best rulers that the India could possibly have. The Indian even thought that the British are the better rulers than the Muslim rulers are. The British among the Indian people created this kind of impression to establish their superiority. Kushwant Singh comments: “India had never been a nation: they had been divided by; religion, race, caste and language the vast mass of the people were indifferent and frequently hostile to the princes and the nobility who monopolized leadership” (*India: An Introduction* 140). Due to the introduction of English education, large number of English educated Indians, especially the middle-class, joined government services. However, the institutionalization of English was for the administrative and political imperatives of the British rule. Gowri Vishwanathan’s observations are quite relevant here. She observes:

> The English Parliament wished to see a Europeanized improvement in the morals and manners of natives, partly to suit its administrative needs, it was nervous about interfering in their religious beliefs through missionary activity. The teaching of English literature, she argues, was seen as a way to disseminate English values without coming into direct conflict with native religious belief. (qtd. in Priyamvada 15).
A considerable increase in both English language and vernacular journalism created awareness among the Indians. The history of British colonization of Indian subcontinent clearly shows how the English tactfully and shrewdly conquered south Asian countries and subjugated the whole population. By exiling kings, imposing arbitrary laws for their convenience, the British freely plundered the natural resources—the teak, the petroleum, ivory, spices, cotton and other raw materials exported to their countries to cater to the needs of modern European industries. The colonized are the victims of European industrialized, scientific and technological forces. The British greed for power and material wealth destabilized the South Asian and African countries. The European power came as a ‘West Wind’ that swept away whatever came in its way. The tragic effects on Asian population led to the process of ‘Othering’ aimed at eliminating and destroying native cultures, people, languages and society.

The chapter Re-membering History examines all these significant historical events. The novelists use major historical events as backdrop in their novels. The four novels taken up for the study, namely, Amitav Gosh’s Sea of Poppes, Vikram Seth’s Two Lives, Navtez Sarna’s The Exile, and Jaishree Misra’s Rani, are set from the context of the European powers that sought to rule the world for their own survival. Reading these novels as historical episodes/documents, one can come to the conclusion that these writers have used history in their novels unlike their counterparts, the twentieth century novelists. These novels explore the role of historical forces in the lives of the colonized people, who become victims of the European colonial politics. Colonization had its own tragic effects on the people of the world who had made no advance in science and
technology. The chapter also seeks to examine the dastard effects of the colonial powers on the colonized people and the resultant tragedy.

The second part of the twentieth century has witnessed a new breed of Indian English writers who have been ambivalent in their attitude towards history. After the publication of Rushdie’s seminal novel *Midnight’s Children* in 1981, a number of writers found themselves preoccupied with history in one or the other way during this period. Rushdie’s novel has been an enduring source of inspiration in many respects. The writers who are regarded ‘Rushdie’s Generation’ or ‘Rushdie’s Children’, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Farrikh Dhondy, Amit Chaudry, Vikram Chandra, Mukul Keshavan, Arundati Roy, Navtez Sarna, Jaishree Misra and other writers have made an attempt in writing novels based on history to question both, its authority and authenticity. These writers deliberately problematize and some scandalize history by using post-modernistic modes of narration to deliberate their postcolonial pursuits. “They have worked to subvert the Western notion of ‘History’ as well as the imperialistic records of Indian history by disregarding their cultural and political supremacy and also by investigating the assumption of Western tradition of fiction and historiography” (Nila shah 159). Besides, the use of allegory, parody, satire, flash back techniques and other literary devices, they have made use of newspaper reports, personal letters, archives, songs, gossips, folk songs and folk tales, diaries and memoirs, films, jokes and alternative/parallel histories in their novels to undermine and deconstruct the imperial or post-colonial historiography. Rushdie’s contemporaries are characterized by their commitment to history combined with their constant refusal to internalize the conventional notions of linear, sequential or chronological historiography. They
preoccupied themselves with ‘subaltern historiography’ in one form or the other, and they engaged with the problems of exile, cultural displacement, dispossession and emergent plural identities.

The contemporary Indian English novelists present history and current politics and unfold it in layers, through a fusion of private lives and public events, and link them together into a thematic unity. In each novel, the life of the protagonist is fused/braided with the history of the nation. These writers have evinced a lot of interest in the recent past, chiefly in the most turbulent years of Indian history since 1857. Many writers have preferred to appropriate the present in terms of the past, in order to counter the given version of history and have attempted to reconstruct his/her own version. Their engagement with history, as Jasbir Jain puts it:

...is an attempt to define the self and locate it within a sense of nationhood, to understand the past, feeling it from the myths and misinterpretation which surround it, to project the hitherto marginalized aspects as also to analyze society’s responses to socio-political events...

(67).

The protagonists of these novels, for instance, the Landlord and the Prince like Neel Halder, Deeti, a poor widow and other characters in Sea of Poppies, Shanti Seth and Henny in Two Lives, the young princes, Jhansi Rani Lakshmibai, in Rani, Duleep Singh of Punjab in The Exile; are the victims of the colonial policies and politics of the British. The powers of local princes weakened and destabilized through the introduction of arbitrary policies of the colonizers. At the same time, the English wanted to expose the
princes’ incompetency to the public to rule their states. All these happened to the kings, queens, princes, and to common people whose lives and fate were not under their own control but rather they were under the power of colonizers. These colonized were never looked and treated as human beings and were silenced by force. All these novels document these major historical events in a matter of fact manner and they are painstakingly well researched by the novelists. “History itself, with all its modern horrors, has become too awesome a subject for most modern writers and critics to contemplate” (Afzal Khan 137). In this fashion, the novelists’ ‘Re-member’ the history in their works. When history-fiction interface occurs, it involves the interpretation of history of lives and relationships—national, international, familial, personal and so forth. It implies acknowledging the presence of many voices in search of the hidden layers of meaning, reflecting the well-known postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha observes that:

Memory is necessary and sometimes a hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity. Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present’. (Homi Bhabha 63: 1994).

**Amitav Ghosh’s  *Sea of Poppies* (2008)**

Amitav Ghosh (1952- ) is one of the influential writers in the Indian literary scene after Rushdie. He is a trained Anthropologist, historian and a novelist, lives and teaches in New York and India. He is graduated from St. Stephen College, postgraduation from Delhi University, went to Oxford for his Doctoral studies in Social Anthropology and
Philosophy. Since Ghosh himself was a student of history, his novels naturally reflect (his) historic sensibility. For him, past is not a dead or a remote thing but it still is in the present. Thus, he concentrates more on the past to understand the present from different perspective to throw light on the impact of the past on the lives of the individuals, families and on nations. Ghosh’s reconstruction of history explores the psychological dilemmas experienced by individuals whose quest for identity is the predominant theme in all his novels. His novels deal with the subaltern themes and give voice to the silenced humans of the past. Ghosh’s novels go beyond historical, political and national boundaries and across generations in time. He introduces issues such as imperialism, subaltern problems, imperial historiography, borders, beyond borders and multiculturalism as central to the postcolonial debates, with sharp insights. Ghosh probes historical events which were overlooked in government and official records and upholds the related issues. John Thieme calls Ghosh as a ‘revisionist historiographer’. His novels provide particularly, Sea of Poppies and The Glass Palace, his understanding of the British rule in India and the modes of resistance which people built to fight it. He brings in specific historical details to recreate the ways in which people faced and stood up to the situation. More importantly, he reconstructs history more self-consciously and deftly combines personal and public history by blending the past of individual lives with Burmese, Malaysian and India’s historical past. It makes his engagement with history rich and rewarding.

Sea of Poppies (2008) is Amitav Ghosh’s first projected trilogy that has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. The novel is set in the British colonial period of 1938, leading up to the Opium Wars in the early part of nineteenth century. Ghosh shifts
his focus from the conventional method of reading and interpreting history, interprets it through the eyes of a common man. He revisits the past with the intention to fill the gaps and holes left by the historians. His emphasis is more on the historical truths, which are hidden by the early historians, the common people who were part of the history, whose real worlds, and quotidian experiences are not documented, despite the fact that their lives have been affected by history. Ghosh looks at it as personal histories of the subalterns, re-examines the past and discovers an altogether a new truth of history which gives a new dimension to the past. In a way, Ghosh subverts the grand narratives of the conventional history that paves the way to the history of the subalterns. Thus, Ghosh presents an alternative history to create awareness of the binary and hierarchical oppositions between the two types of history.

*Sea of Poppies* is about the people affected by the Opium industry patronized by the East India Company in the late 1830s. The novel documents two great economic themes of the nineteenth century. First, cultivation of opium as a commercial crop in Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for the Chinese market, and second, the transport of Indian indentured labourers to cut sugarcane for the British colonies in Mauritius, Fiji, and Trinidad. Poppies permeate all aspects of rural life. To feed the insatiable greed of British East India Company the farmers are forced to grow opium. The fields that once grew grain and vegetables are given over to unrewarding opium harvests. The colonial masters by forcing an ever worsening cycle of debt on to factory owners and money lenders-leave many peasants unable to provide themselves with even the most basic needs. Kushwant Singh criticizes the British for impoverishing the agriculture labours and the weavers due their policies. The farmers had to pay,
… a higher rate of revenue payable in cash rather than in kind and enforced by attachment of holdings, and the compulsory switching from food grains to cash crops. For the farmer the choice was between life-long servitude to the moneylender and starvation- or both (India: an Introduction 146).

