



Historical Cultural Elements and their Intricate Manifestations in Mughal Dynasty in Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem*

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Asst. Prof. Tahseen Ali Mhodar

The Department of English

College of Education-University of Misan

Email: tahseenali34@uomisan.edu.iq

[https:// Orcid: 0009-0002-2859-9433](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2859-9433)

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Abstract:

This Paper examines the role of history in Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem*. It attempts to explore the history in the novel as a manifestation of the consecutive exemplification of the contemporary dynasty and how it affects the current social and political status quo. As such, the significance of the representations of history corresponds to the fact that ethnicity would be understood in the light of historical elements as being depicted by Podder. This is due to the fact that the perception of ethnicity, moreover, results in comprehension of its nations, traditions, norms, culture, and customs and the like. Consequently, the representations of history is an implicative representations of history of Mughal community, which is the core indication of history portrayed in the novel. As such, the aim of this study is to explore the intricate layers of history through its influence upon the Indian society and how they intersect with each other throughout historical periods. Thus, the



study's methodology will be limited to the concept of tradition and its relationship with culture and society.

Key Words: Culture, History, India, Podder, Society, Tradition.

العناصر الثقافية التاريخية وتجلياتها المعقدة في عهد المغول في رواية تانوشري بودر
(الهروب من الحريم).

أ.م.د. تحسين علي مهودر
كلية التربية / جامعة ميسان

Email: tahseenali34@uomisan.edu.iq

https://Orcid: 0009-0002-2859-9433

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1. Introduction

Historical fiction focuses on engaging the reader with literary places and events that are displaced in the distant past. It includes real or imagined people or places for the sake of discussing a certain historical fact. It comprise reality and some authorial fictional manipulations in order to provide the reader with a comprehensive view of any historical fact. It refers to the authorial imagination of creatinine fictional plot that resemble true stories that took place in the past. It sometimes employs personages and regions inhabited by a specific nation, yet, it describes them in a narrative or dramatic modes (During 124). Consequently, literature provides readers with effective genuine clues about the authorial investigation of drastic temporal changes and their influence upon people. Moreover, societies get affected by these changes to a great extent because literature has both implicit and explicit implications about societies and their leading authorities that might play a decisive role in shaping their futures. In this manner, history has a material characteristic that enables it to be documented in literary recounts.



The capacity of imagination, therefore, enables the author to comment on society and culture in a matriculate literary description through which many fictional components could be conveyed to the receptive audience. Consequently, historical fiction is used as a critique of social or cultural phenomena in literary works to provide such audience with true views of reality outside the literary demarcations (During 95). For this reason, authors resort to write about culture or society utilizing historical fiction for the sake of empowering people's human affairs. The setting and the characters, accordingly, are the most vital literary tools discussed in historical fiction and its elements that "are subjects to perception and criticism of social communities" (Al-Fartoosi 33). By accentuating these elements, authors offer precise and authentic depiction of the past in terms of grand fictional style. In fact, scholar attempt to unravel the importance of historical recounts to show how they are related to the main literary topics and authorial insights projected in the fictional demarcations. As a result, reader would immerse in the intricate peculiarities of historical fiction to locate the authorial subjective response to the temporal changes encompassing the literary text.

The relationship between history and fictions is of paramount importance since history needs authentic documentation, especially in depicting historical facts. Therefore, there is a close and mutual affinity between literature and history because the latter is primarily interested in describing the crucial events throughout human history (Railton 20). For this reason, the study of the historical components of literature must yield to the material attributes of history regarding the originality of the writer's style and its pertinent topics. History usually has a typical feature of realistic recounts because it deals with the authorial dependence on some relevant resources from which he/she drove out the target historical fact or event (Foucault 131-132). Historical fiction is very essential for perceiving specific historical eras through literary lens. This study, accordingly, tries to reveals the effective role of historical narrative clues in Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem*. It will demonstrate how history plays a significant role in dealing with documenting the emergence of Indian dynasty portrayed in the course of the main sequence of events.

