

Diamond Shumsher Rana's *Wake of the White Tiger* as History in Disguise

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Abstract

Seto Bagh (*Wake of the White Tiger*) is an old classic on Nepalese history written by Diamond Shumsher Janga Bahadur Rana, born on 5th July 1918 in Palpa Durbar, Tansen. He grew up in an aristocratic family, enjoyed being a part of Rana lineage, and he was also a captain in the Royal Nepal Army. Though he belonged to the ruling class of Nepal then, he favored democracy and he was on the side of poor Nepalese. He wrote *Wake of the White Tiger* in 1970 when he was in jail for advocating democracy. *Wake of the White Tiger* is a biography of Jagat Jung who along with his father Jung Bahadur Rana literally changed the course of Nepali history. Many critics and scholars, in Nepal, believe that *Wake of the White Tiger* is a work of fiction. The basic contention of this paper is that *Wake of the White Tiger*, despite being many things, is basically a book of history, rather than a novel. It is primarily a biography that depicts the three decades political history of Nepal. Biography is often considered as a variant of history itself. Both biography and history are often concerned with the past, and it is in the hunting down, evaluating, and selection of sources that they are similar. In this light, *Wake of the White Tiger* deserves an equal attention of literary writers, critics, as well as historians.

Keywords: History, Fiction, Biography

In broad sense, literature is understood as communication with the use of written words or symbols. At times, the purpose of communication involves some degree of emotional or aesthetic response and sometimes it is concerned with a mere transfer of information. History on the other hand is defined as a continuous record of public events, or simply as a research into past events.

History and fiction are old acquaintances. Their interrelationship has been a basis of various forms of literary writings. These two genres, though distinct from each other, share a long relationship of mutual complementarity. The relationship between history and fiction has evolved through different stages of co-operation and confrontations. These two disciplines share obvious similarities as well as some underlying differences. Arnold Toynbee in his masterwork *A Study of History* mentions that history and fiction originated from myths and they evolved

together. About history and fiction he writes, “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 (3).”

Though many writings exhibit distinct quality of being either history or fiction, some of the writings stand at the borderline and resist clear-cut demarcation. Diamond Shumsher Rana’s *Wake of the White Tiger* is the type of text that resists such easy categorization. But at close scrutiny, a good reader may find out the underlying patterns of the text that will certainly allow a basis for such categorization of this text.

Wake of the White Tiger (Seto Bagh) is an old classic on Nepalese history written by Diamond Shumsher Rana. Rana was born on 5th July, 1918 in Palpa Durbar, Tansen. He was born in a very rich family and he enjoyed a privileged upbringing. Not only that, he was also a captain in the Royal Nepal Army. Despite being a member of the ruling elites, he advocated for democracy. In 1948, he wrote a novel entitled *Basanti* with an anti-Rana theme that later caused his arrest. He wrote his another novel titled *Wake of the White Tiger* in 1970 when he was still in jail. After his release from the jail, Rana involved himself into an active politics, being a member of the Nepali Congress Party. He actively served the party from 1954 to 1987.

Wake of the White Tiger is a biography of Jagat Jung who along with his father Jung Bahadur Rana literally changed the course of Nepali history. This is why *Wake of the White Tiger*, despite being many things, is basically a book of history, rather than a novel. As a biographical account, it shows the three decades political history of Nepal. Biography is often considered as a variant of history itself. Both biography and history are often concerned with the past. They are very similar in the hunting down, evaluating, and selection of sources. Biographical writings- such as the Memoires of the French counselor of state, Philippe de Commynes, or George Cavendish’s life of Thomas Cardinal Wolsey- have often been treated as historical material than fictional accounts. This is why it is often said that biographical approach provides one of the most fascinating and illuminating approaches to history. Famous historian Thomas Carlyle rightly stated that, “the history of the world is but the biography of great men” (2). Carlyle strongly believes that biographical writings are cornucopia for history.