Ghosh takes us back to the India of 1838 and to the scene of opium wars and the heat and dust of India under British colonialism. Divided into three parts namely, ‘Land’, ‘River’, and ‘Sea’, the novel comprises historical and social backdrop and life and each part ends in a new beginning. The first section ends with the beginning of a new life to Deeti, while the second section ends with the beginning of a new life of Neel Ratan, the Prince of Rasakali, and the insolent in particular and the third section ends with a new life of all the characters of the novel. It explores the unrevealed aspects of British colonial period in India which gets explicated through a story of Deeti and Neel Rathan and other characters. The slave ship, Ibis, which means, ‘blackbirder’ was used to transport indentured labours in America. Since the slave trade was abolished and the ship was old, as it would not serve the purpose of patrolling the West African coast, it is sold to Burnham Bros., the shipping company owners to use it for the transport of labourers. As the term ‘slave’ was banned, the British businessmen gave a new term ‘coolie’. The British run the opium business with the help of Indians like Byron Singh and Kissan Panda, who supply labourers and control them through financing them. Moreover, people like Byron Singh and Kissan Panda are responsible for the smooth run of the colonial rule and its ideologies.
Deeti, the protagonist, an illiterate woman who never had a chance to go out of her district visualizes the ship, *Ibis* at the very beginning of the novel. The fact is, at a later stage, she is fated to be in that ship unfortunately which is suggested through her premonition. “She had never seen the sea, never left the district, never spoke any language except but her native Bhojpuri, yet nor for a moment did she doubt that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction” (8).

Ghosh also gives a graphic picture of how the small farmers and agricultural labourers have been exploited in Colonial India and were forced by circumstances to be Coolies and deported to Mauritius, Fiji, and Trinidad to work in the sugar canes fields and serve the colonizers purposes. To evoke the history of colonial India, emblematized in the Poppy, Ghosh brings in a large cast of characters: British, Indian, French, American, Chinese, and many others of mixed races and ethnic identities. For example, Deeti’s tragedy begins with her marriage to Hukum Singh, an opium addict, whose brother rapes her on the wedding day. When she is ready to perform *Sati* to save herself from the lustful brother-in-law and his family members, Kalua, a low caste cart-driver saves her. Her family members promised her that, if she commits *sati* they would build a temple in her name. Kalua marries her secretly and then takes her to the ship intending to leave the country to become coolies in some distant land. Deeti leaves her daughter, Kabutari to her brother’s care and sets out with Kalua to begin a new life in a new world.

The bigot and profit hungry British are constantly assisted on their way by the likes of Bhyro Singh, a brutish Subedar who relishes flogging/battering his compatriots when they step out of line. Burnham, the owner and a ruthless merchant of the ship, supports the combined merits of capitalism and evangelical Christianity. The devout
accountant, Baboo Nob Kissan Panda, the pen-pushing clerk, strangely womanish, worshipper of Lord Krishna, justifies his involvement in the trade of drugs and humanizes it by imagining the great temple he would build when he retired. The other travelers of the ship are, Paulette, who is an orphan and in the disguise of a coolie, a Bengal-raised daughter of a freethinking French Botanist, Zachary, a deceptively white-seeming freedman from Baltimore, the vessel’s second mate and other subalterns-belongs to diverse and varied cultures, nationals and social backgrounds in one place. Ghosh thus shatters the illusion of the sense of place. He digs out the colonial oppression by the British businessmen and also some historical facts which were hitherto unexplored by the historians. He exposes the British greed to earn easy buck from the cash crops, and the Indian farmers who are forced to grow/produce crops according to the needs of the British. Deeti comes to know of this through the contact of other shipmates, that everyone’s land was in the hook of the agents of the opium factory, which left them with no option but to strew their land with opium. After the harvest, the farmers found that with little amount of grains they were destined to plunge into debt. It was done deliberately by the British to help the landlords and local money lenders to create a labour class to work in their colonies. Ghosh provides the condition and plight of the farmers thus:

No one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies- fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining cold to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scarped. Such
punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies—but what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, or vegetables?.... Come to cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign ‘asami’ (astronomical interest) contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refuse, they would have their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you had not accepted money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. And at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance (9-10).

It quite apparent here how the British trap the innocent farmers into debt and ruin their lives. Then the farmers had to depend on the landlords as their labourers throughout their lives and suffer. “Lands that had once provided sustenance got swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples or sip the starchy water from a pot in which rice had been boiled” (202).

The novel also throws light on how the British not only exploited the subaltern class but also targeted the well-off Indian landlords who had unshakable faith in the Company’s policy and a high regard for the Queen’s rule. Ghosh portrays the lives of the people residing near the coast of old Calcutta where Raja Neel Ratan, who entertained
British merchants and seamen aboard in his affluent estate with wine and Chicken. He is a wealthy Raja whose ancestors have been ruling the province, Rakshali for centuries. Unfortunately, Mr. Burnham confronts him with the need to sell off his estates in order to pay for the debt he had incurred while trading opium with China, at the height of the opium trade. Due to the resistance shown by the Chinese authorities, the opium trade stopped; he is left with no money to clear his debts. When Mr. Burnham proposes to settle the loan for Halder's property, he refuses the deal as the property has come to him from his ancestors and selling it would mean deceiving many of his dependents living in his household. When the case goes to court of law, the English Judge treats Raja Neel Ratan unmindful of his position and place, and passes the sentence- seven years imprisonment to Raja Neel Ratan and explains to him that it was a crime of utmost gravity, states that, forgery was a hanging offence. In a way, the English wanted to show it to the Indian public, how fair their law and court was and they would not spare even persons like Neel Ratan, and everyone was under the strict observance of the law. Through such an act, the British showed how the civilised nations discharge their sacred law to instruct the natives. But Neel Rath, who is a law giver in his native land considered a superior being- almost a deity in his native place had to bear the humiliation. Such a man of stature has to travel with the indentured labours in the ship as a common man and he is taken across the black waters in the ship where he is thoroughly disgraced, and which he could never have dreamt of. He has to stay with a man, Ah Fatt, half Chinese and half-Parsi, an Opium addict, the only companion to Neel Ratan, who always lays unconscious, making the place smell full of shit and urine and Neel Ratan had to clean the place as the scavengers do. Such an act of cleaning toilet gets repeated many
times to reduce his ‘supra-human’ status as a king and landlord. The inscription of the
tattoo on his forehead declaring his crime, “Forgerer, Alipore 1838”, completely
obliterates his past and presents him with a new identity. Ah Fatt, for a small quantity of
Opium, proceeds to urinate upon Neel Halder. But this heinous act of urinating on the
Kingly Neel Halder is the final humiliating (ignominy) act of bringing him to the level of
any other ordinary human being. He is made to feel low by the racist attitude of the
British. His pride gets punctured during such acts of ignominy. Towards the end of the
novel, Neel Ratan and Ah Fatt are seen escaping in a boat along with Serang Ali, Jodu
and Kalua. Before their escape, Kalua kills Subedar Bhyro Singh, who happened to be a
relative of Deeti’s in-laws. Subedar whips Kalua in public apparently to punish him for
escaping with an upper class woman, who wanted to have sexual relationship with her.
As the stories merge, each carrying its share of joys and sorrows, the Ibis becomes a
shelter for the destitute.

Export of Opium to China was the brainchild of the British and the American
businessmen. Ghosh thus breaks the myth of China’s hunger for Opium. China had
banned Opium trafficking but the British colonial policy putting on the facade to hide the
ugly face of colonialism is revealed in Mr. Burnam’s arguments in favour of free trade,
which, he says, is likely to be the professed cause behind the impending war against
China. He even defends it by saying,

The war when it comes will not be for Opium. It will be for a principle:
for freedom-for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of Chinese
people. Free trade is a right conferred on man by God, and its principles
apply as much to opium as to any other article of trade. More so perhaps,
since in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantages of British influence…British rule in India could not be sustained without opium- that is all there is to it, and let us not pretend otherwise. The Company’s annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of your own country, the United States? Do you think that British rule would be possible in this impoverished land if it were not for this source of wealth? And if we reflect on the benefits that British rule has conferred upon India, does it not follow that opium is this land’s greatest blessing? Does it not follow that it is our God-given duty to confer these benefits upon others? (115).

When Neel Rathan asks him politely if he is not troubled to invoke God in the service of Opium, Mr. Burnam promptly and shamelessly answers thus:

Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus- if it is God’s will that Opium to be used as an instrument China to his teachings, then so be it…I can see no reason why any Englishman should abet the Manchu tyrant in depriving the people of China of this miraculous substance (116).

Ghosh introduces both English and American characters on the illegal Opium business, and discloses the unashamed colonial policy of making money as well as spreading Christianity through illegal and immoral ways. Even the English are ready to go to the extent of disrespecting the Parliament for the sake of profit. When Neel Rathan asks them what their Parliament would think about this business, Burnam’s answer is, “Parliament. Parliament will not know of the war until it is over. Be assured, sir that if
such matters were left to Parliament there would be no Empire‖ (117-18). This exposes the hypocrisy of the Englishmen and their attitude towards the colonized. Burnam avers that he disliked war more than anybody else did, but “there are times when war is not merely just, but necessary”. His wife’s remark is more hypocritical, “indeed, humanity demands it. We need only think of the poor Indian peasant- what will become of him if his Opium can’t be sold in China?” (260). After an objective display of the plight of the Indian farmers because of the plantation of poppies, the boastful remarks of the British businessmen expose ironically, the hollow colonial demand that colonial rule was necessary for the total development of the natives. It was the impression that the British had created in the minds of the Indians.

