



AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Reframing History through Imagination: A Study of Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Josnar Jhitas*

Munmoni Saikia
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Borholla College, Jorhat.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13683849>

Article History: Submitted-05/07/2024, Revised-13/08/2024, Accepted-15/08/2024, Published-31/08/2024.

Abstract:

This paper aims to examine how Arupa Patangia Kalita frames an alternate version of history through imagination with special attention to her fictional work *Josnar Jhitas* (2022). Her projection of history in the cited novel can be viewed from two ways – her unconventional reading of past and her preference to understand history from the perspective of the unmapped, unexplored, and unrepresented. An attempt has been made to analyze her novel as a model of history of the voiceless and the marginalized rather than those of historical figures as novels that enhance family than nation in their juxtaposition of public and private histories. In her novel, migration and displacement are viewed only from the historical angle, thereby portraying migrants as victims trapped in the cauldron of history. Hence the study will focus on the writer's effort in the representation of a parallel history of Indian freedom struggle which is solely from the perspective of the marginalized/ the subalterns/ the other.

Keywords: history, imagination, marginalized, representation, migration.

Introduction:

The terms “History” and “Imagination” are completely different from each other. The word ‘history’ is derived from Greek word ‘historia’ meaning ‘inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation.’ The term relates to past events as well as the memory, discovery, collection, organization, presentation, and interpretation of information about these events. Historian E. H.

Carr in “What is History?” defines ‘history’ as a means of ‘interpretation’ which speaks of different possible ways of perceiving history. On the other hand, imagination is a kind of mental faculty that leads us to an unauthenticated perceptivity, experience, and creativity. According to Nigel Thomas, imagination is:

...as responsible for fantasy, inventiveness, idiosyncrasy, and creative, original, and insightful thought in general, and, sometimes, for a much wider range of mental activities dealing with the non-actual, such as supposing, pretending, ‘seeing as’, thinking of possibilities, and even being mistaken.
(www.artsci.wustl.edu/~philosDict/imagination.html.)

Hayden White has also voiced similar reservations for history. He defied the authority or possibility of single view point for history. He also established the force and effect of an individual’s perception and interpretation that can play with facts. He added one more dimension of individual’s capacity for creativity and imagination. Therefore, the element of fiction also prevails in the narrative of history. He brought out two aspects of narrative history from the point of view of subjective influence.

- (i) There cannot be a single point of view of history
- (ii) Element of fiction is an intrinsic part of narrative history. (White, 1973)

Thus, there cannot be ‘The History’ or History as ‘The Truth.’ Hayden White took it as axiomatic that histories – especially narrative histories (though probably all histories are narratives in their overall structures) are basically fictive. In this context, Ankersmit opines, “we can say the *simulacrum* (text) precedes reality . . . that history is as much ‘made’ as ‘found’ – coinciding with Hayden White’s definition of history as “a narrative discourse the content of which is as much imagined as found” (Ankersmit 98).

The theorists argue that the misrepresentation by historians for hundreds of years was an instrument to manipulate future. On the contrary, “The fact that the historian’s empirical account and the novelist’s imagery story share the narrative form... has challenged thoughtful students of imaginative literature and of history since Aristotle” (Bruner 45).

Arupa Patangia Kalita is a renowned Sahitya Akademi award winning author whose latest novel *Josnar Jhitas* (2022) is chosen to study in the light of above concept of history and imagination as juxtaposed throughout the novel in order to explore a different kind of history that is never documented in the official history; and hence the writer makes an effort to represent an alternate history from the perspective of those who always remain overlooked, powerless, marginalized or othered in recorded history. Although the novel delineates the life of Durgi Bhumij, along with it some historical aspects of that are parallelly detailed throughout the narration. This combination of history and imagination can be experienced in the Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *Josnar Jhitas* that provides an imaginative understanding of history. While history belongs to the sphere of logic and rationality, imagination belongs to that of a-logic or a-rationality.

Discussion:

The novel draws attention of readers to the pre-independence era when British colonials were engaged in expanding the tea industry in Assam and in this business lots of labourers were needed. Most of the labourers were brought to Assam from different parts of India. The novel's protagonist Durgi Bhumij was one among such immigrant who migrated with her husband to Assam in search of a secure future. Although the novel is based on the life of Durgi Bhumij, readers would come across some surprising facts which are never found in any history books. Durgi might be an immigrant labourer in Assam, but her love for Assam and her sense of nationalism can be traced through the narratives of her agential activities in India's freedom movement in Assam and her consequent martyrdom for the great cause.