It is said that Jang Bahadur Rana, probably the most influential leader of Nepal, while wandering in the dense forest of Tarai, saw a white tiger that finally succumbed him to death. White tigers are often entangled with some sort of mysticism. There is some other-worldliness about them that captivates peoples' imagination. They appear frequently in myths and legends. Thus, the title of the novel itself arouses curiosity and some sort of disbelief in readers. However existence of white tigers has been already proven, though many myths related to them are baseless. In fact in 1951, a white tiger, later named as Mahan by an Indian Maharaja, was captured and put into a cage that definitely resolved many myths associated with it.

As per the documented history, the first white tiger was captured from the forest of Bandhavgarh, Madhya Pradesh, India. The Maharajah Martand Singh trapped it in 1951. He named this nine months old cub Mohan (the enchanter). Maharajah was successful in breeding white tigers by mating them with regular females. In those days, white tigers were very popular. And their demand was everywhere, especially in circus and zoos. After some time a researcher

named Ralph Scott succeeded in taking the white tigers to America from India. A daughter of Mohan named Mohini, was later gifted by the Government of India to the US government in 1960. Finally, Mohini was placed at the national zoo in Washington D.C. In this light, we can't, with certainty, deny the fact that Jung Bahadur might have seen a white tiger in the dense forest of Tarai.

Based on the rise of Rana Regime in Nepal, this book deals with the narrator's search for the lost information related to his family and his country. It attempts to foreground many repressed stories pertaining to the Ranacracy then. And, the narrator of this family profile is no other than the member of the same family who ruled Nepal for 104 years. In this sense, it is also the writer's own family history. Because Janga Bahadur Rana and his son Jagat Jung's history is inextricably inter-twined with the history of Nepal, *Wake of the White Tiger* can be taken as a history book, disguised as a novel. *Wake of the White Tiger* draws characters and events from Nepali history and contains actual historical information.

The novel describes Jung Bahadur Rana losing his grip over the control of the palace and also the fall of his sons and the rise of his nephews to power. However, the novel is like a sequel to Diamond's previous novel *Basanti* where he wrote about the rise of Jung Bahadur along with his love life. *The Wake of the White Tiger* is more like a biography of Jagat Jung.

It describes the love relation between Jagat Jung and the Princess, the daughter of King Surendra Bikram Shah. The novel starts with the mention of ongoing war between Nepal and Tibet. As the war proceeds, the love story between the two goes along. It describes the emotional state of Jagat Jung as he fights the urge to accept the Princess' love. Due to the fear of being called a sinner for stealing his cousin's would be wife, Jagat at first could not express his love to the princess. He tries his best to make her hate him. However, with the help of their cousins and the support of their family, they are married. Although his love life becomes successful, his chances of being the heir of the Prime Minister' position were very remote. Thus the story proceeds with the downfall of the promising Jagat Jung and rise of his cousins. The story tells how the sons of Dhir Shumsher Rana massacred their own clan and captured all power.

Diamond Shumsher Rana, being a member of the Rana family itself, had some special privileges. He had an access to the information that common Nepali folks could only think of in imagination. Nepali people, reeling under extreme poverty then, were always fascinated to the inside stories of Ranas. When Diamond Shumsher, almost like a journalist, presented some of the stories of Rana rulers, people took it as a great work of fiction. Yes, the writer has used his imagination in the novel but he has kept it to the minimum. He has resorted to imaginative details where he has no other options left. In history, there are gaps and fissures and historians sometimes need to fill them up with their imaginative power. Every historian does that and Diamond Shumsher also did the same!

A famous historiographer Louis O Mink claims that reader and critics often misunderstand history. People assume that a book of history does not tell beautiful stories. But after all, history books also may tell stories since they are also a kind of narratives. Mink writes:

Researches of historians, however arduous and technical, only increase the amount of

precision of knowledge of facts that remains contingent and discontinuous. It is by being assigned to stories that they become intelligible and increase understanding by going beyond “what?” and “when?” to “how?” and “why?” (47).

