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The Living Tree: Kṛṣṇā Sobtī’s Pre-Partition Punjab and the “Other History”

SUMMARY: Historical fiction covers a wide range of texts and presents a large variety of views on the subject of history. It is often seen as a way of narrating history from a perspective ignored by academic historiography, thus offering an alternative narrative of the past. This other way of writing history, namely by way of literary texts, is not always conscious or openly acknowledged. In her essays on literature, the Hindi writer Kṛṣṇā Sobtī (1925–2019) clearly formulates her views on the role of the writer when she commits herself to represent the past, differentiating her role from that of a historian *per se*. Personally, as a writer, she is primarily interested in the perception of time of the people of a region and their understanding of their own past transmitted through tales, songs and other media; this constitutes what Sobtī calls the “other history,” a notion close to Jan Assmann’s “mnemohistory.” Through the example of Sobtī’s magnum opus, *Zindagīnāmā*, this paper explores what this specific way of narrating history reveals about the rural society of the pre-Partition Punjab.

KEYWORDS: history writing, mnemohistory, Kṛṣṇā Sobtī, Hindi literature, Partition, identity building, *Zindagīnāmā*

History
 that is not
 and history
 that is
 not the one
 recorded in the archives
 and preserved
 with evidence and proof
 in the power halls
 of the rulers
 but the one
 that flows
 with the Ganges
 of people's consciousness
 flourishes and spreads
 and lives on
 in the cultured sagacity
 of the common people!¹

Kṛṣṇā Sobtī's (1925–2019) longest novel, *Zindagīnāmā* (1979, lit. "Chronicle of Life"),² opens with the above epigraph, a warning to the reader: the history narrated here is not that of a historiographer or an archivist, but a history of another kind. Besides this warning, the epigraph also puts forward a claim: that of offering a narration of the history present in "people's consciousness" (*lokmānas*), in other words, a record of lives lived, a document of a community's and individuals' perception(s) of the past. *Zindagīnāmā*, considered Sobtī's *magnum opus*, is not a conventional novel; rather, it may be viewed as a fresco depicting the life of a village in rural Punjab at the beginning of the 20th century, long before the Independence and the Partition of the subcontinent. The text

¹ "itihās// jo nahī hai// aur itihās/ jo hai / vah nahī/ jo hukūmatō kī/ takhtgāhō mē / pramāṇō aur sabūtō ke sāth/ aitiḥāsik khātō mē darz kar/ surakṣit diyā jātā hai/ balki vah/ jo lokmānas kī/ bhāgīrathī ke sāth-sāth/ bahtā hai/ panpatā aur phailtā hai/ aur jan sāmānya ke/ sāmśkr̥tik pukhtāpan mē/ zindā rahtā hai" (Sobti 2013 :7). Unless stated otherwise, I use my own translations from the Hindi. There is however now an English translation of the novel (Sobti 2016).

² Published in English as *Zindaginama* (Sobti 2016).

has a peculiar structure; it is divided into vignettes of varying length, where the focus of the narrative moves constantly from one character or a group of characters to another. While the events are narrated in chronological order, the structure generates a curious feeling of non-linearity. The variety of the presented episodes highlights many aspects of everyday life in the village and offers a multiplicity of perspectives. Such a narrative structure, which has induced me to label the text a fresco, is in itself far from the conventional way of narrating history. Although set at an important point in time in the recent history of South Asia, *Zindagīnāmā*, from the very beginning, does not read like a history book on pre-Partition Punjab. Nevertheless, history (not only the history of the village at this specific time of the early 20th century but also of the region across various epochs) plays an important role in the text. Particularly central is the way in which history is perceived, understood and transmitted by and among the diverse (religious or social) communities of the village. In this respect, *Zindagīnāmā* arguably sheds a new light on the Partition of the subcontinent and the relationships between the religious communities (Hindu, Muslim and Sikh) before 1947.

