



A Study Of *The Queen Of The Night* By Alexander Chee As A Work Of Historical Fiction And A Representation Of French History

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Abstract: The present paper studies Alexander Chee's novel *The Queen of the Night* as a historical novel that brings the Second French Empire to life through fiction. Alexander Chee is a Korean American novelist, essayist, short story writer, and editor. He was born on August 21, 1967, in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, United States. Chee spent his childhood in Korea, Kauai, Turk, Guam and Maine. He writes on subjects such as race, gender and sexuality, especially on LGBTQ issues. He has a trailblazing and sumptuous writing style. He has so far written two novels, *Edinburgh* (2001), *The Queen of the Night* (2016), and a collection of essays titled *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* (2018). *The Queen of the Night* is Alexander Chee's second and acclaimed modern novel. It is about music, voice, opera, history and fiction. It engages with the cultural and political dynamics of the Second French Empire. Set against a backdrop of imperial grandeur and social unrest, the narrative weaves together fact and imagination, raising questions about how history is remembered and retold. *The Queen of the Night* deals with many ideas and themes that present the story from different perspectives. The first and the most important aspect of the novel is its presentation of French history. The paper also sheds light on the genre of historical fiction or novel from its definition to its origin and development.

Key words: History, Fiction, Historical Fiction, France, Second French Empire, Third Empire.

What is historical fiction?

Historical fiction is a combination of two words 'history' and 'fiction'. History deals with facts, and fiction deals with the imagination. Therefore, historical fiction refers to the representation of the facts from history through a fictional story and characters. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, historical fiction is "a novel that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity to historical fact." Therefore, this

literary genre presents a fictional story set in a historical time with the presentation of historical events and incidents. It aims to reconstruct history in a fictional manner.

Historical fiction is influenced by a writer's perspectives. The influence of individual choices and thoughts is visible in most of the works of literature. Historical fiction serves various purposes at the same time. It presents historical events, characters, society and norms of a particular age. On the other side, the fictional story presents various themes separate from the history while interrelating with the situations of the past. An author can be attracted towards all the aspects or towards any specific aspect, which makes a great difference. Therefore, any work of art and literature is influenced by its author's own choices and thoughts. It is not always necessary to present history in its pure sense, but sometimes the writer's perspective matters a lot.

Historical fiction and history serve the same purpose having the commonalities. Hayden White in "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact", explains these commonalities:

[...] within a long and distinguished critical tradition that has sought to determine what is "real" and what is "imagined" in the novel, history has served as a kind of archetype of the "realistic" pole of representation.... Nor is it unusual for literary theorists, when they are speaking about the "context" of a literary work, to suppose that this context — the "historical milieu" — has a concreteness and an accessibility that the work itself can never have, as if it were easier to perceive the reality of a past world put together from a thousand historical documents than it is to probe the depths of a single literary work that is presented to the critic studying it. (89)

White suggests that events from history may serve as the subjects of historical fiction.

Salman Rushdie, in *Conversation with Rushdie*, talks about the art of writing historical fiction:

The story does not go from the beginning to the end but goes in great loops and circles back on itself, repeat earlier things, digresses, uses sometimes a kind of Chinese-box system, where you have story inside the story and then they all come back. (76)

This statement seems apt in the case of Chee's *The Queen of the Night*.

Famous Marxist critic Raymond Williams, in his book *Keywords*, states that history is not only a discourse of the universal process of change, but it is also important to understand it in relation to the present. Situations from the past can be discussed to understand and solve the present situations. This adds to the importance of the historical fiction. The events and time may differ, but the stories are the same.

Kathy Nawrot in "Making Connections with Historical Fiction" tells us about the need for the historical elements to be added in fiction as, "historical fiction gives a rich literary experience while talking about the history and presenting historical events. There is something more than only history". This 'something more' is very important. In the words of Linda Levstik historical fiction is an effective way to present the history while telling a fictional story: "In a historical novel the author holds a magnifying glass up to a piece of history, providing humanising details often left out of broad survey history texts."

