



## **City Through the Lens of Poetry: Ramdhari Singh Dinkar on Delhi**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Delhi, having served as the capital of India for centuries, has been a resort to many remarkable figures over time. It is often referred to as 'Mir and Ghalib's Delhi,' an evidence to the city's deep connection with these legendary poets who captured Delhi in moments of prosperity and decay. Their legacy shaped how people memorise Delhi a space where Dreams were built, shattered and reborn. From 1911 onwards when the capital was shifted to Delhi by King George V, it again became a hub of cultural activities even before independence. In the light of this, the paper explores poems written about Delhi by the renowned Hindi scholar

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, composed between the 1940s and 1960s. It dives in to three of his most significant works: *“Dilli”*, *“Chuhe Ki Dilli Yatra”* and *“Bharat Ka Reshami Nagar”*. Ramdhari Singh Dinkar’s poem ‘Dilli’ portrays the city's tragic downfall from a glorious empire to a helpless widow. He exposes the rulers' false display of power, which masks oppression and suffering, he questions the true cost of its so-called progress. *“Chuhe Ki Dilli Yatra”* explores the journey of a timid mouse symbolizing the weak and downtrodden who remains fearful even after independence. The British were replaced by Indian babus, proving that power only changed hands. The poem leaves us questioning— has anything really changed? *“Bharat Ka Reshami Nagar”* explores a city draped in luxury, while the real India struggles in shadows. Dinkar unveils the bitter reality of post-independence India where freedom came, but equality did not. Yet beneath this illusion of prosperity, a storm is brewing, carrying the hope of change, ready to break the



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chains of injustice. The paper compares these poetic themes with historical records, showcasing how literature reflects city's past. This paper will come out with a new way to see Delhi's history through the lens of poetry and provide a bridge between literature and history for understanding Delhi's evolution.

**Keywords:** *Delhi, Poetic themes, Independence, post-Independence*





## INTRODUCTION

Delhi has always been a city of poets and power, evolving through time—from ancient rulers to modern administrators. As capitals shifted and dynasties faded, Delhi remained the heart of cultural and political influence. Urbanization brought progress, yet it deepened the divide between those who thrived and those left behind. Poets have long captured this contrast, and Dinkar was no exception. Through his works, this research explores how, despite its grandeur, Delhi remained a city where the common man struggled for recognition.

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, often called Rashtrakavi, gave voice to the struggles of the ordinary citizen. His poetry, blending history, mythology, and social critique, carried both the roar of rebellion and the whispers of reality. Writing in a newly independent India, he exposed the illusion of Delhi's grandeur, where power shifted hands but inequality endured. As Sharma (2016, 278) notes, Dinkar's poetry critiques how Delhi became an exclusive urban hub, where the ruling class distanced itself from the rural poor rather than uniting the nation. His poems, such as *Bharat ka Reshami Nagar* and *Chuhe ki Dilli Yatra*, reveal this disillusionment, questioning whether freedom truly reached every doorstep or simply changed its disguise.

*दिल्ली (Dilli)*

The poem “दिल्ली” (Dilli) written by Ram Dhari Singh Dinkar is a beautiful portrayal of Delhi's transformation from a city of cultural grandeur to a symbol of decay and false pride. This poem mainly revolves around 1911 event and post -1911, when the capital was shifted back to Delhi from Calcutta by king George V. Though the entire city was revamped however, Dinkar views this event through the lens of downtrodden people who paid a huge cost for the so called ‘reorientation’ of the entire city by Edward Lutyens and Hebert Baker. Dinkar urges Delhi to remember its cosmopolitan past and warns it to be proud of its rich cultural heritage. In the poem Dinkar delineates Delhi's syncretic past and laments its lost. He uses various metaphors for Delhi which is reflected in the stanzas of the poem.



“यह कैसी चाँदनी अमा के मलिन तमिस्र गगन में!

कूक रही क्यों नियति व्यंग्य से इस गोधूलि-लगन में?”