But what is the text's relationship to history writing? In essays devoted to her novels, Kṛṣṇā Sobtī discusses her understanding of the role of the writer in opposition to that of the historian. She reveals her notion of the "other history" (*dūsrā itihās*)³ linked to the more general perception of time bound to a specific location (i.e., how the local communities view and experience time, both past and present, and think about them) as well as people's understanding of their past including the legends and myths they build around it. This other history lives through folklore, stories, family sagas, and orally transmitted versions of events (often embellished). As such, it is instrumental to the construction of community identities. It not only uncovers the relationship of communities and individuals to their past but also to their present

³ *Dūsrā* can mean both 'second' and 'other.' Because of Sobtī's deep awareness of the multiplicity of reality and of the multiple perceptions of it, I chose here to translate *dusrā* as 'other.'

and to one another. This view of history shares some similarities with modern approaches to history writing such as oral history or subaltern history, though Sobtī does not directly refer to any of these concepts. Nonetheless, her notion of the ‘other history’ bears a strong resemblance to Jan Assmann’s ‘mnemohistory’ and demonstrates deep awareness of the importance of a group’s view of its past for its present (and future) self-understanding. Through an examination of Sobtī’s theorisation on her writing of history, this paper aims to analyse how history is narrated and related to in *Zindagīnāmā* and how this allows for a better understanding of the later Partition of the subcontinent.

The “other history”—Sobtī’s approach to history writing

Historical fiction, especially in the form of a novel, covers a wide range of miscellaneous texts, directed at diverse audiences and serving a multitude of purposes.⁴ Hindi literature offers a huge variety of such historical texts,⁵ and novels have often been considered by critics to be an informative and reliable source for better understanding of the socio-historical contexts.⁶ Sobtī’s approach to history writing is distinct not only because of the perspective on historical events and societal changes that her three historical novels offer,⁷ but also

⁴ As De Groot argues, the genre of the historical novel cannot be reduced to a single type of text but must include all the genres (detective, romance, postmodern, epic, fantasy, etc.) and all the possible approaches to history (from conservatism to dissidence), see De Groot 2010, especially the introduction, pp. 1–10.

⁵ Bhagvatī Caraṇ Varmā (1903–1981) is probably the most famous author of historical fiction in modern Hindi literature; his novels often highlight contemporary issues through a plot set in an ancient historical time, involving major historical figures. The genre of the historical novel (*aitihāsik upanyās*) is popular in Hindi today as well.

⁶ See for example Vasudha Dalmia’s study of “eight classics” of modern Hindi literature as history (Dalmia 2017) or Kumool Abbi’s socio-historical analysis of Sobtī’s *Zindagīnāmā* (Abbi 2002: 2008).

⁷ Among Sobtī’s novels, three are often described as historical: her first novel, *Ḍār se bichuṛī* (1957, published in English as *Memory’s Daughter*), *Zindagīnāmā*, and *Dilo-dānīś* (1993, published in English as *The Heart Has Its Reason*).

because she herself theorises on her concept of historical writing in her essays. Without referring directly to modern concepts of history writing (oral history, microhistory, ‘history from below,’ for example),⁸ Sobtī highlights the importance of the ‘other history,’ which doesn’t focus on what is perceived as key historical events or major historical figures but presents the perspective of the individuals and the communities caught in the middle of the events. For example, Pāśo, the young heroine and first-person narrator of *Ḍār se bichuṛī*, struggles to survive, being pushed from one household to another during the second Anglo-Sikh war (1848–1849). She never seems to be aware of what is happening around her, not even that she is witnessing the last, decisive battle that will bring the Sikh Empire to its end. In fact, no generals’ names, no places’ names, not even a single date are mentioned in the whole novel. The text presupposes a certain background knowledge of the events on the part of the reader but doesn’t give any detailed account of them.⁹ Dates are significantly absent from the two other novels as well, even from *Zindagīnāmā*, in which different events (both past and those occurring at the time of the narration) are discussed by the men and women of the village, and profusely commented upon.

In Sobtī’s novels, the unfolding of historical events itself is not so much the focus of the narrative as the characters’ perception of their present, their past and their own identity. In this regard, Sobtī’s approach to history writing reflects the idea that the history lived and remembered (and later transmitted through community tales, folklore, and in other ways) has a greater impact on the perception of the past—and, as a due consequence, on identity constructions—than a more factual history, from which it can also markedly differ.

