

Forging Empire and Identity: A New Historicist Reading of Alex Rutherford's *Raiders from the North*

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Abstract

In *Raiders from the North*, the first book of a series of novels, the Empire of the Moghul, Alex Rutherford recounts the history of the Mughal dynasty, starting with the life of its founder Babur. The novel is a blend of fact and fiction. In this combination, the novel demonstrates the ways of distribution of power, of dissemination of ideas and of the ways of interactions and impacts of cultures. These concepts are related to the perception of New Historicism by Stephen Greenblatt. In this paper, it is argued that the transformation of Babur between being in exile and becoming the emperor is not depicted as a smooth and direct path to without any challenges. Rather, it is an ongoing struggle between the actual historical events on the one hand, and forces in the surrounding culture on the other hand and it was his struggle to create a self-identity. Using the analysis of the events, war, writing, and reflection, this paper considers how Rutherford demonstrates history as a continuous act of production. The language, ritual and symbolic acts used by Rutherford help the reader to remain engaged to his creation of Empire as a means of ruling politically, as well as to form a culture. In combination with the historical way of writing and the force of imagination, the *Raiders from the North* is revealed as the story of how human beings make themselves, and generates a bigger history of the world.

Keywords: Alex Rutherford, Babur, Cultural Poetics, Empire of the Moghul, New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt

History has always been written as an official record of works that includes autobiographies, memoirs, royal orders and chronicles. These records are often associated with the heroic side and the expected side of the Empire and their praise figure of the ruler, but on the other hand, it has a complex hidden actions behind this. In this novel, *Raiders from the North* (2009), the first novel in the Empire of Moghul Series by Alex Rutherford, shows the past but differently as a historical fiction. It recollects the same history but differently. This, instead of showing Babur, founder of the Mughal Empire as an ideal symbol and a distant of the imperial destiny, it shows him as a Human who tried from the very basics to understand, adapt and build the Empire amidst the changing political and cultural situations around him.

The recognitions are only visible in the context of expressing and performing power in the society. The novel by the author makes us see that the authority is not simply taken to be passed on to another via the mere royal blood as one of the conditions. Rather it illustrates the process in which it is processed and moved forward with significant things like prudent disclosures, ceremonies and imaginings. Reading the novel through the prism of the New Historicism views of Stephen Greenblatt, one is able to view that it is clear that the identity of Babur is not a predetermined or natural one. Rather, it demonstrates the development of it as the mouldings with the compounds of ideologies and performances which illustrates him as an Emperor as a result of combination of the personal ambition, cultural demands and the historical conditions.

The novel behaves this way as one of the experiments in the historiography that the history is more than simply a sequence of events and it is rather a textual expression. The meaning is also in the state of continuous construction by the flow of power, culture and beliefs. The task of writing history is perpetual; history is being produced as narration and interpretation continue to take place.

The Baburnama or the memoir of the first Mughal emperor Babur is regarded as one of the most candid and poetically related historical records of the era of Mughal rulers. Babur tells about his experiences, his sufferings and choices as experienced by himself in this memoir. The fictionalised retelling by Alex Rutherford does not merely repeat the original story brought out through the Baburnama but subtracts into a dynamic with the Baburnama. In which the material is also reworked by Rutherford to make the difference in that it brings out the novel that takes a greater focus to answer the questions of the psychological nature of the characters and their emotional worlds which are more modernized historically.

Rutherford has retold a chronicle into a novel thus making an essential distinction which is central to New Historicism. A chronicle is a first of all a record of occurrences as they occurred (historical facts in chronological sequences), whereas a novel is a record of occurrences with more colouring in the meaning of interpreting occurrences (ideological meanings) and adding to the context.

