

On the occasion of the 168th anniversary of the Rebellion of 1857

Ghadar: The First Novel on the Rebellion of 1857

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The rebellion of 1857 had spread over a vast area of the Indian subcontinent but its main focus was the Hindi heartland. The effect of the rebellion on Hindi literature, therefore, is expected to be considerable. The first four novels of Hindi were written by the authors residing in Delhi and the surrounding areas. Gauridutt, the author of *Devrani Jethani Ki Kahani* (1870) was from Meerut, Ishwari Prasad-Kalyan Rai, the authors of *Vama Shikshak* (1872) were also from Meerut, the author of *Bhagyawati* (1877) Sradha Ram Phillory came from Punjab, and the author of *Parikshaguru* (1882) Lala Sriñivas Das lived in Delhi. But these texts do not indicate any impact of the rebellion which started from Meerut and a fierce battle had taken place in Delhi between the rebellious Indians and the British forces. Whereas the folk literature of this period depicts the rebellion on a large scale. This despite the fact that novels in large numbers were written in the pre-Premchand era. The detective novel may be exempted but in social and historical novels too, no substantial impact of the rebellion is to be found.

Surprisingly several British writers wrote more than 50 novels/fictional accounts based on the 'Mutiny' between 1859 to 1964 as mentioned by Shailendradhari Singh in his book *Novels On the Indian Mutiny*. Gautam Chakravarty includes and analyses 70 such novels written from 1859 to 1947 in the book *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination*. The first Hindi novel on the rebellion, titled *Ghadar* (1930) was published by a Delhi based writer Rishabh Charan Jain after a long wait of 73 years. Actually this the first full-fledged novel based on the rebellion written in any Indian language. The novel was confiscated immediately by the British government.

This novel is neither easily available now nor does it find any special mention in the history of the Hindi novel. P. J. O. Tailor in his book on the 'Mutiny' titled *What Really Happened During Mutiny* gives a reference list of novels/books written on the rebellion in Hindi, Urdu, Bangla, Marathi and other languages. He makes no mention of this first novel in Hindi written on the rebellion. Dr. Ramvilas Sharma too has not mentioned this novel while analysing the impact of the rebellion on Hindi literature. Scholars who have worked on the modern Hindi prose or political consciousness in fiction have not given any attention to this novel. This indicates a trend of overlooking the fiction based on the rebellion by writers and scholars as well. As late as in 1976, Bhagawandas Mahore in his Ph. D. thesis *1857 Ke Swadhinata Sangram Ka Hindi Sahitya Par Prabhav*, for the first time, makes a special reference to *Ghadar*, accepting its significance as the first novel written on the rebellion. After *Ghadar* came *Jhansi Ki Rani Lakshmibai* (1946) by Vrindavan Lal Verma. This novel can be termed as a trend-setter in the sense that an intermittent process of writing novels on the rebellion of 1857 had begun and it continues till today.

Ghadar, divided into 10 episodes with an epilogue, contains only 88 pages. However, its brevity does not come in the way of its significance. The plot of the novel is based on the incidents that took place in Bithoor and Kanpur during the Rebellion. The novel deals with the period from May 10, 1857, the day of the revolt by the soldiers of Meerut, to July 17, 1857, when Nana Saheb was defeated by the army of Havelock.

The author plays safe while writing this novel as there was an obvious fear of the wrath of British rule. Further, it was a challenging task for him to write a novel based on the incidents of Kanpur. Kanpur witnessed two 'infamous' incidents of Satichaura Ghat and Bibighar. These two incidents are described by the British officers and historians as the most barbaric and deceitful acts of massacre by the rebels. However, there are controversial and contradictory versions about the incidents.

The writer has made a daring attempt when he chooses these two incidents as the subject matter of his novel. In the novel when the flames of the rebellion engulf Kanpur and Nana accepts the leadership of the rebels, the British take shelter in the Entrenchment with their families. After a one month encampment, they strike a deal with Nana. As per their agreement, Nana agrees to give a safe passage to the British to leave Kanpur for Allahabad by arranging boats for them. As they are about to sit in the boats, firing starts, the boats are set afire, and most people die on the spot including the Army Chief Sir Hugh Wheeler.

The historians are not too clear about what exactly happened that day and who were responsible for the massacre. If the rebels had planned the massacre, why then did they bring them on elephants and 'palkis' to the river bank when they could have killed them outside the Entrenchment? Was it a 'conspiracy' hatched by Nana; was it an impulsive reaction by the soldiers provoked by the British firing on a boatman; or was it instigated by the mob present on the spot in a reaction to General Neil's atrocities?

The writer mainly focuses on two characters in the novel: Nana Saheb and Azimullah Khan. The representation of Nana does not emerge in a strong and vibrant manner. He is represented as pro-British and as one who does not have a will to revolt nor has any information about the plans of the revolutionaries. Jain's portrayal of Nana goes against the general Indian perception which views his role as one of the prominent heroes of 1857, but it also questions the British perception that views him as a cruel villain. The author probably intended to present a picture that was very different from the negative or negligible portrayal that was awarded to him in the historical as well as fictional accounts by the British writers.

This bias, even abhorrence, against Nana witnessed in British literature is perhaps rooted in the massacres at Satichaura Ghat and Bibighar in which not only British men but also women and children were killed in cold blood. The responsibility for this carnage, it was believed by the British, lay with Nana. But in the novel Nana is shown to be innocent of these massacres. Jain goes a step ahead in this endeavour. Towards the end of the novel, he writes about a distraught Nana suffering because he considers himself morally responsible for the inhuman slaughter. The novel concludes with Nana, along with his family rowing down a river and then embracing death voluntarily by sinking into the waters in an act of moral repentance.

27 years after the publication of *Ghadar* comes Surendra Nath Sen's 'objective and factual' history of the rebellion titled *1857*. Abul Kalam Azad while writing the Preface to the book emphatically felt that the time had arrived when the Indians and the British both should view the Rebellion objectively and factually so that the feelings of hatred on both sides could be wiped away. Whether the author of *Ghadar* shared a similar sentiment or not, the novel minimizes the possibility of further provocation for the feeling of hatred between the Indians and the British. In fact, the writer has confessed that he did not want to tarnish his fictional representation by commenting on the religious-racial revenge undertaken by the British in Kanpur after the defeat of rebels. There is no need to say that this first novel on the rebellion can be read from the perspective of other characters and incidents besides the notable characterization of Nana Saheb.

P.S. A detailed analysis of *Ghadar* can be found in my article '1857 in the Hindi Novel: The Character and the Spirit of the Rebellion' compiled in the book *Literary Resistance: India 1857*, Ed. G.K. Das, Sushma Arya, Primus Books, Delhi, 2009

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