⁸ Both *Ḍār se bichuṛī* and *Zindagīnāmā* were published before those new approaches to history gained prominence. It is difficult to assess whether Sobtī was aware of them: her view of history as an academic field is very conventional as her opposition between the writer and the historian shows (see below).

⁹ Arguably, the text can also be read, without any knowledge of its historical setting, as the story of Pāśo’s personal evolution.

This notion resembles Jan Assmann’s concept of “mnemohistory:” “Unlike history proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered;” (Assmann 1998: 8–9). Mnemohistory looks at how the past “is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present” (*ibid.*: 9) in order to serve a specific agenda within a tradition (meaning here the way history is commonly told and presented within a particular group, through various means). In the example given by Assmann—the many distinct interpretations and presentations of Moses at different historical periods—the focus rests on the historical reconstruction of the figure of Moses in academic literature. But the notion of mnemohistory fits particularly well with the representation and depiction of historical figures or events transmitted through all sorts of channels (oral traditions, novels, songs, movies, etc.) and therefore present in the collective memory of a group. In *Zindagīnāmā*, the media carrying the representation of the past include, among others, the discussions of the villagers, as well as the embedded folktales and folksongs. By showing the villagers’ view(s) on their past and present, the text sets forth what Sobtī calls the “other history.” In her essays and in the long, published exchange on writing with her friend and fellow writer Baldev Vaid (1927–2020), she explains this notion, differentiating between the role of the writer and that of the historian:

There isn’t one, single history but two. (Sometimes, even more than two histories are composed).

One history is the one recorded and preserved in the annals of the government. The other flows with the Ganges of people’s consciousness and lives in the soul of the community.

The writer keeps the chronological record of the ebb and flow of events of the first history in front of her/his eyes but acquires the understanding and the ability to envisage the specifics of time and place through that other history.¹⁰

¹⁰ “ītihās ek nahī do hote haī. (kabhī do se zyādā bhī banā die jāte haī). ek itihās vah jo hukūmat ke khāte mẽ darz kar surakṣit kar liyā jātā hai, dūsrā vah jo lokmānas kī bhāgīrathī ke sāth-sāth bahtā hai. jān sādharāṇ kī ātmā mẽ zindā rahtā hai. lekhak

The first history—the historian’s concern—is based on “the annals of the government” and other documents. Sobtī’s definition of history here seems not to take into account the critical work on sources accomplished by the historians and is one most historians would probably not agree with. In her dialogue with Vaid, Sobtī remains rather uncritical of the records and colonial archives she consulted for her own research while writing *Zindagīnāmā*. It is in her way of depicting history, within the novel itself, that she brings forth the new perspectives from the “other history:”

You will find it interesting to learn that to start with, I opened the files of the regimental records. In the district where my novel is centred, the average enrolment in the army was higher than in all other districts. (...) It was common practice for farming families to have one son in the police, another in the army and the remaining in the village, working the fields. (...) statistics for murders, crimes and litigations were quite high, too. I had now basic information gleaned from the gazetteer and had to skilfully flesh it out.¹¹

What Sobtī considers to be the first history could be called a factual history, a record of events, a ‘calendar’ or a logbook. This history is essential to the task of the writer inasmuch as she has to remain aware of the connection of the past events to what really interests her, namely the “other history:” the history that flows with the “Ganges of people’s consciousness” (*lok mānas kī bhāgīrathī*).

pahlevāle itihās ke ghaṭnā-cakra kā kailenḍar apnī ākhō ke āge t̄āge rakhtā hai aur dūse itihās se deśkāl ko pahcāne kī samajh-būjh aur sāmārthya grahaṇ kartā hai” (Sobtī 2014: 377–378).

¹¹ “dilcasp lagegā āpko ki māñ ne sabse pahle *khātā* kholā rejimentāl rikārḍs kā. jis ilāqe mẽ merā upanyās kendrit thā vahā senā mẽ bhartī kā ausat anya zilō se zyādā thā. [...] khetihar parivār kī sādharāṇtayā tarz aisī ki ek baccā pulis lāin mẽ, ek fauj mẽ aur bāqī gāñ mẽ khetī karne ko. [...] qatl, aprādh aur mukadamebāzī ka ākārā bhī kāfī ūcā thā. mujhe gazetiyyar se ise bas sahī bhar karnā tha” (Sobtī 2007: 65–67). Sobtī then goes on to describe the necessity for the writer to check her knowledge of the general context before writing.