**(‘What kind of moonlight is this in the impure, dark sky of a moonless night? Why is destiny mocking with sarcasm in this twilight hour? Delhi! Why are you adorning yourself like a bride in a graveyard? Oh! Is this a false show of spring in this ruined garden?’) (Dinkar n.d., 1-4, Trans.by the author)**

The above lines depict a powerful contrast between the *mirage of beauty* and the *underlying despair*. The line “यह कैसी चाँदनी अमर के मलिन तमिस्र गगन में!” symbolizes a ray of *illusory hope* shining amid surrounding destruction and gloom. Delhi is metaphorically compared to a bride— “मरघट में तू सज रही दिल्ली! कैसे श्रृंगार?”—a striking image that highlights the irony of adornment in a land of death and devastation.who tries to adorn herself in graveyard

which seems a futile idea as city is surrounded by the clouds of sorrow and despair. The imagery of the spring suggests superficial prosperity in a place where true life and vitality have long vanished. The above lines bring in to limelight the revolt of 1857, which was brutally suppressed by the British victors

Delhi is metaphorically depicted as celebrating this subjugation by the new victors, but it is not voluntary rather imposed from above. post -1857 the control of the colony went in to the hands of crown, which was a major landmark. Ghalib in an introspective mood wrote for inhabitants of Delhi ‘we had only one thing left /the wish to reconstruct the city/ Everything else was plundered’(Gupta 1981, 31) British governance was hypocritic, for they justified there rule their rule as bringing peace, but it was enforced through suppression, thousands were killed and surviving inhabitants were expelled (Gupta 1981, 21)

“इस उजाड़, निर्जन खँडहर में,

छिन्न-भिन्न उजड़े इस घर में,

तुझे रूप सजने की सूझी



मेरे सत्यनाश-प्रहर में!”

*(“In this desolate, deserted ruin,  
In this broken, destroyed home,  
You thought of adorning yourself,  
In the hour of my complete destruction!”)*  
*(Dinkar n.d., 5–8, trans. by the author)*

The above lines portray a shattered Delhi in the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857. The central paradox highlighted here is that the city attempts to adorn herself—“तुझे रूप सजने की सूझी”—amid chaos, devastation, and turmoil. Delhi’s identity, pride, and independence were brutally crushed under colonial oppression. The phrase “निज्जन खंडहरों में” alludes to the large-scale plunder of Delhi by the so-called “victors.” The city’s immense wealth was treated as a prize by both civilian and military officers. These officials were less concerned with the ethics of acquiring wealth or power than with the sheer quantity they could seize (Gupta 1981, 21).

Following the British reconquest, Delhi was reduced to a “ghost city,” as nobles and artisans were either displaced or forced into exile. The Red Fort, which once symbolized Mughal grandeur and sovereignty, was transformed into a “howling desert of barracks—hideous, British, and pretentious” (Gupta 1981, 57).

“डाल-डाल पर छेड़ रही कोयल मर्सिया तराना,  
और तुझे सूझा इस दम ही उत्सव हाय, मनाना;  
हम धोते हैं घाव इधर सतलज के शीतल जल से,  
उधर तुझे भाता है इन पर नमक हाय, छिड़काना!  
महल कहाँ? बस, हमें सहारा



केवल फूस-फाँस, तृणदल का;

अन्न नहीं, अवलंब प्राण को

गम, आँसू या गंगाजल का;”

*(“The cuckoo sings a song of mourning on every branch,  
And yet you thought of celebrating at this moment!  
Here we wash our wounds with the cool waters of the Sutlej,  
But there you choose to sprinkle salt upon these wounds!  
Where are the palaces? We have only the support  
Of straw and grass leaves. There is no food, and for survival we rely  
Only on sorrow, tears, or the holy waters of the Ganges.”)*  
*(Dinkar n.d., 9–16, trans. by the author)*

These lines foreground the deep irony and collective sorrow that mark Delhi’s condition after its devastation. The phrase “मलसज्जय तरन” signifies a city in lament, mourning its loss and trauma. British colonial rule drastically altered Delhi’s physical and social landscape, leading to the large-scale displacement of its indigenous population. Economic control of the capital came to rest in the hands of Hindu and Jain bankers aligned with British officials (Gupta 1981, 57). While these groups accumulated immense fortunes, those who were exiled or dispossessed struggled for basic sustenance and livelihood.