History and Development of Historical Fiction

Sir Walter Scott and others such as J.F. Cooper, Balzac and Tolstoy introduced historical fiction. The roots of historical fiction lie in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In this age, fictional stories were set in the historical setting to represent the social conditions of life at that time. Charles Dickens (1812-1870) is an important writer of historical fiction. His famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) is a valid representation of the Victorian age and social conditions at that time. The setting of the novel is the late eighteenth century, having the French Revolution as its background. Dickens presents the historical facts with the fictional story that serves as the critique of the age while representing it to the readers. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, historical fiction has become an important genre to represent history. The genre remains very popular even today. Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) is another important example of historical fiction. This is set in the period from 1500 to 1535. It documents the rise of Thomas Cromwell in the court of Henry VIII. Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814) is considered the first historical fiction. Scott represents the past ages through his works; he portrays the everyday life of the people with fine details of the daily living routine while interweaving the story of the fictional characters and their experiences. George Eliot's *Romola* (1863) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter* (1850) are other good examples of the genre. *Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), *Our Lady of Paris* (1831) by Victor Hugo is set in fifteenth century Paris. This is a gothic historical romance about unrequited love. Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1996) presents the story during World War II. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is an example of historical fiction to represent the suppressed individual voices that were not allowed to speak out in the past. Therefore, historical fiction, in a way, is a medium to represent the historical, including the political, social, literary and psychological images of an age.

The Queen of the Night as a Historical Fiction

As in a historical fiction, an imaginative story is set in the history which sparks the light on historical events and characters, *The Queen of the Night* is constructed with the same soul in it. History and fiction are finely woven together in this novel. The novel has many features and characteristics of this genre. Historical events and the fictional tragic story of Lilliet go together in the book. The novel presents the story of Lilliet Berne with the background of the Second French Empire. Economic, social and political conditions of the age affect the upbringing of the little girl Lilliet and later her whole life. Her character is moulded by society and its beings.

The first and the most important feature of the novel which makes it historical is its setting. The novel is set in the period of 1860s and 70s Paris during the Second French Empire through the Siege of Paris and into the Third Republic. The Second French Empire was the reign of Napoleon III from 1853 to 1870, between the Second Republic and the Third Republic. Napoleon III surrendered after the defeat at the Battle of Sedan (1870), and the new French Third Republic was introduced in Germany. To end the Franco-Prussian War, the Germans besieged Paris on 19 September 1870. Napoleon III and his son, Napoleon Prince Imperial, died, and Empress Eugenie was left behind.

The plot of the novel is indulged in a historical setting, and this historical touch gives it a new as well as a classical spirit. It adds realism to the fiction with the detailed and realistic presentation of the incidents from history. The decline of the Second Empire and the beginning of the Third Empire ground the background of the book. The novel starts with the protagonist in the year 1882, and then the story shifts to the past life of Lilliet Berne, who is now a successful opera singer. It can also be read simply as a story of a girl from her childhood to adulthood, walking through hardships and struggling for her own identity and things. The story always carries the past with it. On one side, the life of Lilliet is presented, and on the other, the political upheavals are drawn, and readers are introduced to the milieu of the Third Republic of France.

The Portrayal of Historical Figures in *The Queen of the Night*

The Queen of the Night serves as a kind of history book in a way because it brings some characters from history to life. Many Historical personages are part of the novel. Most of the characters are based on the real persons. These are characters from politics, art, opera and fashion. Emperor Louis Napoleon (nephew of Napoleon I), Empress Eugenie (wife of the Emperor and the last Empress of France), Comtesse de Castiglione (mistress of the Emperor and a spy on the French), Giuseppe Verdi, George Sand, Pauline Viardot Garcia, Ivan Turgenev, Charles Gardnier and Cora Pearl are some major historical figures having an appearance in the novel.

