

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.

Prefacing the text with a powerful epigraph, a quote from Chinua Achebe, gives a reader that's starting out an idea of what is to come. And one who has 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, 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 planning to humiliate the Khalsa Army and Avtar's news. And again, there is no indication of the time between them. Divakaruni wields this tool to great extent as this multi-edged sword with many intentions—to slice ideas and time up into smaller chunks, among others.

Palate cleansing is important in novels of a semi-autobiographical nature such as "The Last Queen". As events unfold in the novel as it would in a real person's life, their nature may be hugely varied. A disappointing, regretful moment at one time and a diametrically opposite, joyous, celebratory mood in the next. Of course, to emulate these mood changes through mere text is difficult, since they are usually separated by the passage of time. The kirpans are hence used as an effective palate cleanser. A visible, clear break in the text with more stopping power than the paragraph break causes a reset in the mind of the reader.

Once Ranjit Singh becomes closer with Jind Kaur, there is a part that talks of how she has become the king's favourite queen(p. 101). This section, however, is preceded by a rather less ecstatic Jindan being denied in her request to grant her brother employment. Having a paragraph break here may lend to the sequence being too abrupt a change of mood. But it hardly requires the finality of the chapter break. This makes the kirpan a perfect choice.

It is also to be noted that the passage of time is entirely unclear in the aforementioned excerpt. In fact, it seems that the events of the preceding part could even have happened after the following. It is mostly unimportant since these events are not inter-related but their place in the overall narrative is clear.

Consequently, it is clear that Divakaruni uses these kirpans to denote what Genette calls discourse *anachronies* (23). Although Genette categorises them into either *analepsis* or *prolepsis*, it is nevertheless difficult to categorise Divakaruni's usage as either of the two and Genette admits as much—That is, that every temporal discordance between the order of discourse and story can't be neatly shelved away as either of the two. Events such as the aforementioned can take any order and could even be chronologically contained within each other, happening simultaneously even. This is a virtue of the fact that even though Jind herself can only be in one place at a time, the author describes events in the discourse as happening over longer amounts of time. In the same example, it can be said that Jindan could've been showered by gifts all the while. And only on one of those nights did Ranjit Singh's denial take place. Although it is clear that the conversation with Mangla about Gulloo takes place at a different point in time. The only indication of their order in time, though it may be trivial to say, is the order of the two sections themselves. Most definitely intentional on the part of the author. With the intention of conveying a sense of having a busy life as a popular queen.

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. Prolepsis, even though less common compared to its counterpart (Genette 67), is used to great degree in this text as the reader need not be informed of every happening in Jind Kaur's, sometimes mundane, life.

A more interesting analysis is to be made in the naming of the chapters. It is inarguable that most are aptly and tersely named. Chapters like "8. Banquet" and "16. Birth" fall under this umbrella. They can even be interpreted to be the aspects of Jind's life that she most remembers from that period of time. But the occasional chapter, 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 more 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. Putting that criticism aside, looking at it through the lens of "Jindan remembers this as the most important aspect of her life"—She considers the death of the prince consort as a direct result of their new ownership of the Koh-i-noor. Although, to most rational minds, this could be dismissed as a mere superstition. But as is often the case with believers of superstition, their impacts are often overstated. It's made clear through the duration of the book that the Koh-i-noor is an important possession of the king and, analogously, of the queen. There is no doubt that the Maharani considers the fate of the diamond and the conversation in this chapter important. Albeit, the sequence is mostly inconsequential to the larger discourse, there's non-zero value to the narrative here. Barthes asserts that nothing in a narrative is redundant (249). Even if a narrative unit seems to be redundant, there is value to be gained from its existence by means of existing. It could serve many purposes, it "precipitates, delays, or quickens the pace of discourse, sums up, anticipates, and sometimes even confuses the reader". Divakaruni could have intended the section to slow the pace and show some passage of time before Jind's death in the very next chapter.

"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 it will 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.

Attention should also be called to the passage where little Jind is first brought to Lahore (p. 28). As she is shown around the city on foot by her father, it's clear the time is passing slowly, leisurely even. The wonder and fascination in her mind is clear as they walk through the city. Besides the effective and efficient word pictures we are used to seeing from Divakaruni, this passage also lends itself to another kind:

Lahore makes me realize how little I've seen of life. I gawk at the wares in the shops. Elegant veils and kameezes in brilliant...

(p. 39)

This section reads differently from the other material-detail passages. We do, in fact, know that the party is walking along the roads, but as more details about adjacently placed shops are revealed, it gives the very feeling of walking along the road. As if the reader is moving through the streets and increasingly many things come into view.

Regardless of the scale at which the discourse is operating—be it at the word or the chapter, Divakaruni transmits the feelings, mood and pace in every moment equally competently.

The flow of time, although ambiguous at points in the text, conveys the pace of a queen's life well. Whether she is, in fact, a queen, or a little girl stealing guavas, or an older woman merely living out the rest of her life, the text maintains the feel of time passing in just the right way.

The reader is given a lesson on dynamics of the relationships between characters, especially with respect to the importance of public and private settings.

The flowing of time and the advancing of plot is ensured even through the relatively stationary material detail sections. The author employs her expertise and sets a standard for the novel in these passages.

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. *The Last Queen*, all in all, advances the plot and the time in Jind Kaur's life well through the text. And, along with giving a wonderful message, it indubitably has that inspired, evocative story to boot.

Works Cited

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