

“Shaking up a Continent”:
Biography as a
Postindependence Response

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“DEAR! DEAR!” SAID an Archbishop of Canterbury on meeting Jawaharlal Nehru. “Such a pleasant and charming man. Who would imagine that he could shake up a continent?” (Moraes 72). It can be argued that the disarmingly explosive potential in the image of Nehru is the product of biography as much as it is the nature of the subject. Moreover, the power thus generated by this image is an illustration of the way in which biography as a genre constitutes a radical response to the challenges of postindependence India. To examine the biographies of Nehru then requires examining both the genre (biography) and the context (postindependence), and in doing so I shall use a paradigm originally developed by ethnography, the paradigm of transculturation:

The term “transculturation” . . . (is used by) ethnographers . . . to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subjected peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.
(Pratt 6)

The image of Nehru sustained and developed through a range of biographies opens up a space within which three particular questions can be formulated: Which are the specific elements of British and Indian culture selected by *Indian* biographers—in response to postindependence pressures—to create a composite picture of Nehru? What is the response of *non-Indian* biographers to this image? What are the consequences of this interplay for postindependence writings in English? Answering these

three questions involves examining the process by which biography is converted into autoethnography.

“autoethnography” or “autoethnographic expression” . . . refer to instances in which the colonised subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the coloniser’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan presentations. . . . Autoethnography involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror. Autoethnographic texts are typically heterogenous on the reception end as well, usually addressed both to metropolitan readers and to . . . sectors of the (writer’s) own social group, and bound to be received very differently by each. (Pratt 7)

My general organizing principle in tracing the evolution of the Nehru biography into autoethnography is to look first at the *Indian* biographies (selected to give a sense of the breadth and adaptive strength of the field) which as a rule preceded the *non-Indian* biographies, which in turn use the Indian texts as part of their source material. Frequently questions originally raised in the Indian biographies are further clarified and occasionally complicated in later Western biographies. Chronologically the first of the Indian biographies is *Jawaharlal Nehru* by Frank Moraes (1956), written at the high noon of Nehruvian socialism. B. R. Nanda’s *The Nehrus: Motilal and Jawaharlal* (1962) is the first account of the prehistory of what later biographies would call “the dynasty” and is the only biography to have a sequel, *Jawaharlal Nehru: Rebel and Statesman* (1995), brought out to mark the first fifty years of India’s independence. Nehru’s sister Krishna Hutheesing’s *We Nehrus* (1967) is a personal record counterpointed by Sarvepalli Gopal’s official biography, the first volume of which appeared in 1975. M. J. Akbar’s *Nehru: The Making of Modern India* (1988) is a long look back “through the prism of one man’s life” (Akbar x) at the trauma of nation-making and nation-breaking in the postindependence period.

Of the non-Indian biographies examined in this article, the earliest is Michael Brecher’s *Nehru: A Political Biography* (1959). As a Canadian, Brecher is an outsider in a sense to the two major cultures—Indian and British—that go to the making of the

Nehru image. This distance offers an advantage in that Brecher's attempts to negotiate it called out Nehru's own assistance (as will be seen) in a rather unusual way. *Nehru: A Contemporary's Estimate* by Walter Crocker (1966), as a record by an early Australian High Commissioner to India, is significant in that it comes from a representative of another Commonwealth country, economically stronger than India, and yet politically still in the phase of Dominion status as against India's independence. This account therefore offers a curious blend of both nearness and remoteness in terms of political and cultural image-making. Marie Seton's *Panditji: A Portrait of Jawaharlal Nehru* (1967) is a personal tribute—pretty much the equivalent of Krishna Hutheesing's. In direct contrast is the American historian Stanley Wolpert's *Nehru: A Tryst with Destiny* (1966), which argues sometimes in advance of the evidence to debunk its subject. Finally, there is a pair of British biographies which—taken together—suggest how complex the task of image-making can be when print and visual media compete and collaborate with each other. Tariq Ali's *The Nehrus and the Gandhis: An Indian Dynasty* (1985; updated 1995 to include Rajiv Gandhi's assassination) is advertised with a blurb on its back cover by Salman Rushdie which reads: "It has often seemed that the story of the Nehrus and Gandhis has provided more engrossing material than anything in the cinemas or on television; a real dynasty better than *Dynasty* [the American soap-opera], a Delhi to rival Dallas." Ali's own shift from theatre to Channel 4 (the Arts Channel on British Television) may suggest something of the blend between different media—drama, television, and documentary—that characterizes his record. There is also the family biography accompanying the recent commemorative British Broadcasting Corporation television series *The Dynasty: The Nehru-Gandhi Story* (1997), by British biographers Jad Adams and Phillip Whitehead.