Mink says that historians use their own rationale to establish a Cause- Effect relationship. They attempt to think the way a character of past may think in a particular situation. He writes: “Rational model undertakes an account of explanations of intentional actions which show that the action performed was the reasonable thing to do for someone situated like the agent in those circumstances. (123)”

When Diamond Shumsher Rana had to describe the feelings and emotions of Jagat Jung and the princess, he certainly must have used the rational model that Louis O Mink mentioned just before. Rana must have imagined details. He must have added some facts and descriptions to fill in the gaps that a historian inevitably confronts. Just on the basis of such small scale distortions, we cannot call a historical document a novel.

Hayden White also asserts that history is a kind of narrative just the way a fiction is. He questions the presence of the absolute truths or facts in historical narratives. He believes that historians work on the pool of data and they don't/can't use every single data gathered. They prioritize a certain fact over others. They establish a rationale behind such narrativizations and weave stories of the past. Behind this, historians own limitations and sometimes biases may be at work. It is historians who give meaning or create sense out of the chaos of historical data. Various interpretive tools have to be used for this purpose such as emplotment, and argument building. The finished historical narrative comes to the readers' hand after the rigorous application of the above procedure. Like literature, history also involves a process of selection and exclusion. Just the way a literary writer has infinite possibilities, a historian may also have limitless possibilities that arises due to the blending of fact and fiction. A writer of fiction may have more liberty in comparison to a historian but the latter also may enjoy a certain amount of liberty in the use and manipulation of her resources. Facts and figures alone don't make history in its totality. They are just a part of history, not the whole. Hayden White in *Metahistory* writes:

I will consider the historical work as what it must manifestly is- that is to say, a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them. (2)

White says that historians need to rely on different narratives, eyewitnesses, and imagination. Even eyewitnesses will recount the events as they experienced it, not as it took place. When historians write these events, it automatically becomes a blend of fact and fiction.

Diamond Shumsher Rana's *Wake of the White Tiger* is also a blend of fact and fiction. But he blends them with a purpose. He wants readers to take *Wake of the White Tiger* as a fiction not because it is a fiction, but because it is not! Despite belonging to the Rana family, he hated Rana rulers of his time for exploiting Nepali people and the resources of Nepal. He was a man who fervently supported democracy and was jailed for his beliefs. When he wrote *Wake of the White Tiger*, he was going through a very turbulent period of his life. His own clansmen had put

him into jail, for his democratic views. At this juncture, he had to achieve two ends using the same means. On the one hand, he had to expose the real faces of the corrupt rulers of his time and on the other hand he had to save himself from the fury of the authorities.

In an interview with the Kathmandu Post, he once said: "I took up historical novels to express my feeling because I found no other form of expression efficient to carry my feelings of parliamentary system of Democracy of Nepal. I have tried to show the failure of Rana system in these books...who totally slaughtered the Democracy." This is why, in *Wake of the White Tiger*, Diamond Shumsher writes what he knows and what he heard of Rana rulers as if he is writing a novel but the stories that Diamond Shumsher Rana tells in *Wake of the White Tiger* are, to a great extent, true stories. They are also appropriated by other historical documents of Nepal.

To conclude, the personal in the story is truly political as well. *Wake of the White Tiger*, being based on the murder of Jung Bahadur's own son, presents the sequences of the conspiracy and the massacre that had thrilled the whole Nepal at that time. Diamond Shumsher Rana, an unacknowledged historian, in *Wake of the White Tiger*, loosely but beautifully recorded the events of the era, using an insider's as well as an outsider's perspectives. Ralph Waldo Emerson makes a great sense here for saying, "there is properly no history; only biography" so *Wake of the White Tiger*, a book of autobiography, is also book of history in disguise.

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