Ghosh perhaps knew well that, it would be difficult for the British to rule a vast country like India and run a profitable business. Hence, he shows the Britishers as imperialists who made use of opportunists, caste-based, orthodox, and disunited Indians, who strengthened their hands to make profit. They implemented their infamous policy- ‘divide and rule’ and covertly and efficiently expanded their empire. In the first place, they supported the rich landlords and business class to exploit the poor peasants by depriving their rights. In order to satisfy their perverted greed, the rich inflicted torture on the natives and compelled them to hard labour so that the British rulers and businessmen would be profited. Since poverty is always the root cause for migration of the poor, it was well utilised by the illegal businessmen, the colonisers, and their agents. Therefore, Burnam appoints people like, Byron Singh and Baboo Nob Krishana Panda, who work as agents of British, and are responsible for the shipping of the indentured labourers. Ghosh is very critical in exposing the colonial oppression. To balance this atrocity of the
English, Ghosh presents kindhearted Frenchman Mr. Lambert, the Director of the Botanical garden in Shibpur, who gives away his belongings to some beggars before his death. Mr. Lambert, who is in a financial crunch, approaches Kissin Pander, a moneylender to arrange for money. He pledges his gold chain with Kissin Pander, a locket containing his dead wife’s photo. When Mr. Lambert dies, Paulette had to stay with Mr. Burnam. She is the only white woman in the ship who is in disguise as a coolie. Kissin Pander tells what her father had told him before his death:

She is innocent she has not known anything but Love, Equality and Freedom. If she remains here, in the colonies, where Europe hides its shame and its greed, all that awaits her is degradation: the whites of this town will tear her apart, like vultures and foxes fighting over a corps. She will be innocent thrown before the money-changers who pass themselves off as men of God…(117).

Mr. Lambert desperately wanted the amount for the passage of his daughter who must leave India after his death. Because he thinks that his daughter’s life would be at stake in the hands of the British, as it reminds him of a comment made by an English man- that the British rule in India was rotten and the condition of colonialism was oppressive.

The other shipmates are also treated inhumanly in the crew due to racial prejudices. The black are in chains as they refuse to eat the rotten beef. Zachery, the carpenter, though he had no knowledge of the Sea and ship, had to carry out the duty of the Captain since there was shortage of men. It is his white complexion that helps him to
be a crewman. The last part of the book gives a grim picture of the physical torture inflicted on the natives in the ship both by the white men as well as by the agents of the white men. Thus, a class of Indian people helped the British to continue rule India for centuries. The captain observes:

I will not deny these men, who have served us faithfully, the justice they seek. For this you should know, gentleman, that there is an unspoken pact between the white man and the natives who sustain his power in *Hindoostan*—it is that in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with liker, and each must keep to their own. The day natives lose their faith in us, as the guarantor of the order of castes— that will be the day, gentle men that will doom our rule. This is the inviolable principle on which our authority is based— it is what makes our rule different from that of such degenerate and decayed peoples as the Spanish and Portuguese (482).

The captain thus clarifies the British policy of supporting a part of the colonized people who helped the British continue their rule in India and also takes pride in the ‘civilised’ British rule, as opposed to the ‘barbarian’ rule of the Portuguese and the Spanish.

Ghosh’s novels mirror his engagement with various social, historical, political, economic and cultural issues that most colonized countries face in the present context. He highlights the colonizers constructions, such as superiority, binaries for their selfish ends, the order of social hierarchy, imposition of western ideas and thoughts on the colonized and the projection of the west as the best in all respects. Most of his novels offer
resistance to Eurocentric ideologies, re-visiting or deconstructing and dismantling of colonial discourses, replacing indigenous and cultural values through subverting grand narratives. To explore and expose these truths, Ghosh fuses actual history with the imaginary characters, most of them are the subaltern class who had played a significant role and whose voices were silenced by the colonizers. Ghosh, like most of his Western counterparts, problematizes historical discourse by employing the historiographic metafictional mode. Thus, he exposes the colonisers’ hypocrisy and racial discrimination towards the non-Europeans. In a way, his novels do not present a world of fantasy, instead they present a world of complex reality expertly re-working a part of colonial history of India.

The coolies who suffer in “Sea of Poppies” do not have that power to resist. Since they are illiterates, they cannot even record or document what happened to them. Being an anthropologist and a novelist Ghosh imagines them, based on the limited sources available, but he does it appears so with his instincts. His characters are often incomprehensible to one another, which make for occasional comedy, but too often, they are also incomprehensible to his readers. And his penchant for meticulous detail, the insides of an opium factory, the organization of a coolie ship, impedes the progress of his various plots and subplots. Ghosh invariably makes the novel a literary excavation, digging up the stories of people lost to history.

**Vikram Seth’s Two Lives (2005)**

Vikram Seth (1952- ) is a prominent writer born in Kolkata and educated in India, London, California and China. In this regard, he can be termed as the citizen of the world and a cultural traveler. Even the academic critics are not able to situate him in any
category, such as, colonial, postcolonial, modern or postmodern and so forth. He cannot be categorized along with the other writers of his generation, because of his variety of writings- poetry, travelogue, fiction, novel, history and so on. Seth fits into any category of ‘avant-grade’ novelist by virtue of his wanderings across the globe and his temporal location.

Vikram Seth’s father, Premo Seth worked for a long time with the Bata Shoe Company and his mother, Leila Seth, a retired High Court Judge, cast a seminal influence on young Vikram Seth’s career. Seth did his schooling in Doon School, graduation at St. Stephen College, Delhi, and then he went to Oxford for his higher studies. He took Philosophy, Politics and Economics instead of English Literature. Seth goes to England in 1969 for higher studies where he meets his maternal Uncle, Shanthi Behari Seth, a dental surgeon, and his Jewish German wife, Henny Crado Caro, 18 Queens Road, Hendon, London. In 1975 after the graduation from Oxford, he gets admission to the Doctoral Programme in Economics at Stanford, where he is forced to do compulsory courses in Macroeconomics and Microeconomics but “could not get by without wasting a whole lot of time studying. The subject was dry, mathematically unrealistic and intellectually unchallenging” (26).

Two Lives (2005) is the veritable tale and also an absorbing memoir of two lives- his uncle Shanti Behari Seth and his German Wife, Henny, representing two different religious and cultural backgrounds. The novel is divided into five parts shuttles from past to the present and also to the present and past. Each chapter is further divided into several sub chapters spreading almost to five hundred pages, revealing the tragic story of hope and survival of Shanti and Henny- the two lives. The novel is a part biography, part
memoir, part mediation, part history of our times and it is a matter of fact tale of two remarkable lives of Shanti and Henny who lived in exceptional times of their lives. Henny’s life is shattered to pieces during the Nazi rule and the Second World War, she loses almost her family, her mother and sister to Hitler’s brutal extermination of Jews followed by the holocaust in the mid-nineteen thirties. Seth focuses on contemporary German history, politics, Nazi vehemence and along with it discusses Shanti and Henny’s personal lives in detail through letters, documents and through memoirs: “It was this collection of papers- printed paper, typed paper, hand-written paper, photographic paper” (188). Seth also reflects upon the horrors of Nazi Germany, Indian freedom struggle and the crimes of the Israeli state against the Palestinians and so on. The biographer, Vikram Seth turns into a mediator, refrains from adding to these letters, editing them slightly, and then juxtaposing them in chronological order and brings it in the form of book to pay a tribute to his uncle Shanti and his aunt Henny.

Shanti Behari Seth is sent to Germany by his family to Berlin to study “medicine and dentistry at one out of the best universities in the world in an impossible language that he would have to learn in a matter of weeks was not comforting” (78), in the early 1930s just before Hitler came to power. He left India for Germany as a young man of twenty-three. Though he could not speak a single German word, he was accepted as a student at a Dental Institute in Berlin. After changing several lodgings, at last he finds a house owned by a Mrs. Caro. The elder daughter, Henny opposes providing shelter to a black man and warns her mother- “Don’t take the black man” (81). But gradually the black man wins the heart of Henny, “a hot brick” (95) with his generosity. “This was the beginning of a relationship that was to last five and a half decades” (81). During Nazi
regime, Shanti, as a non-Aryan in Berlin, was prevented from both practicing dentistry and to carry out postgraduate research. Much against his will, Shanti had to move to London in 1937, where he gets fresh entry to the dental course and had to learn English where German language was not accepted.

Along with the story of Shanti and Henny, the novel explores the history of Germany and the greed of Adolf Hitler for power which led to the genocide of millions of non-Aryans. Hitler uproots and eliminates the Jews from Germany and reduces them to non-entities. The novel can also be studied as a postcolonial text as it exposes the colonial designs of the European Empire for power. *Two Lives* is both a history of a violent and historic century seen through the memories of two survivors and an intimate portrait of their relationship, marriage and an abiding complex love. The story recounts the true histories- at first parallel, later intertwined the life of Seth’s maternal uncle, Shanti Behari Seth his German Wife Hennerle Caro and the German heart rending holocaust. Seth says, “When I was seventeen I went to live with my great uncle and great aunt in England. He was Indian by origin, she German. They were both sixty I hardly knew them at the time…” (3). But in the course of time he feels himself compelled to write about their lives with compassionate realism in the historical context.

When Seth was looking for a subject matter for his next novel, his mother, Leila Seth insists him to write about his uncle, Shanti and his German wife, the childless couples who were the local guardians for him in England. When Seth took up the task of writing the novel with the sense of gratitude, he goes to England after several years later in 1994. When Seth interviews Shanti eleven times, who was feeling lonely and lost after Henny’s the death in 1989. In a fit of anger, Shanti had destroyed everything that
reminded him of her. Seth tells that, “But one manifestation that is painful to contemplate is his destruction of all her papers after her death and every photograph he could find of her” (439). But a trunk in the attic which had escaped Shanti’s notice, contained full of Henny’s personal papers, letters, photographs, which proved to be the major source for Two Lives. Seth interviews him for a possible biography that distracts the senile old man a little. Seth relays extensively upon the historical documentation of Germany under Nazi. He spends a considerable time on the happenings/incidents of the Holocausts, or rather on his own reactions to it; and this accounts for a strange moment in his research, reads all the letters, (though they were written in German Language he translates them) relating to the transportation of Henny’s mother and sister to the concentration camp. Seth gives a detailed account of how Shanti and Henny in Germany, objectively from the Indian point of view that can provide to the reader a commonality of experience. This memoir may have something in common with the ‘public’ biography in modern and contemporary Indian literature. Indian life histories, written in English, tend to focus on the ways in which the individual relates to contemporary historical, political events and Nazi vehemence are discussed in detail through letters, along with the exploration of the private self. The letters themselves cover the decade of the 1940s giving crucial evidence of the traumatic events of that period and Henny’s state of mind. Thus, half of the story is narrated in a series of letters written by different characters to one another including Shanti and Henny.