Characters including Comtesse de Castiglione, or the Countess of Castiglione, beauty with brain was mistress of Napoleon, who also served as a spy in his court. Her real name was Virginia Oldeini. Her relationship with the Emperor led to her separation from her husband. After establishing a relationship with the Emperor, she entered the court and became familiar with the people of European royalty. She was very beautiful and known for her entries in the court wearing her gorgeous dresses. She was married to widower Count Francesco Verases di Castiglione in 1854. Chee has collected the details of her character, as he has mentioned in the *Historical Notes and Acknowledgements* added at the end of the novel, from *La divine Comtess: Photographs of the Countess de Castiglione*, that is a catalogue of Comtesses's pictures by photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Show. One of these pictures, titled "The Opera Ball", is used on the cover page of the novel. It signifies her major role in the novel. Her character is having a bad shadow on Lilliet's life as she uses the innocent girl in her conspiracy against the French. She is a spy, and she uses the protagonist as her tool to spy on both the Emperor and Empress. She plays an important role in the Franco-Prussian War with her useful information about the royal family and their functions and meetings. She gets this information with the help of Lilliet although Lilliet was unaware of the Comtesse's intentions.

Emperor Napoleon III and his wife, Empress Eugenie de Montijo, are the characters that give the novel a historical and political colour. The protagonist lives around and talks to these historical personas. She performs in front of the Emperor and receives a precious gift from him. Her relationship with the Empress is of a warm kind. Empress gives Lilliet her own dresses and other things to wear. There are references to Marie Antoinette, the last queen of France, who was overthrown by French revolutionaries after the abolitions of her monarchy.

Cora Pearl is another character based on a famous lady from French history. Cora Pearl was born as Eliza Emma Crouch (1836-1886). She was a popular courtesan of the French during the Second Empire. Her father died, and her mother went with her lover, and she was left behind alone. Once a man seduced her after making her drunk and left some money beside her. This was a turning point in her life. She was unable to return to her previous life. It affected her psychologically. She adopted a new name, Cora Pearl, and started working as a prostitute. She also served herself nude at Parisian dinner parties. In her lifetime she had many lovers who paid all her bills. Once a man ten years younger than her fell in love with her and became very serious, but she rejected him. She is known for her hedonistic and epicurean lifestyle. In the novel, she is the one who warns Lilliet about the reality of men, their love and needs. She advises her to not fall in love with anyone. Lilliet did not like her opinion at first, but after having an encounter with reality, she understood that Cora was right.

Pauline Viardot Garcia was one of the popular artists of her age. She is Lilliet's music and voice teacher in the novel. She is one of the greatest artists in the past and present history of music. *The Guardian* describes her relationship with Louis Viardot and Ivan Turgenev. It says that when Pauline and Louis Viardots settled in Baden-Baden, Turgenev was their next-door neighbour who lived his last years in a flat at the top of the Viardot's house in Paris. Turgenev and Louis Viardot died within a month of each other in 1883. Pauline continued to live in Paris until her death in 1910. George Sand opined Pauline to marry Viardot. He was 21 years older than she was. Later, on a tour, she met Turgenev; both fell in love and the three of them started living together at the end.

The novel deals with the various prospects of the Franco-Prussian War. The details of the frightening sights make the reader feel the time and dangers of the war. Thousands of people were killed, and many also starved to death. Chee draws a vivid picture of the Franco-Prussian War in the novel with the in-depth descriptions. The frightening sights presented by Lilliet depict the terrible conditions of the war. The Siege of Paris is introduced, as Lilliet tells:

There were wild celebrations in the street for the birth of the new republic. It was as if in defeat, Paris dressed in the air, briefly, of a liberated city — liberated from empire. Crowds descended on the Tuileries and it was looted before the new government's troops took control and continued, at least, the posture of a continued war with Prussia. (*The Queen* 349)

Social and medical conditions worsened day by day, and hunger was the crucial concern in those days. There was hunger, which caused death in a large number. The blood, dead bodies, terror and fear were present in that environment. In the markets "...there were only long lines in the cold for what little was there" (363). After some time, there was a lack of the stored food and other things in the houses. The food crisis occurred, which led to hunger everywhere. People were trying every possible way to survive. Earlier in the days, the smell of dead bodies and rotten things caused the infections and diseases. In winter, there was a slight relief from the foul smell, as Lilliet explains, "By December, the food crisis in Paris was in extremis. The cold at least kept the smell of the garbage down, and there was less garbage also, and what there was had less and less in it that would rot" (363). In the history of Paris, the year 1880 is the

smelliest year because of the foul smell of the dead bodies. Thousands of people were killed during the war. The war had ended but had left its long-lasting effects on the people and their lives. The only worry was to remain alive, which is suggested through the words of the protagonist:

