



BLENDED BOUNDARIES OF FACT AND FICTION: HISTORICIZING KITTUR THROUGH LITERARY NARRATION THE QUEEN OF KITTUR BY DR. BASAVARAJ NAIKAR

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ABSTRACT

'The Queen of Kittur' can be read as a postmodern historical novel that seamlessly blends the boundaries between fact and fiction, even while asserting the claim to objectivity of historical narratives. This study categorizes the novel as a representative of historiographic meta-fictions which enable different voices - the voice of history and the voice of fiction - to be heard by opening the dominant discourse of history to multiple perceptions. The postmodern text is analyzed with respect to the writer's emphasis on how history is essentially a human construct.

Key words: Historiography, Postmodern novel, heroic women, facts and fiction, Queen of Kittur, Basavaraj Naikar.

INTRODUCTION

Postmodern historical novels, regarded as historiographic meta-fictions, permit different voices and alternative, plural histories essentially by subverting the historical documents and events that they refer to. However, not all historical novels subvert history to give vent to the creative imagination of the writer. An actual record of historical facts in the form of a third person narrative can lend greater interest in the reader than archival material or a text book with the same information. Such an historical narrative is usually written from the fictional character's point of view or perhaps as the story of a real person from history who has participated in the event. The novel, *Queen of Kittur* is a retelling of history from neither a contemporary of the event / times, nor an historian, but from the eyes of a creative writer, through the reconciliation of several binaries like historical objectivity vs nationalism, cultural present vs cultural history, historical facts vs literary imagination etc., What distinguishes a successful historical narrative from the rest is the presence of an engaging story without meddling with facts. Historiographic understanding of history forms the nucleus of this paper, claiming that it not only represents past events but unravels the underlying meaning in them as well. As a signifying system, therefore this narrative converts historical events into historical facts. The



paper analyzes Basavaraj Naikar's *The Queen of Kittur* as an example of a historical narrative where the blending of fact and fiction is convincingly accomplished.

The Narrative as Historiography

Historiography is the history of history. It can be a literary narrative that does not subject the actual events to historical analysis. Conversely, the subject of historiography is the record of the history of the event: the way it happened. It may, at times reflect conflicting objectives followed by different writers of different eras. Such differences arise more from perception of the times, rather than the events themselves. Therefore, such factors do influence the shaping of our understanding of the actual event, besides the nature of history itself.

Historiography, while constructing historical facts, selects certain past events and omits others, for ideological reasons. This reflects the fact that a select group is unintentionally denied an official voice by the dominant ideologies. Hence, history is relegated to being monologic, representing the dominant discourse and therefore as Orwell says, "History is written by winners". Hayden White, in "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" vehemently argues that historians recreate history through "historical imagination". In other words the historian employs narrative strategies of a literary writer to convey his/her message. He coins the term "meta-history" which very succinctly blurs and sometimes blends the boundaries of facts and fiction. He further claims that history is essentially narrative prose, an amalgam of literary conventions and the historian's imagination. In the process, perhaps historical narrative can include types of "plots" or "emplotments" that include the tragic, comic, romantic, and satiric elements. (Ricoeur, 31). Such an 'emplotment recalls Aristotle's claim that Poetry (Literature) tends to express the universal, history the particular. White questions the existence of the balance between factual reconstruction and imaginative recreation of the events. He probes into the "value neutral" aspect of retelling events. He endorses the need for examining fiction in history, a point raised by Orwell too.

As is clear from the above, it is possible to infer that the underlying attitude of historiography is one of skepticism. This stems from the belief that historians, particularly as writers *do* have agendas and *do* select sources with the intent of *proving* certain preconceived notions. History is, in this sense, never really *objective*, but is always deemed a construct that presents the historian-writer's perception of events or things. At its objective best - which is contestable - history (re)presents basic *facts* (dates, events etc., as recorded in the available sources.); the task on hand for the writer would be to *interpret* these supposed facts. This very *interpretation*, which, by definition a subjective mental process renders the product - a book, novel etc., as less objective as possible.