This somewhat enigmatic idiom deserves to be examined closer. Sobtī uses the term *lokmānas* to designate the consciousness of a community, the ‘collective consciousness’ so to speak. With regard to history, this consciousness is linked through tradition to a shared perception of the past, but also to another temporality different than the linear temporality emerging from the simple chronology of events. This non-linear temporality is that made up of similar, recurring, benchmark events such as the festivals celebrated by a community, or the socially important markers of an individual’s life (birth, marriage, death); it is held together by rituals and tradition. Sobtī figures this through the metaphor of the Ganges (Bhāgīrathī). Besides the common association of rivers with the passing of time, the choice of the name Bhāgīrathī for the Ganges¹² here hints at an important aspect of an individual’s or a community’s relationship to time and its past. The name refers to the myth of King Bhagīratha who performed asceticism for a thousand years in order to bring the Ganges from the sky unto the earth to wash away the bad deeds of his ancestors. By alluding to this myth, Sobtī implies that the people’s consciousness of history is deeply connected to the notion of genealogy, since Bhagīratha carries out the rituals for his ancestors, thus embedding himself in a family line. The idiom *lokmānas kī bhāgīrathī* points to an important aspect of Sobtī’s “other history:” the creation of a community identity through the establishment of a genealogy in which each individual is (and must) be embedded.

For Sobtī, the writer is concerned with the experience of time and its perception, as well as with the history which lives and is remembered (or reconstructed) in the consciousness of a people. The metaphor of the “Ganges of people’s consciousness” refers specifically to the perception (and construction, be it conscious or not)

¹² The Ganges has several names besides Gaṅgā, such as Jāhnavī (daughter of Jahnu) or Trilocanajātavāsīnī (the one who resides in the locks of Shiva), all of them related to mythological episodes.

of one's past by a community.¹³ While examining it, a writer is able to feel the pulse of a country, to understand how its self-image is shaped and transformed, and what this may imply for the future.

In *Zindagīnāmā*, Sobtī's "other history" is present in the tales transmitted within the communities about particular events from the past like the stories about Shah Jahan, Alexander the Great or the kings Jaypal and Anandpal told by the men of the village, or the version of the fall of the Sikh Empire preserved in children's folksongs in Punjab.¹⁴ Here, facts and chronology lose their importance in favour of a narrative which is compatible with the needs or the self-image of a community at the moment: present and past are closely intertwined.

Sobtī's "other history" corresponds to the history as present in collective memory, and she shows, through it, how identities are shaped—and re-shaped—by the narratives of the past alive in people's consciousness. In *Zindagīnāmā*, this becomes particularly important as an indicator of cracks, already present in the fabric of the Punjabi society, which will become clearly manifest at the time of the Partition. To illustrate this, let us now turn to some passages from *Zindagīnāmā*.

A not-so-undivided Punjab: History and identity-building in *Zindagīnāmā*

Sobtī's longest novel, *Zindagīnāmā*, narrates the life of a fictional village of pre-Partition Punjab, situated in the district of Gujrat, the place of origin of Sobtī's family. While Sobtī's family were landowners, like the Śāhs in *Zindagīnāmā*, the text is not primarily autobiographical. In fact, one of its characteristics is that it doesn't focus on one or a handful central characters, but instead features the village itself as its main protagonist.

¹³ A more subjective and individual perception of history and time lies at the core of Sobtī's two other historical novels, *Dār se bichurī* and *Dilo-dānīś*.

¹⁴ See also Sobtī's juxtaposition of two narrations of one single event (the fall of the Sikh Empire) which she uses to illustrate her concept of the "other history" in her essay *Cand noṭṣ zindagīnāmā par*, see: Sobtī 2014: 378–379.

