

**Negotiating History, (Re-)imagining the Nation:
The Indian Historical Novel in English, 1900-2000**

by

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Thesis Summary

As the title of my project suggests, this thesis deals with Indian historical fiction in English. While the time frame in the title may lead one to expect that the present study will attempt a historical overview of the Indian historical novel written in English, that is not a primary concern. Rather, I pose two broad questions: the first asks, to what uses does Indian English fiction put the Indian past as it is remembered in both formal history and communal memory? The second question is perhaps a more important one so far as this project is concerned: why does the Indian English novel use the Indian past in the ways that it does? There is as a consequence an intention to move from the inner world of Indian historical fiction to the outer space of the socio-political reality from which the novel under consideration has been produced. In other words, I read the literary text in the light of the social text.

Like several other sub-genres of Indian fiction in English, the Indian historical novel emerged first during the colonial period. Both its formal and thematic concerns are thus to a large extent shaped in the pre-independence period by the long shadows of the British colonisation of India. The two types of historical fiction written under an oppressive colonial regime—revivalist and nationalist—are geared to regenerating and constructing cultural/national identity/self. That is to say, the pre-independence Indian historical novel uses Indian history/past to imagine the nation.

Many of the inequalities that the political birth of the Indian nation-state was expected to remove have remained. Even more than half a century after the British had

left India, minorities are still ill-treated; casteism is still rampant; discrimination against women is still commonplace. Post-independence Indian historical fiction engages with Indian history/past to retrieve the voices of these subalterns. In challenging the bourgeois-patriarchal hegemony of the nation, the historical novel of the post-independence period sets out to re-imagine the nation in two notable ways, generating in the process the two most remarkable varieties of post-independence historical fiction: feminist and interventionist. A third type is revisionist which focuses on the politics of colonial representation rather than the re-imagining of the nation.

From a contextual reading of seven historical novels in this study, I conclude that Indian historical fiction in English uses Indian history/past both to construct and deconstruct the Indian cultural/national self.

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An earlier version of chapter 5 appeared as an article titled ‘The Nation and One of Its Fragments in *Kanthapura*’ in *Transnational Literature* (vol. 4, no. 1, November 2011) and went on to win the Best Student Research Paper Award 2011 in the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Law at Flinders University, South Australia. I am deeply indebted to my principal supervisor, Rick Hosking, and the anonymous reviewers of the article whose astute comments and suggestions went a long way towards shaping the argument I have finally been able to construct in both the article and the chapter in which it appears.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Date: _____