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Fiction as Translation of History: Narrative and Language in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novels

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Abstract

Literature has long served as a medium through which history is reimagined and retold. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni follows this narrative approach in *The Last Queen* and *Independence*, where she re-envisions key historical moments. It examines the author's ability to translate dry historical records into living, breathing stories by reclaiming marginalized voices. While *The Last Queen* reimagines the life of Rani Jindan Kaur, largely forgotten figure in colonial histories, *Independence* presents the Partition of India through the intimate lens of three sisters navigating personal and national turmoil. By blending documented facts with imaginative storytelling, Divakaruni challenges patriarchal and official historical accounts, offering feminist reinterpretation of the past. The paper argues that her fiction not only humanizes history but also serves as a powerful tool of historical recovery and emotional truth-telling, bridging the gap between collective memory and individual experience. It also examines use of Hindi, Punjabi and Bengali terms as linguistic authenticity and post-colonial resistance.

Keywords: Historical-narratives, Translation, Reinterpretation, Linguistic-authenticity.

History is more than a timeline of events. Facts and dates form the skeleton of history, but interpretation gives it a life. Therefore, literary fiction acts as a corrective lens to add deeper significance to historical narratives. Fiction allows history to speak in a more lucid way. Susan Bassnett in *Translation Studies* opines that "translation is not just about words- it is about carrying meaning across boundaries" (6). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni follows this narrative approach in *The Last Queen* and *Independence*, where she re-imagines key historical moments. Her works can also be understood as an act of

translation, not merely across languages, but also across genres and epistemologies. Through translation of dry historical records into fiction, Divakaruni gives voices to women that are frequently ignored in history. In this regard, Hayden White in *The Content of the Form* writes, "the narrative structure itself shapes our understanding of the past" (26). Instead of relying solely on documented facts, Divakaruni tries exploring more on emotional responses and personal lives of characters.

The Last Queen chronicles the life of Rani Jindan Kaur, the youngest and last queen of Raja Ranjit Singh. Divakaruni intertwines Jindan's life with significant historical events such as First Anglo-Sikh War and the annexation of Punjab by the British. For instance, the loss of the Koh-i-noor diamond and her son, Dalip being taken to England by British are portrayed as personal tragedies for Jindan, rather than merely political and historical events. The novel traces the transformation of Jindan from a daughter of kennel keeper to the regent queen of Sikh empire and her journey through political instability following Raja Ranjit Sigh's death. Divakaruni translates those historical events and re-constructs into a personal story where Jindan takes autonomous decisions like casting aside the veil, directly addressing the Khalsa Army and resistance against British forces. Divakaruni places personal narrative to the forefront and historical events at the backdrop.

Independence novel is set against the tumultuous background of India's Partition in 1947. The story is about three Bengali sisters Deepa, Jamini, and Priya who try to navigate personal ambitions, familial bonds, and societal expectations. The chaos of Direct Action Day, the terror of the Noakhali riots, and Gandhi's assassination are the events that play significant part in shaping the sisters' decision and influencing their lives. Divakaruni shows how these political and historical events lead to emotional turmoil and trauma for sisters. Priya, the most academically inclined sister, aspires to become a doctor sees many dead bodies and injuries due to chaos of Direct Action Day. This traumatic experience compels her for urgency to pursue medicine. The Partition tension and communal violence of Noakhali and Calcutta, serve as barrier in Deepa and her Muslim love interest Raza. Witnessing Gandhi's assassination becomes a breaking point, symbolizing end of hope for Jamini and people around her.

Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* explains partition was not only political settlement or redistribution of property and assets. Survivors often recall it as a "division of hearts" (7). It broke communities and separated families from their loved ones who previously live together. In some cases, people even didn't know whether their relatives were alive or dead. Official historical accounts document borders and the number, but they seldom record human cost and suffering. Divakaruni explores this neglected dimension by portraying emotional consequences of communal violence led due to partition. Deepa and Raza's love disrupted by the communal tension and Priya's desire to heal comes from bodies, she sees on Direct Action Day. Through these characters, Divakaruni translates partition from a political event into the emotional language.

Divakaruni translates history into fiction but consciously chooses not to translate Punjabi and Hindi terms into English, thereby maintaining linguistic authenticity. This narrative technique helps in preserving cultural heritage and resonance of the native language. It is also an act of postcolonial resistance and assertion of indigenous voices within a colonial language system. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin explain in *The Empire Writes Back* that "the imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities" (7). By leaving such words untranslated, Divakaruni refuses to treat Indian speech as an impurity to be corrected and places

it within the English text. This linguistic choice also maintains the spirit and identity of characters.

In *The Last Queen*, if term 'court' is used in place of *Durbar*, the essence of Indian royalty will be lost. Rani Guddan, one of the queens of Raja Ranjit Singh invites Jindan and says, "Come, sister, we will eat from the same thali today, as we did in the childhood" (62). Divakaruni opts for thali over an English word 'plate' to focus on cultural detail and showcasing nativity within a colonial language. Some terms that are used in the novels are following:

- Rani: A royal title meaning 'queen'
- Qila: A place where king lives meaning 'fort'
- Waheguru: A term used in Sikhism to refer to God
- Maa-baap: Indian way of addressing parents
- Purdah: The practice of secluding women from public observation
- Khalsa: The collective body of initiated Sikhs
- Maharaja: denotes a 'great king'
- Sardar: A title for Sikh leader

Ashcroft et al. further demonstrates two interconnected concepts: abrogation appropriation. Abrogation refers to the rejection of the imperial centre's claim to a single and correct form of English with fixed meanings. Appropriation, on the other hand, refers to the process by which language is made to "bear the burden" of writer's own cultural experiences (38) Divakaruni uses both the strategies by refusing substituting indigenous terms with English equivalents. She challenges that English alone can adequately convey meaning and by placing original words within English narrative structure, she appropriates the language to carry Punjabi, Hindi and Bengali cultural significance.

Independence novel deals with Partition and trauma. So, the presence of untranslated Hindi and Bengali words has great significance because it creates essence of nativity, enhances realism and shows rootedness of culture. This authenticity helps the reader to connect with character's world in a more familiar way. The use of native terms like 'Didi, Ma, Baba, Rosogulla, Luchi' denotes Bengali culture. Some words carry emotional depth that may be lost in translation. Therefore, Divakaruni emphasized on theme of belonging by preserving cultural identity and authenticity. Some Hindi and Bengali terms used in book are following:

- Mashima: Aunt
- Mejo: Middle sister
- Durga Pooja: Worshipping of feminine divinity
- Ashirbad: Bengali way of saying blessing
- Bande Mataram: A patriotic song meaning 'I bow to thee, mother'
- Kantha: A traditional form of embroidery practiced by sisters.

Divakaruni not only preserves the linguistic authenticity but also underscores the cultural and political complexities by retaining those original terms. This decision is both aesthetic and political because Indian languages deserve space in English literature just as Indian voices deserve space in historical narratives. Her novels do not claim to replace the records. She presents mother's loss, sister's fear and the significance of culturally specific words. Both novels should be understood as imaginative

engagement with the past. By preserving cultural expressions, giving attention to women's voices, and incorporating personal memories into historical narratives, she establishes fiction as a medium through which history can be interpreted in a new form.

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