The subtitle of the novel, *Zindā rūkh* (*The Living Tree*), hints at the multiple ramifications—the many worlds and stories—unfolding here. *Zindagīnāmā* thus provides a fresco of the life of the whole village over a span of roughly eight to ten years.¹⁵

The reader is plunged into the midst of an everyday life rhythmized by crops, harvests and festivals, and witnesses the village's love stories, family disputes, as well as thefts and crimes, court cases and intrigues. For both men and women, the centre of the village is the haveli of the Śāhs. As main landowners and wealthy moneylenders with a sharp sense of business, they dominate the village. They are simultaneously exploitative—profiting from the dire needs of the poorer farmers, most of them Muslim Jats—and benevolent. All the men of the village meet regularly at the haveli for discussions held in the *baiṭhak* (sitting room). In those meetings, every participant is allowed to freely express his opinion on any topic starting from the latest gossip to court cases, robberies in the area, political events, morals or history, all while smoking the hookah. Meanwhile, Śāhnī and the older women of the haveli are at the core of the women's world, during festivals as well as in day-to-day activities. They often intervene and settle family disputes or arrange marriages. The picture painted by the text is far from idyllic: thefts, crimes and murders abound; tensions and frustrations between and within communities are palpable; the characters are depicted in their complex individualities and in all the intricacies of their multi-layered identity (of belonging to the village, to a religious community, to a socio-economic class, to a caste, to a family, while also having individual personalities and desires). If the village is in many ways a “safe space” where societal norms and good neighbourly relationships are cultivated, the constraints of

¹⁵ In the absence of clear temporal markers, it remains difficult to assess how much time elapses in the course of the novel; at the beginning, Shahni, the wife of the eldest Shah, is struggling to beget a son and heir; in the end, her little boy is seven years old and starts school.

society for individuals and the cracks of the politico-economic system are also visible.¹⁶

History is present at several levels and in several forms in *Zindagīnāmā*. It is unfolding in real time within the novel, where the partition of Bengal (1905), as well as the Ghadar movement (1913–1917) and the beginning of WWI are mentioned. All these events are witnessed by the villagers, although mainly from afar, through second-hand accounts.

But history is also the fuel of many meetings at the haveli, where the village's men, mixing tales of the heroes and saints with the military deeds of ancient rulers, discuss at length the past of their region. In this form, the narration of history becomes a way of creating one's identity: each group feels closer to certain rulers and identifies (with some nostalgia) with a specific epoch. Signs of frustrations and tensions between the communities emerge. The Sikhs cannot but remember proudly the time of Ranjit Singh and tell wonders of his army's exploits. Meanwhile, the Muslim community associates itself with stories centred around the Mughal emperors. The Hindus are depicted, with some bitterness, as clever and educated, able to make their way at the court of any ruler, at any historic time. Here, the growing feelings of uneasiness and acrimony towards the rich—mainly Hindu—landowners and moneylenders occasionally pierce the surface of perfect politeness. This social class is indeed generally on good terms with the colonial authorities. Narrating one's past thus turns into a way of constructing one's identity, but also of addressing current preoccupations and injustices.

Events, news, the latest gossip, and stories of the past are discussed at the haveli's *baithak*. There, in this exclusively male universe, every

¹⁶ In her essay, "*Zindagīnāmā*: The Undivided Panjab of Krishna Sobti," Mariola Offredi devotes a paragraph to the economic factor as a cause of the Partition according to the novel. She otherwise focusses on the novel's recreation of the undivided Punjab through language (where the vocabulary used, mixing Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, illustrates the shared culture of all religious communities of the region), see Offredi 2007.

man expresses his opinion with great freedom—as long as the norms of politeness are preserved. If the main interests are rather local, focussed on the villagers’ and their relatives’ lives, government policies and ongoing events also fill the talk. In fact, the *baiṭhak* is the place where information is exchanged. For example, it is there that the news of the partition of Bengal first reach the village.