Thus, the relation of chronicle and novel is equivalent to that of pure record and ideological explanation. Taking the scattered historical materials, Rutherford performed a dramatic narrative out of it and thus brought out power in terms of how it is performed, but also how it itself is legitimised and is also exercised through storytelling. The storytelling writing style applied in this book explains how Babur undertakes the presentation of himself as a set of actions or performances. He symbolises himself as a poet, soldier, king and as a result constructs his own identity. This is one of the examples of how Stephen Greenblatt proclaims that without culture, there cannot be such a thing as identity. Hence, the formation of self is inextricably connected with the formation of cultural meaning. Initial chapters are about how Babur ascends to power at the age of 12 years old, who is in control of Ferghana, a turbulent kingdom where the civil war and internal conspiracies are frequent occurrences. His rise to power is not described as the beautiful thing to see but it is the way of just surviving in the very hostile epoch politically. This introductory narrative finds its basis in the confrontation against the ancient opinion Rutherford has made against the old opinion known as the divinity right of kings. The strength and influence of Babur is disoriented, feeble and at most, retained by means of the labour of his uncles, (who are also engaged in rivalry over the throne) and even relatives and followers, which may be depended upon to remain faithful.

An atmosphere of insecurity and fear is the first New Historicist discernment that is presented in the novel. The state of power is not a fixed natural state, neither is it an inheritance factor. Power as such requires an act and recognition by other people that are within the society hence, power depends on acceptance and recognition. In this context, rituals that are conducted publicly (ex: enthronement ceremonies, exchange of gifts, repeating the names of ancestors and ancestors) assume specific significance. These occurrences of collective rituals according to Stephen Greenblatt can be called rituals of containment- an icon that aid the transformation of political chaos into apparent order via display of spectacle and symbols.

But these rituals are not fixed and ensured to work. Their interpretation can be subject to new interpretation and questioning. What is thought to be order may easily turn into uncertainty. Rutherford illustrates that ideology is not a unitary system by the use of his description of the court of Ferghana. Rather, it operates by a set of repeated and repeated performances that have to be metamorphosed and reiterated. Power can only be held in so far as these token acts are accepted and believed to be true.

This is indicated by the fact that the events that ensued after Babur was pushed out of his home in Ferghana imply that he always finds himself in exile. Whenever he somehow loses something, whether he loses the land, or he loses his supporters, or he loses the stability, he must adapt, he must start thinking over again, and he has to invent a new personality to himself. Such a conception of identity as a product of historical events or the unstable/ changing aspect of the history are quite effectively illustrated in the works of New Historicism. Ideology can affect an individual in two ways as demonstrated through his two-tier lineage between Timur and Genghis Khan. His origin to his existence lies of an ideological nature taking him legitimacy and a right to a rule. It is ideologically-based, in that it brings about an anticipation that he is to be a conqueror of sorts. Ideology will thus enable a man but on the other hand restrict an individual too.

Rutherford does not introduce the idea of genealogies as the account of the lineage of a family or bloodline. On the contrary, he perceives them as the embodiment of some form of power. Here, when Babur addresses his soldiers about his origin or praying about it, it is the conversion of his memory to social energy as propounded by Greenblatt. As noted earlier, the speech of Babur provides authority to him, oaths, invocations and battle cries are all examples of the performative role of language, which is that an action like speaking and acting together has brought about a political power. Based on the concept of self-fashioning by Greenblatt, Babur can be said to have been a creation in *Raiders from the North* on the political front. His power is established by means of memory, ancestry and perpetuation. Though it is inherently military and bloodlines which give him power, the power is provided with words. It also follows that the construction of power is socially constructed, as opposed to being an unmediated historical reality.

The power in the novel is the most evident at the time of uncertainty. There is still uncertainty even after ruthless conquests. Leadership is not depicted as something which is sure of success, but rather as compromising in a situation of instability. According to New Historicist approach, power is cultivated in changing historical circumstances and it is maintained through challenging and integrating skepticism into leadership. Rutherford also associates culture with power by the fact Babur is interested in poetry, gardens and architecture. Persian garden is a symmetrical illustration of the extraction of order in the disorder. The making of buildings as well as poetry writing are extensions of the struggle over a communal ideology in a political structure. Greenblatt's understanding of the poetics of culture assists one in relating this relationship with each other by demonstrating that the arts and the authorities do belong to a singular or symbolical economy. Aesthetic goods creation may be regarded as the possibility to bring ideology to practice.

