

# WILLIAM DALRYMPLE'S *THE LAST MUGHAL*: Using Fictional Techniques to Write History

MOHIT UL ALAM

*The Last Mughal: the Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* by William Dalrymple is the most engrossing book that I've read recently. A sprawling book, 486 pages long with Glossary, Notes, Bibliography and Index that go on for another 100 pages, it depicts the tragic life of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II (1775-1862). It is divided into 12 large chapters and has a 26 page Introduction. It reveals Dalrymple's sympathetic understanding of the historical phase that ended the 332 years of Mughal rule in India and began the transition of state power from the British East India Company to the British Government. Published by Penguin Books in 2006, this book has color and black-and-white photographs as well as pictures of historical figures such as King Zafar and his influential wife The Nawab Zinat Mahal Begum (1821-82), along with images of Mirza Asadullah Khan—"Ghalib" (1797-1869), the most noted poet of the time, and others. A picture depicts graphically the demolition of the Kashmiri Gate of Delhi by the British army on 14 September, 1857 even as the sepoys try helplessly to defend the wall from above. That was the last bastion to fall, and the city of Delhi afterwards went to the British Raj.

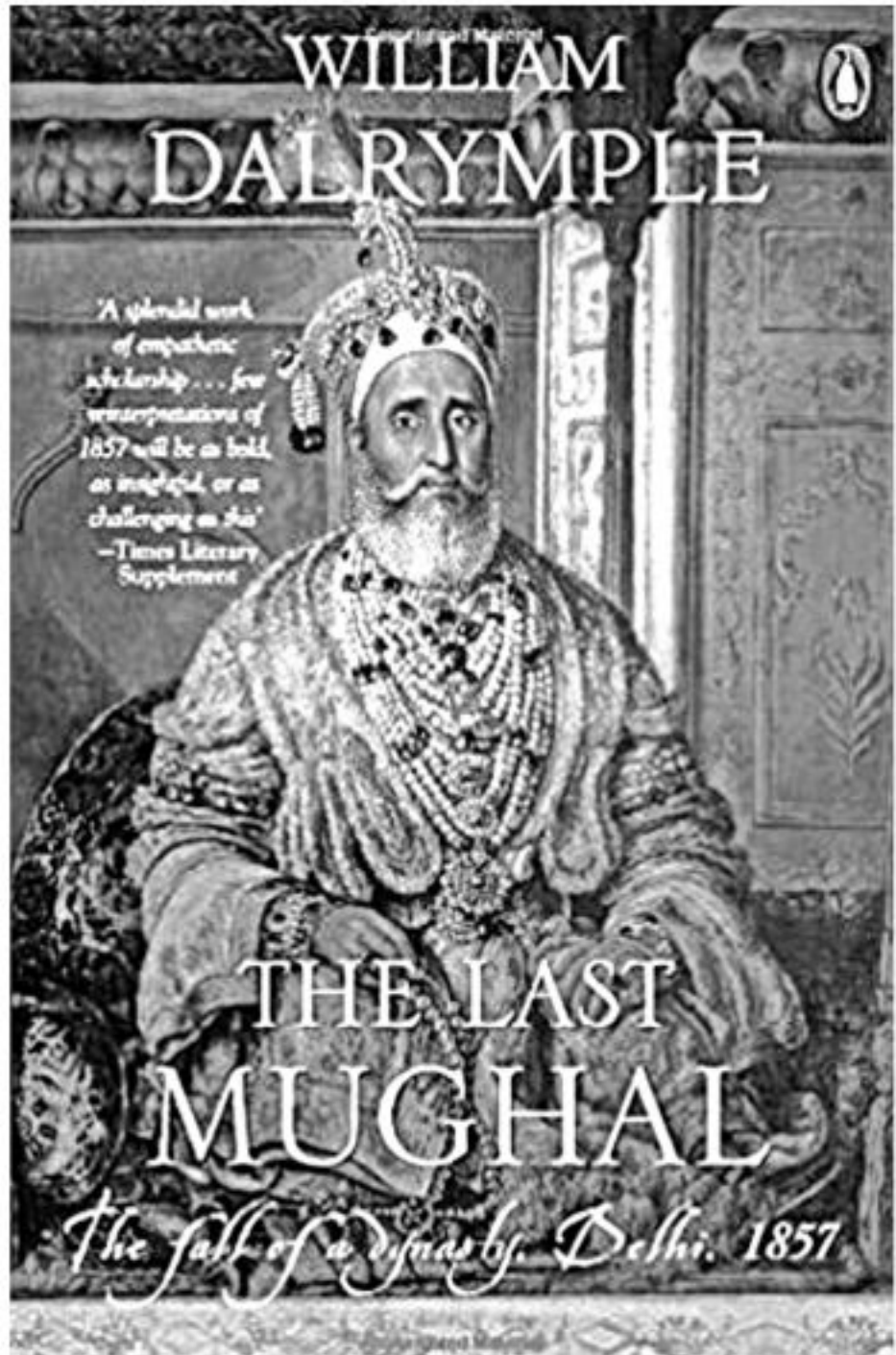
In depicting the Sepoy Rebellion and Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, Dalrymple avoids using the now controversial words 'mutiny' and 'rebellion' and uses the word "uprising". The Bengali word for such phenomenon is *obbhuthan*, and this I think is the appropriate expression. Dalrymple has also used the word 'King' persistently over the more accepted title of 'Emperor' which we're accustomed to seeing as the adjective associated with Bahadur Shah Zafar. Also noteworthy is how he chooses to call Bahadur Shah by his surname 'Zafar' throughout the book in a manner that agrees more with the western form of address than with the usage in currency in the subcontinent.