The author devotes considerable space to Henny. Being a German Jew, she suffers more than Shanti does. Through her letters, Seth gets lot of information about the conditions of the Jews in Germany. Seth defends it by saying:
I think unlikely. And as a result, this book would have been mainly about
Shanti uncle. I could not justly have called it *Two Lives* unless her voice
played a role as strong as Uncle’s. And, had it not been for fortuitous
discovery long after her death in the attic of their house, hers would have
been a supporting role (186).

Henny’s post-war correspondence with her Christian friends in Berlin reveals her
thoughts about her past, her lost home and family, the deep hurt caused by the Nazi’s
atrocities and the betrayal of some of her former friends. Yet, in her letters, she has also
expressed her gratitude for those who had helped her to flee to England and had
supported her mother and sister before they got killed in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.
Her correspondents’ letters portray Henny as a generous and warm-hearted woman
whose response to their material needs in post-war Berlin is accepted with gratitude and
love. However, Seth does not show the same interest in exploring Shanti’s Indian identity
who opted to live in Britain in order to escape the constrains and obligations of the Indian
extended family. Henny corresponds with her friends back in Germany, in which she
attempts a painful process of coming to terms with her past and with that of her erstwhile
homeland, Germany. After the war, her sense of solidarity with her compatriots/friends
has fragmented along very clear lines- those who were consciously in opposition to the
regime, or at least they tried to have as little to do with it as possible and those who
collaborated willingly with it. Her close friends do not help Henny’s sister and mother
who were first arrested by the Gestapo and then sent to the concentration camps in
Theresienstadt and Birkenau, where they were killed brutally. Seth writes in detail about
her suffering and presents how Henny’s sister, Lola faced death and was forced to enter the huge underground ‘disinfection room’, in fact the gas chamber:

Lola would have begun to die in agony and terror, gasping for breath. Within between five and twenty minutes she and everyone else would have been dead. The peephole in the oak door would have helped those in charge to ascertain the situation. In half an hour, the suction pumps would have been turned on. In due course, the oak door would have been reopened and the lights turned on. What would have greeted the eyes of the special group of prisoners- the Sonderkommando- detailed for the next stage of the process would have been corpses scattered evenly across the floor, but a huge pile of piles of corpses. Since the effect of the gas would have been the most apparent close to the floor at first, then higher up, everyone would have been struggling in desperation for air, crawling at, trampling down and climbing upon the bodies of their fellows in order to gain a few extra moments of breath and life. Babies and children, like the weakest and oldest, would have been crushed at the bottom of the pile. (225).

Shanti leaves Germany for England in 1937, as he is not a German Jew. Henny follows him 1939, after two years. However, both Shanti and Henny had to relinquish Germany and choose to live in exile, and settle down in London. Shanti had to leave for the war. From the war field Shanti continuously writes letter to Henny. Although Two Lives consists much that is private, including letters and communications so personal that Seth occasionally feels reluctant to share them with the readers, he adds a more ‘public’
dimension to how his own story by reflecting on the relationship between Henny and the German nation. Seth documents his scruples about the obligation of writing this book involved in writing a biography. Knowing that “every even-handed biography of a completed life has to deal with private matters” (188) and wishing to present the subject as fully as possible, he is in the beginning uncertain about his project.

As the Second World War Begins, Shanti enrolls in the British Army and serves as a member of the Army Dental Corps in a British Regiment. Throughout the war, he writes letters to Henny from the War field, addressing her “dear Hennerle” and “little Kuckuck” but he hesitates and takes six years to propose to her thinking that she may reject him since she was in love with another young man, Hans. But Hans marries a Polish Christian girl. As a German Jew, Henny was obviously forced into exile. She manages to escape from Germany in 1939 and comes to England, meets Shanti, the only person she knows in England. While he was staying in Monte Cassino, where fighting between Germans and allied troops was intense, Shanthi loses his right arm. She was alone, had little money and was desperately anxious about her fate and in the concentration camp; her mother and sister were killed. She endures calmly the loss of her mother Ela and her sister Lola.

After the War, in London, Shanti had to face lot of hardships being a one-armed dentist. He had to lead his life with the pension. He joins as an adviser to the Amalgamated Dental Company with the help of his friend Dr. Rowlett. It helps him to keep up his research and begins to practice again with one hand. His indomitable will power, concentration and dedication make him to build up a successful career as dentist and a researcher. Shanti marries Henny in 1951.
Seth does not explore intriguing questions like why Shanti enrolls in Berlin Dental College in the first place; this in fact raises interesting issues about the relationship to his identity as a British citizen (as an imperial subject) and later his professed loyalty to Britain. One wonders why Shanti does not think of coming back to India. Seth surmises that Shanti’s attachment to Henny may be one of the reasons or his desire for independence from family constrictions. The particular interesting strand of this narrative consists of Seth’s reflections on Germany, and on Israel. It provides some insights as to how an Indian writer has viewed and written history of another nation extensively in defense of secularism. Seth maintains secular stance and expresses dismay at the fact, despite the experience of the Holocaust, Israel has adopted such persecutory policies towards Arabs. Seth’s experience of communal conflict in India makes him skeptical of states like Israel in which religion and ethnicity are equated with nationality. He feels that no state that deliberately prefers one religion to another can guarantee equality and justice to its citizens. But Seth upholds the ideals of love, peace, and tolerance, suggesting that the lessons of the Holocaust might be able to teach us something for the future, while constantly keeping the emphasis on the ‘little’ stories. Seth ends the novel with the hope: “If we cannot eschew hatred, at least let us eschew group hatred! We may see that we could have been born as each other. May we, in short, believe in humane logic and perhaps, in due course, in love” (499). Thus, the author evokes this message of love against hatred and peace against war.

Seth makes an interesting observation during the release of *Two Lives*. The structure of the plot was part biography, part memoir and part history. But it is mostly biography but partly autobiography. He narrates the two lives of Shanti and Henny,
variously separate and fused, but also provides a considerable amount of first person information about himself, his relationship with his great uncle and the background to his own writing process. Thus, Seth plays a duel role, as a narrator and as a character within the text. In a sense, Two Lives can be called Three Lives. Seth in an interview puts the matter more modestly: “It is not three lives- the focus of the book is still basically on Shanti and Henny. The ideal title of the book would be in Hindi, because we have a word for it: Dhai Jeevan, Two and a Half Lives”. Shanti and Henny were in no way famous before this book got published, and will only become known to the public because of this book. Seth to be appreciated for this because he gives prominence to these two subalterns. Through his Uncle and aunt, Seth looks at the Germany and its history. As Rashmee Roshan Lal writes in Times of India review, they are “worthy but unexceptional people, now more famous in death than they could ever have dreamed of being while they lived”. (Rashmee Roshan Lall, “An Indian Dentist and his Frau”. Times of India, internet). Shanti and Henny are, in most ways, two fairly ordinary middle-class people whose lives appear striking because they lived through exceptional times- during the historical times in Europe, World War II, the Shoah, the reconstruction of Europe and so forth. Yet the largest part of the book covers the two lives.

The couple lives a quiet middle-class, childless life in London all their lives except for annual holidays to Switzerland, engaged in work and social outings. She never speaks of her sorrows even to Shanti. Nor does she, despite her marriage to him, ever visit India (Rohini Mukashi-Punekar 187).
On the other hand, both Shanti and Henny can be seen as cases of subaltern lives in certain aspects above all given their time and place. None of them had a single identifiable “home”. Germany’s increasing xenophobia caught up with Shanti and forced him to retreat to England. After enlisting in the British Army, he serves in North Africa and Italy. Even the Caros, being Jews had to face lot of hardships in Germany. Seth documents: “As refugees poured into Berlin from the countryside and smaller towns out of their jobs and robbed of their property and savings…” (127). Henny’s non-Jewish friends drift away and are too afraid to visit them. Henny loses her job with the Insurance Company, manages to get out of Germany to London just a month before the war broke out to stay with a family called Auberry in London. Thus, the novel portrays overwhelming historical events along with Shanti and Henny’s bitter life-experiences during the Second World War, The Third Reich, Auschwitz, Holocaust, Israel, Palestine, post war Germany and the 1970s Britain. Two Lives says a review, “is as much a commentary on the ethical issues surrounding biography as it is an exemplary act of biographical writing” (Wilson). But Seth’s final justification of writing this novels is, for ‘mining’ their privacy for public purposes is perhaps a motive that biographers could do well to remember: “I want them complexly remembered” (498).

Seth asks a pertinent question; “Where did Shanti and Henny belong? Which country did they belong to? Not Germany any more, not India” (400). Despite their not belonging anywhere, it is interesting to note, on all the evidence, the lack of racial prejudice experienced by both Shanti and Henny in England. Both of them do not seek refuge in any German Jewish or Indian community in London, despite Shanti’s physical disability and skin-colour and their friends they seem for the most part are British.
Besides, their love story, the novel focuses on contemporary history, politics, and Nazi vehemence in detail through the available letters. He is more inclined towards family-ties and communal harmony. Thus, Seth presents their lives with compassionate realism from the historical context.

In one of the interviews, Seth confesses that that novel, *Two Lives* had changed his perspective on relationships, courage and love. To quote: “seeing uncle Shanti suffer in his last days changed me as a person. You don’t have to be an author for life or death experience to change you. Even the choices both Shanti and Henny made, made me think about relationships” (435). Seth feels: There was a relationship based on “mutual confidence rather than confidences” (435). Thus, Seth explores this relationship in its various possibilities. In a way, Seth has chosen to be faithful to the source materials and be a memoir writer rather than fictionalize it.