Historiography permits foregrounding history as it unfolds in the literary narrative. Unlike historians, litterateurs *do* have the license to dwell deeper and unravel a profound historiographical insight. However, debatable its veracity may be, such insights help in forming a certain perspective about historical events. These are especially true in the case of colonialism when recordings were indeed



one sided and whose authenticity may be questioned. The natives somehow never really worried about serious documentation processes that have coerced both historians and literary writers to rely on the colonizers point of view.

The story of Kittur: Fact versus Fiction

The Queen of Kittur is a post modern historical fiction that glorifies the heroism of the Rani, while combating both internal (Peshwa kings) and external (The East India Company, later day British colonizers) forces. The novel deals with the life of Rani Chennamma, the second wife of Raja Mallasarja of Kittur a small kingdom beaming with pride in tradition and culture.

The plot may be captured in a nutshell. Kittur, as a kingdom, is not overwhelmingly powerful in comparison to more prominent Mughals and many other neighbouring kingdoms. However, Raja Mallasarja has led the land with impeccable integrity, despite clandestinely escaping from the clutches of the Peshwas. His son Sivalingarudrasarja, not as able an administrator as his father, is issueless. Therefore, Rani Chennamma, decides to adopt a child - Sawai Mallasarja - from the village. As the king dies even before the formal adoption takes place, the ceremony is held before the final rites are performed for the king. This invites the attention of the British, as the 'Doctrine of Lapse', wherein, any king who dies without an heir to the throne forfeits the land to the British, had just come into effect. Thus begin the confrontation of the natives and the colonizers. The Queen sends emissaries with positive yet firm statements, refusing to give in to their demands. Notwithstanding the loss of Thackeray, two other generals and several others imprisoned, the British army repeatedly attacks Kittur. Displaying courage even in the face of defeat, the Rani symbolises 'shakti' in terms of female valor. Having tasted victory once, she is motivated to continue her confrontations with the British, consistently defying their orders. Her countrymen loved her audacious attitude and were highly supportive of her actions. Unfortunately for her and India, the internal feud and self destructive betrayal by her own courtiers and the deceit and foul play on the part of the Company soldiers, ensure that the brave kingdom is brought to its knees. The ruthlessness of the colonizers, forces the helpless people to surrender. The valiant Queen is eventually imprisoned in the Fort of her own town, though the imperialists found it hard to subdue their admiration for her bravery. She dies in confinement.

The story of Kittur's History

Kittur's history is very much the story of Indian history, recorded in the view of the outsiders rather than the internal players. Several factors have influenced the course of documenting the history of this kingdom. Dearth of archival material, rigid imperialism during the Colonial regime that lasted for more than 300 years, a ravaging independence struggle that destroyed several human lives, lack of authentic documentation in the native language, and the eventual collapse of the kingdom have left the people of kittur and India both powerless and speechless. Ignorance of English among the natives, and ignorance of Kannada or any other Indian language on the part of the British, rendered communication or a two-sided dialogue impossible between them. The conflicts within Kittur are of a varied nature and incomprehensible to the colonizers who lack an in-depth knowledge of the



complexities within Indian cultural history. Lack of unity among the neighbouring kingdoms as they disagreed intensely on the issue of nationalism vs beneficial subordination, compounded the problems; thus making it extremely difficult for a collective fight. The failed attempt by the British to overawe the natives "by exhibiting the military wealth of the Company government" (Naikar, 168) resulting in the death of Thackeray himself reflects a total lack of understanding of the native strategising abilities, particularly in war. Such incidents forced the colonizers to resort to cunningness to conquer both lands and minds of India. Perhaps, this is the impetus for the author, Basavaraj Naikar to intensely preoccupy himself with the colonial past of India in this novel and reveal the richness of the Indian cultural history that encompasses the intellectual superiority of the people.

The novel projects loyalty, patriotism treachery of the natives and the scheming shrewdness of the British - the essential ingredients of an intriguing novel. It is this quality that demarks historical writing from literary writing.

The narrow divide between historical discourse and literary discourse, which, at times, is almost a slippage, as pointed out by Hayden White, is very relevant here. This enables reading the novel, primarily as a literary artist fictionalizing history solely for the sake of keeping Kittur alive and seeing it in books. In order to achieve this, he draws heavily from historical and quasi-historical sources for firsthand information. Such a method should provide an authentic historical dimension to his works.