Such usages, however, are understandable. Since Queen Victoria was often grandly called an Empress, Zafar, for his subordinate status then, could only be a King! Dalrymple seems to have found that title alright, though to our Bengali sensibility the acceptable adjective for Zafar is 'Samrat' (emperor) rather than 'Raja' (king).

Dalrymple has a knack for ingraining his historical narrative with a fictional brush in a manner that is delightful. The description of Zafar's trial is where we get to know that the octogenarian emperor is so senile that he is well above the requirement imposed to listen

to the proceedings drawn against him. He was then being portrayed by the trial committee as the mastermind of a kind of fundamentalist Islamism emerging globally. So, when, Major Harriott, the prosecutor, asked him a question on his possible links with Persia, the old man was startled and wanted to know "whether the Persians and the Russians were the same people" (p. 438).

Ghalib is quoted generously by Dalrymple from his *Dastanbuy*, and one would know that the emperor and the poet had the same feelings of disgust about the sepoys who had swarmed the palace to pledge to the emperor that they would sweep away the British army



from the Ridge, where they stood on siege, if the emperor would bestow his blessings on them. After much hesitation, the emperor agreed to support them, but in due course, it became clear that the sepoys were nothing but men who preferred plundering and looting inside the city to driving away the English from their encampment. According to Dalrymple, siding with the sepoys was the first vital mistake made by the emperor, but at the end of the Uprising's journey, on 14 September 1857, when the English had finally stormed the Fort, the sepoys had urged him to support them one final time and lead an attack with himself in the front. The old

man put on his war dress and embarked on the mission in his palanquin. But his Prime Minister and personal physician, Hakim Ahsanullah Khan, came rushing to counsel him to turn back as the English victory was imminent and he would be killed. The emperor preferred to listen to the Hakim to the disappointment of thousands of now newly-motivated sepoys. According to Dalrymple, this was the second crucial mistake committed by the emperor. If Zafar had continued to be aggressive, the already faltering British army could have been defeated and the Mughal Empire could have entered a new phase of its history. Hakim can therefore be called a traitor, but the more vicious traitor was the Emperor's eldest son Mirza Fakhru's father-in-law, Mirza Ilahe Bakhsh, who had played a Mir Zafar-like role against the Emperor. He was called the "Traitor of Delhi" even by the English.

Captain William Hodson, on the other hand, was a competent English soldier. He arranged secretly with Zinat Mahal Begum so that she, the Emperor and her son, the heir-apparent, Prince Mirza Zawan Bakht, would be spared even if in a trial they were found guilty. Hodson died soon after, but in spite of the feelings of the trial committee that the old King should be court-martialed to death, they decided to respect Hodson's arrangement. From Calcutta Lord Canning now advised them that the King and his remaining entourage should be sent to exile in Burma. Mirza Ghalib, on the other hand, remained the only royalist to go unscathed. When Colonel Burn asked him if he was a Muslim, he replied that he was only half a Muslim, because he drank wine but ate no pork! Burn asked him then why he hadn't meet him before in front of the Ridge, Ghalib, who was a fashionable man and always appeared in public in his best attire, replied that the rank and status he enjoyed in society demanded that he come on a palanquin with four escorts. But the escorts had deserted the palanquin out in the street and so he wasn't able to come! Then he showed his poem on Queen Victoria to Burn, who subsequently let him go. Ghalib, must have considered himself very fortunate in being allowed to live, because the victorious English were then out to take revenge for the killings carried out by the sepoys in Kanpur and Delhi.

