Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss how two different types of texts written 500 years apart negotiate between two perspectives on Indian Mughal history. First, we have the Baburnama, an early exemplum of Islamic autobiography. It is written in the Turkic vernacular Chaghatay by the Timurid prince Babur (1483–1530; 888–937 AH) who was extending his reign from Kabul into Hindustan, not by impulse but with a long-standing vision. Babur’s military achievements were no doubt far-reaching and remarkable – and they created durable effects on the cultural outlook of India – but even more permanent influence he has had through his memoir. Baburnama is an early exemplum of Islamic autobiography, written in the Turkic vernacular Chaghatay, and provides a first-hand account of a historical period that was to change the fate of the Indian Subcontinent.

The present-day perspective is provided by the novels of Salman Rushdie, a Cambridge history graduate. He has long had an interest in the Indian Mughal heritage, and makes recurrent reference to it in his novels starting with his second, ground-breaking novel, Midnight’s Children (1981). Especially strong presence of the Mughals is found in Enchantress of Florence (2008), set in the times of the third Mughal Emperor Akbar, Babur’s grandchild, in the heyday of the Mughal Empire. In the novel, Rushdie writes both a historical – albeit counterfactual – and fictional ac-

1 Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur, The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor, translated by Wheeler M. Thackston, 1996; repr. with introd. by Salman Rushdie (New York: Modern Library, 2002) [orig. 1494–1529]; references to Baburnama are marked BN, pagination is first to the folio number (F), then to Thackston’s translation (T).
2 In the following, the years are given first according to the Common Era calendar, and then the Islamic calendar (AH).
count of the period. Rare for a novel, even a historical one, Rushdie lists 94 sources in his (partial) bibliography at the end.

While in Baburnama Babur is on his way to conquer India, Rushdie writes in the climate of Indian national chauvinism that has seized power of linguistic and political identification. I argue that what Babur’s and Rushdie’s narratives records is an ambivalent time of “undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention.”

While Babur justifies his conquests through his account, Rushdie’s use of Mughal history can be described as “a tactical reversal of domination.” Thus, both texts negotiate the ground between different understandings of Indian Mughal history.

**Babur’s Writing**

The founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, Babur – Žahīr-ud-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur – was a Timurid prince whose father was ‘amīr of Fergāna, ‘Umar Shaikh Mirzā II (1469–1494; 870–899 AH), descendant of the Turcic ‘amīr Timūr ‘Lenk’ (Timūr-e Lang; 1336–1405), and mother

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6 ‘Mughal’ is derived from the word ‘Mongol’; although Babur became the first Mughal Emperor of India, he detested both India and the Mongols. In their translation of Baburnama, William Erskine and John Leyden have included a verse by Babur on the Mongols (omitted by Thackston who simply refers at that point to “these damn Moghuls” [BN F90b/T106]): “If the Moghul race were a race of angels, it is a bad race./And were the name Moghul written in gold, it would be odious,” Žahīr-ed-Dīn Muḥammad Babur, *Memoirs of Zehir-ed-Din Muhammed Baber: Emperor of Hindustan*, translated by William Erskine and John Leyden (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1826), 93 [orig. 1494–1529]); see also R. W. Frazer, *A Literary History of India* (Delhi: Mittal, 1898), 353.

7 Fergāna, and the Fergāna Valley, once an important post on the Northern Silk Road, is in today’s Eastern Uzbekistan.

Qutlugh Nigar Khanum (1459–1505; 863/4?–911 AH), descendant of the Mongol ruler Gengish Khan (originally Temüjin; 1162–1227). Thus, Babur had a double heritage as a ruler, and in the age of twelve (1494; 899 AH), he became the ruler of Fergāna after his father.  

Babur considered extending his reign into Hindustan already in January 1505 (910 AH) when he launched his first campaign into India, as far as the Indus River. He made a further raid into Adinapur in 1507 (913 AH), and in 1519 (925 AH) he made the first of his five substantial forays of Hindustan. Although Babur was practically compelled to move south because he had been forced out of his Central Asian realms due to lost dynastic wars, his interest in India was not initiated by impulse. In his memoir he writes that “we had always had in mind to take Hindustan […] be it by force or peaceful means.” In this he may have been inspired by Timur's invasion of India (1398; 800 AH), although Timur never did, nor intended to, rule over India.

