

Allegorization of History in Burial at Sea

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ABSTRACT

The paper titled “Allegorization of History in Burial at Sea” investigates Khushwant Singh's novel as an allegorized history of post-independent India. Published in 2005, Singh's narrative intertwines the lives of fictional characters with historical figures. Using a combination of textual analysis and historical data, this study examines how Singh's portrayal of these characters serves as an allegorical representation of broader historical narratives. By analyzing the allegorical elements within the novel, the study reveals how Singh's fictionalization serves to critique the idealized images of prominent historical figures, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, and the socio-political dynamics of their time. The findings suggest that Singh's work offers a complex re-interpretation of historical events and figures, highlighting the intersection of fiction and history. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the discourse on the allegorical nature of historical fiction. This research provides a comprehensive analysis of how fictional works can reshape our perceptions of historical reality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Khushwant Singh's book *Burial at Sea* has enthralled readers and academics with its allegorical examination of post-independent India's historical context. The novel, which was published in 2005, is nevertheless well-known for its distinctive depiction of Jawaharlal Nehru's family and the hidden stories of their lives. By skillfully fusing the lives of the Nehru family with the social, cultural, and political context of their day, Singh's tale helps readers explore the complexities of history via the prism of fiction. The novel has generated a great deal of discussion and analysis. By employing an exploratory research design, this study aims to examine *Burial at Sea*'s

historical elements and reveal the deep relationship between the fabricated characters and their real-life equivalents. The goal of the research is to show how Singh's work goes beyond simple narrative to provide a provocative examination of the complex nature of history itself.

This study is based on the claim that *Burial at Sea* is fundamentally a dramatized account of Nehru's family history. It attempts to support the claim that the novel functions as an allegorization of history by scrutinizing the complex web of politics, history, and interpersonal relationships. This article claims that the novel challenges the prevailing narratives and opens the door to a more complex

understanding of India's past. The study implies that Khushwant Singh's *Burial at Sea* is an allegory for post-independence India, using a fictionalized portrayal of the Nehru family to reflect and critique real historical events and figures.

1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Burial at Sea has earned good fame among scholars in India and beyond. Different scholars have highlighted different aspects of the novel as it contains multiple possibilities. Some critics have emphasized its portrayal of political leaders whereas some have pondered upon its portrayal of gender dynamics. Abdul Ghaffar Bhatti et al., use a gender-based lens while interpreting the text as they conclude that *Burial at Sea*, portrays an appropriation of women's time, bodies, and labor in the broader social milieu of Indian society—“For instance, it discusses the character of Victor Jai Bhagwan, who views his wife merely as a “sex-toy” and never provides her with happiness, demonstrating the objectification and marginalization of women (Bhatti et al. 177). Their reading of the novel concludes that the novel denounces patriarchal norms using a dominant female character who defies the taken-for-granted values of the then-patriarchal society of India.

Nancy and Marwaha highlight different aspects of patriarchal appropriation and sexual obligation that have been depicted in the text. They opine that Singh portrays his female characters as objects, oppressed by various tandems of the patriarchal system and subsystems. Concerning the objectification or commodification of women, they mention—“We find them as women suffering in one way or another, being appropriated based on time, body, sexual obligation or taking up the physical charge of the male members in their lives” (126). This appropriation of women's bodies in the inner and outer space of our societies breaks the confidence of women in general.

Marwaha and Nancy's study delves into societal expectations regarding women's roles and the perpetuation of

male desires, offering valuable insights into the patriarchal structures present in Singh's narrative. Another critic Shalini Yadav provides a unique perspective on the novel, focusing on the character of Victor Jai Bhagwan as a representation of India's struggle for independence. Yadav writes, “*Burial at Sea* turns us towards the Indian history where Victor represented those all-young men who were fiercely committed to the country and fought either physically or economically” (9). Yadav suggests that Victor symbolizes a different kind of freedom fighter who champions economic modernization as a means of achieving independence. This analysis offers a fresh interpretation of historical figures within Singh's narrative, highlighting the complexity of their roles in shaping India's trajectory.

