
Uncloaking Subversed History through the Lens of Magic Realism in Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1995)

Samoyeta Ghosh¹, Rajat Subhra Roy², Tuhin Lodh³

¹Second Year, Bachelor of Education, Baba Saheb Ambedkar Education University, Master of Arts in English, Department of English, University of North Bengal, India, Email: ghoshsamoyeta@gmail.com

²Independent Researcher, Master of Arts in English, Department of English, University of North Bengal, India, Email: rajatsubhroy.edu@gmail.com

³TGT English, Techno India Group Public School, Jalpaiguri, Master of Arts in English, Department of English, University of North Bengal, India, Email: tuhinlodh2@gmail.com

Abstract

American historian David McCullough promulgates that, "History is who we are and why we are the way we are" while Napoleon on the contrary dismissed it simply as "a Myth" and Henry Ford derogatorily termed it as "Bunk!". While its value can be contested, one cannot deny its varied guises. However, traditional macrohistory seemed to have disparaged the microcosm historical study until the 1980s when theorists alike Ginzburg, Levi and Cerutti lay bare the significant gaps in the then-popular historiographical approaches. Many an incident have taken place in the time gone of which most's intricacies have faded out due to negligence of its microstories. The Indian subcontinent too has gone through radical alteration in the past few centuries, principally after 1947, when India was suddenly bifurcated on communal lines due to political vendetta. This was the biggest ever exodus of people in the history of humankind, often compared with the European migration during the Nazi regime. The partition of India and associated bloody riots inspired many creative minds, both in India and Pakistan to create literary and cinematic depictions of the event. A professional historian turned novelist; Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1995) is one such literary work. Shaped by fiction and historiography and with the employment of Magic Realism, it depicts the gruesome climate of the masses but ultimately leaves it upon the audience to decide whether it is *pukka* or magic. This novel interrogates the personal as well as the political decisions taken about or during partition from the present perspective, so also, countering the official history. In light of this, the paper seeks to explore how Kesavan has problematised traditional recorded history and that so through the meticulous use of the lens of Magic Realism.

Keywords: Microhistory, Magic Realism, Migration, Macrohistory, Partition.

“The weather was frightfully hot,
And a bout of dysentery kept him constantly on the trot,
But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided,
A continent for better or worse divided.” (W. H. Auden, ‘Partition’, 1966)

Seven weeks! And that was all it took a person who had “never set eyes on the land he was called to partition”, to complete his task. (Auden) Auden sarcastically points out the injustice and the frenzy in which the deed of the partition of the Indian subcontinent was executed. His poem moots several questions in our mind - How easily do we divide a nation into two separate nation-states? Who is authorized enough to draw the borders, and what happens to the people on either side when they resettle? How did South Asian literature and oral narrative come to terms with the violence that accompanied decolonization after 1947, and why are these queries regarding the history of Partition relevant even today?

Undoubtedly, the most important determining factor in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh’s destiny - the Partition - is much more than a historical fact. No post-colonial denizen of the subcontinent possessing a sense of history and living in the post-independence era can ignore the pervasive influence and impact of the Partition on contemporary life. Urvashi Butalia attests to this in her book, *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), “There is no way we can begin to understand what Partition was about unless we look at how people remember it.” (Butalia 29)

Meenakshi Mukherjee adds,

Everyone knows that all narratives are to be read in the context of a specific time and place but what is not always remembered is that while the narratives emerge out of a culture, they also contribute towards the construction and definition of this culture. Stories and communities are thus bound together in a symbiotic relationship. By making the listeners perceive how their present flows from a common past, stories can draw people together. (138)

In the gaping absence of public memorials or museums dedicated to the Partition of India, the narration of this traumatic story is vital to its commemoration. Yet the tragedy of the violent events of 1947, which saw mass displacement, death, abduction and rape,

is punctuated by silence. About her interviews with partition survivors, Butalia discovered that a fluid account of Partition was impossible, she implies,