Arupa Patangia conveys an imaginative understanding of history through her writings. The close proximity of the historical and fictional in her novel helps underline multiple and perceptive readings and interpretations of the past. For instance, Arupa Patangia Kalita narrates about the boycott of foreign clothes which was a kind of resistance/ rebellion against the British colonialism in Assam. Her protagonist character Durgi Bhumij deeply involved in this action against British colonialism; out of hatred she threw out all the belongings of her children and Fraser Saheb which were imported from Britain. Her sense of nationalism is much stronger than the memories of love and sentiment connected with the material belongings of her dear ones.

The term 'story' resides within the word 'hi(story)' and indeed history is a 'story' of particular time in past. Although the events of past are recorded in history, yet the authenticity of these documentation is always under skeptical criticism. Indeed, we know whatever happened during an event but we know it partially, as it tends to generalize and bring in the major threads of the fabric. These generalized statements about such events of past always overlook and the victims or the ordinary people who suffer because of such events, they get quantified and reduced to numbers. Arupa Patangia Kalita is such a writer who makes an attempt to imagine and create those situations from historical past and presents the ordinary individuals' narratives in his fictional works. Her primary concern shifts towards what the history has not said till date. On the basis of available historical data, she poses some histories of the people whose lives and voices are never a part of history. This is an attempt to record subaltern history through fiction and making the theory in practice in a unique manner. The Subaltern Studies Group makes an attempt to fill the gaps of history written by elites, by reorganizing, recovering, restructuring and identifying the stories of non-elite, subjugated and marginalized people. Kalita puts forth the concept of centrality of role and brings the marginalized into the center by making it their stories. The fictitious and real-life characters of his writings are central to the concerns of the work; it is their story that leads us into the realm of the marginalized. By assigning centrality to the marginalized characters, Kalita manages to answer the dilemma of the postcolonial intelligentsia regarding the ability of the subaltern to speak. Instead of being the representative, she assumes the role of a narrator of a narrative which allows the representation of the subaltern group by the same group. Throughout her writings she strongly confirms to the notion that the subaltern can speak if given a proper chance and with an appropriate employment of the discourse.

Post-colonialism listens to stories of exploitation and dispossession, hardships and desperate journeys of migration. . . . The problem is not only that the subaltern cannot speak, in Gayatri Spivak's often cited phrase, but also that the dominant will not listen. (Young 19)

Kalita has delineated numerous characters that belong to the subaltern group and the works/ professions they do are always looked down upon by the society. She focuses on the personal histories of these individuals. These marginalized characters help us to perceive life, events, and issues from their point of view. For instance,

Like his contemporary novelists, the author makes use of various methods such as memory, diary, personal belongings etc. to narrate events related to historical past. She engages personal reminiscence to replicate the workings of memory in 'remembered' histories. She focuses on memory of public events in private memory, which colours and distorts them in accordance with personal biases and priorities.

Durgi Bhumij was an indentured labourer who got migrated to Assam by the British in order to work at Atharighat tea plantation of Assam. Unfortunately, she lost her husband Docharu, then the widowed Durgi was taken by British Fraser Saheb as his mistress in order to satisfy his physical needs. Durgi had three children, two sons and a daughter, from Frazer and all of their appearances were like their father. One of their sons died in epidemic occurred during the time. Indeed the author delineates in the novel how British officials were experiencing rebellious acts of the indigenous people of Assam during that period, resulted out of the nationalistic consciousness to save the land from the British exploitation. Many British left for their homeland during that period and Frazer was one of them. He only took their daughter to his homeland leaving Durgi in Atharighat. He also wanted to take their son Laba, but he expressed his willingness to stay with her mother. On the other hand, Laba, her son had to stay separated from her mother for the socio-political situation in Assam was not safe for those children who were born of white fathers and brown mothers. Laba experienced discrimination in the society where he lived because of the British blood that he bore in himself. This separation of Durgi from her children made her insane, feeling the voidness of her life. Initially Durgi was quite unaware of all happenings at her surroundings, only indulged in her responsibilities as a mistress as well as a mother of her children. But the sudden disasters happened in her life made her to suffer from trauma leaving her devastated. A certain kind of hatred was born within herself towards the British people and Boruah Babu helped her to divert this hatred for British into a sense of rebellion against the British colonialism and hence a sense of nationalism to serve for the land that provided her shelter to survive. She jumped into the freedom struggle against the British assimilating with the Assamese people, working as a secret messenger and in this way, she unveiled many secret conspiracies of British people planned for action. But somehow, she was suspected by Lakra, the British Saheb at Atharighat tea estate and murdered her in secret. For the sake of the nation, she sacrificed her life and become a martyr. Durgi is positioned as a witness of both the British and the people of Assam;