Delhi’s old aristocracy was unable to reconcile itself with this harsh and callous reality; many were reduced to petitioners in their own city (Gupta 1981, 92). The line “तुझे सूझा इस दम ही उत्सव मनाना” points to the period when Delhi was rebuilt under colonial authority and reduced to the status of a provincial town. A striking example of this transformation is the sale of the Fatehpuri Masjid to Lala Chunna Mal (Gupta 1981, 71), symbolizing the commodification of sacred and cultural spaces.



The line “केवल फूस-फाँस, तिनटू क” underscores the extreme impoverishment of the lower sections of society. Basic necessities of life were heavily taxed to generate colonial revenue (Gupta 1981, 159). Colonial administrators such as Harcourt Butler considered the financing of New Delhi to be of paramount importance, believing that a grand capital would impress Indians and signal the British determination to remain in Delhi (Gupta 1981, 179). The irony, however, lies in the fact that Indians themselves bore the financial burden of the city’s renovation. Resources were systematically extracted from the Indian populace, exacerbating their misery and compelling them to survive on “गम, आँसू या गंगाजल.”

“वह विहगों का झुंड लक्ष्य है  
आजीवन वधिकों के फल का;  
मरने पर भी हमें कफ़न है  
माता शब्या के अंचल का”

*(“That flock of birds is forever a target  
Of the hunter’s arrows throughout their lives.  
Even in death, our shroud is drawn  
From the lap of Mother Earth itself.”)  
(Dinkar n.d., 17–20, trans. by the author)*

In the above lines, “विहगों का झुंड” functions as a metaphor for the innocent and vulnerable populace of Delhi, who continually bore the brunt of colonial exploitation. For instance, in 1914 the wheel tax was increased, and protests by the *thelāwalas* of Idgah were ignored. Similarly, *gwalas* in Sabzi Mandi and the militant leather merchants of Sadar Bazaar organized protests in response to their growing impoverishment (Gupta 1981, 187).

Despite enduring violence and suffering throughout their lives, even in death they find solace only in the embrace of their homeland, symbolized by the shroud drawn from the lap of Mother Earth.



This metaphor powerfully underscores the persistent exploitation and helplessness of Delhi's people—individuals who remained victims of power and destruction, yet ultimately returned to their roots in search of eternal peace.

“अपनी गरदन रेत-रेत असि की तीखी धारों पर

राजहंस बलिदान चढ़ाते माँ के हुंकारों पर।

पगली! देख, ज़रा कैसी मर मिटने की तैयारी?

जादू चलेगा न धुन के पक्के इन बनजारों पर।

तू वैभव-मद में इठलाती,

परकीया-सी सैन चलाती,

री ब्रिटेन की दासी! किसको

इन आँखों पर हे ललचाती?”

*(“Slitting their own necks on the sharp edge of the sword,  
The royal swans sacrifice themselves for the cries of the Mother.  
See how they stand ready to die with unwavering resolve.  
No magic can work upon these determined wanderers.  
You are intoxicated with the pride and arrogance of wealth—  
Alas! You have become a slave of Britain!”)*  
*(Dinkar n.d., 40–47, trans. by the author)*

In the above lines, “राजहंस” symbolizes the brave patriots who willingly sacrificed their lives for the nation, doing so with unwavering courage and dignity. In stark contrast, the poet condemns Delhi by likening it to a prostitute—“परकीय-सी शयन-चिन्ती”—who welcomes all who arrive at her



doorstep. Through this scathing metaphor, the poet accuses the city of moral and political surrender.

The poet further argues that Delhi had accepted British subjugation, a reality exemplified by the *Imperial Durbar*, where the British Emperor and Empress appeared at the *jharokhas* of the Red Fort. Ironically, they were celebrated as the “Mughal couple of the twentieth century” (Gupta 1981, 167). This spectacle symbolized the appropriation of Mughal authority and the erasure of indigenous sovereignty.

Through these lines, the poet urges Delhi to awaken, to rebel, and to be ignited with the fire of resistance. He reminds the city of the immense sacrifices made by the patriots and calls upon her to reclaim her lost spirit. The line “तू वैभव-मद में इठि ती” refers to the extravagant expenditure incurred in rebuilding the capital, which was financed through oppressive taxation—such as octroi, house tax, and other levies imposed on the inhabitants (Gupta 1981, 157–160).