Tellings . . . would be left incomplete: I learnt to recognize this, the mixing of time past and time present, the incompleteness, often even contradictoriness, in the stories as part of the process of remembering, to oneself and to others. (Butalia 38)

Butalia's remark creates a perfect segway as we delve into Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass*. As the narrator-photographer is in the process of fixing the "man-with-telescope" (11) into a photographic frame, he himself falls into the time-space of the photographic object. Now, the photographer is himself in the grips of the photograph, as a captive rather than a controller of the frame. If it is the camera that normally separates the seer and the seen into distinctively separate spheres, here we see the camera itself dragging the photographer to the other side.

As represented in a clever photographic fashion, the image is that of the narrator falling into a liminal point, a moment outside the continuum of time, or it can be perceived as a 'frozen' moment. Through this representation the novel urges its readers to transcend boundaries that demarcate the past from the present, and by relying on a narrator who is also a photographer, the novel directs us to an understanding of the 'urge for knowing' ingrained in historical inquiry. *Looking Through Glass's* intervention in such a mode of inquiry stresses the mediating function of the glass/camera by calling attention to the dynamics of looking 'through' rather than 'on' the glass.

The plot of Mukul Kesavan's novel, *Looking Through Glass* presents itself as almost a spectacle. The closest compeer to *Looking Through Glass*, as is also suggested by their titles is, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), the second of Lewis Carroll's Alice books. In the train episode in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the Guard keeps looking at Alice — 'first through a telescope, then through a microscope, and then through an opera-glass' (39), eventually declaring 'You're travelling the wrong way' (39), something of which is not warned to the narrator in *Looking Through Glass*. The narrator here falls headlong into the river while trying to zoom in on a scene from his train and travels not only in the "wrong way" but also in the "wrong time" (335). Thus begins the adventure of the narrator with his grandmother's ashes.

At the thematic level, it enables those familiar and having hindsight knowledge or more appropriately, those trained in "official" Indian history of the national struggle and post-Independence India to look at the key moments in 1942 and the upcoming traumatic

years thereafter, leading to Independence and henceforth partition. The utter distraughtness of the times is dramatized by personal involvement and urgency.

India has been much photographed, both during the Raj and since; indeed, it has an extraordinarily rich photographic history. *Looking Through Glass*, however, is more than a mere rendering of this photographic data; rather it represents, cumulatively, a truly photographic way of seeing. We shall now further investigate how Kesavan successfully captures a myriad of issues with the help of the riveting literary expression i.e. Magic Realism.

The Lens of Magic Realism

Scholars have examined issues of ‘fantasy’ and ‘reality’ in Magic Realism and Conventional Realism respectively. As a result of the postcolonial technique, the narrative style of Magical Realism allows us to view and debate reality in a new way, different from the Western way of looking at things. The magical and the real are opposing elements of the oxymoron as is suggested by the name, and so is also the case with the narrative style which blurs the distinction between the supernatural and the mundane reality. It has therefore become the vehicle of expression for writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy and enables such authors to present their version of reality.

Midnight’s Children (1981) by Salman Rushdie is one of the first on this track, which has then been followed by various other novelists, such as Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason* (1986), Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) and Nina Sibal’s first novel *Yatra* (1987) (which deals with Sikh history, especially the political situation in Punjab during the 1920s). Like Rushdie’s hero, the heroine of *Yatra* is endowed with a magical skin that changes colour in response to India.