*Two Lives* is an indictment of a historical century of two world wars and a rejuvenated love between Shanti and Henny against the racial divide. Just a brief description of the early part of Shanti and Henny’s history suggests the wealth of material that Seth, as biographer, had to sift through to write *Two Lives*. But that was, perhaps, the least of his worries. As he admits near the end of the book, he faced a number of challenges, foremost of which was how to present two overlapping life stories in a single volume: ‘In a double biography, an intertwined meditation, where the author is an anomalous third braid, sometimes visible, sometimes not, there are intriguing possibilities of structure.’ There was, too, the ever-present worry of being unfaithful to the memory of his uncle and aunt by revealing intimate details that they would not have wanted the world to know.
Seth probes deeply and calmly into deep political and ethical issues, though the discussion of these issues is general. He offers rational analyses on some of the most controversial issues of contemporary geopolitics. *Two Lives* renders microscopic details of a particular time span of history of Germany and evokes a message of love against hatred and peace against war. It is an indictment of a historical century of two World Wars and a rejuvenated love against racial divide as the novelist wishes at the end of the novel.

**Jaishree Misra’s *Rani* (2007)**

Jaishree Misra (1962- ) is one of the emerging women writers, born in Kerala and stayed for sometime in England and is presently settled in Delhi. She worked, as a Radio Journalist for the BBC and a Film Classifier at the British Board of Film Classification in London. She taught adults with special needs, did childcare work in a Social Services Department.

Writing a novel on history and historical personages is not new in the literatures of the world. Historical novels have already attained canonical status and help to throw light on the men and women of history and help us to cast off the cloud of obscurity shrouding the backyards of their lives. It also helps us to understand better about the important historical figures and significant events which are overlooked by the historians. One must applaud Jaishree Misra for selecting a historical as well as controversial subject matter for her ambitious novel, *Rani* (2007). Knowing well that writing about historical figures and about their lives would lead to controversy, yet Misra daringly attempts to
explore the personality and character of Lakshmibai, who is revered even today as an iconic historical personality in India.

It is said that, history has always been silent about women and also Women have nothing to do with history, may be the reason that history is his/story and not her/story. Since ages, women were confined to the four walls and they were not allowed to look beyond their domestic world. Nayantara Shagal perhaps is the first Indian woman novelist who wrote novels based on political events. After Shagal, Misra has taken up this kind of challenging task of writing a historical novel, which led to a controversy. Although in regional languages, very few women writers have made attempts writing historical novels eg. Mahaswetha Devi’s *The Queen of Jhansi* (2000), in Bengali and Pratiba Ranade’s *Jhansirani Lakshmibai* (2009) in Marathi respectively, both the novelists have written on the life of Rani Lakshmibai. Misra displays commendable artistry and craftsmanship in depicting Rani’s personal as well as public life.

Misra’s long felt desire was that she wanted to write about an inspiring woman of India. What captured her mind was her reading of Subhadra Kumari Chauhan’s poem about Jhansi Rani Lakshmibai in her school days, when she was just seven years old. This poem, which was haunting her mind since her childhood, seemed to be an appropriate subject matter for her historical novel, *Rani*. In the introduction of the novel, Misra mentions that the reliable and primary sources on Lakshmibai of Jhansi are very less. Her letter correspondences with the British Government and Rani’s personal letters were destroyed during the assault on Jhansi fort. It took Misra several years to collect materials through archives, folk songs, local legends, internet and India section of the British Library.
Lakshmibai played a crucial role in the Great Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. She is also one of the victims of the British colonial policies and politics. Jhansi, the rich state was captured by the British in the pretext of Doctrine of Lapse. Thus, she becomes the victim of the colonial greed of English. The British records still hold the fact against Lakshmibai as a mutineer, conspirator and a murderer and also is recurrent in the British sources. Misra attempts to erase this black mark by attributing Lakshmibai with a character of incomparable integrity and highlighting the circumstances that finally damaged her good intentions. Misra, as a novelist, takes creative liberty in depicting Rani’s personal life along with important historical events, although there are many discrepancies in the available records. On the other hand, the Indian Nationalists eulogized Rani almost as a symbol of national icon and made her the necessary inspiration during the freedom movement and a symbol of resistance to the British rule in India. For Misra, Lakshmibai was a fascinatingly modern woman who resisted all the hurdles posed by the British. The novel displays Misra’s understanding of history with an insight into the intertextual connection between history and creativity. She faithfully recreates the milieu of the period and displays consummate artistry in depicting Rani’s personal life. Thus, Misra balances dexterously both personal life of Rani as well as the historical events of the period in an unprejudiced way. The fictional treatment to the myth, legend, folk songs and historical facts surrounding Lakshmibai’s life is significant because as a creative artist Misra is interested in metamorphosizing more than treating the life of Lakshmibai for drawing a philosophy relevant to the modern world.

Set in nineteenth century colonial India, Jaishree Misra’s *Rani* documents the gradual transformation of a simple and intelligent girl into a ‘warrior queen’.
Manikarnika, known as Mani, (in fact she was called Manu, but Misra names her as Mani here), loses her mother at the age of four, intelligent beyond her years. At the age of fourteen, she marries the king of Jhansi, Gangadhar Rao, a middle-aged warm hearted but a weak spirited king. Being a woman, and having all sorts of womanly passions, Lakshmibai never let her emotions rule her. Lakshmibai is viewed still as an unparallel courage and humanity, a freedom fighter, a symbol of bravery, and also called Indian Joan of Arc. Even today, her role in the freedom struggle is remembered in India. Although many novels have been written on Lakshmibai in the English and in regional languages, a few writers have attempted to depict the Queen as a human being and a woman. Instead, the writers have projected her as a sword wielding brave queen and have glorified her as more than a human. In this novel, apart from tracing all the important historical events, Misra throws light on Rani’s personal life, her feelings, and emotions and fills in flesh and blood to the skeletal form, to give a new lease of life to the personality of Rani.

Misra candidly captures the Indian credulity, pusillanimity, indifference, complacency, selfishness, avarice, sycophancy, indiscipline, disunity and treachery, and shows how these things contributed significantly to the failure of the uprising of 1857. As for historical significance, some historians like V.D. Savarkar called this event as the first war of Indian independence. The English historians depicted Rani as an immoral woman whereas the Indian historians depicted her as an archrival of the British. The Uttar Pradesh Government banned the novel soon after its publication, as the people protested against the novelist alleging that Misra misrepresented Rani Lakshmibai. It created a pandemonium in the State Assembly. The fact that, the author has fictionalised a part of
Rani’s private life and showed her as involved in a romance with an Englishman, Robert Ellis, is viewed by the public as blasphemy. This distortion of queen’s character hurt the feelings of the people, especially the people of Bundelkhand. The protestors burnt the effigies of the novelist and demanded to ban the novel. Some criticised that, the politicians of that particular constituency made use of this situation to divert the attention of the people from other serious and burning issues such as the draught. Two Congress MLAs and MPs of Uttar Pradesh were successful in persuading Mayavthi, the then Chief Minister of UP Government in banning the novel.

After the marriage, Gangadhar Rao encourages Rani Lakshmibai to take part in the affairs of the state. He likes his Queen to be present in the assembly. After his death, she takes important decisions in the best interest of her people and leads a lonely widowed life with dignity before dying in the war field as a martyr. As an intelligent women, Lakshmibai uses commonsense and takes the help of the British Agent, Robert Ellis who was also close to her Husband and sympathetic towards Jhansi. Rani becomes close to him because she had a fear of the British that they would do some harm to Jhansi. To avoid this, she seeks Ellis’ help. Their friendship turns to a love affair. When Misra uses this incident in her novel, the people of that region who adored Rani as a national icon got hurt and protested against the author and demanded to ban the book. In one of her interviews, Misra clarifies Rani’s love affairs, that only “the name of the Englishman is true, the rest is fiction”. However, Misra defends her novel:

I was, all said and done, terrified by what I’d set off. And upset that people who had clearly not read the book were accusing it of being disrespectful of Rani Lakshmibai, a figure I had in fact grown to like enormously while
researching her. Additionally, there appeared to be misunderstandings in India about the genre of historical fiction in which it’s usually considered fair game for writerly imagination to fill in the gaps left behind by recorded history. But a love story (albeit unexpressed and unfulfilled) between a widowed Indian queen and her British political agent was considered inflammatory by some. ‘A suitable metaphor for Empire’ was a kind of description I’d have preferred personally but never mind. Luckily, sometime after the cinders of those rather plump effigies had been swept away, I sold Rani’s film rights to a Bollywood company and was instantly filled with the most gratifying sense of divine justice. (Web Source)

Although, Rani is a historical novel, there is a lot of fiction as well. Misra balances both history and fiction deftly to make the novel an interesting one. She observes:

I have taken further liberties with Ellis’s story. The last recorded fact I could find on him was his punishment posting to Poona soon after Jhansi’s annexation but after that, and rather frustratingly, the trail went cold. The rest of his story in this book springs entirely from my imagination and from various writings by a handful of British men and women of the time, brave enough and clear-sighted enough to see the cruelties perpetrated by their Government in this terrible conflict (Author’s Note. Vii).

And again,
Lakshmibai lived in mostly in the safety of folk songs and ballads, some going as far as suggesting that she never died in battle at all. In terms of actual research material, all that remains now are pages of official correspondence between Jhansi and Government House in the run-up to Jhansi’s annexation and the most fascinating of these relate to the support that Lakshmibai received from her British political agent in her darkest days (*Author’s Note*. vii).