Nasīb Siṃh, a cloth merchant from the village, has received a letter from his father, who was in Bengal to sell cloth, and Shahji reads it to the whole assembly (Sobṭī 2013: 215–218). Nasīb’s father, Tufail Singh, a respected villager, has lost all his goods in the riots and turmoil following the partition of Bengal. The letter presents the Hindu-Muslim riots as a direct consequence of this partition, without entering into any details. It shows concern that a similar situation might occur in Punjab, in which case Tufail Siṃh advises his son to send all the goods currently in their shop to a Muslim friend as “[n]owadays the English government is protecting the Muslims.”¹⁷ Tufail Siṃh’s main preoccupations remain with his business and the safety of his family. Of his own political opinions, not much transpires.

The reading of the letter, however, has a great impact on the men of the village. The fear of the same happening in Punjab emerges, immediately countered by some of the elder members of the group, who argue that such movements and divides are the product of cities and would not grow on their soil, where village councils take care of all matters. Two points are particularly interesting in the depiction of history in this passage of the novel. First, no specific details of the partition of Bengal or the protests and riots that followed are given; the text doesn’t expose the full context of the partition nor its implications. There is no account of the chain of events leading to this political decision, no mention of Lord Curzon, nor any direct reference to the nationalist movement and its claims for independence. This knowledge is presupposed, since it is only thanks to a certain familiarity with the historical context that the reader may fully understand the allusions and indirect references of

¹⁷ “āṅkal sarkār āgrezī musalmīnō kī himāyat par hai” (Sobṭī 2013: 216).

the scene. The letter is not taken as an opportunity to give a complete introduction to the 1905 partition of Bengal and its aftermath through a first-hand witness' account. On the contrary, Tufail Singh writes his letter from the position he is in, with the emotions he feels, and with the awareness of what his audience (his son and the men at the *baiṭhak*) know already and what is of interest to them. The scene thus presents itself as a naturalistic depiction—a rendering of such a moment “as it would have happened.”

Second, the interpretation of the news by the assembly is centred on their own reality and on their own knowledge of the world. It lays bare the issues faced by the villagers through their own association of ideas. By a naturalistic rendering of the letter and the villagers' reaction to it, the preoccupations of the local communities and, to a certain extent, their relationships to one another and to the policy of the colonial government come to the fore. History is told here from the perspective of the men of the village, as they see it unfold. If both the partition of Punjab and inter-communal violence seem at the time absolutely inconceivable to them, certain tensions and a general mistrust towards the authorities as well as the nationalist press are palpable. Indeed, the whole discussion closes with Najībā, one of the farmers, taking a jab at Śāhjī and his ever-growing account-book, asking whether the language of his ledger will change as well, if the language of the region and of business switches from Urdu and Persian to English, hinting not only at Śāhjī's economic hegemony over the village, but also at his good relations with those in power (*ibid.*: 218).

This atmosphere of good neighbourly relationships (mixed with sudden jabs or—more rarely—open complaints) characterises the gatherings of the men of the village. One of their favourite topics are stories about historical figures and interesting facts connected to their region and its eventful past. There, the imagined affiliation of each community becomes apparent: a sense of identity and ‘filiation’ is built towards specific historical periods or characters. In the memory of the Sikh community, the defeat of the Sikh imperial army by the British in the battle at Chillianwala is still a deep wound, and the tales of the glory of Ranjit

Singh's army are very popular.¹⁸ Such feelings of association with one or the other ruler from the past by the men of the village can lead to heated discussions, since the rulers in question usually fought against each other. The identification with one dynasty or one ruler seems to be based almost exclusively on the religious affiliation of each community; it becomes apparent that there is a clear definition of identity along the lines of faith, and that this definition is self-evident to everyone, in spite of the larger sense of belonging to the village itself, or of belonging to a given socio-economic strata.

The heated discussion between Muṃśī Imdīn, one of the more learned Muslim men of the village, and the retired soldier Gurudatt Siṃh, regarding Ahmad Shah Durrani and the Khalsa is a telling example (*ibid.*: 207–212). The men are talking of the military exploits of the former rulers, in particular Akbar, Hemu Vikramaditya and Ranjit Singh. The conversation tends to take communal turns and Śāhājī promptly mediates to avoid tensions. As Muṃśī Imdīn, who prides himself on his historical knowledge,¹⁹ praises Ahmad Shah Durrani and his military acumen—in answer to some criticism towards him—Gurudatt Siṃh, referring to the incident when Durrani's horsemen drowned in the Chenab, explodes: “Munshiji, the accounts had to be settled one day! Shah Durrani swore to wipe out the seed of the Khalsa (Sikhs) but on the way back the Afghans and the Pathans lost their lives right here! So, after all, Khvājā Khizr, the Pir of the river, heard [the pleas] of his devotees, didn't he?”²⁰

¹⁸ See for example the tale of the four braves of Ranjit Singh's army, (*ibid.*: 153–154).

