History Redefined: Reading Aruni Kashyap’s novel The House with a Thousand Stories as a Historiographic Metafiction

Jimin S Mathew  
M.Phil Research Scholar  
Dept of English & Languages  
Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi  
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham  
India

Dr. Sreenath Muraleedharan K  
Assistant Professor  
Dept of English & Languages  
Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi  
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham  
India

The word ‘truth’ has undergone many transformations over the time, in terms of its meaning and the concepts that it represents. In 2016 the Oxford Dictionaries has declared the word ‘post-truth’ as its international word of the year. The editors say that the “use of the term “post-truth” had increased by around two thousand percentage in 2016 compared to last year”. They have also noted that the word gained its popularity as an adjective under the lights of US presidential Election and Brexit referendum. It defines ‘post truth’ thus: “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” In other words the world detains emotionally ornamented, seemingly factual appearances than facts as such. A simulation of reality gets more prominence than reality itself. Modern American writer Samantha Young, in her article Based on a True Story: Contemporary Historical Fiction and Historiographical Theory, observes “…truth in an age of relativity and perspectivism is a volatile concept” (2).

Traditional academic circle looks upon History as something which represents ‘objective truth’, which is formed on the basis of unambiguous enquiry of facts and its validation. History, according to the popular beliefs, is more reliable and holds more referential integrity than any other realist representation. But in the post-modern academic circles, historical documents are often scrutinised for its authenticity in representing historical facts. The problem with history is that the documents also incorporate its author’s viewpoint or how the author looks at the events of the past. “In a history text, the historian’s reading of the past is at the forefront of the narrative, and therefore more readily open to scrutiny and questioning” (Morris-Suzuki 42). The authorial intervention in a historical text questions its very claims of representing ‘objective truth’ or ‘facts’. In his novel Foe, Michael Coetzee also reveals that storytellers and historians can certainly silence, exclude and absent certain past events (Hutcheon 122). Another problem which history faces is its inability to capture feelings and emotions of the time it represents. In the post-truth era, narrative historic fiction or self reflective historical narratives holds more currency than objective history as such. Narrative historic fiction, a hybrid of both ‘facts’ and ‘imagination’, without sacrificing the laws of facts and fiction, blurs it to suit its
narrative purpose. In the view of Samantha Young, narrative history presents history in a fresh fabric, which has more outreach to the reading public. She says: “narrative history allows experience an opportunity, and that it is often the encounters we have and the stories we tell that make history accessible, memorable and applicable to our present” (1). Among the Post-modern theorists, critics like Linda Hutcheon challenge the separation of ‘literary’ and ‘historical’ and calls for a blend of both to represent today’s world. She calls such kinds of historical narratives with the blend of fiction and self reflexive narration as Historiographic Metafiction. ‘Verisimilitude’ is the key, according to Hutcheon, that drives both fiction and history; not any ‘objective truth’. She also identifies similarity in both history and fiction as ‘linguistic constructs’.

However, it is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure. (Hutcheon, 105)

There is a basic difference between historic documents and Historiographic Metafiction. History tries to trace and represent events of the past in objective frameworks. Whereas in Historiographic metafiction, history is modified with subjective reflections and imagination of the narrator. Critics have always demanded for historical works that present clear, documented and self-validating evidences, which can be taken as the unchallenging truth. But narrative realistic fiction has the opportunity to interweave fiction with reality or truth. Such an interweaving does not intend to compromise ‘truth’ but instead, offer the reader an opportunity to witness history through novel spectacles. To represent history in fiction requires a perfect amalgamation of what is proved to be ‘real’ and what is ‘imagined’.

Defacing the ‘real’ to represent it in art has started long back in Plato’s time itself. Plato’s banishment of poets from his Republic had happened because the ‘real’ is thrice removed in order to represent it in art. In book III of the Republic Plato states “the tragic poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and from the truth” (113). Historiographic Metafiction, as a critical as well as narrative method also defaces history to narrativise fiction. Metafictional novel gains its significance because of its reflexive tendencies, outwardly projecting the inner self of the novel. An author uses certain techniques of defamiliarisation to make his/her reader, who is still spellbound in traditional narrative techniques. This study endeavours to examine Aruni Kashyap’s novel The House with a Thousand Stories as a Historiographic Metafiction. The ‘real’ self of the novel is exposed by different means of narrative techniques like exaggeration, defamiliarisation and the constant interventions in the narrative voice.