The final line of the stanza suggests that Delhi may have been swayed by the rhetoric of Thomas, a missionary who argued that the British government was *swadeshi* rather than partisan, and that Indians should therefore cooperate with it (Gupta 1981, 166). By internalizing such narratives, Delhi is portrayed as having resigned herself to colonial servitude, thus becoming a “slave of Britain.”

“हमने देखा यहीं पांडु-वीरों का कीर्ति-प्रसार, छिनी सजी-साजी वह दिल्ली

अरी! बहादुरशाह 'ज़फ़र' की; और छिनी गद्दी लखनउ की

वाजिद अली शाह 'अख़्तर' की। छिना मुकुट प्यारे 'सिराज' का, “

*(“We have witnessed the glory of the Pandava heroes flourish here.*

*Akbar and Shah Jahan themselves adorned this city.*

*That exquisitely embellished Delhi was snatched away—*

*Alas! From Bahadur Shah Zafar.*



*The throne of Lucknow was taken away*

*From Wajid Ali Shah Akhtar.*

*The beloved crown of Siraj was also seized.”)*

*(Dinkar n.d., 48, 51, 60–64, trans. by the author)*

The lines reflect the loss of India’s composite past and the fall of great rulers who once adorned and protected their kingdoms. Delhi, once the jewel of the Mughal Empire, Bahadur shah’s long reign saw flowering of Delhi’s Urdu Litrature and Lucknow, the heart of Awadhi culture, were stripped of their honor and sovereignty (Gupta 1981, 226-27).

The above lines also highlight that europe’s expansion in to India was slow and piecemeal penetration, moreover as CA Bayly puts that ‘India was made tributary to the capitalist world system.’ The metaphor highlights India’s descent from a land of power and dignity to one of subjugation, where even the symbols of strength and resistance were mercilessly crushed.

“आहें उठीं दीन कृषकों की, मज़दूरों की तड़प, पुकारें,

अरी! गरीबों के लोहू परखड़ी हुई तेरी दीवारों”

*(“The sighs of impoverished farmers rose upward,*

*Along with the cries and agony of laborers.*

*Oh! Your walls were built upon the blood of the poor;*

*Your towering ramparts stand upon their sacrifice.*

*O Delhi—*

*Queen of the farmers’ intellect and labour.”)*

*(Dinkar n.d., 68–72, 77, trans. by the author)*

The lines metaphorically highlight the suffering and exploitation of farmers and laborers whose blood, sweat, and sacrifices built the grandeur of Delhi. The majestic walls of Delhi stand not on prosperity but on the pain and oppression of the poor. Delhi, once considered the queen of agricultural prosperity and labor, is ironically built on the exploitation of those very people who



toiled to create her splendor. Electricity, tramways and railways changed the entire terrain of the city, corn fields which occupied the city earlier were displaced by large railway stations with ten platforms, two polo grounds and the King's camp covered a large area of 85 acres was laid down beautifully with lawns and roads (Gupta 1981, 175). The imagery criticizes the unequal socio-economic foundations that sustained the city's magnificence.

“अरी, हया कर!

यह जर्जर खड़ा कुतुब-मीनार

इब्रत की माँग करता है—यही है, अरी! होशियार!

हूक न उठे कहीं 'दारा' की,

कूक न उठे कब्र मदमाती!

बाबर है, औरंग यहीं है—

बक्सर को मत भूल,

यहीं है विजयी शेरशाह निर्दयी।

न निकल पड़े क्रोध में लेकर

शेरशाह की तलवार!”

(Dinkar n.d., 88, 89, 96, 104, 105)

The lines urge Delhi to honour her rich heritage and to remember the sacrifices of great historical figures such as Dara Shikoh, Babur, Aurangzeb, and Sher Shah Suri. Symbols like the Qutub Minar and the Jama Masjid evoke Delhi's former glory while simultaneously warning that continued moral decline may awaken the wrath of history and of her ancestors. The reference to Nur Jahan and Jahangir—“नूरजहाँ की प्रेम-व्यथा में”—serves as a reminder that the neglect of historical sacrifices inevitably demands moral reckoning and justice.