Mukul Kesavan too, employs the device of magical realism in *Looking Through Glass* to explore the pre-independent India which gives him the scope for defining the indefinable, visualizing the unseen and experiencing the inexperienced. The unnamed narrator was on his way to tip his lordly grandmother’s ashes, who was also the matriarch of his family, into the holy Ganges. Mid-journey, his train stops on a high bridge near Lucknow and being the avid photographer, that he was, he could not restrain himself from climbing out on the catwalk to try for a spectacular shot but something strange takes place and the narrator is sent hurtling down into the river:

But most of all it was the weight of the lens [...] it suddenly became twice as heavy and [...] ten times its normal weight and more, as it dragged me downwards. Then I was falling, hurtling towards the green river, the down-swinging dhobis, the man with a telescope – and just before I knew nothing I saw my free-falling ten-ton lens beat me to the water. (Kesavan, 8-11)

The photographic object, the man in the white kurta, (later revealed to be Masoor) was peering at the narrator with a telescope - another magical device, the first being the narrator's zoom lens itself, the one with 'magical properties' which together worked towards transporting the narrator into the past. Masoor's hand, holding another glass which in some way looks back at the narrator from a different time zone – the time zone of the past, of a different place. The past in this case is that of the days of the Quit India Movement and the traumatic years of many other anti-colonial movements leading to the country's independence.

By strategically deploying the image of a post-colonial subject falling into the temporal space of a bygone age, *Looking Through Glass* discursively constitutes a composite time zone, inviting its readers to cross the boundaries that separate the past and the present in conventional accounts of history. (Sati 162). Kesavan successfully employs the brand-new zoom camera lens, purchased with the narrator's grandmother's pension as a magical wand with which one could see through the boundaries of time past: "When I looked at them through my magic eye[lens], they became dhobis, slapping clothes on washing stones." (9)

At the end of the chapter titled "Outside" (p. 33) where the narrator escaped death inchmeal, has another use of a magical element. While the lorry which created the ruckus leaving the scene, an advertisement passed right in front of the narrator's eyes. There were two khaki soldier figures on the truck along with whom he got a glimpse of a third figure which was none other than Masoor: "How a three-dimensional man could be ironed onto a flat surface" the narrator wondered aloud, "Things can't be make-believe at random and real when they choose to be" but this was exactly what it was. (Kesavan 47-48)

Kesavan's entire narrative is full of postmodern elements and while describing the misfortune of Inayat Sahib, Magical Realism came in its full flight. In this episode, he implores those who have started to get politically distanced from the Congress party and met with some or other physical changes. In one such instance, Inayat Sahib found himself completely naked in the middle of a conversation. With the employment of such

instances, Kesavan has bridged the gap between the present and the past flawlessly and therefore paved the way for the narrator to explore what comes his way, but almost 50 years back.

Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* after stating some 'facts' about Partition asserts that, "As facts, they recount only the minutiae of history, not its general, overarching pattern and that, "despite the recent opening up of Partition histories, there are many aspects that remain invisible in official, historical accounts of the event." (Butalia 297). Here comes the ingenuity of fiction and fictional writers.

Magical realist works usually work on the opposition of binaries - reality and fantasy. In this particular novel, however, Kesavan though agrees on the existence of the binaries, yet there is no domination of one system over the other. Both exist in his writing in such a way, that the reader cannot know for sure what belongs to reality and what to fiction. Kesavan himself posits in an interview with Ansari (2009) while responding to an argument that "*Looking Through Glass* argues so much history, it seems very much as if a historian took on the novel genre". He states that he makes historical points but writes novels because he has always liked reading them (which is also the case with most of the readers worldwide). These Partition novels attempt to bring into light what is invisible, to fill in the gaps where there is obscurity and lift the cover from what has been hidden.

The Intricate Tapestries of Microstories

Rushdie through Saleem in *Midnight's Children* contemplates his own version of the history of India after the Independence. This is an alternative rendering of the events that occurred then. He warns the readers that, "...memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end, it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events, and no sane human being ever trusts someone's else version more than his own" (González-Rodríguez 45) Here also lies the juncture, where we can consider the term the 'birth of microhistory', takes place.