The basic strategy deployed by Dalrymple's in his narrative is to extract big chunks from his sources in between his own encompassing descriptions. But through the quoted passages Delhi life of the mid-

nineteenth century comes to life. What is more rewarding for the reader is to get first-hand observation of the duress undergone by both British and Indian citizens during the four months of the Uprising. Their sufferings took place in two phases. At the outbreak of the Uprising, it's the English men and women who suffered and died; after the capture of Delhi, it was the turn of the rebels and city dwellers to suffer or get killed by the British. Dalrymple notes that while the sufferings of the English had been recorded by survivors in letters and diaries, particularly by the ones written by the English ladies that were eventually preserved in archives, the recording of the plight of Indians is scant, and, therefore, has to be imagined. The more significant argument developed by Dalrymple is that the British themselves had termed the counter-attack as revenge. It was spearheaded by the cruelest of officers, Brigadier General John Nicholson (1821-57). The Victorian Evangelist Padre Rotton explained it happily as being ordained by God. But Rotton's overenthusiastic response was matched by that of Maulvi Muhammad Baqar, the editor of *Dihli Urdu Akbhar*, who envisioned that the Uprising would sound the bells of the ending of the infidels' (kafirs) rule in India.

Dalrymple's shows with clarity how the seeds of communalism were implanted through the events of the Uprising. From Baqar's editorials it is clear that British supremacy was viewed by the Muslims as a sign of the way Islam was being crushed by Christianity. To them the Uprising was tantamount to religious war, or Jihad. But like Zafar and Ghalib, Baqar also got disillusioned with the sepoys.

Another interesting point that Dalrymple stresses is that this Wahabbi mindset based in Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanaautawi's Deoband Madrassa may have evolved into the militant psychology propounded by Al Qaeda today (and we can also include the IS in that evolutionary process). But Dalrymple's alert eyes don't miss out on an underlying paradox. The Uprising originated in Meerut because of sepoys who were predominantly high-caste Hindus, Mangal Pandey being the major figure in this context. They had revolted because the newly-introduced Enfield rifles needed its cartridge to be opened by one's teeth, which were greased, as it was rumored, with cow and pork fat. The cow, of course, is holy to the Hindus and the Muslims consider the pig unclean.

But when the British took back the city after four months of siege, they identified the Muslims as the real culprits while the Hindus were let off lightly. So, while at first the Uprising was a united Hindu-Muslim Indo-Islamic movement against the Christian invaders, later with English prejudice increasing against the Muslims, the Hindus became the favored community, while the Muslims fell out of favor. We can say that it was from here the "divide and rule" policy got its roots. The subcontinent was eventually partitioned in 1947 on the basis of the two-nation theory.

Against this communal development in the subcontinent, Dalrymple's adulation of Zafar becomes significant. Zafar might have been a failed monarch resembling King Lear, but he was the last symbol of the civilization the Mughal Empire had helped create. Zafar's decision to stop cow-killing on the day of Idul Adha is one example of how tolerant he was as a ruler: "Id, Zafar told them in a 'decided and angry tone that the religion of the Musalmen [sic] did not depend upon the sacrifice of cows'" (p.82). Today this kind of decision would be impossible to take. One of Dalrymple's passages sums up Zafar's equitable nature well: "One of Zafar's verses says explicitly that Hinduism and Islam 'share the same essence', and his court lived out this syncretic philosophy, and both celebrated and embodied this composite Hindu-Muslim Indo-Islamic civilization at every level" (p. 80-81).

The characters and events of Dalrymple's book are drawn from historical writings and documents, yet it has a way of inducing imaginative responses from its readers. Of course, the reader is perusing a history book, but he all the time feels that he is reading fiction—almost a thriller. Dalrymple, in fact, has used fictional techniques to write a book on history. So, for example, when Ghalib and Zauq pose as rival court poets, Ghalib's sharp retort at a comparison between them is revealing of the poet's immense self-confidence: "How can Sahbai be a poet? He has never tasted wine, nor has he ever gambled; he has not been beaten with slippers by lovers, nor has he once seen the inside of a jail" (p. 41). But that is not the point to be noted here; the point is Dalrymple wisely thought that this anecdote could be included in his book.

Mohit Ul Alam is a professor of English and the Vice Chancellor (designate) of Eastern University.

## 9/11 Cataclysm and Sustaining Fear

MD. ABU YUSUF

The other day I was reading Deepa Kumar's *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* while traveling on a bus from Rajshahi to my home district Bogra. I was enjoying what I was reading as well as the journey. The weather was pleasing and the bus not so crowded. But my sense of contentment vanished the moment I took a close look at the man sitting beside me. The thing that startled me was that he was a bearded man, wearing a prayer cap, a *kurta* and a pajama a tiffin box and a cell phone in his hands. Quite unaccountably, I began to think that the tiffin box could have a bomb inside it. A feeling of anxiety gripped me. For a while, I was in a state of shock. What should I now do? All sorts of thoughts came to my mind. Perhaps he was a member of some suicide bomber group? But, I also began to wonder why I suspected him to be that kind of person on the first place. After all, he could very well be a pious Muslim just like me. Was it because of the current political climate worldwide or his physical appearance which seemed to correspond to the media-propagated image of a Muslim terrorist since the 9/11 cataclysm? No doubt I could also have been so apprehensive because it was a remote area which I was traveling through then, but surely it would be difficult to find a member of an international terrorist group here? But my feeling of insecurity kept increasing and I kept apprehending danger.