Furthermore, the work of Pari emphasizes Singh's use of satire as a tool for social critique, particularly in his portrayal of historical figures. Pari argues that Singh's novels, including *Burial at Sea*, blend humor with commentary on societal issues, challenging traditional narratives and advocating for social reform. She writes, “Through a uninhibitionistic portrayal of sexploits and the voyeuristic view of male and female anatomy and titillating accounts of the innumerable sexual encounters, Singh parodies all the religious and moral taboos and codes of social respectability imposed on individuals in contemporary Indian society” (3). Using satire as a façade, Singh makes scathing comments about the follies of Indian societies.

Lohat, in her study, deals with Singh's portrayal of historical characters and events. She concentrates on how Singh's characters are guided by their libido, i.e., carnal desires. But she says that his characters don't just have libido, but also a spiritual dimension. Despite the novel's overreliance on lustful themes, Singh also succeeds in addressing some grave concerns of national importance. To quote her, “Khushwant Singh and Tarun Tejpal can be bound in a common strand for their treatment of ribald subject matter such as

sex. Nonetheless, both the writers save themselves from any artistic flaw as they do not go down to the drain while dealing with the themes of lust in their fictional worlds” (69). This perspective sheds light on Singh's skillful blending of personal desires with broader socio-political narratives. Moreover, Dilip Bobb, in *India Today*, highlights Singh's use of intelligent guesswork to reconstruct historical relationships, such as the alleged affair between Jawaharlal Nehru and Shradha Mata. Bobb suggests that Singh's portrayal of these relationships challenges traditional narratives, revealing hidden truths about India's political elite (2). It shows Singh's ability to map the delicate historical landscape with subtlety.

In a similar vein, Marwaha and Nancy (2023) have studied Singh's *Burial at Sea* with a focus on how there exists an interplay of patriarchy and sexuality within Singh's novels, including *Burial at Sea*. Their findings show that Singh portrays female characters as objectified and fetishized. However, Singh does not portray all women characters on a one-dimensional scale. Some women characters in the novel are outrageously bold and empowered. Marwaha and Nancy's study adds some important insights into Singh's portrayal of men and women.

Another important work concerning Singh's *Burial at Sea* comes from the critics Sabariraja and Pushpalatha. In their article “Human Relationship in Khushwant Singh's *Burial at Sea*” they provide a detailed analysis of human relationships as depicted in Khushwant Singh's novel, focusing on the various dimensions of interpersonal connections such as friendship, professional, romantic, and family ties. They write, “The protagonist Jai Bhagwan alias Victor is a superior example for Friendship, Professional, Romantic and family. During his stay in England, he upheld a good rapport with his roommate Big Boy. He met Madhavan Nair, a Keralite from India at Oxford. Victor liked Nair because of the same spirit. Both had the intention to develop their native land” (398). Their study also delves into the portrayal of characters

in the novel, examining their interactions and the impact of societal and personal factors on their relationships, ultimately offering insights into the universal nature of human bonds and their role in personal growth and societal functioning.

1.2 RESEARCH GAP

The existing literature on Khushwant Singh's *Burial at Sea* provides valuable insights into themes such as feminism, patriarchy, Struggle for Independence, and satire, yet there remains a research gap concerning the broader allegorical significance of the novel in representing Indian history. While scholars have analyzed specific themes within Singh's work, there's limited exploration into how these themes intersect to allegorize broader historical narratives. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how Singh's depiction of characters and events symbolically represents India's struggle for independence and post-independence political landscape, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the novel's allegorical dimensions.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on a textual analysis of Khushwant Singh's *Burial at Sea* (2005) to explore its allegorical representation of historical narratives. The primary data source is the novel itself. A detailed thematic and critical analysis has been done to uncover how its fictional elements mirror real historical figures and events. Secondary data is drawn from a range of scholarly sources, including works by Abdul Ghaffar Bhatti et al. (2022), Priyanka Marwaha (2021), Shalini Yadav (2023), Sabariraja and Pushpalatha (2022), and Dilip Bobb (2023), which provide context and critical perspectives on gender dynamics, patriarchy, independence, human relationships, and historical interpretation. This approach combines thematic analysis to identify key motifs and critical analysis to assess their broader historical implications.