The Third Republic had proved no more effective at ending the Siege and fighting the Prussians than the Second Empire, though, of course, I wanted to know only when we could eat again. As winter started, the hunger became unbearable, and now there was also a need for wood for fires. (363)

Lilliet and Aristafeo visited various places to find something to eat. Aristafeo searched for anything to eat while Lilliet gathered the chestnuts, leaves and the bark of the chestnut tree to make their food at home. She did this until the trees were bare. They were sometimes dependent only on animals. As she describes that one day they brought some thin rabbits and dogs from outside, and Aristafeo skinned them in the kitchen, and she roasted the chestnuts she collected. He wanted Lilliet to make a blood sausage from the blood of the animals, but she does not know how to make that. They stewed the rabbits, ate them, and discussed what to eat on Christmas because it was near. First, they thought about eating dogs but ended up deciding to fast on Christmas. In the city of Paris there was continuous bombing for three days, as Lilliet describes, “at the end of the third week Paris was shelled for three days straight” (366). People of Paris were sick from the war and deaths, and they took the shelling as a sport or a matter of keen interest. After the explosion, children collected the fragments of the shells hoping to sell them as souvenirs. People were told to keep the buckets of water by their door to help and save the persons from the fire and shells. Bombardment caused the terrible death of inhabitants and destruction of the houses and other buildings. Lilliet explains a terrible image of the death of a woman who dies in the shelling. A dead body of a woman remained at the same place for almost a week, and nobody was concerned to remove the corpse. She wanted to remove it but did not have any idea where to place it or whose help to take. Finally, the body was removed from there, but Lilliet still feels the fear of the presence of the dead body. She explains another terrible image of a man all covered in blood carrying a blood-soaking and filthy package resembling the head of a person tied to his chest with the help of his torn sleeve. It is a horrible picture of the state of that time.

Therefore, the novel presents a society or a city where life was under the shadow of war and death, and these horrible images witnessed by Lilliet help the reader to observe and understand the situation of the war.

This novel could also be written to present Chee's own understanding of the age and its events. He creates a character, Lilliet, and sends her to that age. The character may represent herself adjusting and escaping in that time with a constant struggle. On the other hand, Chee was not aware of the fact that his novel would come out as a work of historical fiction. He wrote a story of a girl in that age, and with a huge dedication, he added all the details of the age, which have made it a work of historical fiction. Chee says that when he started writing *The Queen of the Night*, he did not realise that he was writing “historical fiction”. He was unaware of the interest of the publishers for this genre. He had read historical fiction throughout his life simply as novels. He read many historical fictions by Mary Renault, a famous historical

novelist. These include *Fire from Heaven* (1969), *The Persian Boy* (1972) and *Funeral Games* (1981). It was Mary's trilogy based on the life of Alexander the Great and Hepaestion, a nobleman and general in his army. He has read *Adam Bede* (1859) by George Eliot, *Cassandra* (1983) by Christa Wolf, a retelling of the *Illiad* from a different perspective and *Obason* (1989) by Joy Kogawa. All the above written works are historical novels, but Chee read and interpreted these works merely as novels. He never divided the novel into further categories. Whenever he described *The Queen of the Night* as the tale of, "an opera singer in the court of France's Second Empire who is afraid her voice is cursed, dooming her to repeat the fates of her roles" he was only responded to in the words "Oh, you are writing a historical novel" (*New Republic*). He always confusingly responded with yes and felt as if his listeners misunderstood him. He did not only mean to write a historical fiction with a reference to the historical period and events.