Babur's numerous military achievements were no doubt remarkable, but his more lasting influence is his memoir, Baburnama (i.e. Tuzk-e Babri). It is the first exemplum of Islamic autobiography, written in the (now extinct) Turkic vernacular and literary language Chaghatay. It provides a first-hand account of a historical period that was to change the fate of the Subcontinent. Thus, Babur made history not only by doing but also by writing. Babur writes eloquently, and in the translator Wheeler M.

10 BN F1b/T3.
11 BN F225/T273.
12 BN F145–51b/T171–79. In 1505, Babur went down the Indus River, through Adinapur ( Jalalabad, in the Nangarhar district in present-day eastern Afghanistan), the Khyber Pass, Bigram (Peshawar), Kohat, and Bangash, as far as Pir Kanu (Sakhi Sarwar by the Sulaiman Mountains) in Balochistan in contemporary Pakistan.
14 BN F223b/T271; emphasis added.
15 BN F224b/T272. Timur's campaign to India covered all of modern Pakistan and parts of Northern India up to Delhi.
16 The users of Chaghatay Turkish called their language simply Türki, but in current discourse the name Chaghatay is used to distinguish it from the present-day Turkish, see Thackston’s notes (BN 464, n6).
Thackston’s words, his “Chaghatai is fluid, idiomatic and colloquial.”

This is not perhaps predictable for a military leader, but beside a chronicler, Babur was very literate and “a noted poet and writer of [Chaghātā’i] Turkish of his time, second only to ‘Ali Sher Nawa’i” (1441–1501; 844–906 AH). Therefore, the memoir has carried cultural significance beyond its insights into personal or political histories.

Babur did not indeed shy away from violent means in creating his Empire, leaving behind a trail of blood and towers of skulls of massacred people: “In no time at all it [Givi’s sangar] was taken, a massacre ensued, and many heads were cut off. […] A tower of skulls was erected.” Although Babur had adopted Timur’s ruthless military methods described here, he also used strategic discretion in treating the defeated enemies: “We pardoned their offences. It was not my intent to alienate these people.” Furthermore, Babur kept also tight reins on his army when necessary: “I had one of the soldiers hacked to pieces for bothering some of the residents there,” at Pir Kanu shrine.


19 BN F148/T174. The Givi were an Afghan tribe; sangar is a temporary fortification.

20 Timur, then, had taken up the tactics from Genghis Khan and used his methods of organising the army. A basic unit of the system was ‘ordu’ – a cluster of (ten) tents – and the term stood for the whole of a Mongol encampment; see William Weir, 50 Military Leaders Who Changed the World (Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 2006), 83–85. Later in Europe, the Mongol word transformed into ‘horde’ to signify the Mongol army, and in North India it was taken up as the name of a Hindustani language, ‘urdu’, see Raghavachari Amritavalli and Karattuparambil Achutan Jayaseelan, “India,” in Language and National Identity in Asia, edited by Andrew Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63.

21 BN F158b/T187.

22 BN F151b/T179.
Kabul in January 1507 (912 AH), Babur’s troops had to struggle in deep snow for several days, and when they reached Khawal Qutâ below the Zirrin Pass they were caught in a heavy snowstorm. Babur refuses offers of taking shelter in a cave: “I figured that to leave my people out in the snow and the storm, with me comfortable in a warm place […], was neither manly nor comradely. Whatever hardship and difficulty there was, I would suffer it too.” In this manner Baburnama creates a particular image of Babur both as a fierce warlord and an honourable comrade.

Having survived the Zirrin Pass, Babur continues his exploits but soon after his second Hindustan campaign in autumn 1507 (913 AH) and the birth of his first son, the future second Mughal Emperor, Humayun in March 6, 1508 (913 AH), his memoir is discontinued for over a decade, until January 1519 (925 AH). How and why this lacuna may have occurred is not of concern here, but it is notable that Babur takes up his narrative again on the eve of his momentous entries into India that eventually lead into the creation of the Mughal Empire. How then does Babur write Indian history?