The poem conveys a profound disillusionment with Delhi's deceptive outward beauty. The line “खिले फूल, पर मोह न सकती हमें अपरिचित छटा निराली” represents Delhi's attempts to reclaim her lost charm; however, the poet remains unmoved. His vision is haunted by the faded redness of wilted roses—



“मुरझे गुलाब”—which symbolize painful memories of past glory intertwined with suffering. Delhi, once described as “खंडहर में हम कंगालों की रानी” (“the queen of the impoverished”), has now become a hollow emblem of splendor, where ruins stand as silent witnesses to a past awaiting revival—a revival that appears tragically unattainable.

Through this metaphor, the poet reveals that superficial beauty cannot conceal the deep scars of betrayal and loss that mark Delhi’s fall. True beauty, the poem suggests, lies not in external adornment but in an unbroken connection to one’s roots, sustained by memory, dignity, and pride.

“चूहे की दिल्ली यात्रा” (**CHUHE KI DILLI YATRA**) and “भारत का रेशमी नगर” (**BHARAT KA RESHMI NAGAR**):

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar’s poem *Chuhe ki Dilli Yatra* exposes the illusion of freedom in postindependence India. माथे पर तिलक लग रहे थे और मैं सोच रही थी कि बनारस से ब्राह्मण किसलिए बुलाए गए हैं ? कारी” क्यों दूँदा जा रहा है ? चंदन क्यों घोला जा रहा है ? (‘Tilak was being applied on foreheads, and I kept wondering—why have Brahmins been called from Banaras? Why is the ‘kaari’ being searched for? Why is the sandalwood being prepared?’) (Kidwai 2000, 4) this statement rightly echoes the essence of this poem i.e. After independence, society, instead of progressing, returned to old religious traditions. Delhi, once a symbol of diversity, started adopting a rigid identity, reflecting the deep impact of Partition on the nation’s mindset. He uses the mouse as a metaphor for the common man, filled with aspirations of reaching independent Delhi, believing they will finally feel empowered. However, this delusion shatters when the mouse encounters the cat, representing the ruling elite (Babus), who monopolize power.

Dinkar states: “इतने में लो पड़ी दिखाई कहीं दूर पर बिल्ली, चूहेराम भगे पीछे को, दूर रह गई दिल्ली” (**Suddenly, from afar, the cat appeared, the mouse ran back, leaving Delhi behind.**) (Dinkar n.d.,25-26) Terrified, the mouse retreats, revealing powerlessness, unmasking vulnerability, and symbolizing the continued subjugation of the weak. Dinkar’s statement-“ पहले जहाँ लाट साहब थे वहाँ आज बाबू है!” (**Where once the Viceroy stood, today there is just a clerk!**) (Dinkar n.d.,13) critiques how only the



rulers have changed, while oppression and exclusivity persist, reinforcing Delhi's artificial prosperity, which overshadows the hardships of the weak.

Similarly, Bharat ka Reshmi Nagar presents Delhi as a "silken city," an illusion of luxury, where the privileged enjoy comfort while the rest of India remains buried in hardship. This divide was not only economic but also intellectual. As Sharma (2016, 277) notes, Delhi's coffeehouses became the new centers of intellectual engagement, dominated by a privileged class of Hindi intellectuals, many of whom were migrants. While these spaces provided a sense of belonging to some, they further alienated those who had lost everything to Partition, reinforcing the idea that freedom was not truly universal. The poem exposes the economic divide between the urban elite and rural poverty. Dinkar denounces Delhi's false grandeur, which conceals the ongoing struggles of the marginalized. The critique is evident in the lines, "दिल्ली में तो है ज्योत की चहल-पहल, पर भटक रहा है सारा देश अँधेरे में" This reflects the post-independence reality where power shifted but inequality persisted. "Independence was experienced differently depending on class and community, where a 'ruling class celebrated, while a 'refugee class remained displaced and dispossessed" (Pandey 1997, 2264). Just like the mouse in Dinkar's poem, many Indians walked into the dream of freedom (Delhi) but found themselves outsiders in their own nation Dinkar captures this irony when the mouse, full of hope, declares:

"गाँधी-युग में कौन उड़े अब चूहों की दिल्ली?"