2. Authorial Impetus for Writing History

There are a number of impetuses that motivate author to record history in there works. Authors believe that historical writing have significance merits of writings about history, including unravelling fake historical events or facts and correcting social or political aversion. Another motivational merit is furnishing the text with reliable information that could be traced and amended in case that are fabricated (Jaimes 48). It also helps both readers and critics to look back into the past and identify the true history that shaped their current affairs. It enables the new generation



to look deep into the past and understand the fraudulent facts created by unjust interpolation.

The manipulation of history is another aspect of historical writings. History, however, is often manipulated and the younger generation is deprived of the truth. History is manipulated through false interpolation created by powerful people in order to reinforce the cultural traits in the past. Here, manipulation of history has political, social, cultural, geographical and ethnic purposes. History is manipulated, therefore, to create a utopian past which sharply contradicts with the present. The result is negatively massive; whereby the younger generation is led to live in a deformed and bogus obsession with the past that does not almost exist (Rid 30).

The aim of this study is to explore *Escape from Harem* as an embodiment of Podder's preoccupation with investigating reality in the novel and how she records some facts that were brought to India by foreign cultures. In this case, Podder attempts to offers a vivid picture of quasi-utopian Indian before the advent of foreign n cultures that assimilated with the native Indian traditional society. She meticulously depicts the political events in the Indian History, especially during Mughal dynasty, when tremendous cultural changes took place due to the cultural religious assimilation. During this historical era, the Indian society was taking a new shape within the political tumult and how influenced the public mentality concerning the new imperial dominance. Being so, Podder exposes the irrelevant cultural aspects of imperial rulers who depend on power to control society and its people, like women and "how these women could overcome such gender discrimination by social equality and self-autonomy" (Abu Jweid 30). Thus, she deconstructs the defamatory image of Indian created by the Mughal dynasty at the time in the course of the novel's historical plot.

This study, accordingly, attempts to achieve three objectives:

1. To examine Podder's historical depiction of Mughal dynasty the oppressive an inhumane cultural conducts of emperors.
2. To investigate the exploitive mistreatment of women at the hands of Mughal dynasty.
3. To explore Podder's revelation of the negative practices of this dynasty that rely on power and conquest; and how it differs from the ideals of the original fair Indian society.

3. Textual Analysis and Discussion

Podder is an Indian writer. She was born in New Delhi. Before she becomes a writer, she participated in humanitarian activities on corporate sector, then, she allocated her whole time from writing. Her novels are almost adventurous, and they appealed to



both English and Indian readers because they have a great degree of entertainment. Her travel writings have universal themes on the relationship among human ethnicities and cultures. Her major non-fictional books are *Death of a Dictator*, *Secrets of Happiness*, *The Ultimate Food for Body, Mind and Soul*, *The Power of Relaxation*, and *The book Smart Memory*. In these non-fictional books, together with her novels, she mixes the Indian experience with world issues in order to create archetypal image of Indian literature. These seminal books formulate her legacy as a creative author dealing with contemporary and historical matters. They indicate her authorial dexterity to put forth some laying premises for empowering the Indian literature in a universal literary appeal.

Podder's *Escape from Harem* recounts a story on lust that reflects the inner motives of human behaviors. The temporal setting of the novel is set between 1610 and 1650. The spatial setting is the Indian Mughal and its surroundings. The female protagonist, Zeenat, is exploited by Mughal emperor who takes her with his harem, or women. She undergoes harsh experience upon her first night, especially when she is put into harem; and she decides to work for Bahar Begum. In the main, the plot hinges on Mughal history in a fictional way. The novel is a fine example of Mughal culture, politics, and how the Indian people lead their lives. The emperor Meherunnisa and he renames her "Nurjahan." Zeenat's life is devastated through these incidents where she is confined to cultural and historical injustice.

Zeenat, in this case, is an optimal stereotype of the female characters. She exemplifies the nexus of female oppression as there are many factors social and historical factors surrounding her. As a matter of fact, she is a victim of a suppressive system that appears in certain historical factors "which are profoundly concerned with the subordination of women and the possibility of making women equal to their masculine counterparts" (Sasa and Abu Jweid 326). Consequently, Zeenat yields to the dominant historical material events that put women at loggerheads with their societies. In this sense, women are confined by their social and historical restrictions imposed on them by contemporary changes. Here, they do not have any outlet for establishing their own identity or self-autonomy. They live in a seemingly social vicious circle regarding their social positions. Being so, the author uncovers the intricate layers of women's social status via Zeenat's personality.

