



William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal* as a Masterpiece

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ABSTRACT

William Dalrymple is a prominent, bestselling author, particularly known for his travel writing and narrative histories. In most of his works he emphasizes his interest on Indian Sub-continent. This research paper examines William Dalrymple's historical narrative from a New Historical perspective in order to map the relationship between past and present. It emphasizes on William Dalrymple's representation of mutiny as a three-cornered context including the general folk of Delhi playing the main role in Mutiny. It also reveals how William Dalrymple concentrates on Zafar, specifically focusing his support to the mutiny as one reason to turn an army mutiny as a major political challenge to British dominance in India. This paper highlights William Dalrymple's authentic usage of the hidden treasure in 'Archives' and also focuses on the point that he has given equal credit to both literary and nonliterary text books to gather genuine information on "*The Last Mughal and The Mutiny*".

Keywords: *The Last Mughal*, Delhi, East India Company, Sepoys, Historical.

William Dalrymple, New historical Perspective, three cornered context, Archives William Dalrymple's 'The Last Mughal: The Fall of Dynasty, Delhi, 1857' was published in 2006. He is the author of five books of history and travel. His first foray into narrative history is 'White Mughals: The Love and Betrayal of 18th century' won the prestigious Wolfson Prize for history 2003 and the 'Scottish Book of the year' prize. 'The Last Mughal' is his second venture into narrative history. As its title suggests, 'The Last Mughal: The fall of Dynasty, Delhi, 1857' chronicles the events of 1857 and represents the transformation from Mughal power to British power of India. The book closes with the seize of Delhi by the East India Company and the introduction of the 'Act for the better Government of India'. Khuswant Singh in 'Out Look India' applauded Dalrymple's narrative approach:

The Last Mughal shows the way history should be written: not as a catalogue of dry –as-dust kings, battles and treaties but to bring the past to the present, put life back in characters long dead and gone and make the reader feel he is living among them, sharing their joys, sorrows and apprehensions.... Darlymple’s book rouses deep emotions. It will bring tears to the eyes of every Dilliwala... (Singh 2008)

Bahudhur Shah Zafar: William Dalrymple centres his narration chiefly on Bahudhurshah Zafar whom he referred with his pen name ‘Zafar’ throughout his book ‘*The Last Mughal*’. Zafar was the Last Mughal emperor of India. He came late to the throne, succeeding his father only in his mid sixties. By the time he gained throne, the entire India was under the control of British. He was a chess board king. Neither he could take the decisions nor could he make his people to follow his decisions. He used to spend most of his time with his wives or concubines. At the age of sixty, he married Zinat Mahal, a young woman of nineteen years. He neglected his other wives and sons and decided to make Zinat Mahal’s son as his heir apparent. So, he repeatedly requested Dalhousie to accept his proposal and to continue the grants forever given to him. But Dalhousie’s response was negative. He made it clear that the grants would be maintained upto his majesty’s own life time, but cannot be extended beyond that. Zafar was weak and he badly needed the support to go against Dalhousie. When sepoys were ready to take revenge on those who tried to hurt their religious feelings, Zafar , with no second chance, he accepted their decision. He hoped that he could regain the power and throne of Timur . His decision to revolt against British was the turning point in the history of Mughal dynasity. His inner zeal to restore his kingdom provoked him to support sepoys but his indecisive nature proved him incapable in handling the situation. He ran away from the situation and tried to hide himself. Finally, he was caught and kept in jail.

Zinat Mahal: Darlymple quoted some other characters that were indirectly responsible for the downfall of Mughal Empire. One such character was Zinat Mahal, beloved wife of Bahudhur shah Zafar. She had her own strategy. She persuaded Zafar to recognize her son Mirza Zawan Bakt as his heir apparent. To achieve her deep desire, she trapped three important British officials and killed them with slow poison, when they supported Mirzafar, the senior prince. She



was wholly opposed the decision taken by Zafar. While Zafar was encouraging sepoys for Mutiny, Zinat Mahal wrote secret letters to British officials and requested them to nominate her son as heir apparent. She turned as an informer to the British against her own husband in her selfish quest for power to her son. The above two characters place a very significant role in Dalrymple novel. He places the overall narrative as a clear cut chronicle of the decline of Mughal emperor and the rise of British influence in India. Although he mentions the general causes that are narrated in the other text books, his text mainly emphasizes the religious and cultural facets of the unrest. He reiterates throughout the book that the root cause of the mutiny is mutual lack of cultural understanding on behalf of both Indians and Britons in India

