

Scott and Sharar:

A study of Common Aspects of Historical Themes

Farida Yousaf

Abstract:

Scott and Sharar hold a unique position in the literatures of their nations due to their great contribution in originating and developing the art of historical novels. This paper is an endeavor to explore the intricate similarities in the themes of their novels.

A critical analysis of the themes in the novels of Scott and Sharar reveals that there are comparatively fewer similarities and more dissimilarities in the subjects that they select for artistic representation. Their greatness as historical novelists is evident from their modes of dealing with popular periods of history by imparting to them a tinge of romance. Both of them wrote profusely.

Despite the fact that they lived in two different centuries, they dwelled in the similar political conditions as both India and Scotland were occupied by the British rulers in their life times.

Both Scott and Sharar approached historical fiction in terms of a story to be told and of a theme to be worked out. The crusades is a common theme between them. Both Scott and Sharar can be paid equal tribute as they are the great initiators of historical novel in their respective cultures and literatures and have established this genre for the forthcoming generations.

Introduction:

The selection of theme is the first and most important stage in the creation of any kind of novel. The responsibilities of a historical novelist are doubled as compared to those of a social novelist because he has to go back to history to select a period and adopt it as the theme of his novel. If the novelist selects a popular era from history, he has to be careful to maintain accuracy at every stage because the readers are aware of almost every detail and the novelist has not even the slightest chance of deviation from the truth. On the other hand, if he selects his theme from a remote and unknown period of history, he can give a comparatively free vent to his imagination and can also fill the gaps left by the historian by inserting romantic elements in history. In this kind of theme the reality and imagination are merged together in such a perfect way that the reader cannot question the authenticity of history.

Scott and Sharar hold a unique position in the literatures of their nations due to their great contribution in originating and developing the art of the historical novel. This paper is an endeavour to explore the intricate likenesses in the themes of their novels.

Analysis of the similar themes of Scott and Sharar

A critical analysis of the themes in the novels of Scott and Sharar reveals that there are comparatively fewer similarities and more dissimilarities in the subjects that they select for artistic representation. Both Sharar and Scott wrote about the great eras of history. Their greatness as historical novelists is evident from their modes of dealing with the popular periods of history by imparting to them a tinge of romance. Both of them wrote profusely. Sharar's novels are mostly about early and Middle Ages while Scott chose the period between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries as the themes of his novels.

Despite the fact that they lived in two different centuries, the political conditions both in Britain and India were similar to a great extent. Scott created his historical novels at a time when the traumatic events of the French Revolution had shattered his generation and had produced a new awareness of the past. In 1603 Scotland was united with Britain. The Scottish people felt dejected and suffered from an inferiority complex. In this situation of frustration Scott considered the historical novel as the most effective tool for arousing a new zeal in the Scottish nation. He endeavoured to build up the morale of his countrymen and tried to bring them out of the state of hopelessness and uncertainty. For this reason most of his novels deal with Scottish themes. He wanted his people to realize the positive side of the Scottish alliance with the English. The Fortunes of Nigel is an evident example in this respect. This novel states a whole series of themes, the historical novelty of life in the seventeenth century London and the hostility between the English and the Scots. Most of his novels dwell upon the theme of reconciliation between the Scots and the English. These novels show that Scott is torn between two civilizations. He has nostalgia for the independent past of Scotland but, at the same time, he also realizes the importance and inevitability of Scotland's allegiance to England.

In the same way Sharar wrote at a time when India was colonized by England and the tragic consequences of the 1857 war of Independence were still impinging upon the lives of the people. Sharar himself had been an active participant in the freedom movement. He considered the historical novel an appropriate medium for invoking the suppressed emotions of his people. He wanted his countrymen to muster up courage and play an important role in the freedom movement. But while Scott wanted to create an alliance between the Scottish and English nations, Sharar's aim was quite the opposite. The purpose of his novels was to arouse the Muslims of India against the English rulers. He wanted to stimulate them to fight against their oppressor. Consequently, most of his novels deal with the great deeds of Muslim heroes in which they are shown struggling very hard against their enemies and eventually triumphing over them.