3. ANALYSIS

Singh in his celebrated novel titled *Burial at Sea* frames a beautiful narrative that tells us provocative stories that challenge our perceptions. They inspire us to rethink the history-based tales we have grown so familiar with. Often, we have been told that Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi are the purest form of human beings. But Singh provokes us as he highlights some of the instances of extramarital affairs that these noble souls cherished. Not only that, but the book also gives us some profound reflection on the socio-political environments of the time in some subtle manner. Shedding light on the power struggles of the era, he exposes the flaws inherent in the great personalities of Indian history like Nehru, Gandhi, Shradha Mata, and Dhirendra. Though they appear in the novel as fictitious characters, they have a real-life connection with Indian history.

History and fiction are not perennial enemies. They used to be the closest allies in the past and even now they are if we can see the connections. Complex historical events and models can be communicated simply through fiction. It accomplishes this by narrating tales that emotionally bind us to the past. We can experience what it was like to live in a specific time and location when we read a novel or narrative. History texts can't always accomplish this. Symbols and metaphors are sometimes used in fiction to depict historical concepts or occurrences. An author may depict a historical event using a symbol or metaphor rather than by discussing it explicitly. This can increase historical relatability and interpretive flexibility.

Authors frequently utilize fiction to make political and social commentary. They invent imaginary people and scenarios to cast doubt on or critique actual occurrences. This enables people to voice their opinions without explicitly challenging authority. Fiction is an excellent means of revealing untold tales. For this reason, the concepts of textuality and historicity in history are frequently invoked by New Historicists. Montrose makes an appropriate comment in this regard:

By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing – not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence ... and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the 'documents' upon which historians ground their own texts, called 'histories'. (Montrose 20)

Montrose here is drawing attention to the subjectivity and intricacy that come with understanding history through texts. Historical records are products of their time and location rather than direct windows into the past. Historians also add more levels of subjectivity and interpretation when they use these documents to craft their historical narratives. Untold or forgotten stories surround many historical events, particularly those involving oppressed communities. Fiction may highlight these tales and deepen our knowledge of the past.

Fiction can occasionally pose moral and ethical conundrums. Historical events frequently present moral dilemmas and difficult decisions. Fiction addresses the moral aspects of history by putting characters in certain circumstances, forcing us to reflect carefully on the decisions individuals have made. We can also gain insight into a specific era's culture and society through fiction. Fiction provides us with a more comprehensive understanding of history by illustrating how people lived, thought, and acted. Fiction offers alternate histories on occasion. It might ponder what would have occurred if history had gone in a different direction. This can cause us to reflect on the options and decisions made throughout history. This point is made very evident by E. Shreedharan's statement from his book *A Text Book of Historiography*:

History is the historian's reconstruction of the past. The principal materials of reconstruction at the disposal of the historian are records or remains that the past has left behind. They serve him as evidence of facts that he establishes. The records are of a rich variety of buildings, inscriptions, medals, coins, edicts, chronicles, travelogues, decrees, treaties, official correspondence, private letters, and diaries. It is through the study of such history-as-records that the historian gains knowledge of history-as-events. History deals with evidence. Hence the dictum 'No records, no history'. (3)

To put it simply, fiction narrates tales that provide context and emotion for historical events. It makes observations about actual occurrences and untold tales using metaphors, symbols, and fictitious characters. It also demonstrates how people lived in the past and examines the moral aspects of history. Moreover, fiction occasionally conjures up alternate histories, leading us to wonder how history took place in actuality.

Singh orients to bring history and the components of fiction together to build history other than the standard structuralized history, and this give-and-take between history and fiction is effectively understood and represented in *Burial at Sea*. We discover that actual history is being mixed up with components of dream, fantasy, imagination, talk of drunkenness, and various other elements after examining the criticism of the new historicists. Major historical events including the killing of Mahatma Gandhi, which led to political unrest and the circumstances of the nation at the time, are included in this work. For instance, People were deeply devastated by Gandhi's passing. The issue is even described in these lines by Singh:

He has lost his second father:
Bapu had been assassinated. He was devastated. What kind of savage race did he belong to which killed its

own saintly father? He did not know who to turn to for solace. He felt being on a luxury yacht off the coast of Goa was not the right place to be at the time. He returned to Bombay and after a day attending a condolence meeting called by his staff, flew to Delhi to be with his mother. (80)

First of all, the mention of Bapu's assassination alludes directly to Mahatma Gandhi, a historical person who is frequently referred to in India as "Bapu" meaning father. In Indian history, his 1948 assassination marked a turning point. The author is allegorizing this historical tragedy by incorporating this incident into the book. The shock and grief that the country felt after Gandhi's assassination are reflected in the feelings and behaviors of the people in the book.

