

Introduction to Literature

Term Paper - Literary Interpretation

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Questions of narrative structure and time in literature have been posed and answered by any serious analyst of literature from Aristotle to Kurt Vonnegut. In any story, it remains important to convey the advancing plot and flow of time in ways that suit the style of the author and genre that the text belongs to. This essay examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work "The Last Queen", a work of historical fiction that follows the life of Jind Kaur and the struggles and fortunes she faced through her life.

An epigraph starts the text off and gives the reader an idea of what's to come and one who's finished reading could even look back at it and glean an overall idea of the message and intention behind the book and the prologue that precedes the first part also serves a similar purpose. The text is organised broadly into four books according to a range of years in the Maharani's life, giving the reader a concrete idea of how the text relates to the actual order of the events. And each book is divided into chapters that convey a central idea or theme.

Besides these bases of chronological organisation, I believe another main way that the timing of events is conveyed is using the breaks made by the occurrence of small pictographs of Sikh kirpans, the swords decreed to be carried by all Sikhs. Throughout the text, even though the actual amount of time that has passed is often unclear, it is clear that text separated this way occurs at different points in time.

Consider the break after Mai Nakkain's call to the pregnant maharani (p. 123). Right afterwards, the narrator describes the Fakir's visit. It is clear that time has passed but unclear how long.

A break soon after Jawahar's death (p. 235) separates two sections that appear to be happening at the same time, or at least describe a similar period. The description of the courtiers' attitude towards Jawahar's death and Lal's increase in time spent with Jindan seem to be co-occurring. Yet it is to be noted, the actual happenings in these sections happen one after the other— That is, Jindan's plan to humiliate the Khalsa Army and Avtar's news. And again, there is no indication of the time between them.

The author wields this tool to great extent as this double-edged sword used to slice ideas and time up into smaller chunks.

The same cannot be said about the chapters. For the most part, the author seems to use the chapter breaks effectively to convey relatively longer gaps in time and they are named appropriately. But some chapters, namely "34. Koh-i-Noor" stands out as one that might be slightly poorly named seeing as only a comparatively small part of it is about the eponymous diamond and that too, a frankly inconsequential part whose purpose seems to be to show us how much Queen Victoria means to Dalip. In my opinion this could've been done with a great deal more brevity and instead those words could've been contributed to slowing down the narrative after Ranjit Singh's death or even expanding on the characters' whose story received an abrupt end, such as Mangla or Avtar.

On the subject of naming chapters, As a side note, I'd like to point out that the last part of the book named "Rebel" really has nothing to do with rebellion other than maybe Jindan trying to bring out the rebel in Dalip. Fortunately, this isn't something that heavily impacts the reading experience.

"The Last Queen", though called a work of historical fiction, borrows greatly from the autobiographical style of writing and uses a first person narrator, Jind Kaur, to tell its story. The author employs techniques that marry the two aspects and create a text that enables her to maintain the historicity of the novel when needed but also lets her advance the storyline that she has spun for the characters.

The text follows a fairly linear series of events that goes chronologically through the life of Jind Kaur. Regrettably, there aren't enough sources to map even a majority of the life of the Maharani but there remains a good idea of Ranjit Singh's life and of his successors and predecessors. Although, there are many events surrounding the Sikh Empire that cannot go without mentioning as it would pertain to almost anyone living in the region and especially so for someone so close to its center. Divakaruni goes about setting up these events well in the canon she has created for this work. One of the techniques that the author uses is constantly maintaining these complex relationships between almost every pair of major factions and characters. And leading up to pivotal moments in the narrative, the pertinent relationships often come to a head. As seen just after the death of Ranjit Singh, many alliances are put to the test. Wazir Dhian was given the responsibility of protecting both Jindan and Dalip by the Maharaja. Having set this up earlier, the author uses the obligations that Dhian has to the mother and son to drive the plot forward. These relationships

even last as long as the one between Jindan and Jawahar also carry plot forward for a large part of the novel.

The sensation of the flowing of time contributes to the feeling and mood of the text heavily. There are passages that benefit from a slower pace, just as life might sometimes make a second feel like an hour. The more private settings in the book take advantage of this fact. The scene that immediately comes to mind is the conversation between the Maharaja and Jindan atop the Gurudwara (p. 73). The section is peppered with frequent thoughts to herself, a verbatim report of almost every word of conversation and a many, although brief, descriptions of their body language and movements. The reader feels quite "zoomed in" to the lives of the two characters in this scene, appealing to that more base, voyeuristic tendency in us humans when it comes to stories. And the careful control that Divakaruni has over the pace to make it not feel too slow is to be praised, maybe as a result of the aforementioned descriptions of their body language. She conveys so much in so little with words like the following:

There is such sadness in his bearing that if he weren't the king, I'd have thrown my arms around him. (p. 73)

Anger makes me forget discretion. (p. 75)

Conversely, The rather public events of chapter 27 "Coronation" gives a good example of a faster tempo being used to convey the public nature of some events. As is with any public occasion, there seems to be less detail known to the masses and as a virtue of the lack of detail, and thus less to say, a faster pace conveys the lack of privacy easily.

Material detail is given immense importance in this novel, as is deserved in a work of historical fiction. The material detail helps readers immerse themselves in a setting that could be as well be a different planet to the one they currently occupy. The stark differences in our worlds need to be expressed. This essay won't be interpreting the material detail passages but rather I'd like to talk about how even through something as stationary as giving a description of the setting, which should be akin to painting a picture of a moment in time, the author furthers our understanding of the characters and their relationships. Laila is described in great detail at her first appearance (p. 42). The way that Jindan talks about not only about her beauty alone, which indubitably takes her breath away, but gives a description of how trained she is. Mentioning that she doesn't move for any reason. A window into her pragmatic orientation. The way she continues to describe her interaction with Laila, sprinkled with more material detail, spills the feelings of both parties.

Not long after meeting Laila, a description of Jindan's first meeting with Ranjit Singh immediately conveys, without any words having been uttered by the king, his character and quintessence.

*He seems a lot taller than he is, perhaps because he stands so straight.
There's an aura of power around him.
This is a man afraid of nothing. (p. 43)*

After first arriving at the qila, Jindan is shown her first accommodation (p. 87). The room is so dismal and unfitting of a queen. The passage successfully conveys not only Jindan's opinion of the room but also successfully sets up the reader to feel angry along with Jindan. This feeling is immediately used as a method to show how clearly she thinks. When she subsequently avoids ranting to the help and is treated with some sound advice, the reader efficiently understands her approach to what will evolve into court discussions with higher stakes.

"The Last Queen", all in all, transmits the feelings, mood and pace in every moment as competently as it does at the larger scale of the chapter. The reader is given a lesson on dynamics of the relationships between characters, especially with respect to the importance of public and private settings. It can be argued that for a literary work, the structure of the narrative comes second only to the narrative itself. There's almost no point in having an inspired, evocative story without the text effectively communicating everything that the author intends to communicate.