Babur’s History of India

For a century several districts in Punjab and Kashmir “had been under the control of [Timur’s] sons and their followers and dependents.” The decisive step for the Mughal Empire was Babur’s conquering of the last Afghan ruler of India, Sultan Ibrâhīm Lōdī in the battle of Panipat in 1526 (932 AH). Throughout, his text is a hybrid of autobiography, history, genealogy, natural history, ethnography, poetry and anecdotes. He reveres the beauties of nature and culture, and brings this forth almost in awe, at

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23 BN F193–95b/T232–35. The location of the place is not known, as Babur did not leave any sketch maps of his expeditions. In the notes of their translation, Erskine and Leyden observe: “The Zirrin Pass seems to have lain between Yeke-auleng [Yakawlang] and Chekheherân [Chaghcharan]” in Afghanistan (Babur 1826, 210); see also D. Moddie, “Baber’s Crossing [sic] of the Zirrin Pass, 1506,” The Himalayan Journal 18 (1954), http://www.himalayanclub.org/hj/18/14/expeditions-and-notes-18/, accessed December 2, 2019. All in all, mapping (of the area) was scant and/or nominal and often faulty, and Babur often had to rely on conflicting or fuzzy sources.

24 BN F194b/T234.

25 BN F224b/T272.

26 BN F266–67b/T325–27.
times in religious terms. On the eve of the battle of Panipat, Babur writes a
couplet describing the people of India in not so complimenting terms:

A group confused, peace of mind shattered.
A people preoccupied, a very strange people.27

It is quite clear that the conquest of India held no idyllic import for Babur
but was necessitated by political and strategic concerns.

There are certain problems in considering Baburnama as a work of his-
tory. The veracity of Babur’s narrative can be tested against other archival
material and his reliability can be evaluated textually and contextually.
Babur himself has no pretence as to his mission and writes after his return
to Kabul to quench rebels that had turned against him (1507; 912 AH):

I have not written all this to complain: I have simply written the truth. I
do not intend by what I have written to compliment myself: I have
simply set down exactly what happened. Since I have made it a point in
this history to write the truth of every matter and to set down no more
than the reality of every event, as a consequence I have reported every good
and evil I have seen of father and brother and set down the actuality of
every fault and virtue of relative and stranger. May the reader excuse
me; may the listener take me not to task.28

Babur does not have any ‘postmodern’ doubts for using terms like ‘truth’,
‘reality’ or ‘actuality’, and he claims to reveal everything as it is. In the fol-
lowing, I discuss his claims from one particular, everyday perspective, that
of intoxication and its effects. This is suggested by a reconsideration of
Babur’s truth-claims, and the noticeable change in his behaviour from be-
fore the textual lacuna and after it.

The narrative is not either elevated or flattering for Babur. Throughout
Baburnama, there are numerous references to wine, spirits and narcotics as
consumed by the various people Babur encounters as well as by himself.29

In Herat in the end of 1506 (912 AH), at the age of twenty-three, Babur

27 BN F264b/T324; see Stephen F. Dale, “The Poetry and Autobiography of the
28 BN F201/T241; emphases added.
29 E.g. “[Umar-Shaykh Mirza] grew rather fond of ma’jun” (a narcotic mixture, BN
F7b/T10); “Kabul wine is intoxicating” (BN F129b/T154), “Among the wines of
Nijrao the Ala Say wines are the strongest and have the best color” (BN F140/
T166), and “by overindulging in Herat wine he [Ibrahim-Husayn Mirza] drank
himself to death” (BN F167b/T199).
records: “At that time I did not drink.” He further qualifies the narrative by stating that “at that time I had not committed the sin of drinking to tipsiness, had not experienced drunkenness.”  

30 Here he is not claiming absolutism but moderation. However, a turn is about to take place because “not only was I inclined to have a drink of wine, but my heart was also urging me to cross that valley”; indeed, in Herat “where all implements of pleasure and revelry were ready and present,” he takes a deliberate turn: “if I didn’t drink now, when would I? Deliberating thus with myself, I resolved to make the leap.”  

31 If he indeed ‘made the leap’ and ‘crossed the valley’ at the time, it is not related in the memoir, but by January 1519 (925 AH) he certainly had. In the following, I will discuss how this comes through in the narrative.