Microhistory, as Paul notes, is a practice aimed at returning to a narrative where historians are generally concerned with overlooked persons and marginalized voices. Where the historian tries to grasp how large-scale global processes and events are by looking at everyday life during the time period studied (Paul, 64). The perception of what microhistory is has changed significantly in the course of time and is still under

reform. What we can broadly sum up it to be is that it does not look at the daily life of people but rather the micro-scale analysis to test larger-scale explanation paradigms.

Although several critics have revolted against this practice, such as Matti Peltonen, who defiantly rebels that the micro-historians “are actually trying to discover very big things with their microscopes”, therefore indicating that microhistory’s claims are overinflated and exaggerated (Nolan 276), yet there are undeniable gains too from this process of historiography. Microhistory is built more directly on the pieces of facts than that of larger social histories and we can gain more intimate knowledge of the person who is under research.

Traditionally, written historical and related relics are the prime components of macro-history whereas folklore, oral history, proverbs, novels and fiction tend to bear the torchlight for the reflection of real feelings and achievements of the people on the margins. Sometimes though, these sources also do convey a kind of protest to the past or contemporary political and social setup.

In his book, *Studies in Micro-history: Political Movements in Some Parts of India and Bangladesh (1857-1947)*, M. S. Bhattacharya, tries to reconsider the established forms of historiography and pries into what we call the “micro aspects of the great political movements in the Indian subcontinent and illustrates the difference of mindset, attitude and aspirations between the national protagonists and their sub-regional followers.” (Kanakarathnam 934) Bhattacharya further promulgates that the “local or subregional movements often merged with the great mass movements without losing their own features, however, the prevalent idea of historiography overlooks these features which is a sort of abuse of history.” (Kanakarathnam 935)

The novel documents the events of the struggle for independence from the 1942 Quit India Movement leading up to the partition and then independence. The narrator himself attests, “... I felt like a historian brought up face to face with some lost cause, some extinct line that he had chronicled” (52) because “Not everything that happened in the past was [in recorded] history...” (16) On multiple occasions the narrator is bewildered by the disruption of the ‘received history’ inculcated in his mind by the school textbooks and his grandmother’s retelling of the past events.

Accentuating the failure of the Quit India Movement, the narrator discloses the storming of the Madhuban Thana at Azamgarh, “The siege and the storming went like nothing I had expected. I had vaguely imagined.... a bloody milling about till the battle

was won” however, contrarily, “...the action unfolded in a curiously formal, intermittent fashion, like the old plays where there was silence during a change of scene.” (109)

Kesavan grabbed this opportunity to ridicule some of the characters who were participating in the agitation. The prime one being - Bose Madam, a Bengali intellectual, who watched the storming with utmost interest, but from a ‘distance’. It is quite ironic because by the end of the attack, Bose Madam is thrown into the Thana compound and the narrator mockingly comments before losing consciousness of the “the oddly cheering thought...that Bose Madam was now properly in the middle of it all.” (Kesavan 108-109) As Mee comments in his article:

The strident triumvirate is completed by Rat Face, who is mainly motivated by lust for Bose, the epic conception of the nationalist struggle again being undermined by the low comedy of physical desire...Chaubey’s attitudes are a comic rendering of precisely the differences—outlined by revisionist historians such as Pandey—between the Congressmen and the popular movement they mobilised; but, as a rule, *Looking Through Glass* renders the assault in terms of a theatre of the absurd — the fracturing of the national movement being produced as farce. (150-151)

Adding to what Mee puts forward, Kesavan further brings into the light “the peripheral location of marginalised subjectivities within official accounts of the national movement and questions the notion of a nation having a homogenous identity and history” (Sati 161) It also tosses out the cover of manliness, virility, discipline, goodness and morality from the face of the Akhara culture against the backdrop of Parwana’s rape.

