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Historical Re-Interpretations: Writing/Re-Writing of Ethnography and Historiography

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Abstract:

“Those who tell the stories also hold the power” -Plato.

Michel Foucault had formulated that power is more of a strategy than a possession which is co-extensive with resistance. Thus, human relations, science, institutions are all caught up in struggle for power and discourse is a terrain on which this struggle is carried out. The New Historicists and Cultural Materialists based on Hayden White’s provocative statement that all historical facts come to us only in the form of narratives, displaced the notion of objective history. All documented history is in actuality produced in a context and are governed by social, economic and political interests of the dominant groups/institutions.

Furthermore, Edward Said has argued that all art is discourse specific and it is in some degree “worldly” even when it appears to deny any such connections. Linda Hutcheon has also argued that the postmodernist ironic recall of history is neither nostalgia nor aesthetic “cannibalization”. The past as referent is not bracketed or effaced but it is incorporated and modified to give new and different life and meaning. This documented history and its re-formulation also finds resonance in Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak juxtaposes the claims of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to speak for the disenfranchised and how this in turn can paradoxically silence the subaltern by claiming to represent and speak for their experiences.

The particular rejection of the peripheral space rendered by the dominant “self” to the repressed and silenced “other” and their particular recasting of their historiography and ethnography can be particularly viewed in context of some emerging writers of North-East India. The writing of Mamang Dai paints an intricate web of stories, images and the history of a tribe in her novel *“The Legends of Pensam”*. Similarly, Chandana Goswami re-interrogates Ahom history in her novel *“Patkair Ipare Mor Desh”* and rewrites documented objectified history using the techniques of fiction.

Keywords: Power, Objective history, Ironic Recall, Sub-Altern, Self-Other.

“Those who tell the stories also hold the power”

-Plato

French social theorist Michel Foucault developed a notion of discourse in “The Archaeology of Knowledge” and defined it as “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically constructs the subjects and the worlds of which they speak”. Foucault traces the role of discourse in wider social processes of and legitimizing power, emphasizing the construction of current truths, how they are maintained and what power relations they carry with them. He theorizes discourse to be a medium through which power relations produce speaking subjects. For him power and knowledge are inter-related and

therefore every human relationship is a struggle and negotiation of power. Discourse therefore is controlled by objects, what can be spoken of; ritual, where and how one may speak; and the privileged, who may speak. As such, an object becomes a “node within a network”. As an example, a book is not made up of individual words on a page, each of which has meaning, but rather is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences. The meaning of that book is connected to a larger, overarching web of knowledge and ideas to which it relates.

While New Historicists like Stephen Greenblatt turned to history to explain the formal structures of literary texts, Hayden White investigated the formal literary structures of history, describing a “poetics of history”. In his book “The Historical Text as a Literary Artefact”, he gives a broad reflection on the very nature of culture and on the nature of humanity itself. Reacting against the tendency of history as a discipline to seek its models in the sciences, White considers the literary dimension of history and how historians deploy the traditional devices of narrative to make sense of raw data, to organize and to give meaning to their accounts of the past. Using the tools of literary critic, White analyzes the nature and mechanisms of history as discourse.

Moreover, as Paul Hamilton contends in his essay “Reconstructing Historicism”, all critics are historicist up to a point. The historicity of the texts that we interpret demands inclusion of critical approaches to negotiate historical differences. Equally, if a work of literature speaks to us now with a contemporary relevance, that inevitably plays some part in our evaluations. However, historicism becomes interesting when it addresses questions of perennial philosophical importance, such as the relations between fact and fiction in history and aesthetics. The vital question as to whether historical and aesthetic discourses are necessarily opposed in their tasks, or whether they offer mutual support is a major crisis point of understanding point for re-writing and historicism. Traditionally, the aptness of literary skills to the evocation or re-creation of the past has helped to distinguish historical explanations from scientific ones, for which fictional assistance is usually thought to be a disadvantage. And the philosophical legitimacy of poetic and other literary practices has been enhanced in proportion to their historical uses. More recently though, New Historicism have presumed on this discursive friendship and have explained away literary effect as an entirely historical phenomenon. The final irony in this, though, results from the return to prominence of the idea that history has come to an end. The end-of-history thesis renews Hegel’s argument to provide the latest challenge to Historicism. It is also an immensely influential idea, underpinning assumptions about the uniformity of aspiration and political rationality that are used to justify the imposition of international law and order. In response to this supposed demise of history, historicism finds that it needs its discarded literary ally. Accordingly, it rediscovers an understanding of aesthetics, extending from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin and beyond, that restores literature’s credibility as a power to regenerate our threatened historical sensibility.