After the conquest of Bajaur,  

32 and having another tower of skulls erected, Babur organises a wine-drinking session. Nine days later, on a way to raid the Yusufzai Afghans, Babur shares some “delicious and intoxicating kamali. […] It was fantastic.”  

33 The drinking sessions seem to have become for him an ordinary, at least a weekly, routine (just like the cutting off heads). With narcotics, Babur is still a novice, but he heightens his tolerance over the years. In the text there is an interesting anachronistic moment when Babur describes his use of kamali: “These days, if I were to eat a whole kamali, I don’t know if it would produce half the high.”  

34 The phrase “these days” indicates that the narrative is not recorded at the time of the events in hindsight. It is not possible to determine how much time has passed when Babur comments on his kamali-eating habits but it signals clearly that the text has been retouched afterwards, which means that the authenticity of first-hand reportage is somewhat forfeited.

Babur does not avert from writing about banalities and writes about them in a matter-of-fact manner. At one point (March 8, 1519; 925 AH) Babur overindulges in spirits: “I must have been really drunk. […] I didn’t

30 BN F189/T226.
32 In today’s Pakistan, close to the Khyber Pass.
33 BN F218b–19b/T266–67. Kamali is a narcotic mixture like ma’jun.
34 In 1519 (925 AH), after the first mention of these sessions on Jan. 12, they continue on Jan. 29 (kamali on 21), Feb. 4 (ma’jun on 15, 23), Mar. 5 (also ma’jun), 8 (ma’jun on 11, 22, 24), 12; Apr. 2, 3 (on 20, a party is cancelled in reverence of a local judge), 24, 25, 30; June 8, 16; July 6, 9; Aug. 2 (ma’jun on 12), 13, 14, 17, 24; Sept. 25 (ma’jun on 26), 30; Oct. 3 (ma’jun on 2, 31), 18, 19, 25, 29, 30, 31; Nov. 11, 12 (ma’jun on 9, 12), 13, 18; Dec. 23, 24, 26, 31.
35 BN F219b/T267; emphasis added.
remember a thing, except that when I got to my tent I vomited a lot.”

His observations seem to be affected by the drinking. For example after the above drinking bout, the next time he writes is as long as three days later, when he is again taking ma‘jun and having a party. More to the point, having ma‘jun ten days later, he describes a psychedelic experience: “How strange the fields of flowers appeared under its influence. Nothing but purple flowers were blooming in some places, and only yellow ones in other areas.” Babur continues to pay attention to his surroundings, but his reliability and diligence can be questioned on the basis of the commentary of his own capabilities. Evidently, he is sometimes so overwhelmed by the parties that he writes only about them.

Another lacuna in the text appears in January 1520 (926 AH), when the narrative ceases for almost six years until November 1525 (932 AH). Again, Babur continues at a point when he is entering India, this time for good. The use of wine, spirits and ma‘jun continues and in a letter to Khwaja Kalan, Babur writes that “the craving for a wine party was so overwhelming that many times out of longing for wine I was on the verge of weeping.” Things remain thus until February 25, 1527 (933 AH) when Babur takes the pledge of temperance, extending it through his royal decree to apply to also his subjects:

> Upon the completion of this intention and the accomplishment of this hope, a decree obeyed by all the world was issued to the effect that within the protected realm […] absolutely no creature would commit the sin of imbibing intoxicants or endeavor to acquire, produce, sell, purchase, possess, or transport same.

If there are traces in the text that reveal instances of later editing, Babur’s documentation also divulges an individual who is not always fit to record the events, although he can be commended for being candid about his addictions and their effects. However, the beginning of the history of Mughal India is tinted with insobriety, a legacy that was shared with the subsequent generations.