The power explained in the novel is channelled through approval as well as the use of strength as a source of their power as shown in the novel. The technique of persuading others of their point of view, of convincing through narrative (story) to persuade them to follow the vision of Babur, is readily visible in the discussions that were conducted by Babur with both Kasim, Wazir Khan and with his family elders. The followers start enacting the ideology of Babur through their actions by repeating the vision that Babur had of fate to each other and developing a shared belief (imagination). Trust (bond) is built by language, which removes any uncertainty about the other, and an act of one person towards another makes present history (shows history).

Besides this process, material cultures facilitate this. As concerns the means through which one material culture buttresses this process, one can cite such proofs as the trade routes, defensive mechanisms, weapons (bejewelled swords), the silk flag, and the throne which are semiotic symbolizations of power. Culture and material objects have an inherent relationship. As an example, when Babur inherits the sword of his father, he inherits a material object (the sword) and a story with it (the family history). This represents an example of discourse and ideology of New Historicism, since it involves a manifestation of material truths being conceptualised in the form of ideology.

Reflective pauses in the novel are used to assist in portraying a difference between real events and the descriptions of the events. These writings depict these by showing that there is no pure object of inquiry; rather, there is only an encounter to the thing itself through our perception of it as characterised by different languages. The impartial historical difference between *Raiders from the North* lies in (1) the historical accuracy of the representations it provides and (2) that the historical representations are clearly realised as elements of narrative. The cultural translation which arises out of the reduction of Babur's memoir into historical fiction creates a different facet of culture translation as provided by Rutherford, which is an equivalent of the conquest that the protagonist does.

The power is not an idle state of residence of a single leader or organisation, but rather a transitional thing, moving between one person to the next, place to place, as a result of the sequential use of words, symbols, rituals and the relationship between these people with each other. This dynamics of power flow and interplay between theory and narrative may be observed in the manner in which Babur carried out his coronation as well as the manner in which he decided to march in India. Authority is executed not intrinsic in a person or an institution and this notion is upheld by the notion of Greenblatt that significance is formed out of a system of negotiation and not in the ownership. To become legitimate, the story of Babur has to be known by other individuals and that is the level that is created through the process of telling stories. This way, Rutherford has constructed a kind of imperial narrative which has turned into a discourse event the belief in the performance must always be reinforced.

The vision of Hindustan is the end of the initial stage of ideology of the novel. The mountain pass trip of Babur describes both the literal mountain pass and the figurative mountain pass. The ascendancy to India is a backward way of 1) looking back (by use of ancestral memory) and 2) imagining and creating a brand new future. The picture of the sunrise points out to the re-born just like the history is being re-created. The fact that he has gotten into an area that is new also signifies that he is self-created. This is a production of the author into existence as political and production of the literature. In reaching India, the journey to India is the location of the exiled authorship shifting to a new history.

Desire to Babur is embodied in the ideology of Samarkand. It is not just a place, but it was likened to a storehouse of history and memory and it belongs not only to Timurs memory but in some respects, by its majesty in relation to the empire. The fact that Samarkand is affiliated with Babur's desire is emphasised during the description by Greenblatt of the process of creating identity when personal values collide with cultural codes. All the sieges and the defeats at Samarkand explain how power takes the shape of an unsteady circuit and that a person may become great this time and the next, this person may lose all the power in one moment and get unstable in the following moments.

The initial attack of Babur against Samarkand is a sort of an initiation into the story of the novel. There is no sense that Babur sees the city in question as a position that can be identified as a definite, material site, but rather as gates and domes that are intelligible writings of their ideologies which is a manifestation of the power of his ancestors and hence his imperial histories. The process of taking possession of the city of Samarkand, however, is not a simple process of taking possession of land, but is also the process of taking possession of the imperial discourse. However, the triumph of Babur does not last long and famine, revolts and refusals come in a flow. Such a circular process occurring through the intermittent ascending and descending states is an illustration of the concepts of transgression leading to restriction that Greenblatt aimed to present. Any powerful assertion of an identity will then experience distress and restraints of bigger force.