Before looking at specifically British and Indian elements in the Nehru image that biography has created, one caveat must be entered. This concerns the deeply skewed image biography itself inherits from autobiography. Nehru is brusquely dismissive of his young self, which he sees as being wholly the product of a British education—Harrow and Cambridge—and therefore lu-

diculously out of place in a nationalist struggle: "I am afraid, as I landed at Bombay, I was a bit of a prig with little to commend me" (26). Similarly he shrugs off the early Congress movement as a part of British lapdog culture. Congress at this time was a typically British, middle-class Liberal party, gesturing toward representative government alone, with no thought of independence. "I visited, as a delegate, the Bankipore Congress during Christmas 1912. It was very much an English-knowing upper-class affair where morning coats and well-pressed trousers were greatly in evidence. Essentially it was a social gathering with no political excitement or tension" (27). For Nehru, the life-altering moment is the intervention of Gandhi: "It was remarkable how Gandhi seemed to cast a spell on all classes and groups of people and drew them into one motley crowd struggling in one direction." He became "a symbolic expression of the confused desires of the people" (75). Biography, however, cannot take the royal road to its subject. Autobiography may prioritize the development of the nationalistic phase over that of the exclusively British phase. Biography must not only soldier on through both but must try to establish a relationship between the two. How does biography cope with this problem?

To begin with, it does so by acknowledging the existence of the problem. Biography consistently highlights the culturally-riven nature of Nehru, sometimes by anecdote and at other times by argument. A typical anecdote is the following:

"If you come to my place," said an Indian university professor at Allahabad, "I can arrange for you to meet a few groups of keen students trying to think."

Nehru paced the corridor in which they stood.

"Ah, yes," he said, stopping suddenly before the professor and grasping his arm. "But what about the groups inside me?"

From this rootlessness stemmed the restiveness, particularly of his early years as an exile back in India. "I am a stranger, an alien in the West; I cannot be of it," he lamented. "But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile's feelings." (Moraes 43)

A surprising displacement seems to be at work here. Usually autobiography is seen as the stuff of the confessional, while biography is seen as hagiography with a purpose. Here, however, the reverse obtains. It is biography which draws attention to the

way in which the image is characterized by Nehru's Janus-like attitude to two cultures. Biography is able to do this precisely because it is not curbed by the instincts of the cautionary tale that colour the autobiography. The latter is written self-avowedly for an Indian readership, to retrieve an Indian past, during a period of personal and political stress.

The biographies—while subject to specific pressures in their turn—are written in and for a postindependence that privileges rootlessness and exile. Understandably then they allow their subject all the time and space he needs in which to confess his sense of exile because—in a postindependence world which views nationalism with reserve—exile has a high cultural value. In a world that claims to exalt pluralism, the cultural mobility inherent in the Nehru image is of paramount importance. Consider, for example, the ambiguous crosscultural argument in the following anecdote:

In spite of his unattractive Congress dress and cap, the Pandit looked a thorough gentleman and an impressive figure. He is about the only good-looking Indian as I have seen in a Congress cap and appears sturdy and vigorous. . . . He does not "intone" like so many Indian public speakers, but at the same time addresses his audience in rather a scolding manner. He certainly does not go out of his way to flatter them. It is easy for a European to follow his Hindustani, partly because he uses simple words and phrases, and partly because he talks it with what I can only describe as an English accent . . . the Pandit is by far the most attractive speaker whom I have heard in India. There is no doubt that his manliness, frankness and reputation for sacrifice attracts a large public. (Gopal 216)