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36 BN F228b/T276–77.
37 BN F232/T281.
38 Letter on Feb. 10, 1529, BN F361/T436.
39 BN F313b–14/T382.
Rushdie and the History of Mughal India

Babur’s influence on the construction of Indian history is irrefutable although its interpretations are not uncontested. Rushdie’s interest in Mughal history, then, is equally clear throughout his novels. What, then, is Salman Rushdie’s Indian Mughal history like? In *Midnight’s Children* (1981), the protagonist’s father Ahmed Sinai had desired to prove his descent from Mughal emperors – “Wrong side of the blanket, of course; but Mughal, certainly”; in *Shame* (1983), Omar Khayyam Shakil’s brother had been named “Babar” after the first Emperor of the Mughals who had marched over the Impossible Mountains and conquered wherever he went”; in *The Satanic Verses* (1988) Zeeny Vakil holds the idea of “the eclectic, hybridized nature of the Indian artistic tradition. The Mughals had brought artists from every part of India to work on the paintings; individual identity was submerged to create a many-headed, many-brushed Overartist who, literally, ‘was’ Indian painting”; *Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) mentions warrior-princess Chand Bibi who held the Ahmadnagar Fort against “the armies of the Mughal Empire – of the Grand Mughal Akbar himself”; in *The Ground beneath Her Feet* (1999), there is a mention of the “Treaty of Bassein under which the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah ceded...
the Seven Isles [of Bombay] to the Portuguese”; in *Fury* (2001) there is the imaginary land, “the primitive but independent nation of Baburia” ruled by the Mogol; and in *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), Prince Salim is described as “a popular figure in Kashmir, not because he was the son of the Grand Mughal, Akbar the Great, but because once he ascended to the throne as the emperor Jehangir he made it plain that Kashmir was his second Anarkali, his other great love.” On top of these examples, there are numerous other instances in Rushdie’s works where the Mughal heritage is present.

Especially strong presence the Mughals have in *The Enchantress of Florence* that is set in the times of the third Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great (Abu’l-Fath Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar, 1542–1605; 949–1014 AH), Babur’s grandchild, in the heyday of the Empire. In his novel, Rushdie combines the histories of Europe and Mughal India through the journey of the protagonist Niccolò Vespucci (or Uccello, or Mogor dell’Amore) who travels to Akbar’s Mughal court. In the guise of history, it lays emphasis on imagination and its power.

Of special significance in the story is Queen Jodhabai, one of Akbar’s (in popular imagination alleged) queens and wives:

One of these royal personages did not really exist. She was an imaginary wife, dreamed up by Akbar in the way that lonely children dream up imaginary friends, and in spite of the presence of many living, if floating, consorts, the emperor was of the opinion that it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the nonexistent beloved who was real. (*EF 27*)

Rushdie here adopts the view of leading Indian historians, who claim that there is no historical evidence of Jodha, least of all of her having been...

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45 Salman Rushdie, *The Ground beneath Her Feet* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), 79. Anārkalī is another figure in the Mughal history who is enclosed in debate and imagination. She was a slave girl Sharif un-Nissa, aka Nadira Begum, whose story is told in the Bollywood film *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). She is alleged to having had a forbidden relationship with Crown-Prince Salim, future Emperor Jahangir.


49 E.g. Satish Chandra, “Jodha Bai: Who Was She?” in *State, Society, and Culture in Indian History*, edited by Satish Chandra (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 7; M. Athar Ali, “The Perception of India in Akbar and Abu’l Fa-
Akbar’s wife and queen. She is not mentioned in Akbar’s biography by Abu-l-Fazl, in the autobiography of his son Jahangir, nor in other contemporary sources.

An indication that the issue of Jodha’s authenticity still remains a heated topic is the debate that ensued the opening of the film Jodhaa Akbar (2008) directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. Coinciding with the publication of Rushdie’s novel (and their production processes being involved in the debate over Jodha), the two narratives on the one hand take opposite views of the historicity of Jodha – Rushdie’s as imaginary, Gowariker’s as historical –, and on the other hand they both play with the idea that one of Akbar’s queens, a Rajput princess, Mariam-uz-Zamani, may or may not have been Jodha.

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50 “Akbar actually married seven women through nikah marriage (three more than the allowed four allowed to Muslim men) and then reverted to the Shia tradition of muta marriages of which he contracted almost three hundred, yet Akbar’s harem of 5,000 women contained more than just wives,” Shahnaz Khan, “Jodhaa Akbar: Masculinities, Femininities and Cultural Politics in Bombay Cinema,” Feminist Review 99 (2011): 137, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41288880. In historical records, Jodhaa is mentioned as Akbar’s daughter-in-law, a wife of either his son Mirza Nur-ud-din Beig Mohammad Khan Salim, or Jahangir.


