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## Representing Freedom Fighters in Indian Historical Fiction: Nationalism and Literary Imagination in *The Last Queen*, *The Great Indian Novel*, and *Sea of Poppies*

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### Abstract

Indian historical fiction offers a distinctive way of revisiting the nation's struggle against colonial rule by combining historical events with imaginative storytelling. Through these narratives, writers reconstruct the lives of freedom fighters, exploring their sacrifices, ideological commitments, and contributions to the making of modern India. Beyond recording political history, such works reveal the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of resistance. This paper examines the representation of freedom fighters in *The Last Queen*, *The Great Indian Novel*, and *Sea of Poppies* through the perspectives of Postcolonial Theory and New Historicism. It argues that these novels reform historical memory, reinforce national identity, and demonstrate how literary imagination enriches the understanding of India's freedom struggle.

**Keywords:** Historical Fiction, Nationalism, Freedom Fighters, Postcolonialism, New Historicism

### Introduction

Indian historical fiction provides a compelling medium for reinterpreting the nation's struggle against colonial rule by blending historical realities with literary imagination. Unlike conventional historical accounts, these narratives present freedom fighters as multidimensional individuals shaped by personal sacrifices, social circumstances and ideological conflicts. Contemporary authors broaden historical discourse by highlighting the experiences of women, regional leaders, and ordinary people whose contributions are often overlooked in mainstream historiography. Through this approach, historical fiction strengthens collective memory, reinforces national identity, and encourages readers to engage critically with the past. This study examines the representation of freedom fighters in *The Last Queen*, *The Great Indian Novel*, and *Sea of Poppies* through the frameworks of Postcolonial Theory and New

Historicism, exploring how these novels reconstruct history while reimagining the legacy of India's freedom movement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study adopts Postcolonial Theory and New Historicism as its analytical framework to examine the representation of freedom fighters in selected Indian historical novels. These approaches help explain how literary texts re-explain the colonial past, restructure historical narratives, and contribute to the formation of national consciousness.

#### **Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial Theory investigates the lasting cultural, social, and political effects of colonial law. Scholars Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argue that colonial discourse frequently marginalized indigenous perspectives and restructured historical narratives to support imperial power. Indian historical fiction challenges these inherited narratives by restoring neglected voices and presenting resistance from the viewpoint of the colonized. Within this framework, freedom fighters are portrayed as symbols of political resistance, cultural resilience and the struggle to reclaim historical identity.

#### **New Historicism**

New Historicism, introduced by Stephen Greenblatt, views literature and history as mutually influential rather than separate disciplines. It suggests that historical knowledge is shaped by ideology, cultural values, and power relations instead of being entirely objective. Historical novels therefore combine documented events with imaginative reconstruction, enabling writers to explore the emotions, personal experiences, and motivations that conventional historical records often leave unexplored. This approach presents freedom fighters as complex individuals whose lives reflect both historical evidence and literary interpretation.

#### **Relevance to the Study**

Together, Postcolonial Theory and New Historicism provide an effective lens for analyzing *The Last Queen*, *The Great Indian Novel*, and *Sea of Poppies*. While Postcolonial Theory emphasizes the recovery of suppressed histories and the assertion of national identity, New Historicism demonstrates how fiction reinterprets the past through creative engagement with historical evidence. These perspectives reveal that historical fiction functions as a powerful medium for preserving collective memory, questioning dominant historical narratives, and deepening the understanding of India's freedom struggle.

#### **Analysis of Selected Novels**

##### **1. *The Last Queen* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

Although set before the Indian independence movement, *The Last Queen* reconstructs the life of Maharani Jind Kaur, whose resistance against British imperial expansion foreshadows the later struggle for freedom. Divakaruni portrays Jind Kaur as a politically intelligent and fearless leader who refuses

to surrender the sovereignty of the Sikh Empire. The novel challenges patriarchal norms by presenting a woman who actively participates in diplomacy, governance, and military resistance.

The narrative blends historical documentation with imaginative storytelling to explore Jind Kaur's political vision, emotional resilience, and unwavering commitment to her people. Rather than depicting her merely as a historical figure, the novel humanizes her struggles as a mother, queen, and nationalist symbol. Through this portrayal, historical fiction expands the definition of a freedom fighter by including those who resisted colonial domination long before the formal independence movement.

From a postcolonial perspective, the novel challenges colonial historiography that often marginalized female rulers. Using New Historicism, Divakaruni reconstructs historical events while giving voice to experiences absent from official colonial records.