Second, the character's internal conflict and his inquiry into whether he is a member of a "savage race" that murders its own virtuous parent are metaphorical. This reflects the wider reflection on society that followed Gandhi's murder. The idea that one of their own had perpetrated this crime severely disturbed many Indians, particularly since the victim was a respected figure who promoted nonviolence and peace.

Uncertainty has been portrayed also through the character's quest for comfort even in the most hostile environment. There is a feeling in the character that he is in the wrong location on a lavish yacht off the coast of Goa mirrors yet he has a desire for comfort. This scene in the novel can have a parallel reading with the Indian national tragedy at the time just before independence. That was a moment of national tragedy. The way the characters in the novel sought comfort and healing in the novel, similarly, Indian people sought healing and solace in their everyday life. In this sense, the above discussion symbolizes the historical background of Mahatma Gandhi's murder as well as the collective moral and emotional introspection it

sparked in Indian society at that time in history.

Another significant piece of historical evidence is how Jai Bhagwan's dying scenario resembles Jawaharlal Nehru's. The book offers an allegory of a momentous historical event, equating the passing and grieving of notable political individuals or leaders with, for instance:

For two days and nights, his embalmed body lay in the Darbar Hall of the Governor's palatial residence overlooking the Arabian Sea. Raj Bhavan had been thrown open to the citizens so they could pay homage to the man who perhaps had done more for their country than anyone else in living memory ... Those who lingered, hoping to get a glimpse of his daughter and heir to his vast fortune, were disappointed. Only his aging sisters could be seen in the hall, receiving important visitors. (Singh 8)

These extracts from the book provide an allegorical depiction of historical occurrences involving the passing of significant public or governmental leaders. The rites and actions depicted capture the sense of communal mourning, devotion, and political legacy associated with such historical persons, evoking historical situations where similar tragedies have occurred. They serve as the author's way of painting a clear and moving picture for readers of the historical event that forms the core of the novel.

A different scene in the book has people willingly and deeply taking part in a funeral procession and expressing their sincere condolences to the character Jai Bhagwan. This symbolic depiction illustrates the significant influence that particular historical individuals or leaders can have on a country or a society. The novel's depiction of Jai Bhagwan's tremendous impression and appreciation represents the regard that people might have for historical heroes whose deeds and convictions leave a lasting legacy. Similar to how the loss of

historical personalities is felt across regional bounds, the word of Jai Bhagwan's dying traveled throughout the entire nation, highlighting his national or international significance. Singh composes:

At exactly 10 a.m. a cannon was fired from Raj Bhavan. Its boom echoed over the city ... Faint notes of a military band playing the Funeral March led the procession to the bottom of Walkeshwar Hill at Chowpatta ... People stood on their balconies showering rose petals on the bier as it passed below them: women sobbed and shed silent tears for a man most of them had never but whose presence they had felt around them all their lives. (9)

In an allegorical sense, these lines could represent the mourning and collective reverence associated with the passing of influential historical figures, leaders, or public figures who have profoundly impacted a society or a nation. Singh further writes:

He contradicted everything Gandhi stood for, handspun cloth, self-sufficient villages, and very basic education. Victor wanted to see an India that had modern textile mills, steel plants, automobile factories, huge dams, and thousands of miles of canals, every village connected by road, more schools, colleges, and hospitals. In short, the most prosperous country in the world, free of religious and caste prejudices. (22)

The similarities between Jai Bhagwan and Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi in the book *Burial at Sea* represent the philosophical and ideological tensions that arose during India's war for independence and the establishment of its nation. Similar to Jawaharlal Nehru, Jai Bhagwan embodies an industrialization and modernization agenda for the advancement of India. His vision calls for the construction of contemporary steel and textile mills, auto manufacturers, canals,

dams, and vast infrastructure with the ultimate goal of making India a prosperous country devoid of caste and religious discrimination. Mahatma Gandhi's goals, represented by the handspun cloth, self-sufficient villages, and the spinning wheel (Charkha), stand in sharp contrast to this vision. Gandhi promoted a return to independent, self-sufficient rural lives that prioritized self-sufficiency, simplicity, and rudimentary education. The plot is tense as a result of these opposing philosophies, reflecting the actual historical tensions that existed between Nehru and Gandhi.