53 Gowariker’s film took three years to be completed, and Rushdie contributed an introduction to a reissue of Thackston’s translation of Baburnama already in 2002, see Rituparna Roy, “Enchanting Tales of Jodha-Akbar,” IIAS Newsletter 48 (Summer 2008), 34–35.

54 Mariam uz-Zamani (aka Harkha Bai, or Rajkumari Hira Kunwari, 1542–1623) was Akbar’s third, and first non-Muslim, wife and the mother of the next Mughal
Niccolò’s journey to Fatehpur Sikri – the Mughal capital from 1571 to 1585 – is an encounter between the European West and the East in an Indian colonial context where European colonialism was still in formation. It is by far not the first contact between these different worlds. In fact, at the same time as the traveller appears in the court there are the first Jesuit visitors to see Akbar, headed by the Spanish Father Antonio Monserrate together with the Italian Father Rodolfo Acquaviva (EF 70). Historically, there was actually such a visit by these Jesuit Fathers and a number of other clerics – on February 18, 1580 to be precise. Although historically established, Rushdie’s story would locate the incident in a later moment, 1583, closer to the abandonment of Sikri. This desertion is believed to have been done because the lake where the city drew its water from suddenly dried up, which is another fact ‘recorded’ by Rushdie.

Rushdie’s Questioning of Indian History

The historical Akbar fought wars to expand his empire but he also unified Hindus, Muslims and other creeds through his religio-political inclusive-


ness, and in 1582 he tried to create a syncretic religion on the basis of Islam and Hinduism, as well as of Christianity, Jainism and Zoroastrianism. In his oeuvre, Rushdie has questioned the Hindu majoritarian and nationalist view of Indian historiography and has interpreted history in more pluralistic terms through narrative methods. This interest is echoed in the wanna-be polytheistic Akbar’s ‘Tent of the New Worship’, with the camps of Water Drinkers (the manqul party) and Wine Lovers (the ma’qul party), who debate over correct interpretation of various issues (EF 79). In the historical Akbar’s case similar debates took place in a similar hall of worship, ‘Ibadat-Khaana’.57

The novel appears, thus, less as a fabricated story, ‘fiction’, than a retold history. Rushdie himself commented on this aspect in April 2008 when he replied to a “belittling review” of his novel by Ruth Morse58 in The Times Literary Supplement. Rushdie writes:

I did not invent the Mughals’ excessive fondness for opium, or Jahangir’s rebellion against his father, or the scheming world of the royal harem; nor is it my idea that the senior […] women of the Mughal court were figures of authority; nor do I falsify the nature of the marriage of Niccolò Machiavelli and his wife Marietta, which was characterized, as all historians agree, by her devotion and his philandering. These are matters of record […].59

Throughout the pages of The Enchantress of Florence Rushdie emerges insistently as a historian – a Cambridge history graduate of 1968. The insistence on the correctness of historical record is peculiar, for apart from the ‘accu-

rate’ historical records there are a number of points that are less ‘historical’. In fact, the text itself is presented in the form of a generic hybrid between fictional and historiographic narrative, which is corroborated by the fact that there is a six pages long bibliography with as many as ninety-four sources at the back\(^60\) – excluding the more literary sources.

The bibliography could be taken as a kind of postmodern parody – after all, we are talking about a novel, not a historical study\(^61\) – but there is strong indication that this is not the case. One could speculate that Rushdie is here creating a counterfactual history, a narrative universe where certain historical events are used as invariables while others are changed in order to see how things might have developed.

A Hidden Chapter

The traveller’s, Niccolò’s, tale is told in a proper storyteller’s fashion “indirectly, with many detours and divagations,” \((EF\ 10)\) to reveal a “hidden chapter” in Akbar’s family story \((EF\ 109)\). What emerges is a counterfactual history of the European push to the East as we are introduced to a forgotten, forsaken princess Qara Köz, “The Lady Black Eyes” \((EF\ 121–22)\). It is her story that the traveller has come to reveal, and to establish his own family ties with Akbar, amazingly as his long-lost uncle. In Qara Köz’s character Rushdie toys with two ideas.