The novel is profoundly concerned with the intricate notions of feminism, especially female history in the male-mainstream communities. The Mughal dynasty, though wealthy and great, inflicts oppressive treatment upon women. Podder depicts history in this period through the discussion of women plights created by this dynasty, whereby women were exploited for sexual desires. Jahangir's marriage, in this sense, exemplifies this feminist fact since it is depicted as being strange and unconventional: "the entire city was agog with excitement. Jahangir was marrying the woman he had been pursuing for the past four years" (29). Such marital incident



incarnates the historical implication of feminist presence in the Indian conventional society. This fact does not exist in the original Indian society. However, it was brought by the Mughal dynasty.

Podder depicts the very mechanism of human psyche and how it is formulated by some outer complications which have radical influences upon the historical potential of persons through history. This is done via Zeenat's and Jahanara's dispositions. They exemplify the factual women plights during the contemporary dynasty, whereby they could not have any control over their destiny as human beings: "as for Jahanara, she was entrusted with the duties of running the harem and supervising all the work. It was a job generally assigned to dowagers, or the chief queen" (163). Here, Jahanara relentlessly tries to prove her personality and disposition as an independent women. However, she confronts stubborn patriarchal restrictions limiting her human potentials because patriarchy severely blocks women in their quest for self-autonomy (Bressler 8). In this sense, Mughal dynasty embodies restrictive authority inflicted upon women by their prevalent and marginalizing mainstream in their traditional society. History, therefore, sheds lights on this intricate issue during Mughal dynasty.

These problems are representation of the exploitive mistreatment of women at the hands of Mughal dynasty: "from dawn to dusk, the girl dealt with different kinds of problems" (163). In addition, women are not given any form of social power since they are neglected by this dynasty: "never had a woman been given so much power and authority. Women were meant to give pleasure to men and not rule them" (33). The dynasty, indeed, is influenced by non-Indian culture adopted by Mughal family. In fact, the Indian natives have deep sympathy with their compatriots; and they natural do not have any bias against women. Traditionally, Indian women are treated as equal to men without gender discrimination; and the Jahanara's experience is a fine example of this. Unlike the Mughal dynasty, her native compatriots profoundly sympathize with her and offer her shelter to live peacefully. However, her life is hindered by the negative foreign culture of Mughal dynasty.

In *Escape from Harem*, Shahjahan embodies such gender marginalization. She does not gain her independent entity. As such, she is utterly dependent on other persons in her society. She is assigned to please the dominant patriarchal mainstream in her life: "Shahjahan depended on her sagacity and consulted her on many state matters" (163). Accordingly, Podder depicts the intricate manifestations of women history in the traditional Indian society. She attempts to employ history a way of reinforcing women's marginalized status in their societies: "Women of the royal harem were not allowed to seek the services of male hakims" (37). This mistreatment embodies the negative side of the imperial Mughal dynasty which is influenced by



foreign cultural view of women. There are evident texts clues in the plot about the possible ways of sustaining women's self-autonomy. This is because they are exploited for different benefits desired by men at the historical implantations of Mughal dynasty. Consequently, this view is not necessary Indian because the native Indian culture not look at women in the same way the Mughal family does.

Podder, in *Escape from Harem*, the typical masters are men who seek to exploit females for their own sake. Women, on the other hand, are normally responsible for offers their male master fine services. Shahjahan, for instance, is asked to hold different responsibilities since she is merely female and she must comply with men's orders: "At an age when she should have led a carefree life, she was burdened with enormous responsibilities" (163). Shahjahan's personality incarnates the historical insights of patriarchy, especially when women are limited to do domestic affairs. Again, the use of power enables men to marry several times: "The men are allowed to marry as many times as they wish as they can enlarge their kingdom" (135). This masculine cultural trend was brought by the Mughal dynasty from the oriental culture through conquest. Yet, it was not a merely definitive feature of the traditional Indian society. In this way, Podder exposes the negative manipulation of the Indian history; whereby the native history was devoid of such social aversion between men and women. Instead, it was overwhelmed by peacefully fraternity and cultural symbiosis away from all forms of socio-cultural disintegration and interpersonal schism.