The major part of the narrative is based on the recorded history and local legends. But the focus of the novel is mainly on the fortunes and misfortunes of Rani Lakshmibai’s personal life. Therefore, the novel is a blend of history and biography of Lakshmibai. The other main characters and incidents stand obviously apart. Misra recreates the milieu to the period of the story by introducing realistic details of the social, political, and cultural and the religious life of the time by referring to native legends, folk songs, panegyric and by presenting details of British atrocities and their attitudes towards India.

Moropant, Lakshmibai’s father, after the death of his wife, moves from Bithur to the court of Peshwa’s in Varanasi. He is appointed as a minister in the court of old Peshwa. Both Moropant and Peshwa groom the motherless, attractive young and dynamic girl with great love and affection. With the help of her childhood friends, Nana Sahib and Tatya Tope, Mani learns the required qualities and skills of a warrior. When she is fourteen years old, she is married off to forty-year-old widower, Gangadhar Rao, the king of Jhansi. Misra depicts his personality as, “Even as a child, Gangadhar had shown scant
interest in affairs of the state, a nervous little boy always preferring to escape into strange unnamed reveries and artistic pleasures” (115). She further depicts him,

“He was painfully thin compared to his strapping brother it did not seem fair at all. She had also recently noticed that Gangadhar’s left leg had developed a tremor whenever he sat in the court, although the spasms seemed considerably reduced when he was relaxing at one of the evening soirees” (118).

He marries Rani to get an heir to the throne of Jhansi. But he lacks interest in conjugal responsibilities, administrative skills; rather he was a great lover of art. Despite his weaknesses, Gangadhar Rao is a kind hearted and loving husband. “…she had learnt that there was so much to love in her husband- his kindness and courtesy, his obviously growing confidence in her” (119). This helps her to learn administrative skills; she could ably rule the state in lieu of her husband. With great difficulty, after eight years of marriage, Laskhmibai consummates her marriage, and gives birth to a male child. The sick Gangadhar Rao tells his wife before his death, “My dear Lakshmibai, I give you my word that neither you nor our child will ever lose Jhansi if anything happens to me. My word” (162). Unfortunately, within four months the child dies then followed by the death of Raja Gangadhar Rao due to his poor health. Lakshmibai becomes a widow at the young age of twenty-eight.

The young Lakshmibai takes the reins of the state and seeks the help of the Englishman, Major Ellis, the political agent and a good friend of Gangadhar Rao. It shows Lakshmibai’s diplomacy in approaching Ellis, as she wants to be friendly with the
British to save Jhansi. Being a trusted friend of Jhansi family, Lakshmibai finds in him a momentary relief from her tensed political life. Gradually the friendship turns into love and results in failure, as both belonged to a different religious and cultural background. When the British suspect their relationship, Ellis is sent to Poona and back to England. Captain Alexander Skene takes over Ellis’s position at the crucial hour in 1857. As the Sepoy Mutiny breaks out, to save himself and his dependents, Captain Skene seeks temporary shelter in Jhansi Fort. Rani offers shelter to Captain Skene and his family, missionaries and orphans, on humanitarian ground despite the annexation of her state by the British. The suspicious sepoys come to know that some English people are hiding in the Jokhan Bagh palace, and attack the palace by force. But Rani’s request to the frenzied sepoys remains unheeded and she becomes a helpless, mute-spectator and witness to the mass massacre of more than 70 English people. But another version says that, Rani Lakshmibai appeared as the leader of the sepoys in Jhansi, although earlier she was prepared to accept British hegemony if her adopted son was recognized as the legitimate heir to the throne. Shekar Bandyopadhyaya argues that, “the Rani of Jhansi was actually threatened with death if she did not assist the sepoys or collaborated with the British”. (Shekar Bhandopadhyya 172).

Unfortunately, English treat this Jokhan Bagh massacre as a conspiracy of Rani Lakshmibai. Rani’s decision to give shelter to the Captain Alexander Skene and his family members turns out to be fatal to her. She tries to convince the British that she is not responsible for the tragedy. Though the Royal family of Jhansi had a cordial relationship with the British till the death of her husband, Gangadhar Rao, the British do not trust her. She makes several appeals to the Governor General, Dalhousie to re-
consider her case. But the cunning Governor General turns deaf to her appeals. Since the British had already, annexed Jhansi they did not want to listen to her. Misra convincingly settles the doubt of why Rani waited four long years to fight the British in the uprising of 1857 although Jhansi was annexed in 1854. The British misuse her widowhood in not giving permission to adopt a boy though they agree to this in the beginning. The patience and wisdom of Rani holds back till she is forced to jump into the fray. To save the honour of Jhansi, Lakshmibai, as a last resort, joins hands with her childhood friends, Tatya Tope and Nana Saheb to fight against the army of Sir Hugh Rose, and attains martyrdom. Till then, she uses her sense and good judgment not to rebel. Gradually she realizes that, it would be wrong to expect any kind of help from the wily British. She reads the situation in the right perspective. When war was inevitable, she takes the sword as a last resort to fight against the injustice done to her. While history viewed Rani to be the great warrior queen, Misra finds in her a modern woman, who fights for her rights against the formidable British. The Jokhan Bagh massacre is an important incident in the history of India, which changed her fate from a queen into a ‘most wanted’ person. She had to flee from Jhansi disguised as a male, strapping her adopted son, Damodar Rao to her back to save herself.

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi is still adored as a spotless leader of the National Movement of 1857, an epitome of bravery and full of compassion. Most of the historians have overlooked this Jokan Bagh incident. However, Misra by adding and highlighting this significant event does some justice to Rani as well as to history. Otherwise, this important historical event would have remained unknown to the readers. In a way, she fills the gap left by the historians. Throughout the novel, we can see Rani is considerate
about the welfare of the people, who had great faith in Rani than Raja Gangadhar Rao. What is conspicuous in the novel is Misra’s treatment of her protagonist, Lakshmibai, as a woman with flesh and blood.

As a creative writer, Misra takes a little liberty in depicting Rani more as a human being than as a Queen of Jhansi. She depicts Rani not from the viewpoint of an historian but from the novelist’s perspective. For this, Misra has relied more on British sources perhaps she might have thought that the British sources are more authentic than the less available Indian sources. Therefore, she had to fictionalize certain events in the story to portray Lakshmibai not only as a Queen but also as a human being. It is also to be considered that the British archives give a negative picture of Rani as the murderer, mutineer and a conspirator. She is responsible for the massacre of a huge number of British including women and children who were ostensibly under her protection. Misra presents several historical records in the novel, such as mails that passed between Rani and the British Headquarters. She quotes some letters to prove the factual authenticity of the novel, but there are plenty of fictitious events as well. Misra portrays the warrior queen’s eventful life and says that she in fact stood for peace and harmony and not the sword-swinging heroine. She was hunted by the British for something she had not done. This voluminous book which runs to about 400 plus pages is written in rather heavy vocabulary, which is expected to create an archaic ambiance to the novel. The reader gets curious to know how a queen finds time and space for love especially in a troubled time of 1850s.
The novel offers useful insights into the inter-textual relation between history and the historiography and the creative mind of the artist to reveal how a historical narrative related to the society of the past can serve as a key to the understanding of the present.

One may wonder how did the English come to acquire such a vast domain? How did people of this vast country put up so miserable a performance resulting in foreign domination? Kushwant Singh’s answer to some extent is convincing. He comments:

Indians had never been a nation: they had been divided by religion, race, caste and language; the vast mass of the people were indifferent and frequently hostile to princes and the nobility who monopolized leadership. The princes, owing loyalty only to themselves, were often more eager to the downfall of their rivals than in following their own interests; they were easily outmanoeuvred and out-gunned by the better trained, better disciplined and better equipped soldiers of the company. The English acquired India with the help of Indians; Madrasi militia against Marathas, Bengali and Bihari’s against the Sikhs, Sikhs and Punjabi Muslim against the rest (1970: 140).

Navtez Sarna’s *The Exile* (2008)

Navtez Sarna (1948- ) an IFS Officer from the Punjab Cadre, is a novelist, poet, short story writer and a columnist. Despite his busy official assignments, his interest in Literature is noteworthy. Born in Jalandhar, Punjab, he did his schooling in Dehradun, graduated in Law from Delhi University, and joined Indian Foreign Service in 1980. He was a joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, and holds the distinction of
being the longest-serving spokesperson of the ministry and served two Prime Ministers of India. He also served as a diplomat in Moscow, Geneva, Tehran, and Washington DC. Sarna retires in 2008.