It's rather hard to know how to read this passage. At first glance, it is possible to place it entirely within the Orientalist paradigm. All that is Indian—the uniform that is the badge of nationalism—is unattractive. All that is Anglicized—the attitude of "manliness and frankness"—is attractive. Examined more closely, however, this stands forth as an inaccurate reading. Attitude and accent may be British but the content is explicitly anti-British. For this was the first time that Congress contested elections to defeat British legislation and seek the annulment of the regressive Government of India Act, 1935. The episode is a good instance of autoethnography. The conquered people selectively appro-

priate the idiom of the conqueror—extempore haranguing that seems a direct legacy from Hyde Park “oratory”—for their own purposes. The audience is fissured in a way characteristic of the reception of autoethnographic texts. The metropolis is represented in the person of the (British) District Magistrate of Multan, from whose report to the Home Department this extract is taken. There is the Indian public before whom this scene is enacted. Finally, there is biography, which self-consciously markets across cultures the image of “a leader of the Indian people . . . a representative of the new mood of Asia and . . . a spokesman of the international conscience” (Gopal 5). It has a vested interest therefore in making available an image of anti-conquest that must be seen to be acceptable in a postindependence situation to descendants of both sides. How does biography achieve this and what are the consequences?

Canny selection is one stratagem. Biography is careful to indicate the fraught relationship between Nehru and the Indian state. As a rule, biography avoids making the criticism levelled by contemporary historiography when it censures the long-term breakdown between Nehru and the state: “Gramsci would likely have characterised Nehru’s Congress as ‘revolutionaries of yesterday—today become reactionaries’” (Bose 115). Yet biography makes its own kind of criticism—incorporated within the image of Nehru it creates—by the selection of detail rather than the addition of commentary. We see this, for example, in the account of Nehru’s background at a point of critical national change from British to Indian dress (the *swadeshi* phase of the freedom struggle, which sought to abolish foreign fabric). At this stage, the focus is on his father, Motilal, who as patriarch makes decisions for the family, including his son Jawaharlal.

Since nothing British must be used, Father put away all his fine clothes—and so did we all. From that time forth, we all wore khadi, the coarse homespun cotton of India. Father’s usual costume consisted of a dhoti wrapped around his waist, and the long shirt called a kurta, with a shawl for his shoulders on cool nights. These gleaming white garments did not detract from but rather enhanced his natural dignity. With his white hair and nobly formed features he looked like one’s idea of a Roman senator. (Hutheesing 48-49)

The details excluded are as significant as those included. On the one hand, there appears to be total conformity to the imperatives of *swadeshi*: the adoption of Indian dress, and the very obvious rejection of foreign goods. On the other hand, ultimately the dynamics of the image is European. The role-model cited is that of a Roman senator. The detail of the toga can hardly fail to remind the reader of Julius Caesar, who is wholly apart from any kind of Indian reality. Race and Indian racial affinities then—supposedly ratified by *swadeshi*—only gloss over a reality that is emphatically European rather than Indian. Moreover, the image articulates class-affinities, which allow the reader to understand how a product of this milieu may be “for the people” yet not “of the people.” For the reference to the Roman senator clearly evokes the idea of a ruling class, which by definition exists apart from the masses. Biography does not ram home a critique. Indeed at times it may seem more royalist than the king, as when it appears to glorify the image without probing its areas of darkness. “Many of the crowd came . . . merely to see for themselves the god-like figure of whom they had heard so much. Gandhi was one of them but Jawaharlal was the glamorous prince” (Gopal 216). Yet by allowing its readers to see the principles on which the image is constructed, biography makes available materials for critical appraisal through the device of shrewd selection.

An equally canny sharing of personal and political space is another means by which biography addresses a postindependence world. Along with race and class, gender has now emerged as an essential predicate for scrutiny. Autobiography and history both have revealed Nehru’s delight at the involvement of hitherto secluded women in the freedom struggle without analyzing the reasons for the shift. It has been left to biography to suggest—even if through the medium of a single family—a possible reason for this change. For the men—as the *swadeshi* vignette suggests—the change may not have been initially welcome or ultimately radical. Indeed the assimilation of the Nehru family as regard Western culture had been so complete that it was probably hard for Motilal Nehru’s British friends to know how to read the change, which may well have seemed facile at first. “So long had Motilal been known to admire English ways, English tradi-

tions and English institutions that when he turned rebel against the Raj, the feelings of his numerous English friends (in the words of an Anglo-Indian journal) resembled those of a fond Edwardian father whose delightful daughter became a suffragette and broke his windows" (Nanda, *The Nehrus* 340). For the women, however, it meant genuine liberation.