and simultaneously a representative of those simple poor Adivasi people who got immigrated to Assam from Bihar, Bengal and Odissa by the conspiracies of British to work in tea gardens as laborer. Through her character, Kalita tries to highlight how these groups of people assimilated with the land and its cultures. But the strategies the white people had for them never let this community of people mixed up either with them or with the indigenous community of Assam. The whites considered them as inferior/ the other, uncivilized people who are meant to be treated harshly or most often inhumanly in order to dominate them.

The author as the narrator in the novel expresses how she worked very hard and finally succeeded to find out the root of Durgi's fifth generation. In this process, she physically visited the address where Durgi passed her life as a tea labourer, as a mistress, as a mother, as a freedom fighter and as a martyr fighting for the cause of India's freedom struggle. The official documents of British Officials during the colonial period that Dr. Kalita somehow managed to find out, but without any clue of Durgi. The documents tell everything from hobbies to favourite dishes of the British Sahebs, but not a single line about the workers (coolies).

Boga Sahabor jaat jaat kotha haat dilei ulai ahe. Kintu boga sahabor koli mam buror kotha hudhibo golei kagoz-potrabor nimat hoi. Othoso seal-muhor mora kagojot spostokoi likha asil, 'mini allowed'. Companye aaingoto boidhota diya ei miniburor kotha j kotu nai. Kotu pabolo nai ei mini aru boga dubhochia lora -suwaliburor kotha. Ekebare pabolo nai gham aru tejere haar di chah bagan pati pelua rode pura manuhburor kotha... Sahabor mukhedi ulua horu hohoje aaukan koribo pora dui ekhar kothathe ei manuhkhinir kotha ahe. Boga sahabe spostokoi likhi thoi goise 'Coolie sabdatuei hoise samashya.' (Kalita, p. 423-424)

(Various things about the white officials are easily available in any documents. But the papers become dumb when searched about the black ma'ams kept by the white officials. However, in official documents it was clearly written that 'minis allowed'. Nowhere to find about the minis that the company lawfully allowed as legal. Nowhere to find out about the *dubhochia* children born of the minis and white sahebs. Not a single line is there about the hard-working community of tea garden labourers.... The context of these people comes

only in one or two small easily overlooked things spelled by the sahebs about the tea labourers. White sahebs clearly wrote that ‘the term coolie itself is a problem’)

Hence Dr. Kalita had to excavate the history of this subaltern group, whose existence is never recorded in the official documents. But without getting into their perspective history always remains partial. The novelist taking the role of a narrator in the novel thus successfully presents an alternate history of this subaltern group, especially portraying the life of Durgi Bhumij, with the juxtaposition of history and imagination.

Conclusion:

The author’s choice to represent the life of Durgi Bhumij is in itself a challenge to the official history. Dr. Kalita herself reveals in the novel about her research on Durgi’s life which was very difficult to continue sometime due to the absence of documentation. After all history records the people in power! Therefore, Dr. Kalita had to go through numerous links to connect with people who belonged to the land where Durgi had belonged. From them she got to collect details of Durgi and hence with the details of her life another version of history remained hidden which was solely of those voiceless/ otherized group of people, also contributed in the making of history.

Works Cited:

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. India: Eastern Press, 2004.

Ankersmit, F. R. “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *Tropics of Discourse*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973.

Bruner, J. *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Desai, Gaurav and Suprita Nair (Eds.). *Post-colonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, UK: Berg, 2005.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Post-modernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Kalita, Arupa Patangia. *Josnar Jhitas*. Chandra Prakasan. 2022

Kumar, Priya. "Testimonies of Loss and Memory: Partition and the Hunting of a Nation",
Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies 1, no. 2. 1999.

Thomas, Nigel J. T. *Dictionary of Philosophy of Mind*.

<http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~philosDict/imagination.html>. Accessed on 13 February,
2013. Web.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe*. 1973.

Young, Robert J. C. "What is Postcolonial?" *Ariel* 40.1, January 2009.