Extending to the Postmodernists, Linda Hutcheon in her essay “Rethinking Literary History” explores the idea of rethinking. To “re-think” is not only to think again; it is to think anew. This does not involve revisionism or revising; it is not a question of correcting, altering, amending or improving. To rethink is to re-consider, with all the associations of care and attentiveness and serious reflection that go with the notion of consideration. The “history of

literature” is, in fact, the multiple and complex histories of its production and reception. What has come to be called the “literary institutions”- the field in which literary experience occurs-is therefore as much a part of this history as is the development of genres or thematic motifs. For this reason, economic, political and broader cultural and social perspectives on issues like race or gender must be brought to bear in the construction of any “literary” history in a different way than they might have in the past. Newly theorized by post-colonial and gender thoughts, these perspectives help make conscious the ideological underpinnings of the experience of producing and responding to literature—and of writing literary histories. The post-modernist ironic recall of history is neither nostalgic nor aesthetic “cannibalization”. The past as referent is neither bracketed nor effaced but it is incorporated and modified to give new and different line and meaning.

Documented history and its re-formulation also find resonance in Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”(1998). In Spivak’s essay, she relates to the manner in which western cultures investigate other cultures. It presents in the tradition of Lyotard, the ethical problems of investigating a different cultural base on “universal” concepts and frameworks. The basic claim of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is that western academic thinking is produced in order to support Western interests and without co-operation of the colonial project. Spivak points out to the fact that research is in a way always colonial, in defining the “other”, the “over there” subject as the object of study and as something that knowledge should be extracted from and brought back “here”. Critical thinking about the “other” tends to articulate it’s relation to the other with the hegemonic vocabulary. This is similar to feminist writers which abide by patriarchic rules for academic writing. Spivak juxtaposes the claims of Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze to speak for the disenfranchised and how this in turn can paradoxically silence the Sub-Altern by claiming to represent and speak for their experiences.

In Northeast India there amalgamates diverse ethnic and religious groups having different beliefs and customs. However, the land has been plagued by problems like unchecked militancy, insurgency, ethnic riots and killings etc. These rapidly suffusing violence has disrupted and paralyzed normal life. This region has been, for generations, the battleground for sub-national identities confronting insensitive nation-states and their bureaucracies as well as for various internecine strife. It is a battle of ideas and arms, of new concepts and old traditions and of bitterness and compassion. This imposed nomenclature and constructed identity of Northeast generates a site for encounter; and therefore, within the region there are evidences of fractures: ‘things fall apart’ and ‘the centre cannot hold’; marginalization engenders further marginalization.

Kailash C. Baral in “Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India” says the emerging literatures from Northeast are variously critiqued as ethnic writing, lacking in history and tradition, and often subjected to the virulent diatribe that it lacks in aesthetic virtuosity. These critical opinions are at best paternalistic and at worst, smack of ignorance in understanding the societies and cultures of the Northeast. Contemporary writers from this region aspire towards a vision beyond the narrow ethnic groove and represent a shared history. In these writings, the cultural memory is reprocessed in that the intensity of feeling overflows the labor of technique and craft. Tilottama Misra says that, “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.’” Temsula Ao, says that the ‘otherness’ has helped them to overcome their isolation once their thoughts and feelings are textualised; yet the uniqueness of their cultural difference has not disappeared. In spite of this assertion, marginality defines the essence of that ‘otherness.’ It becomes a defining trope that signifies this literature’s location as well as its reception by mainstream critics. However, literary marginality contests and problematized some of the universalistic assumptions of literature while factoring in and often valorizing the unique ethnic and cultural experience that needs to be critically evaluated. The major factor has been the shift from “Master/Grand Narratives” to “Meta/Local Narratives”; the metamorphosis from Globalization to Glocalisation. Objectified history is rendered insufficient to understand factors and is replaced by “comparative history”, *moving dialectically between past and present, between concrete observation and an awareness of the heterogeneity and complexity of life.* A “comparative” literary history would not only try to keep in the foreground this dialectic hermeneutic movement between past and present, but would try to do something analogous to what Braudel and the Annales school accomplished in their moving of history’s emphasis from the events of politics and diplomacy to, on the one hand, a study of the broader circumstances (demographic, geographical, climactic, etc.) conditioning such events and, on the other, a parallel and very detailed scrutiny of the concrete material data (quantified) of life of the past.

Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is an intricate web of stories that explore the hidden agendas of life and is a delightful mixture of myth, history, tribal beliefs and customs of the Adis, literally called “hill-people”. It has, indeed, wide range of themes ranging from tribal practices, superstitious beliefs, human and the spirit world, tradition and modernity, memory and reality and the essence and importance of Oral narratives. Through these stories the author tries to give voice to the ‘peripheral people’ who are often marginalized. Surviving in the heat and humidity of the Siang valley, the Adis accept things unquestioningly. They still practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. In the book, Mamang says, “In our language, the word ‘Pensam’ means ‘in-between’ which suggests the middle-ground. It is the sphere where anything can happen and everything can be lived.” Recounting the various legends that influence the lives of the hill people, this book is a lyrical and moving tribute to the human spirit. It also reflects upon the lost history and the cultural dynamics of the Adis.