Women had been marginalized in an earlier Anglicized ethos since they had usually been kept from a familiarity with Western ways or even the English language. The cost in human terms must have been crippling, as this early account of Nehru's wife suggests: ". . . poor Kamala was completely confused and uncomfortable in a place so different from her home. The big dinners with crystal and china on the long table and rows of wine-glasses at everyone's place, the strange food, and most of all perhaps, the quick loud voices of our many British guests, made her feel lost and lonely" (Hutheesing 9). In a very real sense, the fight for freedom meant that the women found their voice. For Motilal's rule had been until then that English was to be the only language spoken at home and women such as Kamala (whose brush with Western education had been slight) needed extra coaching before they could even share in family conversation. "He required everyone in the house to speak English instead of an Indian language and the members of the family who did not know English had to stay silent until they learned it" (Lamb 17).

Understandably therefore, Kamala and other women like her threw themselves into the freedom struggle since — by returning them to the Indian way of life they knew — political liberation meant their emancipation. "The wine cellar disappeared, along with all the paraphernalia of luxury: crystal, china, horses, carriages and the wardrobe. . . . The women of the house, of course, loved this transformation. This was the Indian life-style which appealed to their instincts" (Akbar 141). Perhaps too women were able to go further down this road than men could, since their attitude to the West was more likely to be unambiguous. So the ephemera that biography collects enables readers to problematize issues — gender and the freedom struggle, for instance — that are frequently given a value-neutral reading.

Occasionally biography can pull off a conjuring trick so that what appears descriptive becomes interpretive. A classic illustra-

tion of this is perhaps the best known description of Nehru: “a slight slim man, dressed in a pale cream *achkhan* and wearing an immaculately white khadi cap . . . (with) the red rose flaunting a challenge” (Moraes 1-2). This seems at first a painfully trite image, marketed to death. In fact, though, it can be read as biography’s response to a desperate problem of postindependence India—communalism. So far, biography’s response to a postcolonial world in general has been considered: its valorization of exile, its treatment of race, class, and gender. Now, in Moraes’s depiction of Nehru’s clothing this specifically Indian issue of communalism is addressed even as the Nehru image seems, as it were, to be under construction, as in this account:

It was this “composite” Mughal culture (as the serviceable but rather ungainly phrase goes) which was the inheritance of families like the Nehrus, shaping their habits and outlook; at one level, creating the preference for the churidar and sherwani over the dhoti, and at another making secularism a part of their natural instincts. To be communal was bad manners, and what could be a greater sin than that? And yet in that environment lay also the seed of a revivalist movement which was to have such enormous consequences that it would lead eventually to the division of the subcontinent—and, implicitly, to the greatest defeat of Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, a failure from which neither they nor the subcontinent quite recovered. (Akbar 14)

The *achkan*, *churidar*, and *sherwani* are items of clothing traditionally associated with Islamic culture while the *dhoti* is associated with a Hindu background. So the extract from Moraes’s biography presents the cosmeticized version of the image, while the construction of the image is discussed in the Akbar extract. The latter suggest both the immediate appeal of Nehru—his ability to take an obvious stand against communalism by his dress, and his final flaw, namely, his inability to understand the less-than-obvious genesis of communalism. Precisely when biography seems most descriptive therefore it reveals itself by sleight-of-hand to be most interrogative. In this it indicates how the Nehru image is shaped in response to communal pressures and the way in which it is ultimately judged by these pressures.