The elements of Babur's remembering are historiographically rich. To him Samarkand is a place of terribly poetic tranquillity because its every tile is of evening sky, and the call to prayer is like the throbbing heart of all his ancestors. As a result, the frames of the historical space turn into a psychological metaphor to him. He uses artistic expression, descriptive language to regain the symbolic power that he lost with his political loss. This way, power will remain in circulation by means of representation, even as it goes away in the process of war. The repetition of mirrors and reflections makes us aware of Babur knowing that the identity is performance. He is a prince, exile, poet, warrior, and is alternating roles depending on the audience that he is addressing. This is the case of Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning in which identity is created following current cultural constructs of manliness and kingship as opposed to an individual process.

Ritual interaction as a form of diplomacy is discernible in the Babur-Uzbek rulers diplomacy, Afghan leaders diplomacy, as well as in the Persian envoy diplomacy. These diplomatic meetings are what Greenblatt is trying to describe as the circulation of social energy. Besides the ceremonial swapping of swords, fine textile, and poetry, these objects are no longer gifts but a source of symbolic communication. Power manifests itself in different ways of communication, among others, warfare, ceremonial activities, language, and negotiation. The act of power is through the circulation of official exchanges.

Babur makes the analysis on how history is going to be written and evaluated and comes to the awareness that history is not merely something that occurred but a story of what would have occurred in the future. This is because this moment will cause Babur to cease to be an event participant as it will make him a narrative participant in the way that he will be remembered in history. He now understands that memory is even better than any success which he can win at the moment. It is not the actions of his that will nowadays come to stay, but the way these actions will be preserved in memoriam. The combination of historical fiction and metafiction has become useful to demonstrate the manner in which the two elements to exist. The aim of creating this novel is to show creation of history by narrating a story and the creation of history itself as well. This practice strengthens the idea that Greenblatt has about the role of the representation in forming meaning of something. Historical representations are never impartial, they are created with the use of words they are told.

The geographical movement contributes to the formation of identity as well in the novel. Babur goes through the mountains, deserts and valleys whose land describes his inner turmoil and changes. Natural world is not merely a backdrop scenery but it brings into the process of self-fashioning. The social energy flow can be observed with the help of the picture of a landscape. The spaces also pass with power, faith and ambition and such spaces define the way Babur sees himself. At this point ecology and ideology become entangled in the identity process.

The concept of containment, which Greenblatt depicted can be seen in Samarkand quadrilateral garden restoration. The garden with the ordered water streams is a well organised garden that depicts the order over chaos. Extraordinary design invests the tangible appearance in control and order in comparison to anarchy in politics. It is on the basis of it that the historical experience is structured by the aesthetic shape. It is not that which lies outside politics, but that which trains disorder, and firms up power, which becomes art.

Experience of failure and exile contributes towards the Babur construction of identity. The experiences of such experiences have shown that lineages, monuments, and so on are not the only counts that authority can make. It does not simply use bloodline to acquire power. Narrative construction also has to be created as power. It is an indication that by the transfer of Babur to poetry, the shift of a direct political action into the representational self-fashioning took place. He begins to construct himself through the means of words and therefore, Loss becomes an element of self-identification.

The movement of the novel is organised by the repetitive scheme of the exile and return. Both of the displacements transform the identity of Babur, but by the same token perpetuate the greater imperial discourse. This is an aspect of cultural reproduction represented by Greenblatt in his repetition. Ideology persists due to its repetitive forms although people change. The alternation of third-person narration with inner reflections is a reflection of New Historist movement

between personal experience and the significant collective forms. History is revealed in the novel to be functioning concurrently at the social and individual levels of consciousness. Individual thinking and ideology systems interact.

Moral restraint is brought in by Babur when he talks to Aisan Daulat Begum. Her focusing of the concept of mercy as knowledge of oneself is moderation in the context of a culture. In this home trade, Rutherford demonstrates that ideology is not within the political institutions. It also works on the relationships in the family and in the day to day interactions where it influences the sense of identity in small but significant ways.