The British in India

The life of the British in 18th century India was different from 19th century British. The tone of the earlier period was intermixing and impurity. It was the period of unexpected and unplanned mingling of people, cultures and ideas. Dalrymple in his introduction to his book 'White Mughals: The love and betrayal of 18th century' explains: It also becomes increasingly clear to me that the relationship between India and Briton was a symbiotic one. Just as individual Britons in India could learn to appreciate and wish to emulate different aspects of Indian culture, and choose to take on Indian manners and languages, so many Indians at this period began to travel to Briton, intermarrying with the locals there and picking up Western way (XII) Dalrymple straightly accepts that the success of the East India Company in its early years was because of the hybridity and intermarrying:

The success of East India Company in its formative years depended as much on contacts across the lines of race and religion as it did on any commercial acumen, and to varying extents the traders, soldiers diplomat and even the clergyman who ventured eastwards had little choice but to embrace Mughal India. (Dalrymple 2002:17)

A sudden and unexpected transformation had taken place. Europeans started feeling that there was nothing to learn from India, and they had come only to civilize Indians. They felt that India was a place to be changed and conquered. A new order was passed banning the Anglo Indian orphans of British soldiers from travelling to England to be educated and to get qualified for the



service of the company. With their imperialistic approaches, they created policies which shacked the confidence of Indians. Dalrymple specifically named few people in his book who dreamt of imposing imperial rules in India. One such was Jennings. He had come to India in 1832. Ever since he entered he had been working on his plan to convert the people of Delhi to Christianity: Having initially been posted to various quiet hill stations, and forced to focus his energies on such peripheral concerns as designing suitably modest heads tones for the Christian cemeteries there, he had long dreamt of opening a mission in Delhi and getting stuck into serious work as ‘Missionary to the Heathen.

(Dalrymple 2006 : 59)

Another General whom Dalrymple mentioned in his ‘The Last Mughal’ was John Nicholson. He represents Nicholson as violent, boisterous and psycho. A taciturn and self contained Ulster protestant, it was said that while he was district commissioner in Rawalpindi, Nicholson had personally decapitated a local robber chieftain, then kept the man’s head on his desk as a momento. He was moreover, a man of few words. (Dalrymple 2006: 199)

The representation of such characters in his book represents Dalrymple as a fair, balanced and impartial interpreter of historical events. He was unafraid to narrate the cruel activities that were inflicted by the British on Indians. Through his textually mediated process, he tries to show his penitence for imperial wrongs committed by his men and also frees his contemporary Britons from associations of guilt at their atrocities. But some critics questioned his technique in contrasting the British of eighteenth century and nineteenth century. Gyan Prakash, a reviewer of Dalrymple’s works states:

Dalrymple assumes that but for the nineteenth – century imperial fool hardiness, the imagined eighteenth – century empire might have remained intact. (Prakash 2006)

These words of Gyan Prakash reinforce the statement that Dalrymple has chosen a dual role. He tries to draw a dividing line between 19th century imperialists and 18th century White Mughals. Most part of the novel shows the 19th century evangelists as the real cause for uprising and that their thoughts set a stage for a clash of rival fundamentalism:

The histories of Islamic fundamentalism and European imperialism have



very often been closely, and dangerously, intertwined. In a curious but very concrete way, the fundamentalists of both faiths have needed each other to reinforce each other's prejudices and hatreds. The venom of one provides the life blood of the other.

(Dalrymple 2006: 84)

This story of rival fundamentalism aggravates and resulted in problematic situation. But Dalrymple's story features a disguised argument that there is no intrinsic problem as long as Hindu culture is secure. The hatred of religious flame rose only when the British involved in the evangelical activities. Ross Leckie, his reviewer supports his argument: British mercantile greed – and evangelical Christianity – sought dominance. Moderate Muslims became fundamentalists. In 1857, the Indian mutiny, the largest popular uprising against British imperialism, was the result. (Ross Leckie: 2007) On the whole, it can be concluded from Dalrymple's work that he is not prepared to go all against the arrogance and superiority complex of colonial rulers. But at certain places, he shows his penitence over the misbehavior of the colonials. He expresses clearly that British are not arrogant from the beginning but only some of them had been so.

