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NARRATIVE, HISTORY AND FICTION IN *THE LAST MUGHAL: THE FALL OF A DYNASTY, 1857* BY WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

Gayathri Narayanan Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sree Sankara Vidyapeetom College, Valayanchirangara Perumbavoor.

Abstract

History, the term despite its apparent innocence and simplicity eludes a clear-cut definition. In the conventional sense history means the events which happened sometime in the past. But history cannot be reduced into mere past events, dead and buried, rather it is a growing entity, a dynamic process, a continuum which has its origin in a bygone time, continues and influences the current period and stretches out into a forthcoming tomorrow. One thing which is more difficult than giving a fitting definition to history is the process of transforming it to a coherent narrative. Historiography or writing of history is therefore a complex process that demands a great degree of objectivity as it provides a standpoint from which significant events are observed and analyzed. The complexity arises when the writer of history cannot dispense with subjectivity in the interpretation of outwardly objective facts. In such a dead lock situation the writer of history chooses subjective interpretive methods and this accounts for the interface between history and literature, more precisely fiction. Fiction and its different techniques including the process of narration, narrative elements, characterization and other tropes have often been used by historians for constructing 'histories' and authors of literary works use historical facts in fictional works to produce alternative histories. Postmodern historical theorists like Hayden White have insisted on writing history using the method of fiction. For the postmodern fiction writers, history is an indispensable element in their works. A host of other emerging historians resort to writing history in the garb of fiction. A number of hybrid forms like historical fiction, fictional history, historiographic fiction and many others have cropped up from this lawful liaison between fiction and history. Yet another genre of writing which is fiction and history simultaneously is on the rise in contemporary Indian literary topography. This paper is an attempt to analyze this new genre, its idiosyncratic features and possibilities based on the celebrated work The *Last Mughal: The Fall of a dynasty, Delhi, 1857* by William Dalrymple.

Key words- history-facts- objectivity- fiction-reality- subjectivity- narrative- historiography.

History, Objectivity and the idea of Narrative:

History in the traditional sense plainly means events that happened sometime in the past and the way it is recorded and preserved. Though apparently innocent this definition hides a number of real issues. What is 'past' then and how can anyone draw a demarcating line between past and present? And which is the best method that could be adopted to record those events which are generally considered as 'factual' and to preserve them for futurity? The question of where does this time period of past end and present begin is a perplexing one of rhetorical nature for anyone pondering over it. At one point it is past at the next moment it has become present and it is then stretched out into future leaving its mark upon all the intermittent episodes.

Another major challenge that a writer of history in his / her effort to preserve these vital events, confronts is to find an ample method for documenting them without tampering its factuality[1].

[1] Factuality refers to the state of being real or truthful. The concept of factuality in a narrative, both literary and historical is a complex one and it may give rise to questions of ontological and epistemological nature.