First of all, there is the question of the influence of women in imperial politics. Qara Köz is described as Akbar’s grandfather Babar’s sister.\(^62\) In his “Introduction” to the 1996 reissue of Thackston’s translation of Babur-nama, Rushdie already evokes Niccolò Machiavelli as well as the ideas of “polytheistic inclusiveness” and imaginative history: “Where facts are insufficient, what fills the space is interpretation.”\(^63\) Akbar comments on the traveller’s claims: “So if your story is true, then the beginning of our own empire is the direct consequence of the willfulness of Qara Köz. Should we condemn or praise her? Was she a traitor […] or our genetrix, who shaped our future?” \((EF\ 216)\). This kind of gender reversal of the established order of things

\(^{60}\) About fifty of these deal with the European Renaissance, and about twenty the Mughal, Islamic or Indian history or culture. In the other novels by Rushdie there are no bibliographies.


\(^{62}\) BN 12, 16, 199.

\(^{63}\) Rushdie, Introduction, xii, x and ix.
would be anathema for any patriarchal society. Except that Akbar had, for a year and a day, been entertaining “megalomaniac fantasies of a joint global empire” with the English Elisabeth “that united the eastern and western hemispheres” (EF 74). Once again we have Rushdie developing an idea of women’s unacknowledged significance for world history, although many critics are once more not convinced of this stance.64

Secondly, there is the reverse travel of an Easterner, and a woman for that, into the heartland of Europe. Qara Köz becomes the Enchantress of Florence, who puts all of the city’s population under spell (EF 244), in her angelic form as Angelica. Hers is in a way a reverse postcolonial history. There are a number of such moments of postcolonial reversals in the novel that rewrite the hegemonic understanding of the East and the West. The English are here described as having “no future on this earth” for their lack of moral integrity (EF 98), and – as a counter-Orientalist commentary – Akbar concludes that “the lands of the West were exotic and surreal to a degree incomprehensible to the humdrum people of the East” (EF 326). The stated purpose for Qara Köz’s arrival in Florence is “the hope of forging a union between the great cultures of Europe and the East, knowing she has much to learn […] and believing, too, that she has much to teach” (EF 276). The people of Florence begin to see her as “a symbol of peace” and they “talk of her ‘Eastern wisdom’” (EF 286). In her disillusioned way, Qara Köz dismisses these ideas as follies: “There is no particular wisdom in the East […]. All human beings are foolish to the same degree” (EF 286). This ironic comment breaks the illusion of the Orientalist notion and brings both hemispheres to the same level.

Such parallel histories of the genealogy of the Mughal Empire and the envisioned unifications of the East and the West both in Akbar’s and Qara Köz’s visions seem to suggest that the colonial history was not a foreclosed, inevitable development in one direction, but a conjunction of various factors, and other possibilities would have been available.

The traveller’s linguistic capability emerges as a conjuring trick, similar to the poets and artists “who claimed for themselves the power of language and image to conjure beautiful somethings from empty nothings” (EF 47; emphasis added). He has, on his way to the Emperor Akbar’s palace, acquired

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himself an important document and a role to accompany it: he has become a self-appointed Ambassador for England, a messenger for Elizabeth, the Queen of England (EF 23). If we consider historical records, such a missive was (allegedly) delivered to Akbar by one John Mildenhall (1560–1614) in 1603, pretending to have been sent by Queen Elizabeth on behalf of the East India Company. There was also an earlier visitor with an actual letter of introduction from the Queen, namely a merchant called Ralph Fitch (c. 1550–1611). Fitch appeared in Akbar’s court in Fatehpur Sikri in 1584 and marvelled the merchandise present:

Hither is great resort of marchants om Persia and out of India, and very much marchandise of silke and cloth, and of precious stones, both rubies, diamants, and pearles. The king is appareled in a white cabie [i.e. a muslin tunic] made like a shirt tied with strings on the one side, and a little cloth on his head coloured oftentimes with red or yellow.