आजादी के जश्न देखने मैं जाऊँ दिल्ली"

**In Gandhi's era, who would dare mock the mice? I go to Delhi to witness the celebration of freedom'** (Dinkar n.d.,16-17). Yet, as the mouse soon discovers, this celebration is not for all, mirroring the disillusionment of the common people, who realized that freedom did not necessarily translate into empowerment. This vision stands in stark contrast with Nehru's Tryst with Destiny speech, where he declared that "India will awake to life and freedom" and that the goal was to "wipe every tear from every eye" (Nehru 1947). Nehru saw independence as a transformative moment, an opportunity for all Indians to rise together. However, both Dinkar and Pandey inquire whether this promise was ever fulfilled. Pandey notes: "The two faces that I have referred to are



represented in Delhi by two very different answers to the question, 'What were you doing on August 15, 1947?' One response is symbolized by Nehru's well-known speech, and the other by the countless displaced individuals who found no place in the celebrations of independence" (Pandey 1997, 2264).

The shift from colonial to national governance did not immediately dismantle the structures of hierarchy and privilege. "Partition, rather than Independence, was the event that decisively disrupted lives, while independence merely continued them in familiar structures" (Pandey 1997, 2261). Sharma (2016, 279) further highlights this continuity, explaining how tea and coffeehouses in Delhi became symbols of modernity but remained exclusive spaces, largely catering to elite intellectuals rather than the displaced masses. This mirrors Dinkar's critique of Delhi's artificial prosperity, where the Babus replaced the British, but true inclusion remained elusive. This suggests that while power changed hands, true transformation never occurred, aligning with Dinkar's critique, where the Babus replaced the British, but the common people still remained powerless "The Congress fought against the Raj, but it was also progressively becoming the Raj" (Sarkar 1983, 3). Dinkar captures this irony in *Chuhe ki Dilli Yatra* when he writes:

“किले पर खूब तिरंगे झंडे का लहराना,

अब न रहे अंग्रेज, देश पर अपनी ही कब्जा है।”

**(‘On the Red Fort, the tricolor flies high, The British are gone, but the country is still controlled.’) (Dinkar n.d.,11-12)**

Bharat ka Reshmi Nagar further critiques how Delhi's wealth remained confined to elite circles, reinforcing Pandey's argument that "independence was not universal but selective" (Pandey 1997, 2265). Dinkar highlights this disparity when he writes:

“उद्यानों का यह नगर, कहीं भी जो देखो,

इसमें कुम्हार का चाक, नहीं कोई चिंता है।”

(This city of gardens, look anywhere, and you will not find a potter's wheel turning) This divide is also reflected in Kidwai's haunting description of Delhi post-Partition:



“दिल्ली, जिसकी हर गली-कूचा अतीत की खोई हुई किताब है,

अब एक खून में लिथड़ी हुई लाश थी,

जिस पर सैकड़ों गिद्ध और चीलें मंडरा रही थीं” (Kidwai 2000, 15)

This highlights the stark contrast between prosperity and suffering in post-independence Delhi, mirroring the contradictions Dinkar exposes in his poetry. While some celebrated freedom, others were left in the ruins of violence, displacement, and despair. "Partition created refugees in their own homeland, questioning the very meaning of citizenship and belonging in independent India" (Pandey 1997, 2263). Post -independence Delhi's social fabric was redefined through elite-controlled public spaces, reflecting a deeper struggle over who truly belonged in this "free" India. (Sharma 2016, 281)

“आजादी का तथाकथित दिन खून में सना था,

जिसके कदमों में राजधानी की लाशें पड़ी हो रही थीं

और औरतों की इज़्जत लुट रही थी”

(Kidwai 2000, 3)

This reinforces the idea that while the elite celebrated independence, ordinary people faced violence, loss, and uncertainty. Delhi's journey reflects both glory and hardship. Dinkar's poetry reveals that while independence came, true freedom remained uncertain. The rulers changed, but the struggles of the people persisted. Even today, the city carries the weight of its past, still searching for its true identity.

Both history and literature reconstruct the past but through distinct approaches. History relies on objective analysis of sources, while literature re-imagines the past with creativity, offering a more subjective perspective. Though historians often use literary works to enrich historical understanding, these sources require caution due to artistic embellishments and biases. In a nutshell, this paper has examined how Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's poetry reflects 20thce Delhi's history, highlighting how literature adds nuanced layers to historical narratives. Analyzing these works alongside historical texts reveals the interplay between fact and fiction, enriching our understanding of the past.



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