¹⁹ Imdīn is often the one to explain historical events and that too without really taking sides—he has the same admiration for Hemu as for Akbar, Babur or even Ahmed Shah Durrani as great military leaders.

²⁰ “hisāb-kitāb to muṃśījī, ek din pūrā honā hī thā. durrānī śāh ne khālsō kā bīj naṣṭ karne kī qasam khāī thī, par lautī belā afgān-paṭhān yahī kām ā gae. ākhir ko dariyā pīr khvājā khizr ne bhī to sunnī thī apne murīdō kī!” (*ibid.*: 209–210). Khvājā Khizr, the Pir of the river, thought to be the protector of the people of the region, is a saint revered by all the communities though originally connected to the Islamic tradition.

Gurudatt's answer threatens to make a communal issue of Ilmdīn's remark; Ilmdin, angered, tries to defend his hero by retorting that Ahmed Shah Durrani's raid into the Punjab aimed to put an end to the dacoits and wasn't targeting any specific community. But it is, as so often, Śāhjī who intervenes to really calm things down, reminding everyone that Ranjit Singh and Ahmed Shah Durrani had ministers and poets of all faiths at their courts and didn't practice religious discrimination: "Punishment, crime, oppression, murder, manslaughter—those are the games of the invaders, isn't it? But the kings and the emperors also keep the company of people of virtue."²¹

This simple sentence brings the conversation back to a polite tone, and the men recall all the wise and cunning men of all faiths who became important figures at the various courts.

Śāhjī's intervention bears similarity to several of his previous remarks, in which he insists on not conflating one's own religious identity with an affiliation to one specific ruler; just before Gurudatt's explosion, guessing where the conversation might head, Śāhjī had already warned against the construction of such affiliations:

Shahji [Śāhjī] started to laugh: "Even if something seems right, you should first assess it. So that it doesn't become a women's squabble of 'mine' and 'yours,' like, 'Sister, Babur is mine, Bikramajit²² is yours!' Or 'Turks are yours, and Mughals mine!'"²³

In other sessions as well, Śāhjī always restores balance and reminds everyone not to cross the boundaries of politeness and neighbourly relations. However, identity, for each member of the village, is centred not only on the village itself, but also on religious affiliation. This leads

²¹ "sazā, jurm, zulm, mārkaṭ, qatleām—ye to hue na khel hamlāvarō ke. bāqī sāh-badśāhō ke sāth guṇagrāha kī bhī lagī huī hai" (*ibid.*: 210).

²² Popular spelling and pronunciation of Vikramaditya.

²³ "śāhjī hāsne lagā: 'bāt vājīb bhī ho to bandā pahle tole. zanāniyōvālī tū-tū māī-māī to na ho jāe ki bahnā bābar merā, bikramājīt terā! yā turq terā aur muḡal merā!'" (*ibid.*: 208).

to growing tensions, in particular when combined with socio-economic factors. Śāhjī's policy serves the purpose of maintaining equilibrium and peace, but it is not wholly disinterested: indeed, for none more than for him, it is essential to keep the status quo. Some of his interventions clearly denote the wish to avoid any questioning of his own status as main landowner and most powerful man in the region. His primary concern is for everyone to remain happy with things as they are, and if his voice is often that of reason, it is a reason advocating for the current order of things. When the men discuss the many invasions of Punjab and the rulers who succeeded each other there, Shahji asserts that this has no real importance for the most important factor are the people:

Shahji [Śāhjī] very cleverly turned the face of history in another direction: "The crux of the matter is that thousands of invaders have come and gone through this land, but, in the end, Lahore belongs to the people of Lahore, and Kabul to the people of Kabul! What I am saying is: emperors and sultans change, empires change, governments change but, listen guys, populations of the countries don't!"²⁴