Rutherford demonstrates that power is not always in the hands of the King only because he is the part of the royal blood and a descendant. He reveals that it is also worked on by the fusion of culture, individuals and common intent. This relates with the idea of New Historicism that holds that authority is never unconditionally determined by social forces and the manner in which power is denoted in society. The novel also reveals that the women that are in Babur influencing his power. This can be traced with the internal guidance of his family members mainly by his wife Aisha, his mother Qutlugh Nigar Khanum and his grandmother. Through this it is highlighted that power is not purely gained through military victories or conquest. Because family advice, cultural values, and emotional strength are also available to support it. This way power is expanded out of both the family world (its private) and the political world (which is the public).

Babur starts to focus on India, and this change makes various aspects of his identity converge. His political aspirations, religion and artistic sense are presented to interrelate with each other. The losses which are suffered by him make him think more deeply over his role in history. New Historicism also holds the view that identity is often constructed in the face of hardship and constraint and not stability. The sense of self-developed by Babur is thus shaped by the issues of exile and failure. Due to this process, empire in the novel starts being explained as the narrative, which is being established gradually. Battles, adventures and time in exile are in categorised forms, as of a bigger story that authenticates the rule of Babur. The concept of power is thus demonstrated to be working via representation and Babur is presented as a political ruler and as a person whose biography creates a historical success story.

Once the conquest is made, in the story the focus is shifted to adaptation and assimilation. It is at this stage when the Mughal garden is presented as a key symbol. These gardens are said to have incorporated the Persian style with the India natural features. Due to such a combination, the garden turns out to be a symbol of cultural hybridity. Using this image, there is a hint that disparate cultural traditions are capable of being unified to establish a new political culture order. Culture has thus been advanced as an outlet in which power is articulated and insulated. This concept is aligned with the theme of mobility and cultural exchange which highlights the concept of Greenblatt.

It is also revealed that writing is significant to the life of Babur. As his experiences commenced to be put on, events are not only narrated, but also fashioned to be remembered in future. Greenblatt states that identity is made through representation, which is being manifested in the writing performed by Babur. By being an author, the meaning of his rule is created and maintained. By doing so, the relationship is established between the political power and the narrative power.

Meanwhile, power stability is not portrayed to be a lasting phenomenon. Babur goes through illness, resistance and recurrent challenges. This makes rituals and ceremonies to be repeated to sustain authority. The repetition of these performance depicts the idea of containment by Greenblatt, and according to which the power should be constantly reinstated. The reality of repetition also tells of the weak nature of authority. The novel also makes attention to the manner in which history itself is fashioned by way of story telling. Through both narrative interpretation and historical detailing we get to point out the process of historiography. The act of representation is thus seen not only to capture historical events but it is also a way of constructing meaning in terms of which the events are determined.

Raiders from the North proves that modern historical fiction can use the knowledge of New Historicism to restructure the past. Instead of introducing Mughal history as a chronological series of legendary conquests, the novel examines the intricate mechanisms of formulation of power, culture, and identity, as reflected by storytelling and presentation. Babur, as depicted by Rutherford, lives in a world of uncertainty, which is volatile in power, doubtful in religion and identity is a continuously negotiated one. But here in the instability meaning is created.

The novel, in this respect, resembles the perception of Stephen Greenblatt that the works of literature are involved in the distribution of the cultural power. Art does not simply mirror ideology, but is also a part of the means of how authority and belief are represented and challenged. Rather than creating a narrative of conquest, Rutherford makes the story of the Mughal Empire the story of a process of self-construction by turning the conventional story of a conquest into the story of authorship, moral conscience, and cultural exchange.

The Babur of the novel turns himself into a ruler and a narrator, a man by whom the history is viewed. The distinction between history and fiction grows more liberal as the narration and documentation of the events he experiences take place. The reader is thus given a reminder that all historical accounts are influenced through interpretation and those cultural presumptions which affect the interpretation. It is due to this reason that *Raiders from the North* cannot be viewed as simply a retelling of the Mughal past. The story teaches the readers to consider the way, in which history is created because of the processes of storytelling, imagining, and interpreting. What emerges eventually in the novel is that, empire is more than a political construction made by conquest. It is also a cultural story which is ongoingly built by means of memory, representation and meanings that individuals give to the past.

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