Historical Studies Of Dalrymple's Work '*The Last Mughal*

Thinkers have different interpretations about history. Some thinkers name history as an enlightenment philosophy and some call it as a science. Whatever is the characterization, interpretations and decisions are based on a judgement on different possibilities of the time. It is impossible to construct truthful narratives as historical explanations. Most historians still insist on the eccentric practice of reading texts to locate the truth. Historians do this because they still believe in the notion that there can be real historical past as it once existed and which can be recovered like treasure from the hidden resources. Dalrymple comes under this category. He spent many years in search of the history which is never touched by the Indian writer. In his introduction of the book *The Last Mughal* he explains his reader his interest and effort in pulling out hidden treasure of 'Archives of India'

"I first encountered Delhi when I arrived, aged eighteen, on the foggy winter night of 26 January 1984. The airport was surrounded by shrouded men huddled under shawls, and it was surprisingly cold. I know nothing



about cold.” (Dalrymple 2006: 6)

He continued in his introduction how it has created a perpetual effect on him: “Delhi had a greater and more overwhelming effect on me than it would have had on other more cosmopolitan teenagers; certainly the city hooked me from the start. I backpacked around for a few months, and hung out in Goa; but I soon found way back to Delhi and got myself a job at a mother Teresa’s home in the far north of the city, beyond old Delhi.” (Dalrymple 2006: 6)

The above words of Darlymple reveal his interest and his willingness to spend his time to complete his project. He spends a significant amount of his time to realize the value and importance of sources – particularly those in Persian and Urdu. “The Last Mughal ‘is the product of his hard research, translation and exciting venture. He thanks his translator Mahamood Farooqui who helped him in his project:

This book would have been quite impossible without the scholarship and industry of my colleague Mahamood Farooqui. For four years we have been working together on this project, and much that is most interesting within it – notably the remarkable translations from the sometimes almost indecipherable Shikastah of the Urdu files in the mutiny papers – is the product of his dedication, persistence and skill.

Dalrymple 2006 (XXV)

The research, translation and writing process are singularly typical. His representational strategy of history proves him as a New Historicist. The term ‘New Historicism’ is coined by American Critic Stephen Greenblatt in his book ‘Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare (1980)’. New Historicism is an approach based on the parallel reading of literary and non literary texts usually of the same historical period. Literary and non literary texts are given equal weight and constantly both texts are used to interrogate each other. This approach is highlighted by Dalrymple in his introduction:

Over the last four years, I and my colleagues Mahmood Farooqui and Bruce Wannell have been working through many of the 20,000 virtually unused Persian and Urdu documents relating to Delhi in 1857, known as the mutiny papers that we find in the shelves of the National Archives of



India. These allow 1857 revolution in Delhi to be seen for the first time from a properly Indian perspective, and not just from the British sources through which to date it has usually been viewed.

(Dalrymple 2006:11)

Previously, most of the historians relied on the huge quantities of British material --- travelogues, letters, histories which carry only one side information but the National Archives contains a detail documentation of the four months of the uprising in Delhi and also in other Indian cities. Discovering this material and using it to bring the hidden treasures of history is one of the highlights of the whole project of Dalrymple. In his description of Indian National Archives, Dalrymple highlights ‘street – level’ nature of the sources, and the impact of the events of 1857 on Delhi citizenry. Kalpana Wilson, questions Dalrymple’s claims for the sources that he champions:

While Dalrymple enthuses about ‘street – level nature’ of the documentation he has unearthed relating to “ordinary citizens of Delhi”, the fact is that the overwhelming majority of the book, where it is not revisiting the oft-cited accounts of various British officers and civilians in Delhi, is written from the perspective of the Mughal elite of the city.

Wilson: 2008

There is no doubt that *‘The Last Mughals’* focuses on the upper echelon of the society, both British and Mughals but he continued his stories of ‘ordinary individuals’ whose ‘fate ‘was in challenge at such upheaval. He uses his work to display the ambiguous and equivocal response of both the Mughal elite and also the ordinary citizens of the city. His concentration on myriad reasons of mutiny without neglecting the poor masses of the city reveals authentic nature of the book.

William Dalrymple’s emphasis on Delhi makes his book *‘The Last Mughal’* a beautiful text. Firstly, this book chiefly serves as a justification for a more concise preview for an already long drawn out text book. It reveals not his love for Mughals but his poignant feeling at the loss of unique culture that evolved from the mixture of Hindu, Muslim and Christian cultures. Secondly, it highlights the genuine Indianness of his sources by focusing the difficulties in translation of the Persian and Urdu papers. Dalrymple did a greater effort than other historians to



unveil the truth which is hidden in the Archives. His description of the scripts, letters, and petitions in other languages reveals his deep knowledge and his connection with the sources. Thus through the usage of both the literary and non-literary texts and his zeal to continue the search for the real historical past turns him as a historian who reinforces the theory of New historicism.

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