Both Scott and Sharar approached historical fiction in terms of a story to be told and of a theme to be worked out. The Crusades is a common theme between them. Scott wrote two novels on this subject, The Betrothed and The Talisman. Sharar read The Talisman and his religious feelings were hurt at the distorted picture of Muslim morals and manners portrayed in that work. So he wrote Malik-ul-Aziz Varjana as a refutation of Talisman. Both the novelists handle this theme in a prejudiced manner as

it haunted them as a popular aspect of history. The tussle between the Muslims and Christians is presented in an illuminating manner by Sharar; Scott does not present true history and tries to avoid the authentic facts. Sharar comments on this theme in his journal Dilgudaz.

“To improve my English, I read Walter Scott’s novel Talisman which is based on the third crusade. I was so annoyed to note the degradation of Muslims on Scott’s part that I thought of writing a novel on the same topic. So I started serializing Malik-ul-Aziz Varjana, the first novel of Dilgudaz. When I used the poetic imagination and simplicity of expression to portray in this novel the facts of the third crusade and heroic deeds of the celebrated Sultan Salahuddin and Richard the Lion hearted which I portrayed with the help of Arab’s history books, the Muslims were immensely inspired”⁽¹⁾ (translation).

These comments of Sharar indicate that he was annoyed at Scott’s presentation of Muslim’s negative role in the Crusades and he wrote this novel exclusively as a result of his Islamic fervour. In order to make it a success from commercial point of view he has tinged history with the element of romance. Dr. Aslam Sayyad expresses his adverse opinion about Sharar’s Malik-ul-Aziz Varjana and says that

“Sharar’s lack of training as a novelist and poor knowledge of history detract from his work. The novel contains long discussions on how Jews were slaughtered in England. Islam was a better religion than Christianity, mere conversion to Islam created miracles and how a woman fought against hundreds of soldiers without receiving the slightest injury. Sharar takes pride in mentioning the fact that King Richard proposed his sister’s marriage to the Sultan’s brother and that Salahuddin did not kill any Christian when he occupied Jerusalem in 1187. He assigns responsibility for later massacres of Christians to the cruelties of Richard he had every Muslim killed and every woman raped after capturing the city. When the Sultan heard of this, he swore not to spare any Christian. It is interesting to note that during his discussions on Islam, Sharar upholds the Sunni orthodox view of Islam by putting the argument of Mu’tazilites in the mouths of Christian priests”⁽²⁾

Scott has also included the romantic element in his novel but he attempts to do so with the help of the institution of marriage and suggests a marriage between Saladin and Lady Edith. Lady Edith is a fictional character. It can be said that both Scott and Sharar have handled the theme in a prejudiced manner.

Malik-ul-Aziz Varjana became more popular in India than Scott's Talisman because the existing psychological condition of Indian Muslims was in favour of such a novel in which Muslims triumphed over the Christians. Secondly, because Sharar was serializing this novel and could make changes at every step to accommodate the demands of the public. He also wrote Shauqeen Malika on the Crusades theme. According to Mumtaz Manglori, this novel is based on authentic historical resources and the events related in it can be verified from the book of Archer and Lane Pool⁽³⁾. But Ali Ahmad Fatimi regards this novel as a deviation from the real history⁽⁴⁾. In this respect Dr. Manglori's comments seems to be more authentic because he has tried to prove the truth of historical details by quoting reference from history. Hence it can be said that Sharar handles the theme of the Crusades more authentically than Scott as it is his characteristic that he deals more comfortably with the remote past.

The two novelists also appear to be similar in introducing the element of romance to the historical subjects. They think it essential because, in their opinion, a historical novel contrary to history, has to be interesting, attractive and colourful. Both of them want to give a colouring of imagination to the realistic depiction of history but they vary from each other in the gradation of the combination of romance and history. As compared to Scott Sharar gives more importance to romance. In fact the romantic theme is used as the central aspect and real history is used only as reference or background. Maulana Salauddin Ahmad comments on this characteristic of Sharar and says that he (Sharar) merges the historical events into the sweetness of romantic tales in such a manner that the reader can remember it for a long time⁽⁵⁾.