How close to the bone historically speaking can this image actually be? One answer may be located in Wolpert’s account of

the shaping of Nehru's image. Wolpert has been severely criticized: "Wolpert's is a chatty, rambling study, replete with literary and rhetorical devices and neat throw-away lines which undermine its historical credibility" (Brown 7). Nonetheless, I use Wolpert's biography when it suggests responses to vexed evidence that can be cross-checked. A case in point is his handling of this question of Nehru's image at the moment of its first recorded change outside India, at a public meeting in London in 1938.

His English comrades cheered Nehru much louder than his peasant audiences in Punjab had. That July he addressed an anti-imperialist rally that Krishna [Menon] had organised in Trafalgar Square, wearing for the first time since he had arrived in Europe a dark Indian sherwani and black Gandhi cap, rather than his Saville Row suits or Harris tweed jackets and ties. He looked as handsome in Indian clothing as he did in his tighter fitting Western garb, and Krishna insisted that for the mass audience in Trafalgar Square the symbolism of his dress was as significant as the short address he gave. Moreover, his choice of north Indian Punjabi dress was tailored to identify him with Muslim India, as it was when he presided over the previous year's meeting of the Muslim League in Lucknow.

(241-42)

Various nuances reveal themselves. First, there is the implication that Nehru's popularity in the West might well exceed his popularity in India. This may be explained by the cultural mosaic—already examined—that is the background to the image. Such a mosaic is by definition evident to anyone with a Western education but less so to a person within a wholly Indian mode of existence. This may be the cause, but the effect is rather more complicated. For the next implication is that the marketing of the image to the West—even in this initial stage—gets added impetus from the deliberate Indianizing to which it is subject. The Nehru image thus is shown to sell in the West because of its strong component of Indianness. Both cause and effect are important not only in the context of literary biography but also—as will be demonstrated—in the context of television documentary as well. Then there is the ability of Nehru not only to represent more than one culture but to appeal to more than one culture in an immediate and visual sense. Again, Nehru's happy gift as one "favoured with a strikingly handsome appear-

ance, both by Indian and western standards . . . making [him] one of the most photogenic statesmen of the century" (Brecher 1) helps the image work across cultures. This too has consequences for the telegenic quality of the Nehru story, as will be shown below. Finally, apart from this dimension of cultural translation is another more disturbing presence: that of party politics. Neither Moraes nor Akbar speaks of the electoral mileage that Wolpert analyzes here with reference to Nehru's attempt to swing the confidence of the Muslim voter away from Jinnah's Muslim League in the direction of the Congress. Yet this question of representation is built into the iconicity of Nehru, as a motive for his self-fashioning and also as a principle that has governed subsequent redactions of this image in literary biography, cinema, and television.

If we ask why biography should be so inept as to address serious issues—communalism and the freedom struggle, for instance—chiefly in terms of a clothes-based image, two answers may be given. The first is that biography does not by definition have the liberty of fiction to constitute its own subject. If the subject responds to a situation in a particular way, biography cannot restructure the response to suit its own agenda and remain biography. The other is that such an image is generated by the subject to meet the demands of a mixed audience, literate and non-literate. Literary biography caters not just to a literate but frequently to a specifically scholarly readership. In contrast, cinema and television in the developing world may have a pre-literate audience. The Nehru image then has to work across fundamental barriers of culture and medium. How does it operate? When it works as print text, biography can enable its readers to plot a particularly sensitive relationship between the way in which two cultures—here, Indian and British—read themselves into each other. Non-Indian biographers have responded for instance with considerable sensitivity to some of the key issues raised in the Indian biographies:

At the sight of the thin man in simple white homespun clothing, the crowds, who had waited for hours in the heat and dust, burst into tumultuous cheering and surged forward to meet him. . . . He was born an Indian but become a man of two worlds: the public school and college atmosphere of aristocratic England, and the hills and

dusty plains of India. His life was as deeply tied up with Britain and the British as with India. . . . He was born into a home of almost legendary wealth. . . . He renounced this life, however, and took to hardship and agitation, down the winding roads of India, in front of the swarming crowds. If his hour had come, it was the culmination of a long journey both for himself and for India. In their remarkable lives, the Nehru family came to personify the struggles and triumphs of the entire nation, an identification with national life which they did everything to promote. (Adams and Whitehead 3-4)

