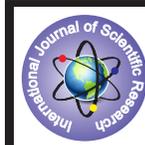


Recalling Assam's Past: A Study of History – Fiction Nexus in *Patkair Ipare Mor Desh*



Literature

KEYWORDS : Historiography, margins, patkai, postcolonial, re-writing

Ms. Monalisa Konwar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Moran College Dist :Sivasagar, Assam, Pin-785670

ABSTRACT

*A resurgent interest in historicity and the eventual re-writing of native history has animated much recent post-colonial narratives. With a critical vision in enunciating and reconstructing historiography by seamless tailoring of fact and fiction these narratives express scepticism on the monolithic nature of history and offer different alternatives and plural histories to reinterpret and subvert the historical documents and events they refer to. This tendency to reclaim the nation's history is noticed among various postcolonial Indian writers including a good number of writers from the North-East too. Their increased inclination for historiography can be explicated as their attempt to assert a sense of historical locations in the erased pages of history. Pushed to the margins of the literary canon it is in part by retrieving own history and recreating personages as subjects and participants in contemporary fictional accounts they claim a fair representation in the national discourse too. Chandana Goswami's recent novel *Patkair Ipare Mor Desh* meaning *Beyond the Patkais Lies my Country* resuscitates an important phase of Assam's history by re-interrogating Ahom history during the 13th and 14th century Assam. This paper attempts at examining incorporation of historiographical elements in *Patkair Ipare Mor Desh* focusing on how the writer problematizes the generic boundary between history and fiction and questions the monology and claim to objectivity of historical representation and thereby brings the untold stories to the fore.*

While history inscribes the past, historical fiction augments that past. Therefore to write a novel based on historiography is always considered to be a mammoth job for a writer. Historiography while constructing historical facts, singles out certain past events while omitting others for ideological reasons. The events that monolithic history discards, the voices that hegemonic ideologies deny articulation are enabled to be verbalised in the postcolonial and postmodern historical narratives. Traditionally history is considered as "an empirical search for external truths corresponding to what was considered to be absolute reality of the past events" (Onega,12). But the postmodernist view of history refutes such conventional idea of history and talks about history as series of human construction. Arguing against conventional history's claims to present historical events truthfully Hayden White says that historical facts cannot be represented objectively because they cannot exist independently of the historian. Historical events can only be accessed through documents and other texts and historiography turns historical events into historical 'facts'. So historians here play a very vital role as they endow certain historical events with added significance by inserting only such events into historical accounts while omitting others on ideological grounds. According to White, "It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context."(11-12). Using the prefix of meta to history White claims that postmodernist history's aim is to lay bare the devices whereby past reality is constructed through the writing of history. This eventually points at the fact that historical events are described through a subjective eye and interpreted through historians' own perspective and constructed reality so historical information is in no way pure and innocent. White highlights the idea that history writing consists of the process of 'emplotment' in which chronicles turn into stories. For White it is a necessary operation as "histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles." (White:2001).

Linda Hutcheon labels postmodern historical novels as "historiographicmetafiction" in terms of their allowing for different voices and alternatives, plural histories by subverting the historical documents and events they refer to. They foreground the excluded events by the monolithic history, retell the stories of the marginalised people whose history never gets expressed in official history, and compose alternative histories on the aegis of existing historiography. As a result a multiplicity of histories are achieved because historiographicmetafictions write alterna-

tive versions to the already accepted one and refracts the dominant voice of history through subversion and gives way to other voices that have been suppressed under the dominating hands of monolithic history. In the process of establishing the right of the novelist to present his/her version of history through fiction more attention is paid to the manner in which the fictional mode is bent in achieving the same purpose and at this stage fiction takes the character of metafiction. The novelist's self-consciousness in presenting his/her version of history enabled him/her to visualize himself/herself as a historian who dilates on what history is and how it should be written. Hutcheon talking about this self-conscious dimension and parodic intertextuality of history in postmodern fiction says, "The term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it "Historiographic Metafiction". (Hutcheon, 1988, 3)