Details of historical sites and events in the novel

The details of historical sites and events also stand out prominently. There are various reasons for the setting of the novel. Chee may have found the setting convenient according to the story of the novel and character. Chee has introduced many historical events. Exposition Universelle of 1867 is given an important place in the novel. It was an international fair managed by Napoleon III. There were many attractions in this exposition. Chee provides rich details of the Tuileries Palace, the residence of Emperor and Empress. Tuileries Palace is one of the major settings of the novel. Lilliet Berne spends a good quality and quantity of time in this palace. She grows mentally and emotionally in this palace. She serves for Empress as a maid in her toilette. She takes care of her dresses. This phase of her life in the palace is very important because here the fictional character interacts with the real historical character, and history and fiction come together. The details about the palace are given in the novel from the eyes of Lilliet. It was a great royal imperial palace on the right bank of the river Seine in Paris. It had been the residence of the French kings and monarchs from Henry VI to Napoleon III. It was burnt by the Paris Commune in 1871. While describing the architecture of the buildings of that time, the story of Lilliet's life is also presented. Lilliet comes across a fan with the portrait of a beautiful woman on it. It is the painting of Henry IV, and the beautiful woman is Gabrielle d'Estrées, the duchess of Beaufort and Verneuil, mistress of Henry IV, who encouraged the King to be a great ruler.

Representation of the Fashions of the Age

One of the notable aspects of the novel is that it records the fashions of the age. There are beautiful details of the high-priced designer dresses of the Empress, Comtesse and Lilliet Berne. It mainly focuses on the dresses and costumes of Empress Eugenie. Women from royal and rich families gave great importance to their appearance. There were designers who designed the dresses for them to wear on different occasions. The costumes were changed five times a day. There were helpers to take care of the dresses and the jewellery. The novel opens with the description of the dress of famous opera singer Lilliet Berne:

The dress was a Worth creation of pink taffeta and gold silk, three pink flounces that belled out from a bodice embroidered in a pattern of gold wings. A net of gold-ribbon bows covered the skirt and held the flounces up at the hem. (*The Queen* 3)

In the nineteenth century, fashion had great importance. Charles Frederic Worth was the famous dressmaker and designer. Ladies of the elite class were fond of his creations. In the fashionable society of the age, costumes and dresses were loved more than anything else. In the novel, we are provided with the fine details of the beautiful hairstyles, gowns with their matching jewellery and differently designed footwear for different occasions and purposes. These details represent the indulgence in fashion of the age. Lilliet finds a list of the outfits of the Empress. The list includes the dresses made by fur and skin of animals. The list was published by a newspaper after the Empress abandoned them after leaving the Tuileries palace. The list includes about sixty items, including cloaks, pelisses, bodices, muffs, cuffs, carpets, carcos, gloves and many more things made from the fur and skin of foxes, otters, goats, sheeps, Spanish lambs, bears etc. These were shown to the public to defame the Empress and to make her feel shame because she wore the skin and fur. However, this presents the cruel nature of man, who only for the sake of fashion and comfort kills the animals. These are listed items only, and there may be more that were not added to the list. In the novel, the Empress wears beautiful and high-priced gowns and changes habitually on every occasion. She does not repeat any dress. She has a new dress for every daily routine event. Wherever she goes, her helpers and maids go along with her, carrying all the things needed for the change, including new dresses, makeup, hairstyles, jewellery, sandals etc. Lilliet, by her fate, reaches the Tuileries and gets the job of the fur keeper of the Empress. Nobody wanted to do this job because it was not easy to take care of the furs and other dresses made by skin and other costly stuff. It seems that Chee is very much interested in presenting the details of the dresses and fashion of the age.