## **2. *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor**

*The Great Indian Novel* presents India's freedom movement through an innovative retelling of the Mahabharata. Tharoor transforms historical leaders into mythological counterparts, creating a satirical yet profound commentary on Indian politics and nationalism. Characters inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah illustrate the ideological diversity within the freedom struggle. Rather than portraying them as flawless heroes, the novel presents them as complex individuals shaped by ethical dilemmas, political ambition, and historical circumstances.

Tharoor demonstrates that nationalism itself is multifaceted. While celebrating India's struggle for independence, he also critiques internal political rivalries, communal divisions, and leadership conflicts. The novel encourages readers to question simplistic historical narratives and recognize that national history is constructed through multiple competing perspectives. Applying New Historicism reveals how literature reshapes historical understanding by combining myth and documented history. Postcolonial theory highlights the novel's challenge to colonial discourse while simultaneously interrogating post-independence nation-building.

## **3. *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh**

Although *Sea of Poppies* is set before the organized nationalist movement, it examines the economic and social conditions created by British colonialism that eventually led to widespread resistance. The novel portrays labourers, soldiers, peasants, and indentured migrants whose exploitation reflects the structural violence of colonial rule.

Unlike conventional historical novels centered on famous political leaders, Ghosh shifts attention toward ordinary people. Their struggles against economic oppression, racial discrimination, and forced migration demonstrate that resistance to colonialism existed long before formal political movements emerged. The novel broadens the concept of freedom fighters by emphasizing collective resistance rather than individual heroism. It illustrates how colonial policies affected everyday lives and generated conditions that later inspired nationalist consciousness.

From a postcolonial perspective, *Sea of Poppies* recovers marginalized voices omitted from imperial histories. Through New Historicism, the novel combines archival research with imaginative narration, revealing how historical fiction reconstructs the lived experiences of colonial subjects beyond official documentation.

## Comparative Analysis

The selected novels collectively demonstrate that Indian historical fiction represents freedom fighters in diverse ways. *The Last Queen* celebrates female political resistance against imperial expansion, *The Great Indian Novel* critically reimagines the ideological complexities of the independence movement, and *Sea of Poppies* foregrounds the experiences of ordinary people whose suffering under colonial law contributed to the emergence of nationalist consciousness.

Despite differences in narrative style and historical setting, all three novels emphasize courage, resistance, sacrifice, and the struggle for justice. They reject simplistic hero-worship and instead portray historical figures as multidimensional individuals shaped by cultural, political, and emotional realities. Through the interplay of history and imagination, these works preserve collective memory while encouraging readers to critically engage with India's colonial past and the enduring significance of the freedom struggle.

## Findings

The analysis of the selected novels reveals that Indian historical fiction serves as an important medium for preserving and reinterpreting the history of India's freedom struggle. Rather than merely recounting historical events, these novels humanize historical figures by portraying their personal sacrifices, emotional conflicts, and ideological commitments. Through imaginative storytelling, authors bridge the gap between documented history and lived experience, making the past more accessible to contemporary readers.

The study also finds that historical fiction expands the concept of freedom fighters beyond well-known political leaders. While national icons such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru remain central to historical narratives, novels increasingly foreground women, regional leaders, and ordinary individuals whose contributions have often been overlooked in conventional historiography. This wide-ranging representation enriches the understanding of India's struggle for independence.

Besides, the application of Postcolonial Theory validates that Indian historical fiction challenges colonial narratives by restoring indigenous voices and reclaiming cultural identity. New Historicism reveals that history is not a fixed record but a dynamic narrative shaped by ideology, memory, and literary imagination. Therefore, the selected novels encourage readers to critically engage with historical events rather than accepting official accounts uncritically.

Lastly, the study confirms that historical fiction contributes significantly to the construction of national consciousness and collective memory. By blending factual history with creative interpretation, these novels preserve the ideals of courage, patriotism, resistance, and social justice, ensuring that the legacy of India's freedom fighters remains relevant for future generations.

## Conclusion

The selected novels establish that literary imagination does not change history; rather, it complements historical scholarship by exploring emotional and psychological dimensions that official records often overlook. Through Postcolonial Theory and New Historicism, this study has shown that historical fiction actively reconstructs the past, challenges colonial historiography, and strengthens national identity by recovering marginalized voices. Moreover, Indian historical fiction reminds readers that the struggle for freedom was not confined to a few celebrated leaders but was a collective movement

involving women, regional rulers, workers, peasants, and countless ordinary citizens. Their stories, preserved through literature, continue to inspire values of democracy, resilience, equality, and patriotism.

In short, the depiction of freedom fighters in Indian historical fiction reflects the enduring relationship between history, nationalism, and literary imagination. As contemporary writers continue to revisit India's past, historical fiction will remain a vital literary form for preserving collective memory, encouraging historical inquiry, and fostering a deeper appreciation of the sacrifices that shaped the nation's journey toward independence.

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