Navtez Sarna’s *The Exile* (2008) deals with the tragic story of Punjab’s last king, Duleep Singh. The novelist breaks the stereotypical image of Royal family, documents the hard realities of the conditions of the Kings, Princes, Queens, Courtiers and others associated with them during the British rule in India. The novel also depicts how the British annexed Punjab and erased the Kings and Princes completely from the public memory. *The Exile* recounts the important events in the life of Duleep Singh, the son of Maharaja Ranajit Singh, known as the Lion of Punjab, and Maharani Jindan Kaur (fifth wife of the Maharaja) in an unbiased way. Sarna captures how the Sikh empire plunged into chaos after the death of its formidable king, Ranajit Singh, lost its glory due to the politics of the British. When Duleep Singh was just six years old, he was declared as the king and gets separated from his mother at ten. At sixteen, he gets converted to Christianity and is sent to England in the pretext of his Education and his future. He is sent to England with a stipend of 40,000 pounds annually and to spend his remaining years in pensioned extravagance in a huge estate, Elveden, as a ‘country squire’. Gradually Duleep realizes the wily nature of the British, and the treatment meted out to him by them disillusions him, and this makes him to re-convert to Sikhism. It leaves him depleted and vulnerable to every kind of deceit and ridicule. In a vain hope to restore his kingdom, he seeks help from Russia, France, Kaiser and other European countries, but fails. Disappointed and frustrated, due to paralysis, and ill health, Duleep Singh dies as an orphan in a cheap hotel in Paris.
If one takes a close look at *The Exile*, one will be in a position to know the historical situation as to how and why a formidable state like Punjab became an easy prey to the British. After conquering almost all the major parts of India, the only other major power left in North India for the British was Punjab. It was strong under Ranajit Singh, in the late eighteenth century and spread from the Sutlej to Khyber Pass. Punjab had no major conflict with the British until the death of Ranajit Singh. Soon after his death, Punjab became politically unstable. Number of courtiers began to contest for the throne. At last, the choice fell on the five-year-old Duleep Singh, one of the acknowledged sons of Ranajit Singh, and he was made to ascend the throne. The whole region was plunged into intrigues, rivalries and prolonged bloody succession of battles. Family feuds and court conspiracies added to the breakdown of the Punjab kingdom. The corruption in the bureaucracy and the internecine strife among the Sardars put Punjab’s economy into shambles. The situation and the political instability offered opportunities to the British to intervene resulting in Anglo-Sikh confrontation. Lord Hardinge decides to declare war on Punjab. The British in the first Anglo-Sikh war defeated the Sikhs in 1845, and sign the Lahore treaty in 1846. Punjab gets divided into two states- Jalandhar Doab and Kashmir. Kashmir is given to Ghulab Singh Dogra of Jammu, as a reward for his allegiance to the Company. The young Duleep Singh is declared as the king and is to be controlled by an English Resident. Maharani Jindan, Duleep’s mother, who was appointed as Regent, is removed from that position. The Resident cum Governor is given full authority over all the matters in every department of the State. This treaty deprives Rani Jindan of all the powers and she is pensioned off with an annuity of Rupees one and a half lakhs. Jindan makes her influence felt since she was the Queen Mother woefully wronged by the
British. The Resident decides to keep away the possessive mother says, “If we could get rid of her, it would give the little boy a better chance of being educated” (K. Singh 141:1996). Her pension amount is further reduced to forty-eight thousand and then to twelve thousand and she is exiled to Benaras. Lord Dalhousie’s ultimate aim of full annexation of Punjab gets fulfilled after the Second Anglo-Sikh War in 1849. As Duleep Singh signs the document of annexation in 1849, Punjab becomes a province of East India Company. The British pillage most of the wealth of Punjab including the diamond, Koh-I-Noor. This annexation drags Duleep Singh into the murky politics of nineteenth-century Europe.

Punjab was one of the rich and vast states in the Indian subcontinent and the British were aware of the strength of the Sikh, the warriors who resisted the British until 1839. They also knew Punjab would be a tough nut to crack. The death of Ranajit Singh leads to chaos as he dies without a successor to the throne. Some of the claimers of the throne involve in murders, hire assassins, betray friends and relations forge documents and involve in intrigues, worst of all, negotiating with the British who were then planning to annex Punjab. The British play foul politics in the downfall of Punjab. “The throne was reduced to being a footstool on which the ambitious could place their feet to climb higher”. (K. Singh.18:1996). The British annexe the whole of Punjab in 1849, within a decade, after the death of Ranajit Singh.

Though Ranajit Singh had seven sons, who were born of different women, none of them was competent enough to manage the affairs of the state. Most of them were inept, drug addicts and alcoholics. The British seize this opportunity and acquire Punjab.
It was great lapse on the part of Ranajit Singh. It is pertinent to note Kushwant Singh’s comments:

Ranajit Singh’s greatest oversight was his failure to train any one of his sons to take his place. When he died on the evening of 27 June 1839, there was no one fit to step into his shoes and guide the destinies of the State. This applied not only to his sons but also to the rest of the favourites at court whom he had raised from rustic obscurity to power, from modest means to wealth beyond their imagination (K. Singh.14: 1996).

The accession of Duleep Singh to the throne does not solve the problem of Punjab instead, accelerates it. After the death of Ranajit Singh, the British wanted Punjab’s administration to be unstable. Duleep Singh was only ten when his kingdom was completely annexed. In those ten years, he sees his mother grossly insulted, exploited and misused by the ambitious men of lust. “The Rani’s name had been linked with many courtiers.” (K.Singh 82: 1996). Duleep had seen relations and friends murdered before his eyes, even he had seen the best of men behave in the vilest manner. “He was frightened, effeminate young man who had enough of the Punjab and the Punjabis and wanted nothing better than to get away from both” (K. Singh 181:1996). Bir Singh, an influential religious guru/pontiff of Sikh Community, had a huge army under his control, rescues the name of Jindan from the low-level to which it had been reduced by bazaar gossip and elevated it to the status of the Mother of Khalsa. When the Resident feels that, the next best he could do was to find some excuse for removing Rani Jindan from the position of the Regent, as she would become the symbol of Punjab resurgence. To avoid Jindan’s interference in the administration, the British implicate her in one of the
conspiracies and the Resident orders her deportation from the Punjab. This treatment to Rani by the British outrages the sentiments of the people of Punjab. Her stipend is further reduced; she was stripped off all her jewellery before she was sent to Benaras under a heavy armed escort. On 18 April 1849, she eludes the Security and escapes to Kathmandu thinking that she could get the help of Gurkhas to liberate Punjab from the British. She comes back disappointed and is allowed to join her son in England, where she dies disappointed two years later. Her last wish, “Do not let my bones rot in this inhospitable country. Take me back to India” (K.Singh 184:1996.) was not fulfilled.

After acquiring Punjab, Dalhousie appoints Dr. Login as a tutor and a companion to Duleep. Within a few months of the Englishman’s tutelage, Duleep expresses his desire to accept Christian faith, renounces the Sikh faith, and goes to England. He takes such a stern decision to accept the other faith because the young Duleep got frustrated with his own people and their behaviors. The opportunist Dalhousie thinks that, his conversion would gain importance and would forever stop his chances of being acknowledged by the Sikh community as their king permanently. After two years of probation, he is baptized as a Christian. At first, Dalhousie is a little apprehensive of this move because this move would destroy the Sikh royal family and the community might rebel against the British. When Duleep has to select a companion, he selects Prince Shiv Dev, his nephew, the only surviving member of the direct line of Ranjith Singh. Shiv Dev Singh is an intelligent boy with a foolish mother, who was hoping that her son would be the king when Duleep became a Christian. Dalhousie presents Duleep a copy of the Bible as a parting present. In England, Queen Victoria treats Duleep as her grandson. In 1861,
he returns to India, takes his mother to England. Two years later, he comes back to India with his mother’s ashes to immerse it in the holy river, Ganges.

The story of *The Exile* is narrated by six different voices including that of Duleep Singh. Each one is chosen because the author was perhaps looking for a person who would have an authoritative voice; somebody who would have easy access to the maharaja throughout the fifty-five years of his life. To gather as many facts as accurately possible, Sarna traces Duleep Singh's footsteps across several continents and countries—England, Moscow, Paris, Lahore (the then capital of the Sikh kingdom) and the Library of Congress in Washington DC. Incidentally, the author spends almost nine years to carry out research on Duleep Singh.

The novel tells the story of many characters with heart breaking dramatic events—the tragic life of Duleep Singh. To give authenticity to the narration, Sarna uses multiple narrators as the main characters selecting from those who were close to Duleep Singh. Sometimes, Duleep himself narrates his own story. The narrators include- Mangla Mai, the favourite slave girl of Duleep’s mother, Dr. John login, the British who serves as a father figure to young Duleep, Lady Leena Login Dr. Login’s wife, Arur Singh, Duleep’s confidante and General Charles Carrol Tevis, Duleep’s confidante in Paris. All these persons give first hand information about Duleep and his tragic life story in India as well as in Europe.

One can find many similarities between Sarna’s *The Exile* and C.P. Belliappa’s novel, *Victoria Gowramma: The Lost Princes of Coorg* (2008). Both the novels are based on history and both the states, Punjab and Coorg were annexed in the similar manner.
Victoria Gowramma documents the tragic history of South Indian small state Coorg, its king, Chikaveera Rajendra, and how the British annexe a beautiful and small independent state, rich with natural resources. The King and his young daughter Gowramma were transported to Varanasi and then to Vellore and finally to England. She too was converted into Christianity like Duleep, at a very early age. The Queen Victoria names Gowramma, as Victoria Gowramma. Gowramma becomes completely western, ‘fair as a European, of royal descent and a Christian (Victoria Gowramma 159). The Queen takes extra care about her, ‘she was the Queen’s god-daughter’ (The Exile 159). She hesitates to identify with her father, completely neglects him in the later stage; rather she wants to identify with the elite English society. She thinks that, identifying with her father would be a hindrance to her new life in English society.

Both, The Logins and Her Majesty, propose Gowramma to Duleep to marry her as the Queen Victoria finds many similarities between Duleep Singh and Gowramma. Duleep’s kingdom was annexed in the same way Coorg was annexed. Gowramma’s father too was a political prisoner for many years in India as well as in England, as Duleep’s mother had been in India. Here too the British play a foul game of politics in proposing them to marry. The hidden agenda behind this marriage was, if Gowramma and Duleep marry, the other Indians would follow them and they could create an elite Indian Christian class. Duleep does not agree to the proposal and says, “I cannot marry her. She will not be able to make me happy. I could never feel more than pity for her. I don’t have the confidence in her; I cannot seem to trust her. I would hate to have trouble after marriage” (161).
Gradually Duleep gets exhausted with the European way of life. The hollow tedium of Western life disillusions him. He realizes that he was deceived and ill treated by the British. Frustrated, Duleep thinks of returning to India and reclaim his kingdom. He does letter correspondences with several Indian Princes and Sikh Sardars. To make his chances better, as well as to threaten the Queen indirectly, Duleep renounces Christianity with the same alacrity he had embraced it and gets reconverted to Sikhism. He contemplates thus,

My renunciation of Christianity would shake the crown. The more they ill-treated me, the more my countrymen would believe in me. I would a true Sikh and martyr in their eyes. My life would have meaning, and I would earn the dignity appropriate to the son of Ranajit Singh (191).