Initially this looks suspiciously like the grand totalizing narrative which characterizes Orientalist writing. There is the easy essentialism of "aristocratic England" and "the dusty plains of India," which are carefully not interrogated. There is, however, the recognition that somehow the crowds of India matter because in a sense they have been seen to fashion their own ruler. If he has worn *khadi*, it is because it is a token they recognize. If he has led agitations, these have *had* to succeed with the same crowds in the public arena. By and large Indian biographies have tended to examine Nehru's own attitude to the masses—rightly enough—with certain reservations: "Jawaharlal glamourized the *kisans* [Indian farmers] and saw them as brave men uncontaminated by city life or text-book education; but he was not deeply moved by their economic wretchedness" (Gopal 53). What has not been recognized by Indian biography is the way in which Nehru was the first national leader to create the idea of the Indian masses for an Indian and a non-Indian public. Of course, the situation is laced with irony. It recalls Lenin's comment on the way in which Tolstoy created the Russian peasant for his readers: "until this nobleman came along there was no real peasant in Russian literature" (Mukherjee 95).

Exactly who are the people for whom the image of Nehru is shaped and to whom is it marketed? The answer seems to vary with each redaction of the image and also depends on who stands out as redactor each time. Nehru queried his self-fashioning quite early and with more scepticism than any subsequent writer:

Is all this natural or the carefully thought out trickery of the public man? Perhaps it is both. . . . The most effective pose is one in which there seems to be least posing and Jawaharlal [Nehru writes in the

third person here under a pen-name] has learnt to act without the paint and powder of the actor. With his seeming carelessness and insouciance he performs on the public stage with consummate artistry. Whither is this going to lead him and the country? What is he aiming at with all his apparent want of aim? What lies behind that mask of his, what desires, what will to power, what insatiate longings? (Qtd. in Wolpert 228)

The issue of the target-audience immediately raises itself. Nehru's piece reads uncannily like an analysis of his own will to power as seen in his conscious image-making that can become a threat to the yet-unborn Indian nation. It was published under the pseudonym "Chanakya," the name of a Machiavellian Prime Minister of Mauryan India during a leadership struggle within Congress, which Nehru lost to Vallabhbhai Patel. Originating as a disclaimer at a moment of party politics, and hence of interest to those only within this framework, it is now cited as proof of Nehru's prescience concerning the dangers of iconicity for the icon and for the nation before whom it is raised as an object of worship.

But we cannot speak simply of the "Indian masses" or "the Indian nation" and have done with the subject. Recent historiography has suggested that the people are the makers of history, which is no longer the chronicle or the result of the lives of heroic individuals.

Parallel to the domain of elite politics, there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the . . . people. This was an *autonomous* domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter. (Guha 40)

The people then are not passive image worshippers or consumers. Not only (as has been suggested) do their preferences shape the image, but they are also to be seen as interactive competitors for space and attention in their own right. The effects of their participation may be seen in the way in which cinema and television have recreated the image of Nehru.

It is precisely this constituency—the people of India—who are claimed by Tariq Ali as the supporting cast of the soap opera-

like sequence that he sees in the fortunes of the Nehru-Gandhi family. He makes essentially three claims. The first is that the performance of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty may be examined almost in the light of classical Sanskrit drama written according to the rules of the *Natyashastra* (an ancient Indian text equivalent to Aristotle's *Poetics*). The second follows from this: that the audience—the Indian people—are not merely spectators watching the plot unfold; instead, like the spectators of the miracle and morality plays in medieval Christendom, they are people who know both the theoretical requirements of the theatre they are watching and the story-line, and are thus exacting critics of the performance. The third—as suggested by Rushdie's comment on this text—is that the history of the Nehru-Gandhi family is India's own soap-opera, and that this dynasty is India's answer to *Dallas*. Ali's claim is that such a perspective allows the people of India the position they deserve in this endless production of images: "that is where the ultimate power resides. It is the people of India who can make and explode dynasties" (300). This is one kind of retrieval in that it claims the people of India not just as spectators but as cast.

The criteria devised were such as to be easily grasped by the audiences, for the aim was not to restrict the output of criticism by confining it to a tiny elite, but to ensure the exact opposite. Anyone could judge for themselves.