The book recounts the historical developments in the tribal areas with the advent of the Britishers. Rakut’s father, Lutor, and many others worked under the Migluns. The elders were brainwashed and dominated by the Migluns into considering themselves inferior to the Migluns and were forced to stifle their energy and determination. The early decades of the twentieth century were times of great upheaval, where the killing of Williamson in 1911 by an angry Adi suggested that there existed a communication gap between them. Many people were killed and since the Abor expedition of 1912, the whole of the Siang valley had been under the control of the British administration. Images of violence and brutal killings also find a place in the narrative. We see how an elderly man from the Migu clan slaughtered two women and how Kamur kills his own children as if he had been under a spell. In ‘Daughters of the Village’, Arsi says, “In my next life I shall be born a bird”. She longs to break free from the routine rustic life and to enjoy life to its fullest.

The love relationship between Nenem and Captain David Ferguson takes us to a different plane altogether. It is an enigma how, despite all their differences, the two strangers were drawn to each other in the forlorn hills. When they parted, Nenem said to herself. 'No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough of my own.' Years later, when she resigns to her fate and gets married to Kao, things have changed. She had dreamt of raising up her family and living amidst her own people. But few years later, after the disastrous earthquake had claimed numerous lives and property, she faints one day and passes away. In the later part of the narrative, conflict goes on between tradition and modernity. With modernity, came issues of burglaries and murder. Their houses were not safe anymore. Electric poles and land were stolen. Forests were being cut and logs floated away down the river. New fences marked old territories and it seemed a curtain had fallen over the old villagers. What was once sacred, the old sense of joy was being lost. Towards the end, Raket says, 'We are peripheral people. Everywhere, people like us, we turned with the world. Our lives turned, and in the circle who could tell where was the beginning and where the end? We are just peripheral people, thinking out our thoughts!' Thus, Mamang Dai, in her novel historicizes the cultural context of the people and attempts to give them a voice which would transcend across boundaries. Local incidents, images and history of a tribe has been described through some codes which though subjective and particular, has global overtures in paying tribute to the human spirit.

In the first instance, Chandana Goswami's "Patkair Ipare mor Desh" (meaning Beyond the Patkai Lies my Country) seems to be a fictionalized account evolving from the psyche of the writer. But, a deeper perspective shows the novel to be a rich addition to the emerging genre of literature from the North-East. Memory has been reconstructed and written historiography has been reconstructed which mediates between the line of history and literature. Lost history has been re-interrogated and a fictionalized account of that history has been re-emerged in the particular novel. The setting of the novel is the thirteenth and fourteen century scenario of Assam. The whole history of Assam revolves around the historical events of these particular centuries. Former Kamrup kingdom got shattered during this time leading to the formation of several smaller kingdoms along the banks of the Brahmaputra. And around this time period, the future rulers of Assam, the Ahoms had come down from the Patkai Mountains and set foot on the banks of the banks of the mighty river.

The first line of the novel itself deals with the recognition of history as she describes the period to be a time not clasped by the clutches of history. This narration in the novel is said to be of a history which have no history. The history books records the Ahom kingdom to have been established in 1228 when the first Ahom King Chao Lung Siu-Ka-Pha came from Mong Mao (now in China) and entered the Brahmaputra valley crossing the rugged Patkai mountain range. He established his kingdom without any battle and occupied a region on the south bank with the Burhidihing River in the north, the Dikhou River in the south and the Patkai mountain range in the east. As a result of successful befriending and the wet rice cultivation process, the local groups like the Barahi and Marans were completely subsumed under the fold of the Ahoms. The process of Ahomization was particularly significant till the sixteenth century, when under Suhungmung, the kingdom made large territorial expansions at the cost of the Chutiya and the Kachari kingdoms.

Chandana Goswami highlights the early decades when the Ahom kingdom had just begun to establish itself as a prominent kingdom. In the novel, the ministers sent by the Kachari King Pratapdhvaj as an official embassy to the neighboring states and the detailed analysis of their first hand experiences on their return is the re-writing of historiography keeping in mind not only the demographic but also the cultural and social factors. Their narration is retelling lost history which in a way marks out the “identity” of the Assamese people. Chutias, Ahoms, Dimasa Kacharis, Kacharis, Jaintias are some of the ethnic diversities which make up the common fold of “Assamese people” and history has been revisited and re-interpreted in a literary and fictionalized way. Fictionalization of real events is what marks out Goswami’s novel “Patkair Ipare mor Desh”.

From both of these novels, we get an understanding of the aesthetic/historic nexus. We can come to a conclusion that the aesthetic rendering of historical content adds to, rather than transforms or radically interrogates it. The free standing quality of the aesthetic is symmetrical with, and maybe implicated in a political tactic. Distinction typifies that individually grasped singularity, impervious to scientific investigation, on which the existence of the aesthetic depends. That singularity results in a shift of narrative from a globalized to a localized point of view. No more in the postmodern conditions, is worldview deemed requisite to narrate a singular “me”. The definition of “me” will be rendered by myself keeping in view all the internal, external and other requisite factors that constitute “me”.

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