Śāhjī doesn't merely manage to keep the conversation at a polite level; he also brings the villagers to consider life from the perspective of the everyday—from their own tangible reality—thus avoiding self-identification with any historical ruler. By doing this, he wishes on the one hand to keep the village community together in the very way it is organised, and on the other hand to prevent any demand for change to become too vocal. This wish comes to the fore as the reason behind Śāhjī's decision to wipe out the debt of one of his tenants, Farmān Alī, simply because Farmān's son, Mahr, delivers revolutionary harangues about the land, which, according to the young man, should belong to

²⁴ "śāhjī ne baṛī aqlmandī se tavārīkh ka mūh hī dūsrī or moṛ diyā: 'bāt to asal yah hai ki is dhartī par hazārahā hamlāvar āe aur gae par ākhir ko lāhaur lāhaurvālō ke pās aur qabūl qabūlvālō ke pās! kahnā kā matlab yah ki śahāśāh-sultān badle, bādśāhatē badlī, hūkumatē badlī, par muñdho, na badlī mulkō kī khalkatē!'" (*ibid.*: 103).

those who work on it.²⁵ To put an end to the continuous airing of an opinion that openly challenges his status and his source of income, Śāhjī proposes to settle this debt, for once—earning Farmān Alī’s gratitude. As for the further development of Mahar Alī after this decision, the novel doesn’t reveal it... This passage, like the political and historical conversations at the *baiṭhak*, are clear signs of the changing mood of the country, of its “time,” and of its people’s perception of their own past.

The men’s discussions on the topic of history show how much, despite the veneer of politeness and the feeling of belonging to the same land and village, tensions and divisions already exist beneath the surface. These are very often closely linked to the religious affiliation of the villagers, and mask socio-economic inequalities in a not so un-divided pre-Partition Punjab.

Conclusion

In its representation of the history and the present, *Zindagīnāmā* doesn’t offer a chronologist’s account, as the epigraph had warned. Instead, the novel takes the pulse of the country, and shows its mood, its atmosphere. It lays bare the existing cracks in the society of the time, cracks which may well lead to the tragedy of Partition, lyrically bemoaned in the poem-preamble which opens the novel.²⁶ *Zindagīnāmā* thus shows how the perception of one’s past, one’s time and one’s identity can evolve and lead slowly to major historical shifts.

²⁵ The story of Mahar Alī and his discourse against the debt and moneylending system and in favour of the redistribution of land to the farmers is present throughout the novel where the reader follows the evolution of the young man. The resolution of this situation by Śāhjī’s offer happens towards the end. See Sobtī 2013: 276–283.

²⁶ This article is not the place to discuss the very interesting—and somewhat melodramatic—poem which opens *Zindagīnāmā* and its relationship to the rest of the text. Let me just mention here that the tone is very different from that of the novel where the life of the village is shown in all its complexity and with all its darker sides. The poem is a hymn to Punjab, to its people, and to a style of life forever lost. Sobtī had in fact hesitated to include it in the novel, leaving the decision to her publisher, Shila Sandhu, who chose to do so, see Sobtī 2007: 68.

Zindagīnāmā is an excellent example of Sobtī's approach to history and illustrates her notion of the "other history." This concept bears strong resemblance to Assmann's "mnemohistory;" it is the way history is told and remembered by each community and thus influences how each group constructs its identity, its affiliations—and its antagonisms vis-à-vis other groups. Understanding a community's perception of the past enables therefore a better grasp of the present reality and the possible future. In *Zindagīnāmā*, the stress lies on the perspective employed to view the past of and by the various communities and individuals of the village. The factual or more traditional historical narrative is presupposed as already familiar to the reader. Building on it, Sobtī's historical fiction becomes the place to tell a form of history that was so far untold and unrecorded, a history not found in any official accounts. And yet, as a novel-fresco, the text can also be read without any prior knowledge of the context, as a story of a village in the district of Gujrat, with all its intrigues, love stories, births and deaths. *Zindagīnāmā* cannot and must not be reduced to a historical document alone; it is a complex work of literature.

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