To that end, the unbending dramaturges of old defined eight formal categories or flavours: marvellous, romantic, comic, sorrowful, violent, heroic, terrifying and repulsive. The success or failure of a play depended on the ability of the writer and actors to evoke the emotions that flowed directly out of those flavours. (Ali ix)

A confusion of models becomes apparent. If indeed this theory of drama is "a matter of inference due to clever imitation" (Kane 371) based on performance, the role of the audience is significant in terms of theatre criticism. But can this be paralleled by soap opera? A nation expressing its views on governance at the General Elections is hardly the same as television viewers expressing their preference through channel-ratings. Moreover, in any society that has such a large percentage of a preliterate audience, the power of the visual media over the print media can be disturbing. Television, even in the developed world, has

worked as “a powerful form of social integration and control [with] many of its main uses . . . [being] seen as socially, commercially and at times politically manipulative” (Williams 23). How just can it be to co-opt casually such an audience as cast or indeed even as scrupulous theatre critics? “The audience in this play,” Ali says, “is not just a collective critic, but also the cast” (x).

The BBC television series *Dynasty: The Nehru-Gandhi Story*—the accompanying biography of which was discussed earlier—was watched in India largely by Nehru’s own original constituency: the upper-middle class, Western-educated elite. This was not only because its medium is English. Its general cultural referents are precious in an almost archaic sense, even when these went beyond the Harrow-and-Cambridge parameters of Nehru’s early life. The people interviewed, for instance, were by and large those who had known the family closely, particularly in its early years, either personally or professionally: the Mountbattens, or B. K. Nehru and Nayantara Sahgal from the extended Nehru family. This is understandable in that the ambience sought to be established in a documentary based on a family biography may be that of intimate personal reminiscence. Yet there is an unusual visual dialogue between two sets of images at the beginning and end of each episode. The protagonists (the Nehru-Gandhis) are projected as figures cut out of large hoardings so as to look very obviously public. The titles are written in a combination of Chancery Cursive and Persian script so as to look quite incurably esoteric. The audience of this television series then might be more fairly described as international rather than as Indian. In that case, the difference between those reached by biography as literary text and biography as television documentary is minimal. For this television series appealed not just to those who have a Western education but to those who have a serious almost scholarly interest in the subject, which is hardly the usual domain of soap opera.

A more obviously democratic audience was perhaps secured by Richard Attenborough’s film *Gandhi*. Although Nehru was by definition not the central character of *Gandhi*, he is shown very much at the centre of the freedom-struggle, which receives extended treatment. Perhaps one of the film’s more memorable—

if somewhat melodramatic—moments is when Nehru tries to quell a communal mob that is baying for Gandhi's blood in the Partition riots. "Kill Gandhi" is the sentiment motivating the mob and "You will have to kill me first" is the angry response made by the Nehru character. This kind of direct intervention—he was known to wield a cane on occasion to discipline crowds—certainly makes Nehru immediately accessible to any audience even if not necessarily at the expense of Gandhi. The film reached large numbers of people; it was dubbed in Hindi, and tickets were priced low since entertainment tax was waived. This was made possible by the collaboration of the National Film Development Corporation and the general interest taken in the project by the Government of India. Government intervention, however, is always a mixed blessing. Does it suggest that—even in cinema—mass involvement requires governmental support? In that case, is the cinematic representation of Nehru necessarily more democratic than that of literary biographies which allow readers to cross-reference and check available evidence—a reversal of the *Natyashastra* paradigm? The masses are far more likely to be passive consumers of the marketed Nehru icon. Owing both to the constraints on their condition and on the more narrow range of the visual media (at least in India), they are unlikely to be critical or selective in their response to the image of Nehru disseminated in this way.