According to Kesavan his novel “is about people in the midst of great change, about ordinary people who do not have any great lasting convictions, people who are attached to the lives they lead” (T.R.K. 1996). When Ammi stands for the election, the Press tries to frame Ammi in a burqa in a scene that is specifically Islamic and their questions revolve around:

Why did you as a Muslim woman set up a Muslim party when you already have the...umm...Muslim League?" ... didn't she [as a Muslim] want the Muslim League to win? Didn't she want to live in the Muslim homeland, in Pakistan?

When Ammi asks the reason for doing so, the reporter replies " It will umm ... be the Republic of Islam,"

"But it won't be Lucknow," comes the simple answer from Ammi. (Kesavan 329-330)

One major deviation from what is usually adjudged is his postulation that Jinnah alone cannot be held culpable for the Partition and the atrocities that followed it. Nehru, Gandhi and if truth be told, the Congress Party is as much to blame. Kesavan even goes to the extent of stowing his narrator next to Jinnah and makes him ask what has remained to be the burning question of both nations since their very genesis if not before. The narrator, now a waiter at Cecil, asks him, “Mr Jinnah, sir, do you really want the country partitioned?” to which the latter vaguely replies that “Barristers do not have opinions- they have briefs.” This does not really answer any question, even to the narrator, but certainly makes the crystal-clear image of Jinnah as a ‘naysayer’ a little milky.

These deviations can be a result of the generalizations that are observed in the process of historiography, as Kanakarathnam says, “History primarily recognises the powerful and the victorious. Much history comprises narratives written from the perspective of the state” and, “Normally the historians and social scientists generalizations are based upon macro situation,” rather than “on the object which did not come under historical scrutiny in a wider context or already handled.” (Kanakarathnam 933-944)

Even after being compared to Rushdie; regarding the employment of magic realistic devices to move forward the narrative, “one is compelled to”, as James Paul notes, “emphasise that Kesavan is no clone of narrative style but instead a keen observer of literature and history who takes the best of successful narrative strategies, which he interweaves with elements of history that may have been overlooked. The result is a compelling and commanding first novel.” Mukul Kesavan's novel explores the tension between the politics of narration and the narration of politics. Historiography may not be able to escape the framing of the photograph or the theatrical staging of events in *Looking Through Glass*, but that does not mean that the task of retrieval is simply to be transcended.

Kesavan argues that only by “looking through the mirror”, or by challenging to cross the boundaries that divide the seen from the unseen, the transparent from the opaque, a clear doctrine can be seen, that of a photographic model of historical inquiry, which makes the object of representation disappear as surely as Masroor, Dadi, and Parwana disappear. Only by inhabiting the invisible spaces of history emotionally as Ammi does, or telepathically, as Kesavan does, can we imagine a space where agency and (photographic) visibility are not coincident.

Conclusion

As we reach the culmination of the novel, it parts with us by providing a scenario, quite uncommon in the majority of the partition novels which conventionally depict Muslims leaving India from refugee camps to Pakistan. Here, however, instead of going to the 'Promised Land' for the Muslims, Masroor and his family opt to go back to Lucknow: their ancestral home. Thus, challenging the official nationalist version; by applying a corrective lens and also removing the lens between history and life. Mukul Kesavan's masterful novel *Looking Through Glass* provides a fresh and unique perspective on the historical events surrounding the partition of India. Drawing upon magic realist devices and a photographic model of historical inquiry, Kesavan challenges the official nationalist version of events, delves into the unseen and the opaque and offers a corrective lens to the dominant narrative.

By encouraging readers to emotionally engage with the past and inhabit the invisible spaces of history, Kesavan creates a space where agency and visibility are not coincident, inviting us to re-imagine the events of the partition in a more constructive light. This provides us with a more nuanced and multifaceted depiction of the partition that is often overlooked in conventional historical accounts. Moreover, the novel's conclusion, which departs from the conventional depiction of Muslims leaving India for Pakistan, provides a powerful critique of the partition and debunks the idea of religious fervour and bigotry as the driving force behind the partition. Overall, Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* offers a thought-provoking and constructive perspective on one of the most significant events in South Asian history.

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