The House with a Thousand Stories, is set in Mayong, a rural village in Morigaon district, Assam. The word Mayong is said to be derived from the Sanskrit word Maya, which means illusion and ongo means part. The village has been called “the land of black magic” and plethora of mysteries and superstitions. Sorcery and black magic are traditionally practiced and passed over to generations with myths and stories associated with it. “Many tales of men disappearing into thin air, people being converted into animals or beasts being magically tamed have been associated with Mayong.”
The main occurrences in the novel happen around the life of a young city boy called Pablo, who has lived a privileged life in Guwahati. The story mainly deals with the incidents that occurred during Pablo’s two visits to his ancestral village Mayong. The first visit occurred when Pablo was only twelve. He stayed there for a week to attend his uncle’s funeral ceremony. The second visit occurred after four years when he was sixteen. His revisit was for his aunt Moina’s wedding. The narrative is progressing through the perspectives of Pablo. As the narrative progresses on, Pablo shifts his narration, intermixing the past and present, and gives subjective reflections on every character and event. The reader cannot fully rely on Pablo, since he is an amateur narrator, not fully aware of the historical, cultural and political scenarios in Mayong. Pablo is amused as well as disturbed by bickering aunts, superstitious events and hysterical gossips. As a youngster he develops an affair with a girl named Anamika and a binding friendship with his cousin Mridul. During the cause of his narratives he brings into light the disturbing shadows of insurgency, the fears and trauma of people and the government and army machinery’s fierce measures to control militancy.

When one analyse the novel as a metafictional self-reflective narration, one comes in contact with a bunch of characteristic traits. In her work *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon evaluates Georg Lukács’ idea of the character type of Historical narrative and states;“the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are anything but proper types”(129). The protagonist of this novel doesn’t belong to a proper type. Pablo is a young unreliable narrator, who narrates his experiences in Mayong through the spectacle of a twelve year old boy and of a sixteen year old youngster. The subjective intervention of the narrator is visible throughout the novel. Pablo—the narrator, even though his ancestral history is rooted in Mayong, has no knowledge of the culture and socio-political scenario in the village. Pablo is the spectacle or the eye through which reader reaches the inner realms of the novel. The author uses Pablo’s voice to conceal as well as articulate the real voices of the novel. In its deeper voices, the novel exposes the real picture of rural Assam—insurgencies, military conflicts and assassinations and people’s fear of getting beaten up or murdered. But every truth is not revealed through the narrator, some stories he narrate are sight concealing. He says; “the truth behind stories mercilessly ensured that certain things should remain unsaid between us forever” (208). The narrator also asks relevant questions such as “why Assam was rich in natural resources but one of the poorest states in the country; why Assam was the richest province in British India but poorest state in independent India”(Kashyap 23).

Historiographic metafiction uses the constant intervention of the narrator as a technique of narration. For instance, the novel begins with a mention of a rumour about the groom’s family, Pablo’s cousin Anil-da has brought the news to the wedding house. But instead of revealing the rumour to the reader, the narrator takes a diversion in his narration and gives a subjective description of Anil-da’s way of delivering the rumour to his audience. It goes like this,

A while later, as Anil-da narrated the story, he froze at least seven people who were busy doing different things for the wedding....Anil-da had created this tense situation with his ability to inspire curiosity. He wanted people to ask him questions. He wanted them to be afraid, to think that the wedding might not take place at all.”(Kashyap 13)
The rumour, which reveals that the groom’s brother was an active member of an insurgent group (ULFA), later results in the suicide of the bride - Moina Pehi. Such important news, which showers light on Assam’s political unrest, is deliberately set aside by the author, because he wants it to be self reflexive.

Rumours are used as a main tool to narrate historiographic metafiction. The narrator himself is sceptical about the rumours but some of them turn out to be true when the novel progresses. Rumours don’t assert to hold any ‘truth’, but it can carry elements of truth in it. Since rumours can hold elements of facts and fiction, the author uses it as a vehicle to narrate the story. Rumours can be used to narrate unpleasant stories, alternative realities and subjective reflection of different characters. The story is narrativised using different rumours about the bridegroom’s family, rumours about the killings happening in the village, rumours about Prosantoda’s and Mridul’s love affairs and so on. The narrator says, “Rumours inevitably destroy all the happiness in wedding. But with the girip-garap sounds of boots, with the fratricidal violence in the state, I guess such rumours become verdicts, alternative realities, faceless voices turned real. Some of those faces had scars and you can count the numbers of stitches on it” (190). The narrator of the rumour is not a reliable narrator. Since whatever the narrator tells is a rumour, no one can question him for its authenticity and the narrator is not obliged to prove his statements. The listener can either take it or leave it as it is. That is the reason why, in the story, nobody was bothered to question Anil-da about the authenticity of his rumours and gossips. “But no one bothered to worry about his unreliability, that he liked to exaggerate things, that he was a compulsive storyteller.”(76)