Near the end of the novel, after murdering the tenor, Lilliet wears only black as a sign of mourning. Her black dresses are also specially made for all the events she attends. It is funny that there are also matching ornaments with these mourning gowns:

I dressed instead, in yet another elaborate mourning costume, this one with a black feather ruff, the bodice shining with black beads, a black fur cuff for the cold, black ostrich shoes that gleamed so that my feet were like that of some even stranger bird, hoping to make myself brave; but this costume was nothing, and I sat before Aristafeo at dinner....” (534)

When Lilliet reaches the Comtesse, after escaping from Compiègne, she gets her new dresses made by Felix. It was a well-known brand then and a designer of the rich class in the nineteenth century. Lilliet gets the following dresses:

The one for day was plain, with sleeves to my wrist and a high neck; the one for dinner, with silver silk ribbon piping and a white machine-lace trim, was cut lower but still demurely, and the sleeves just covered the shoulders. The last, for the opera, was square cut, more daring, a black-velvet-ribbon trim at the neckline, the arms nearly bare. (240)

She feels she is fortunate to get the dresses because she had never owned a dress of her own. Lilliet, after becoming popular and rich orders the dresses made of “satin, velvet, chantilly, *point d’Angleterre*, sable, ermine, fox, red and white nutria. Gold thread and silver. Ostrich and peacock and pheasant. Jet, garnet, glass” (Queen 432). The dresses take a long time in their designing:

The dresses I [Lilliet] was ordering, some would take months to finish. The way the other women in the rest of Paris lived made its way in front of me for my regard: tea gowns, visiting dresses, afternoon gowns, riding suits, robes de chambre. (432)

Charles Frederic Worth was the favourite dressmaker of Empress Eugenie. His designed dresses won the awards at the Great Exhibition in London (1851) and the Exposition Universelle (1855). He was called the father of haute couture. *Fashionista* describes genius Worth as:

The status of his clientele, which included the French court and members of the nouveau riche, proved instrumental to the success of the House of Worth. Today, celebrities on red carpet can make or break a designer, however in the nineteenth century, it was society and official court portraits that provided a designer with a literal royal stamp of approval. (*Fashionista*)

He had seen a rise in his career as a designer during the Second Empire. After the retirement of an empire in France, there was a heightened demand for luxury goods and extravagant fashions, and he was the only man to set the tastes of the French Imperial Court. Empress Eugenie was a trendsetter in the world of fashion. Her outfit and dresses influenced the French Empire. She found Worth's creations the best to match with her style and status. During this time, he became a very popular designer in America and Europe. The fashion, social norms, manners and lifestyle are well presented in the book.

The Construction of *The Queen* as a Work of Historical Fiction

For the historical fiction, a relentless amount of research is needed. The novel itself shows the research behind its construction. At the end of the novel, Chee talks about the sources which he consulted while writing the novel. These sources contributed a lot to the construction of the book. He added a section titled "Historical Notes and Acknowledgements". In this section, he tells how he came to know about Jenny Lind from his friend David Rakoff. David narrated to him the story of Jenny Lind, who was famously known as the Swedish Nightingale, an opera sensation. After listening to the story of Jenny, an image of an opera singer inscribed in his mind with its whole life story and struggle. The image he had imagined of Jenny was not the true image, but it worked as the "seed of the novel" (*The Queen* 554). He says if David had not told him the story, he could never have written this novel (554). Chee further makes it clear that Lilliet has a slight resemblance to Jenny Lind. Lind was Swedish, but Lilliet is American. In an interview with *Bomb Magazine*, Chee talks about the research he did for 15 years to write this novel. He says that he has read several things about Jenny Lind's life, and he has read the autobiographies and biographies of famous opera managers and singers. He has also read the biography of Jenny's contemporary famous music teacher, Pauline Viardot Garcia, who appears in the novel as Lilliet's voice teacher. Pauline's daring steps to protest the policies of the Second Empire, which were a suppression of the freedom of women, also caught Chee's attention. When Chee was asked about the similarity between Jenny Lind and Lilliet, he denied the fact that Lilliet runs into Jenny's life. Jenny made a good amount of money from her performances, and one day she resigned from her career because she thought that music is an immortal thing and, being a mortal, she cannot serve for the whole time. She organised a farewell concert in London in 1883. Her fan following was so powerful that the House of Lords declared a holiday

on the day so that people could visit her concert. Chee further says that Jenny was a legendary singer, and it is difficult to imagine such a powerful singer in today's world. Therefore, it can be said that Chee just got the idea of an opera singer being the heroine of his novel after listening and researching about Jenny Lind. He has designed her heroine with some additions and subtractions.