Malik-ul-Aziz Varjana is a great example of Sharar's mergence of fact and fancy. Its story starts with the advance of troops headed by Malik-ul-Aziz who kills the Christian leader. During his chase of the Christian the prince reaches a lonely and barren place. He rescues a Christian princess from the capture of a Jew. This historical event serves as an instance of love at first sight⁽⁶⁾. According to Dr. Mumtaz Manglori, a greater part of the second half of Malik-ul-Aziz varjana is fictitious and imaginary. Dr. Manglori proves his statement by referring to the history of Ibn-i-Shadad and gives the correct details of the events⁽⁷⁾. The same is true of his other important novels like Mansoor Mohna and Yousaf-w-Najma. In fact all his novels are heavily tinged with romance. He regards this element as inevitable and says that

“The novels of European taste are not needed for India.
Instead the Indians need the romance in which they are
reminded of the great deeds and glories of their ancestors”
⁽⁸⁾ (translation)

Again he says that

“The most essential thing for a novel is that it should be
extremely interesting and interest can very rarely be
inculcated without love and beauty”⁽⁹⁾ (translation).

Thus his own comments prove that Sharar is basically a romantic novelist who wants to create a new zeal and enthusiasm in his countrymen with the help of his

historical romances and in this endeavour he tends to make romance dominate over history.

Scott also gives much importance to romance in his novels. Ian Jack comments that Scott has found Scotland's past and its events as romantic as any thing he has discovered in imaginative literature. "his aim in the Scotch novels was to communicate his imaginative excitement to his readers (10) while Sharar separates the two cultures by converting nonmuslim heroines to Islam as a result of their romantic relationship with the Muslim heroes, Scott, on the contrary, has tried to wed the two cultures by creating love affairs between Scottish heroines and British heroes. The love affairs between the two are usually the result of a compromise on the part of the Scottish heroine and her father with the changed and new society. The examples in this instant are the marriage of Waverley and Rose Bradwardine in Waverley and that of British Frank Baldistone who marries his Scottish heroine Diana Vernon in Rob Roy.

According to Marian H. Cusac "the fundamental theme in most of his novels is the movement of the protagonist from Scottish romanticism to English realism. In all his novels historical story dominates over the love-story" (11). Hence unlike Sharar Scott does not give greater importance to romance: the romantic relationship between the hero and the heroine exists as an important part of the novel, but never dominates the realism. It is also undeniable that Scott is deeply associated with nineteenth century Romanticism. Jane Millgate comments on Scott's Romanticism and says that:

"he could explore the tension between imagination and reason in a much more complex fashion. He had no philosophic interest in the problem and was incapable of any coleridgean formulation of it, but in the movement from verse romance to prose fiction as embodied in the completed Waverley of 1814 Scott shifts from an initial romanticism of a very eighteenth century kind to that much more nineteenth century variety which perceives the imagination not as enemy of knowledge and wisdom but as their very source"⁽¹²⁾.

Hence his involvement of romance in history that bears most of the characteristics of Romanticism and romance in his novels is associated with past and pessimism. Even though Romance is an important aspect of his novels, unlike Sharar he does not indulge in making it a dominant element in them.

Conclusion:

Hence a critical analysis of the similarities of historical themes concludes that Scott and Sharar are alike on a few points as far as the thematic aspects of their historical novels are concerned. A deep probe into their themes is evident of convergence even within these similar aspects as due to the difference in their aims and situations. However both of them can be paid equal tribute as they are the great initiators of historical novel in their respective cultures and literatures and have established its mode for the forthcoming generations.

References

1. Sharar, Dilgudaz, May 1924, pp.97-8.
2. Aslam Syed Muhammad; Muslim Response to west: Muslim Historiography in India, 1867-1914, Islamabad, 1988, p.118.
3. Manglori Mumtaz Dr., Sharar Kay Tarikhi Novel aur In Ka Tehqeeqi aur Tanqeedi Jayza, Lahore, 1978, p.20.
4. Fatimi Ali Ahmad, Sharar Bihasiat-i-Novel Nigar, Luckhnow, 1986, p.301.
5. Salahuddin, Maulana; Urdu ka Afsanvi Adab, Lahore, 1975, pp.19-20.
6. Sharar, Malik-ul-Aziz Varjana, Chapter 1, p.12.
7. Manglori Mumtaz Dr. Opcit, p.13.
8. Sharar, Mazmeen-i-Sharar, Vol.IV, Luckhnow, 1919, p.21.
9. Ibid, p.22.
10. Jack, Ian., Sir Walter Scott, Edinburdgh, 1972, p.15.
11. Cusac H. Marian. Narrative Structure in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Paris 1969, p.57.
12. Millgate Jane; Walter Scott: The Making of the Novelist, Edinburgh, 1984, p.57.