It appears that his reconversion to his own faith is an act of rebellion and also a way of connecting to his people in Punjab emotionally. He tries to win the support from the enemies of the British- the French, the Tsar, the Kaiser and other European rulers. Even he threatens the British to mount an invasion of India through North-West Frontier. Neither in Punjab nor elsewhere in India does anyone take Duleep seriously. This bout of megalomania lasted a few years. He fails in his attempt to come to India as all his plans get blocked by the British. He calls himself an ‘implacable foe of the British’. Desperate Duleep files cases against the British; he fails to get justice obviously, as the judges happened to be English. On being assured by the Queen that his debts would be cleared, he apologizes to the Queen for his past conduct, and resumes his profligate living.
Duleep marries twice, first he marries Bamba Muller, a fifteen years old girl, a daughter of an Abyssinian woman and a German trader, in 1864 at Alexandria, with the hope that, “She could save him from a dissolute, purposeless existence. There was something saintly about her” (176). She bears him six children. On the death of Bamba Muller in 1887, he marries a French woman, Ada D. Wetherill, much younger to him, in 1889, becomes father of two children. Unlike Bamba, Ada is spendthrift, spends huge money, “for food, for clothes, for entertainment” (237). But she does not show any concern towards Duleep Singh when he was on the deathbed. He says, “but I managed to give her the money, by selling jewels and selling my dresses…that way, I kept her chained to me” (238). Desponded Duleep boozes heavily, hopelessly, feels “wine stilled the pain in my heart. It was the drink that helped to kill the taste of defeat” (237). Ada, her sister and mother, like vultures, peck at every piece of jewellery. Carrol-Tevis, a General’s observations about Duleep are apt here:

Duleep was under the influence of his wife, Ada, fast becoming a besotted swine. His only endeavour was to get money out of the Indians to enable him to supply her every extravagance. She encouraged his wild drinking; taking him around the night houses in Paris. He was often too drunk to even sit straight in his carriage. His face was like that of a defeated prizewinner (238).

With the fake passport, Duleep tries to escape from England with family. He is detained at port Aden, allowed neither to go back to his “native people nor live with dignity and grace in England. The British brand him as an extravagant spender, an inveterate womanizer: in short, an orient philanderer” (186). Duleep Singh’s life appears
as an utter failure, as a prince, as a husband, as a father he could not fulfill his responsibilities.

The British do not allow him to go to India. He wonders: “Why the British block his ways of going to India? Why do they fear of me when many powerful Indian kings, like Scindia and Holkar and the Nizam of Hyderabad, men of great wealth and with armies at their command, could move about in India freely?” (199). It was a mystery for Duleep. The British might have thought that, the people of Punjab were still against them. As they had deceived Punjabis, dethroning young Prince, separating him from his mother, the Sikh community being still formidable may rebel against the British who were still ruling India. The clever British put a spy to watch his movements. However, Duleep could not understand this, foolishly shares his personal plans with General Carrol-Tevis. As a result, he loses his chance of reaching India. Attacked by paralysis, Duleep becomes helpless, suffers from diabetes and Bright’s disease, which caused the high blood pressure that burst a vessel in his brain that left him a wreck. It was an indication of his death. The doctor informs that the recovery may be slow and unpredictable. His son, Victor, takes Duleep Singh to a better place for his speedy recovery. He expects some of his friends would visit him but the British do not allow his friends to visit the ailing king, which hurts him further. His son, Victor, on seeing his condition requests him:

Father, please listen to me. You are not well, in fact, you are seriously sick. This is the time to seek a Royal pardon from Her Majesty... This is the only way, Father. I promise you that you still have friends in England who will support you and I feel very strongly, in fact I know that Her
Majesty will forgive you. You are weak and alone, Father. There is nobody who will help you in what you started, not Russia, not the princes of India. For your sake and for ours, please write to Her Majesty. (241-2)

For Duleep this act of begging pardon seems to be giving up his claims forever, to give up the fight for justice for which he fought throughout, finally it is nothing but giving up the throne of Lahore. He had to relent to the proposal offered by his son, and for the sake of his children, “who hadn’t chosen their position, this orphan, mongrel life” (241). One evening he signs the letter written by his son requesting the Queen:

Your Majesty to pardon me for all I have done against you and your government and I throw myself upon entirely upon clemency. It seems to me now that it is the will of God that I should suffer injustice at the hands of your people (241).

He further confesses, “It was as if in the fighting against Great Britain I had been fighting against God” (241). He thus accepts his defeat and becomes a sort of fatalist leaving everything to the God that he believed. He is humiliated, his ego, illusions, and hopes were shattered. The secretary of the state writes to Duleep that, Her Majesty had granted pardon provided henceforth he would remain obedient to her and his movements would be regulated. It is an irony that, Duleep is unable to move in his bed without someone’s assistance. Once rebelled against the British, now the same Englishmen, Doctors, and others, surrounded him. Even his children behave like English people. The money sent to Maharaja from India by the generous souls does not reach him. In southern France, his wife Ada and Victor spend money on gambling in Casino. Duleep has to
spend his days locked up in a hotel room, half-paralyzed. Despite his ill health, he meets Queen Victoria near French town weeps and begs her pardon in person. She forgives him. It is the fate of Duleep, the once Maharaja, dies alone, broken and miserable in a small room in a cheap hotel, in Paris. Even his last wish that he wanted his body to be buried in India was not fulfilled. Even in his death, the British behave inhumanly, throughout his life they do not show any mercy and help under any circumstances. They always behave contrary to his wishes.

Duleep Singh’s is a pathetic story of being a victim of British colonial politics like Rani lakshmibai of Jhansi, Peshwa Nana Saheb, Cikaveera Rajendra of Coorg and many other Princes of India. Ever since his birth, he emerges as an ill-starred child. Soon after his birth, he loses father, is separated from his mother who is defamed by the British, exiled to England, the people of Punjab and his own family members who fight for the throne, and the British interference in the political affairs certainly made the Duleep frustrated and confused. Moreover, he was too young to understand or grasp the wickedness of his own people and the British. The sophisticated ways of British might have attracted him and deceived him later. Hence, he readily consents for conversion and goes to England. In this nuanced and poignant novel that draws upon true events, Sarna attempts to tell the unusual story of the last King of Punjab.

Most of the historical works have documented the history of Punjab till the death of Raja Ranajit Singh. Very few historians have mentioned that one of Ranajit Singh’s acknowledged sons was crowned as the King of Punjab at the age of ten. Beyond this, no historical information is available as to what really happened to Duleep Singh. One must applaud Navtez Sarna for going beyond history and presenting candid history of Punjab.
and its last king Duleep Singh. And Sarna gives a graphic picture of Punjab in *The Exile* as to how the British played political game to annex Punjab and how shrewdly they deported the young king to England in the pretext of his better life in England.

**Conclusion:**

The selected novels present the idea that history is as much fiction as fact. These writers emphasize the fact that, history hides more than it reveals. The novelists undermine what has been accepted as history. To his point of view he recreates it to show that in the presentation of ‘truth’ and fact’ the message it to convey a meaning and not to re-tell a historical incident. There are three types of historical novels—documentary historical novels, disguised historical novels and invented historical novels. The first category of the novels which incorporate actual events and people, the second category novels provide sufficient evidence of the novelist’s interest in the past. And the last category stands between documented history and conventional novel. The contemporary novelists follow the third category, to interrogate and contest the authority and the authenticity of the institutionalized or official history. In *The Sea of Poppies*, *Two Lives*, *Rani*, and *The Exile* the novelists’ use of strategies provide a flexibility of narrative techniques in which the aesthetic, cognitive and morals are involved or interwoven. These novelists strongly believe that the Pre-colonial as well as the postcolonial history until recently, was largely constructed by the colonizers. They wrote in English to exhibit their intellectual and cultural hegemony. The colonizers studied history of India ignoring the great past of Indian culture and heritage. But the contemporary writers resort to history to rectify the past damage done by the colonizers to record the unrecorded, to give voice to the subaltern, to question the hegemony, to
interrogate the concept of nation and to present their point of view through it. Also they began to contest the colonial history through allegory, satire, myths, legends and though folk tales. Thus, they attempt to rehabilitate an independent identity that involves in interrogating and fracturing of imposed European perspectives and their systematic replacement by an alternative version of history. “These post modern and the post colonial writers seek to recast history as a redfinable present rather than an irrevocably interpreted past” (Helen Tiffin 170)

Amitav Ghosh presents “alternative history” as a form of historical knowledge in Sea of Poppies, perhaps to seek a social change and new alternative realities. To achieve this, Ghosh creates new historical narratives which allow multiplicity of voices to appear. Another objective of the chapter is it discusses the difference between the historical facts and the fictional narratives through analysis of the meanings and values of history. Hans Bretons opines, “Literature is not simply a product of history, it also actively makes history”. Bretons observes that “historical texts” are viewed as “literary texts” (Bertons 177). Ghosh based on this, offers his vision of history as a literary text which inspires the imagination towards an understanding of new thoughts. This method reveals that history is not only a representation of events but also a dynamic socio-political process that defines the cultural set up of identity. History is not for history’s sake; it is for re-evolution. As a result, historical facts themselves are questionable, and history is narrated to achieve the goal of social change.

History and historiography have become revisionary and dialogical. It is due to discovering of new facts from time to time that the existing facts are being reinterpreted in a different way and given a new dimension. The mode of history writing has been
metamorphosed since 1980s drastically. The boundary between history and fiction are no longer rigid as they are thought to be. The postcolonial novelists’ engagement with the history, in a sense, is a parallel attempt to reconstruct history by interrogating/eschewing/dismantling the official version and by projecting his/her culture or community free from any coercion or domination of the western consciousness of history.
Works Cited