A little later, I heard the man talk on his cell phone. As I listened intently, I realized that he was talking to his unmarried daughter who was probably studying in a madrasa and lived in a hostel. He wanted to have lunch with her. He urged her to have his lunch ready by the time he would reach home. He then offered some advice to his daughter. He forbade her to go outside alone. He

warned her not to have any male friend for this was un-Islamic. I began to feel relieved slightly realizing he couldn't be a suicide bomber. Still, some suspicions kept bothering me, so when he eventually got down from the bus, I checked to see if he had left his tiffin box behind!

I returned to my reading but could not concentrate on the book. I was turning over the pages absent-mindedly and reflecting on the prevailing images of Islam and Muslims circulating across the globe. This got me thinking about the historical associations between Islam and

A little later, I heard the man talk on his the cell phone. As I listened intently, I realized that he was talking to his

the West. By chance, I came across these lines in Kumar's book, "Ruling elites in Europe throughout the history have constructed particular images of the "Muslim enemy" to advance their political ambitions. In short, the history of "Islam and the West," as it is commonly termed, is a story not of religious conflict but rather of conflict born of political rivalries and competing imperial agendas." For such reasons, over time, Islam and Muslims have often been associated with violence, irrationality or backwardness and oppressive politics

associated with gender and sexuality in the dominant western discourses. Perhaps these representations have some basis or they could be what Salman Rushdie dubs as a "version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions." Europe, on the other hand, would imagine itself as superior to the rest of the world and would link itself to the democratic political systems of the Greek and the Roman civilization, especially during and after European Renaissance. It was during the Renaissance, when Europe shed off its medieval garb and entered the modern era that a rather indifferent attitude was shown to Islam until the inception of the Ottoman Empire. At the earliest phase of the Ottoman Empire, some Christians welcomed the Turks partly for the Ottoman policy of "live and let live" and partly to evade religious persecution at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church. Even during the Crusades, some Muslims and Christians fought together at different points against their rival brothers out of territorial interest.

It is thus that in different moments of history the world had witnessed complex, dynamic or contradictory encounters between Islam and the West. It was never then a question of any simple "clash of civilizations". But now we are in a phase of history where mostly the bitter and hostile relationship between Islam and the West is being highlighted. Especially after 9/11, in the dominant western discourse, Islam is being often seen as an inherently violent religion. Muslims are thus being indiscriminately "othered" as terrorists and threats to world peace and are having to live under the cloud of constant suspicion. Hostile narratives of Islam and Muslims have recurrently been re-presented in the western media.

Indeed, the 9/11 cataclysm has created a crisis in the relationship between Islam

and the West. At stake also seems to be the perception of declining western dominance over the world. More specifically, it is symptomatic of the insecurity Americans have of no longer being an uncontested superpower of the world. To sustain power and control, Americans have declared "War on Terror". This "War on Terror" rhetoric has generated a renewed hostility between Islam and the West though it has been made clear that the war was not only against Islam. But the indiscriminate associations of terrorist activities with Muslims have got worldwide media coverage. The link of the 9/11 terrorists with the Muslim world have contributed largely to rising tension in the relationship between Islam and the West. And the crisis has left its impact even in remote corners of the world.

Amid my speculations, I noticed the man departing the bus with his Tiffin box. Nonetheless, his departure left me with all sorts of thoughts. I kept pondering why the sight of a Muslim man dressed in attire typical of men of his belief in the region had produced such suspicion and anxiety in my mind. I thought too of the dysfunctionality of the global media since 9/11. The frequent imaging of Muslims as terrorists in the global politics and media had left a deep mark on my psyche as well! Perhaps that is why the sight of the man had alarmed me so initially. What kind of world am I living in where I am always forced to think of security? Why don't I get a world where people coexist not as a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew or a Hindu but as a human being? Such questions kept preoccupying me in the rest of my journey.

The writer is a Lecturer in the Department of English, Varendra University, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.



POETRY

## Searching

SABRINA MASUD

A pebble ran to a beach in search of a home there was one and then there was one more and they are happy, drowning in the ocean, everyday, A snowflake fell on a mountain in search of warm bed there was one and then there was one more and they become a blanket for Himalaya, everyday, A word curled up on a page in search of a companion there was one and then there was one more and they are in joy when a book is opened, everyday, I walk for a mile and a mile more in search of a street sign there is none, none to be found everyday.

Sabrina Binte Masud writes creatively in a number of genres and has won international awards for her plays.



PHOTO: T.S. MARIN