In *Escape from Harem*, by the same way, females are marginalized in a severe way reflecting their social inferiority. Yet, they attempt to oppose men and halt their suppressive treatment by all means: "blinding was a common punishment for these men who managed to lay their eyes on the harem women" (72). Being so, women could establish their social independence and self-autonomy regardless the rife patriarchal circumstances. This dynasty also prevented princes from marrying because they are members of the imperial family: "my dear sister, we are Mughal princesses. We are not allowed to marry, so forget about marrying an emperor", teased Jahanara" (135). This historical fact is created by Podder to shed light on unfairness caused by this dynasty that had not followed the Indian cultural and social ways of life. It only followed power and conquest in order to dominate the Indian society that had been almost empty of such social unfairness. In doing so, Podder creates a whole historical fiction world crowded with quasi-real characters resembling true life and social backgrounds. She pedantically uses history to reflect the genuine essence of Mughal era when people had their own ways of life. Women, thus, are parts of those societies that looked at females' dependent roles.

4. Conclusion

This study the view of history in Podder's *Escape from Harem*. The main purpose of the discussion was on the perception of history as a material part of human life



portrayed in the main course of the narrative events. The discussion, furthermore, shed light on the essential peculiarities of history that dominates the entire life of the fictional characters that are typically realistic replicas of people outside the narrative text. As such, the study accentuated three interrelated elements of the selected novel. First, the characters were studied as fictional and narrative miniatures of the real people treated by the author. The study of these characters is very integral for the sake of unraveling the relationship between the author and the written text. The character are broadly considered as the basic element of any narrative text; and authors usually use them in precise and intentional way. This is because the characters represent that authorial realistic view of life and its people; and he/she pursues their meticulous features. In doing so, the author casts lasting and genuine impression regarding life and people upon the reader.

Second, the setting was interpreted to examine the temporal and spatial backgrounds of the historical events approached by the plot's main topic. The study of the setting is sorely crucial for the sake of employing some historical incidents and changes that take place on specific regions. Being so, setting was the most important elements because it serves as the suitable and appropriate vehicle used by the author to deal with history. Third, the novel's narrative point of view was also interpreted to emphasize the way by which the author conveys the essence of historical events in India. In this way, the characters, setting, and narrative point of view are the integral and effective literary elements needed for tackling historical changes of the time. The author, therefore, is quite concerned with offering a vivid and blatant view of history by employing these elements in pure narrative techniques.

This study, therefore, focused on the representation of history in Podder's *Escape from Harem*. It discussed Podder's attempt to unravel the negative aspects of Mughal dynasty that contradicts which has dark historical sides though it was powerful and imperial. It examined the oppressive practices of this dynasty and how it deprived women for their liberty. It tackled Podder's narrative depiction of true history that might help the younger generation to understand the past as it is. It highlighted the effect of power and conquest upon history and how they could deform the authentic historical facts. Thus, Podder offers a perfect picture of the Indian society that is devoid of and foreign cultural influences since was undergoing optimal social co-existence and almost equal human affairs which are deformed by the advent of the Mughal dynasty.

The study's finding, consequently, lies in three interrelated contributions. First, it tackled the material role of history in the plot, which is scarcely approached in the existed studies on the selected novel. The material aspects of history is commonly recognized by scholars, yet, it is discussed in terms of the dialectical attributes of history rather than the authorial considerations. In other words, the study concentrated on history by combining both the material and authorial factors of



history; and these factors are not completely approached in previous studies. Second, the study discussed certain temporal point in the novel i.e., Mughal dynasty that is rarely approached in literature written on the same topic. Here, the focus on one temporal historical point reinforces the vigor of the study as it offers an original interoperation of this dynasty in the light of different historical upheavals. In this regard, the authorial insights of history are similarly incorporated in the study in order to examine the author's motivation to write about history. Third, the study accentuated the social aspects of history because both people and their societies are inevitably affected by history.

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