Finally, what are the consequences which biography may have for postindependence writings in English? I think the most obvious contribution it makes is to challenge rigid genre-based classification in this field. So far, such a challenge has been mounted by fiction alone. Talisma Nazrin's *Lajja* (Shame) is the best-known example of docufiction in which reams of reportage are pressed into the service of the novel. Biography need not throw down a challenge as regard nomenclature but it requires a readership more open to creativity wherever it is found rather than one which recognizes creativity only within the parameters of fiction. For instance, in the way in which it projects the image of Nehru, biography might be said to fulfil the twin functions of narrative of the novel in contemporary history: "Narrative can bring about psychological and cultural enlargement . . . allowing

a fuller sense of habitat and belonging" (Connor 4-5). Biography recovers the race and class compulsions that shape the image as well as the way in which the larger freedom struggle was coloured by considerations of gender, communalism, and mass movement. In doing so, it creates new communities of interest and, as has been shown, restructures old ones.

Even if it is cautioned that the subject of biography invents himself, it has to be acknowledged that it is biography which projects the image and, by positioning it in terms of testimonies and concerns, continually reinvents it for succeeding generations. Indeed biography can on occasion think into the mind of the subject with as much of a sense of special pleading as fiction can show a favourite protagonist. Akbar's analysis of Nehru's handling of China is a case in point. Having introduced the debacle of the Nehru years, Akbar asks:

Did Nehru suspect an underlying racism in this western attitude to China, an easy assumption that the Orientals from the winding lanes of their bazaars must be wily—an old stereotype which he himself had encountered during the Raj? Nehru's temperament must have reacted against the traditional stereotypes: West equals straight-from-the-shoulder public schoolboy honesty; East equals labyrinthine minds, where what is said is rarely what is meant. (Akbar 543-44)

This may not be a sound reason for Nehru's China policy. But does this degree of imaginative and collaborative sympathy not equal anything shown in fiction?

This leads on to another contribution made by biography: the creation of a character with divided cultural loyalties. Beginning with Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) through Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* (1923) to Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), writing about India has frequently located such a character in the foreground. Not surprisingly, a brief biographical aside practically identifies Nehru with Kim not only because of a shared cultural mosaic but also because of the intense desire for renunciation that this calls forth: "Before the end of his first month in power, Nehru sounded like a British character out of a book by Kipling, complaining to Pethick-Lawrence 'for the present the burden is too heavy'" (Wolpert 373). The parallel with Kim burdened by the material responsibility of the Great Game and the moral responsibility of the Lama's Law can be extended.

Central to Nehru's image is the glory of renunciation. Brecher recalls Nehru dryly reminding him in a personal interview—one of the very few he gave on this subject—"My growth to public prominence . . . was not by sharp stages. It was, rather, a steady development over a long period of time. And if I may say so . . . I began at a fairly high level" (Brecher 1). For such a person to give up personal freedom for his country is always cited as proof of the moral nimbus that surrounds the image: "Nehru had . . . the halo of a modern prince who had sacrificed wealth and leisure in the struggle for independence. Many had served with equal devotion. Others had renounced as much, perhaps more. But none was so honoured as the aristocratic 'Panditji'" (Brecher 597). Sometimes a biographer may notice Nehru's distance from India: "The world of Bertrand Russell, Shaw, Wells, and the Fabians was largely the world of Nehru the political leader. The world of the majority of Indians is a millennium or so away from that world" (Crocker 158). At another time, a biographer may comment on Nehru's ability to bridge two worlds: the adulatory world of rural Indian followers and the remote island of Delhi's elite who looked at the former with disdain. "The sole connection between observers and observed was Jawaharlal Nehru, who had deserted the company of the elite to surround himself with [the rest]. . . . Yet the cut of his *achkan* coat and his blood-red rose in his buttonhole, the lush green lawn of a classical garden domed by the beauty of the sky, all combined to compose an eighteenth-century pastoral picture of a kingly birthday. The prisoners of the Raj had become the Raj's heirs" (Seton 369).

Biographies of Jawaharlal Nehru do not merely create another character in the same mold. They suggest the consequences of the actions of such a character for both India and the world. In the process, they address vital issues in postindependence India: the creation of a new relationship between India and the West, the reexamination of the freedom struggle in new dimensions of race, class, and gender, the rise of communalism and the role of subalternity. If these claims for biography—and Nehru's biographies—seem outrageous, it's perhaps not surprising, given its subject. After all, Jawaharlal Nehru did shake up a continent.

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