The Queen of the Night weaves history and fiction together in the same thread. The novel talks about many things at the same time. It talks of the opera, fashion, décor and architecture, manners and especially the social and political history of the time. Chee replied to a question about what he feels about historical fiction, and his views on historical fiction. He further says that he never thought of this novel as a different genre. He is of the view that sometimes a writer gets himself into the past: "I simply thought that one of the things you did when you wrote a novel was, sometimes, you went into the past, it never once occurred to me that there was some sort of separate genre." He is of the view that historical fiction seems bound to some sort of "uncanny verisimilitude" or the eccentric probability. According to him, historical fiction is "a way of engaging with the history. It's a way of arguing with history, it's a way of arguing with a culture's idea of itself. It is a novel of ideas about history" (*Bomb Magazine*).

He says that he writes novels only to be a writer, whereas Tolstoy wrote to understand history, and Mantel wrote her novels to understand the writing of fiction. The most important thing that makes a person a writer is the "willingness to follow your thoughts anywhere especially if they lead out of the present, in search of what they will say to you about the past" (*New Republic*). About *The Queen of the Night*, he says:

My woman then, the woman in the court of Second Empire, who hid under the guise of being decorous, their power an open secret hidden up in that high, powdered hair. What could represent them better than that tangle? I longed to dissolve into someone else to put on a powdered wig, a crinoline, and antsy into the past. And that is just what I did. (*New Yorker*)

Chee's detailed description shows his research and study of the history. He was not there in the age which he is talking about, but he has read everything, including political, social and literary details of the age, to portray the real picture of the age. He has read many sources because he wanted the protagonist to be, "woven into the lives of that period very tightly". He wanted the novel to attain the elegance of a fairy tale, and at the same time, "the singer's own very, potentially real autobiography" (*Bomb Magazine*).

Jean Rhys' works also influence the *Queen of the Night*. In Rhys's novel, he finds how women characters are expected to be treated as humans but not as women. The struggle of women is well presented in the novel. Lilliet is struggling throughout the whole story. She struggles everywhere: in her home, outside her home, in her hometown and out of her country. She suffers when she is free and when bound to someone. Chee says that for Lilliet he was thinking, "More of the struggle of women like George Sand, the first woman in France to sue for divorce" (*Bomb Magazine*). George Sand was successful in this, and she became a writer and supported her living by her own income from writing. Lilliet may be resembling George Sand in the struggle and success to get rid of the forced relationships. Lilliet struggles at various levels of her life. However, she does not tell herself and never regrets that she had faced such bad things.

A man called Tenor bought her from Majuris Plaisirs, who says that he loves her, but his love is not powerful or true, which could bind her to him and stop her from flourishing. Though she is not enthusiastic to be successful, gradually she achieves everything. She wanted to get rid of the tenor, but every time she tries to forget him and starts a new life, the world shows itself to be very small, and the next moment he reaches the place where she is. He follows her every time and takes her with him because she belongs only to him, as he has bought her. She is always treated like an object. She is raped repeatedly in the name of love and affection. Moreover, after a lot of struggles and overcoming of the negativity, she, however, can get herself free from Tenor and from all her lovers, including Ariatafeo and Eugene. These things which were pulling her back were denied by her. She starts a new life and becomes a successful opera singer who is a sensation of the nineteenth century. She supports herself. She denies being a victim, anymore of human beings and of situations.

According to him, historical fiction seems to be bound to some sort of “uncanny verisimilitude” (*Bomb Magazine*), which is something strange but resembling reality. In a way, historical fiction is a way of engaging and arguing with the history. In addition, fiction is a way of thinking about things. In *The Queen* he engages with history and tries to explore its layers.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, *The Queen of the Night* offers a vivid reimagining of the Second French Empire by blending historical details with fictional storytelling. Through the story of the protagonist, he shows how personal lives were shaped by the politics, fashion, and culture of the time. The presence of real historical figures and the detailed description of the period make the novel feel grounded in truth, even as it tells a fictional story. By blending fiction and history, Chee gives readers a deeper understanding of the time and the people who lived in it.

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