Like Nehru, the character of Jai Bhagwan respects and accepts the grandeur of Gandhi but ultimately develops his own unique vision for creating a nation. This is in line with historical events since Jawaharlal Nehru created his vision of an industrialized, modern India as the means of advancement and the reduction of poverty notwithstanding Gandhi's influence. The book captures the intricacies and paradoxes of twentieth-century Indian culture, where caste- and religious-based prejudice coexisted with the pursuit of economic growth and access to basic amenities. It highlights the various viewpoints and methods prevalent at a crucial juncture in India's history.

Important romantic relationships also occur throughout the book. When Jai Bhagwan travels to Ma Durgeshwari's vacation resort in Rishikesh, close to Haridwar, his romantic relationship with her begins. There, he meets Ma Durgeshwari, a 35-year-old Sadhvi. Later, Jai Bhagwan extends an invitation to Ma Durgeshwari, her pet which is, in fact, a tiger, and Swami Dhananjay, her assistant, to his home. Ma Durgeshwari emphasizes how her love story is more authentic by contrasting it with the stories that are presented in Hindi films. She had already fallen in love with him as their conversations reveal. She frankly talks about any topic as she is very comfortable in her love with Jai. Even menstruation and other taboos prevalent in India become the topic of their discussions. Concerning such taboos, Ma Durgeshwari says, "I'm not clean. Intimacy and love will have to wait

for the next two days. However, we are still capable of having tender talks and expressing various kinds of love" (43).

The romantic relationship between Jai Bhagwan and Ma Durgeshwari symbolically represents some of the authentic historical accounts, some from the life of Nehru and some from Gandhi. The partnership might be interpreted as a fictitious investigation of Nehru's intricate personal life and, in general, political leaders' private lives. It does not present an accurate picture of Nehru's romantic life, even though it might take inspiration from true occurrences or people. Rather, it provides a fictitious framework for examining issues of love, relationships, and social taboos in the context of that era's Indian society.

In one instance in the novel, a public scandal erupted around Shraddha Mata and her secretary Swami Dharendra because of their previous associations with Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Shraddha Mata had been married twice before choosing to live a sannyasin life, and she had twice rejected the world. In the meantime, Swami Dharendra, her secretary, had a troubled history as well. She did not consider Jawaharlal Nehru to be her great benefactor, even though she was close to him. With regard to this incident, it looks like Khushwant Singh illuminates their entwined pasts in the framework of their public personas, which had become a subject of public concern, by recounting this occurrence. Jawaharlal Nehru's political career was severely tarnished throughout India by the accusations of his adulterous affair with Shraddha Mata and Indira Gandhi's relationship with Swami Dharendra, which led to a national campaign by opposition parties and leaders. This is Singh's technique to reflect facts as gossip through fiction.

3. CONCLUSION

Coming towards the end, it is understood that Khushwant Singh's book *Burial at Sea* weaves together historical and fictional elements to produce a complex allegorical drama, despite being mostly

fictitious, the events and characters serve as symbolic representations of the intricate social and political environment of India in the 20th century. Because the characters—like Jai Bhagwan, Ma Durgeshwari, and Swami Dharendra—are only tangentially related to actual historical people, the book can address various topics and concerns pertinent to the time. *Burial at Sea* exposes the private lives of well-known historical personalities, highlighting the complexities and contradictions. The novel delves into these private aspects to relate them to the broader national contexts. This is what a national allegory does. *Burial at Sea* in this sense is a national allegory that illuminates the hidden dimensions of history and its personalities. The novel posits a new reality by breaking the alleged boundaries between fact and fiction. To wrap it up, Khushwant Singh's *Burial at Sea* explicates

the new historicists' famous proclamation as "the historicity of text and the textuality of history (38)". Using Gandhi and Nehru as fictional characters, Singh illuminates the complex interplay between history and fiction. *Burial at Sea* encourages us, as readers, to rethink all historical narratives as they may be steeped in lies and gossip, just the way a novel, at times, may be saturated with profound truths. Moreover, this study creates new venues for those who want to reexamine certain novels as national allegories of history. Such attempts may end up with a better understanding of the past.

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