Again official history is believed to be the history of the dominant power and it suppresses the history of the minority people as Plato also states that "those who tell the stories also hold the power". Elizabeth Wesseling therefore comments that "the absence of ethnic minorities from... history does not result from some sort of natural, automatic process, but from deliberate exclusion"(1991:166). Writers from the North-East region also suffer from such a denial of proper position in the national literary discourse. Expressing her concern to this debilitating fact Tillotama Misra opines "significantly, for mainland India, the region known as the 'North-East' has never had the privilege of being at the centre of epistemic enunciation...the imagination of the 'mainland' has even today not overgrown those constructs of the mysterious 'other.'" Therefore this literary marginality arouses a compelling urgency in several North-Eastern writers to reopening a dialogue with their glorious past, reconstruct memory to glorify their forgotten history and thereby relocating their position in the grand narratives through their meta-narratives. This attempt gives credence to the endeavour of these writers to give voice to the history of the suppressed through historical fictions.

Chandana Goswami's Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *Patkair Ipare Mor Desh* chronicles an eventful phase of Ahom history from 13th -14th century Assam through re-narrated stories of the Royal Ahom Dynasty and their contribution in making of a greater Assam. The writer has not only tried to resuscitate and recreate kaleidoscopic images of the past but has employed her creative pro-

ess to explore the contemporary reality and concerns about the various ethnic groups of the then Ahom kingdom. The most crucial and troubled period of Assam's history is fictionalised as the writer views it with a concoction of anticipation and retrospection. Here the Ahom dynasty emerges as the protagonist and the intertexts of history and fiction take a parallel status. The intertexts includes both history and historiography of Ahom kingdom and the writer thereby claims a certain amount of historical veracity. Memory has been revisited and reconstructed and written historiography has been re-interrogated and restructured which mediates between the line of history and fiction. Lost histories of various ethnic groups such as Ahoms, Kacharis, Chutias, Dimasas, Jaintias, are retold by delving into their residues of memory scattered in myths and oral history too.

The setting of the novel encapsulates the 13th and 14th century scenario of Assam as the entire history of Assam gyrates around the historical events of these particular centuries. Former powerful Kamrup kingdom got disintegrated during this time leading to the emergence of a number of independent and semi-independent kingdoms or principalities of the feudatory rulers. Chandana Goswami highlights the early part of the 13th century which saw two major events in the history of Assam: one was the beginning of a series of invasions from the west led by the Turko-Afgan rulers of Bengal and the other was the descent of the Tai-Shans from the Patkai Mountain and the foundation of a kingdom by these very people known as 'Ahoms'. History records the Ahom kingdom to have been established in 1228 when the first Ahom king Chao Lung Su-Ka-Pha came from Mong Mao (now in China) and entered the Brahmaputra valley crossing the rugged Patkai Mountain range. At this crucial juncture when the valley was repeatedly agitated by foreign invaders, perturbed by numerous internal dissensions and ethnic clashes led to political instability Su-Ka-Fa overtook the authority of the region not through bloodshed but through successful befriending with the indigenous people by being their saviours from the foreign invaders. Chandana Goswami laments that the way the Ahoms had merged themselves in the process of assimilation and acculturation and contributed to the formation of Assam's demography and identity is known to all but it fails to earn adequate literary attention and critical accreditation even today.

The novel's opening line itself announces its recognition of history as it describes the period to be a time not clasped by the clutches of history. So the narrative canvas extends from the 'history bereft of history' (1) to the untimely death of the 8th Ahom king Siu-Dang -Fain 1330. The novel covers the early decades when the Ahom kingdom had just begun its process of territorial expansion. Chandana Goswami in the note appended to the novel explicates her idea behind writing a historical novel saying that "Although both reality and fiction are extremely antithetical terms but their meaningful nexus only leads to the making of a historical novel". She reflects that in the mechanical description of historiography we never encounter the emotional facets of the contemporary lives. Their sighs, joys, passions, sensitivity all lie muted in the unconcerned documents of historiography. She adds that "history only provides you with parched data...but when such conventional data are touched compassionately by the sensitive author then the past characters emerge from the pages of history...and those passions and nuances become the inspiration of creation of historical literature". (Trans. Own)