Much of the action that is described in the novel is faithful to recorded history. Both in terms of dates and persons, the novel merely weaves the happenings into the narration. Some of the more easily accessible sources do mention the actual events as sequenced and presented in the novel. But the literary sources, mentioned at the beginning of the book give a clue to the role of imagination in effecting the narration in particular, the stringing of the different events. Starting from the first meeting of Raja Mallasarja and Chennamma as a brave girl capable of hunting and archery, their marriage, the rituals, their personal relationship, and many other socio cultural revelations do carry colourful imagination. It is in these instances that the author's creative energy releases full steam.

The fascinating recreation, nevertheless offers the writer the choice of facts and the fictional element to interweave. It is only natural that writers conveniently omit certain facts to suit their contexts and perceptions. However, this novel transcends such methodical omission and presents history as 'it happened', with clear cut literary overtones. This novel can thus be described as a double-voiced discourse where, the people of Kittur, led by their Queen's impeccable authority and power, is subverted by the cunningness of the Company regiment. The dominant voice of imperialist eventually subverts the voices of the people. The author's expertise in blurring fact and fiction is at its creative best in these contexts.

The alternation of facts and fiction is seamless, and one needs an understanding the ethos of the land and its people to tell the difference between the political or historical clime from that of the cultural and social. For instance, the hurried coronation, with its intricate rituals are presented almost as a live coverage that we can see in the modern day televisions, though it is ostensibly true that the details



could not have been recorded. It originates from the author's knowledge and understanding of the cultural milieu rather than extracting them from authentic sources. The songs sung during the wedding rituals of Chennamma and Raja Mallasarja is a classic case in point. This vindicates the intensity of the literary discourse as against the historical discourse.

Naikar provides a fictionalized history of Kittur in particular and India at large during crucial historical moments: the reign on Raja Mallasarja for nearly thirty four years,(Naikar,68), his meeting with Bajirao Peshwa of Pune and the Raja's subsequent arrest and later his death, the controversial administration, illness and death of his son Sivalingarudrasarja, the 'quiet' but brave adoption of Sawai Mallasarja II, Rani Chennamma's war with Company regiment outside the fort of Kittur, the consequent arrest of Company Officers - Stevenson and Elliot, the democratic administration of the native Queen that earned the respect of the opponents, the eventual destruction of the Kittur palace and the death of the Queen.

Naikar's fictional space 'Kittur' is not an artistic construct born out of the narrator's imagination. It is the very embodiment of the first serious struggle for independence from foreign rule. He is intensely passionate with the history of Kittur and for posterity to have access to its recorded history as well. The urge to bring about the richness of Kittur's history is one of his foremost concerns, particularly when the nation's history seldom recognizes the Queen's prowess and patriotism. In contrast, Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai, who under very similar circumstances, defied the colonizers, apparently, is better known throughout the country. Writing, is Naikar's way of opening out to the outside world, at least to the present English speaking India, to become aware of the earliest instance of patriotic and anti colonial wars. The novel yields very valuable insights into the complex and intricate history of Kittur. The need to fictionalize actual events is inevitable on the part of any writer living in politically distant times and conditions where writing is the only medium of expression. This is especially true at a time when we receive lies as truth, war as peace, and impoverishment as development. Under the circumstances, it's only just that a writer chooses, however unjustly, to offer truth camouflaged as fiction.

CONCLUSION

The general acceptance that popular history is something which we already know, or that the victors write/ rewrite the history, does decimate the entire pursuit of history appreciably. However, a keen sense of historiography can intensify the writer's historical sense, thus enabling re-creation of history through a narrative. Establishing a rapport with the historical events through interrogation and interaction, will engage the writer more deeply with the historical events, may even necessitate consultation of additional sources to get the answers. It is precisely in this context that Basavaraj Naikar's *The Queen of Kittur* blends the boundaries that demark facts from fiction. The narration dovetails with the facts woven into literary imagination as is revealed by the historical events and socio-cultural activities. The ratio of facts and fiction can vary with each author and therefore the outcome may not comply with everyone's view of things. Nevertheless, it will allow a better



appreciation for the many factors including, one's bias and prejudice, that contribute to the understanding and interpretation of an historical event. This appreciation, in turn, will enhance the quality of historical researches.

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