Niccolò is, then, at least an implied amalgamation of these two English travellers by Rushdie. When Niccolò gets to reveal the contents of the document to Akbar, he tells eloquently that Elizabeth is seeking alliance with Akbar on trade matters but also against the Pope (EF 72–73). It is this letter

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66 Ralph Fitch, “1583–1591: Ralph Fitch,” in Early Travels in India 1583–1619, edited by William Foster (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 18; spelling is original; the bracketed explanation is by Foster. While Mildenhall was acting in the interest of the new British East India Company that was created in 1600, Fitch was an independent merchant, albeit with an ulterior imperial agenda corroborated by the Crown.

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that makes Akbar dream of a global empire, and also of making Elizabeth his wife.

When Akbar later in life revisits the document, he realizes that he had been deceived by Vespucci’s sweet tongue, reminding him “that witchcraft requires no potions, familiar spirits or magic wands. Language upon a silvered tongue affords enchantment enough” (EF 75; emphasis added). The power of language to create and obliterate is a recurring motif in Rushdie’s oeuvre.

**Conclusion: Ambivalent Histories**

Rushdie’s persistent insistence on the significance of fiction, what I have elsewhere discussed as his epistemological stance,67 is especially strong in *The Enchantress of Florence*. Rushdie’s texts underscore the importance of interpreting Indian history in pluralistic terms, rather than from just the Hindu interpretations that dismiss the Muslim presence in the creation of India. However, Rushdie does not paint an idealistic image of the history of Islamic India, just like Babur refuses to do in his memoir, albeit they both do this from diverse perspectives, and apparently for different purposes.

Although Western historiography (if indeed such a monolith exists) is not an objective model of enquiry, the influential social theorist Ashis Nandy comments: “Traditional India not only lacks the Enlightenment’s concept of history; it is doubtful that it finds objective, hard history a reliable, ethical, or reasonable way of constructing the past.”68 Nandy’s perspective is, I argue, at the bottom of both Babur’s and Rushdie’s texts.

The at once cosmopolitan69 and counterfactual histories that we encounter in Babur’s and Rushdie’s narratives – separated by 500 years –

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67 Kuortti, *Fictions*.
69 Here I use the term ‘cosmopolitan history’ in the sense defined by Karen O’Brien as something that “simultaneously encapsulates an attitude of detachment towards national prejudice (often described as an ‘impartial’ or ‘philosophical’ attitude […]), and an intellectual investment in the idea of a common European civilisation,” with the distinction that the civilization in question is not European but Indian, or Central Asian; see Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon*, Cambridge Studies in Eighteenth-century English Literature and Thought, 34 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.
show that both writing and interpreting history is ambivalent. Despite his long-term desire to conquer Indian conquests, Babur did not appreciate India at all: for him the Indian language was coarse, the people were unreliable, the air was unhealthy, and the climate was too hot. However, it was Babur who brought about, in Sidney Pollock’s terms, “a tactical reversal of domination.” Babur laid foundations both for the Islamic domination of India and its historiography. The Mughal presence in India did not involve large-scale forced conversions, and especially Akbar was known for his ideas of religious inclusiveness. In contrast, Rushdie’s texts posit the Mughal history against the contemporary exclusionist Hindu extremism.

Rushdie, then, writes in the climate of national chauvinism that has seized power of linguistic and political identification. I argue that what Babur’s and Rushdie’s narratives illustrate is, in Homi Bhabha’s terms, an ambivalent “undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention.” The image of the Mughals, as historian William Dalrymple notes, remains “for many Indians today, rightly or wrongly […] as it suited the British to portray them in the imperial propaganda that they taught in Indian schools after 1857: as sensual, decadent, temple-destroying invaders.” Dalrymple notes continues that this image persists despite the fact that Akbar and later Mughal Emperors – including the last emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II (1775–1862) – advocated a deeply cultured, liberal and pluralistic society, and together with Akbar, Zafar remains “an attractive symbol of Islamic civilization at its most tolerant and pluralistic.” Read together, Babur’s and Rushdie’s works display the ambivalent historiography of the Mughal conquest of India, as well as the ambivalence of contemporary status of Islam in India within the majoritarian Hindu framework. Thus, the Mughal history is not only a story of victories and conquests but also a story of erring humans and inclusion, a lesson in approaching historical texts.

72 William Dalrymple, The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857 (Gurgaon: Penguin India, 2006), 479.
73 Dalrymple, Last, 483.
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