As a metafictional self-reflexive novel, the author establishes myths, illusions and superstitions as visible objective of storytelling. The exaggerations and complications help the author to wrap ‘reality’ with imaginative or mythical elements. This in turn helps the novel to disclose its real self. The novel discusses the myth on hooting of owls as an ill omen. “That something terrible would happen very soon, whether before or after the wedding, was evident the night three owls hooted niu-niu-niu, long and hard, so that I woke up from my sleep startled...as if they were singing: ‘I will take you away. We shall take you away. Niu- niu-niu.’” (Kashyap 131). Another incident, a superstition is narrated in the novel, that women are not suppose to enter their bed room or have a private conversation with their husbands which was considered to be a sin. Oholya jetai, Pablo’s father’s maternal cousin indulges in a verbal battle with Pablo’s mother, because she had a private conversation with her husband in her bed room during the daytime. These kinds of exaggeration in narration serve the purpose of the author to avoid touching the realistic objectives of the novel directly.

The next important technicality used for metafictional self-reflexivity is exposing reality in pseudo context. The real context, which the writer wanted to bring in, is the socio-political unrest in Assam. A section of the state is in cry for a separate Bodoland, the protests against AFSPA (Armed Force Special Power Act) and threats and fears of existence. But the author uses the context of a family marriage; the marriage rituals, family unions, gossiping and rumours as a pseudo context to expose the real crux of the narration. The novel talks about an incident where Pablo is exploring the village with his cousin Mridul, and Mridul cautions Pablo about an electric pole, where Pablo also experiences some invisible obstacle. For the first time, the reader feels it as a superstition. But later
Mridul reveals that they had found a dead corpse of a ULFA member’s brother, hanging down the electric pole. The brutality prevailing over a social system is revealed in between a casual chattering of two young boys. During his second visit to Mayong, Pablo sees a “curve on the strait road, just under the electric pole, the grass on the part of the road were the body had fallen...everyone must be walking around the portion all these years, avoiding the imaginary blood-splattered body” (130). The dead body under the electric pole remains as a memory in the minds of the villagers. The green turf and the curve in the strait road stand as a silent monument of brutality and fear. The symbol of electric post itself creates more emotions and explains a lot more than any other descriptive account. The author uses such symbols and metaphors to narrativise history, which cannot be achieved by pure historical writing. Young is very much aware of the importance of symbols and metaphors in narration. She states “The use of symbols and metaphors mean that a world is apprehended rather than defined, and that metaphor may perhaps succeed in representing the world in ways that history proper cannot”(3). ‘The golden laburnum flowers’ is a major metaphor used in the novel. Pablo was very much attracted to the golden laburnum flowers when he saw the patch of yellow flowers spread in front of the bamboo gate, while he was standing in the veranda of Brikodar’s house. He experiences a sensual pleasure and describes the flowers as “rebellious yellow, bursting with youthful energy” (106). But when he is having a conversation with Mridul, Binod and Bakrodar, the suspicious army officers walks in, “crushing the laburnum flowers with their boots” (109). The Army’s presence starts disturbing Bakrodar’s sister Mamoni and she starts to scream after the soldiers leave the house. Pablo is surprised to see Brikodar’s ever smiling sister behaving strange. Pablo narrates the incident thus; “she kept screaming like a lunatic until she fainted. I saw the whites of her eyes; the irises of her eyes had disappeared....I saw the pale yellow trail of urine sliding down on the courtyard” (112). Later Pablo came to know from Mridul that Mamoni was raped by four military men when she had gone to wash cloths in the Pokoria River. The army crushing the laburnum flowers under their boots metaphorically foresights the rape. This incident changes the perspective of Pablo, the laburnum flowers no longer remind him of youthful energy but of dread and vulnerability. He says,“I didn’t want to think about those white eyes, and tried to focus on those golden laburnum flowers that I loved so much. But the more I tried to think about the golden flowers, the more they reminded me of the yellow urine.”(112)

On the whole, Aruni Kashyap’s novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* reveals characteristics of historiographic metafiction. Metafictional narratives gained significance by experimenting new techniques, which is unconventional and transforming history to greater possibilities of narration. By means of implicate amalgamation of facts and myths, by allowing the facts to self reflex and self perpetuate beyond the fictional boundaries, historiographic metafiction allows its readers to experience a new aesthetic feeling. There are ample numbers of narrative methods available to narrativise a novel effectively. But in order to provide the taste of history with wrapping of imagination, the novel uses historiographic metafiction as a suitable tool. “There are so many ways of telling the same story. It really depends on what you want to leave the listener with.”(210). *The House with Thousand Stories*, surely leaves the reader the essence of the Assamese village Mayong, its customs and traditions, historicity and relevance, and its struggles and resistance.

**Works Cited**