The kings of Kamata receives proper illustration in the novel as history tells that during the 13th century the Kacharis became powerful and advanced towards the west upto the boundary of the present district of Kamrupa. Owing to the extension of the Kachari power the Kamrupa Kings were compelled to remove their capital from Gauhati further west to Kamatapur and since then they were known as kings of Kamatapur. The writer with different plots brings forth the stories of the Kamateswars' glorified past with the delineation of historical characters like Pratap dhvaj, Durlavnarayan, Rajani Kunwari, Indranarayan, Queen Avantica etc. and adroitly narrates the condition under which princess of Kamata Rajani Kunwari the 4th Ahom king Su-Khang -Fa and how she devoted her entire life in the welfare of the subjects of the Ahom kingdom. Concurrently the writer narrates the stories of indomitable yet amicable natured great legendary figure Su-Ka-Fa, his dynamism and resourcefulness and his initiative in documenting important events or writing 'buranji' or history. He commanded one of his ministers Takheru Bandukial Burhagohain "do inscribe each and every important event as I say from the very inception in your own description. Let the Bailleurs and Deodhais also write their versions of history. If, unfortunately time destroys any one version, the other would remain for the next posterity." Chandana Goswami's exhaustive reading of historiography is evident from her description of all the domains of history of that period. The Muhammadan invasions are woven in the texture of the novel while describing about the various strategies employed by the native kings to repulse their foreign invaders. The invasion of Bengal Sultan Ghiasuddin Bahadur Shah, Delhi nawab Muhammad -bin Tughluk, Sultan Sikandar Shah are narrated by fusing facts and fictions in a seamless artistry. The writer presents contemporary culture, religious beliefs, customs, superstitions, myths and other fascinating nuances of various ethnic groups through her historical lens and thus she reclaims the rich heritage of Assam. Their narration is retelling of lost or forgotten history which in a way marks out the "identity" of the Assamese people. These stories of integration and brotherhood of diverse ethnic groups like Chutias, Ahoms, Kacharis, Koch, Khamis, Nagas, Garos and the making up of the common fold of "Assamese" people can definitely be paradigms of unity for the people of the same Assam today involved in insensitive internecine strifes. Representation of history in the recent North-East literati can enable the same to claim a respectable position in the national discourse which has been denied for centuries for being assessed as ethnic writing and lacking in tradition and history. As Tillottama Mishra says such an attitude has deeply affected the emerging literati of many of the regions of north-east India" and to resist such diatribe some contemporary writers through re-writing lost histories aspire towards a vision beyond the narrow ethnic traits and represent a shared history. Undoubtedly the engagement with history in fiction involves interpretation of the history of lives and relationships-national, institutional, family, gender and personal and such scholastic revisionist texts can bring the untold stories of the subalterns and the peripheral peoples to the fore. Chandana Goswami in *Patkair Ipare Mor Desh* dexterously exploits history and historiography and through aesthetic rendering of historical contents shows Assam the route to its roots.

REFERENCE

1. Baruah, S.L.A Comprehensive History of Assam. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt.Ltd. 2002. Print | 2. Dhar, T.N. "Towards an Understanding of History-Fiction Nexus" History-Fiction Interface in Indian English Novel. New Delhi: Prestige, 1999. Print | 3. Goswami, Chandana. *Patkair Ipare Mor Desh*. Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, 2012. Print | 4. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1988. Print | 5. Mishra, Tilottama (Ed.). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print | 6. Omega, Susana. Introduction: A Kanck for Yarns: The Narrativisation of History and the End of History. Ed. Rodopi: Amsterdam-Atlanta, 1995. | 7. Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print. <http://ctli.wikispaces.com/Hayden+White> |