

Partition Memory as Shared History in the Picture Book

Mukand and Riaz

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Jean-Francois Lyotard describes postmodernity as an attitude; an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (509). He regards metanarratives as violent and tyrannical in their imposition of a ‘totalising’ pattern and a false universality on actions, events and things. Instead, all one can do, he avers, is utilize local narratives to explain things. Hence, knowledge can only be partial, fragmented and incomplete (Woods 20-21). Lyotard affirms that postmodernism as an aesthetic practice actively searches out heterogeneity, pluralism and constant innovation (23). Rather than accepting grand narratives as the given, we now look for micronarratives- the little narratives- which do not seek to homogenize the story of Everyman, but represent every wo/man’s story as one among many incomplete stories. Postmodernists no longer view history as a totalizing discourse, a single ‘History,’ but as a limitless number of incommensurable ‘histories’.

Children’s literature in India has been satiated with didactic stories from history, religion, myth and folklore in comic book series like *Amar Chitra Katha* and periodicals like *Target* and *Tinkle*, published from the 1970s onwards so much so that the picture book, a fairly recent sub-genre in India, rarely, if ever, focuses on history and religion. One among the notable exceptions is a picture book

published by Tulika titled *Mukand and Riaz*. It is the author-illustrator Nina Sabnani's interpretation of the Partition of India, as gleaned from her memory of the story told by her father focusing on his personal experiences. Narrative, as Peter Brooks has said, is always a perspective on a story rather than a record of every single event (Nicol 27). This paper is an examination of memory as history in *Mukand and Riaz*; more specifically, of the representation of history as biography seen through the spectacles of memory - of history as an oral account of 'his/story' documented and interpreted as "herstory" (Carby 216) by the author, in a picture book for the implied child-reader. It examines, in the process, the author's perspective of history and the importance that she, as a woman, places on certain issues.

Louis Montrose, in his elucidation of the textuality of history, suggests that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by surviving textual traces of the society in question – traces whose survival may be a complex, subtle process of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the "documents" upon which historians ground their own texts, called "histories" (781). It is historiography's explanatory and narrative employments of past *events* that construct what we consider historical facts (Hutcheon 92). As Hayden White succinctly states:

What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography, in service to state apparatuses that have turned against their own citizens, with its epistemically pinched, ideologically sterile, and superannuated notions of objectivity—a historiography which, in cutting itself off from the resources of *poiesis* (invention) and artistic writing, also severed its ties to what was most creative in the real sciences it sought halfheartedly to emulate. (152)

The Partition of India as narrative has undergone a process of “sedimentation” (Ahmad 229) subsequent to numerous accounts of it from the British perspective as well as from the Indian and the Pakistani perspectives. Ranajit Guha posits that the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Both originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively (37).

In the picture book, *Mukand and Riaz*, the memory of Sabnani’s father’s narration metamorphoses the history of an individual into the history of two friends, of a family and subsequently, of two nations during a horrifying period in time. The picture book, *Mukand and Riaz*, was created as a sequel to an animation film of the same name made by Sabnani for the Big Small People Project, Israel,

which incidentally won a certificate of merit from the Tokyo Broadcasting System, Japan. The picture book, unlike most other sub-genres in children's literature, remains unique in its incorporation of both the verbal and the visual narrative, echoing techniques used in other media like films and video games that belong to the digital age.

The title of the picture book on the cover page yokes together two names identified with two predominant religions in the region-Hindu and Muslim. The illustration of the tree on the title page, with its branches of varying lengths attached to the trunk, also signifies the same underlying unity among people of various communities. The Partition of 1947 threw people practising these two religions living harmoniously together for centuries into two hastily-formed geographical spaces – India and Pakistan. But, unlike many written records on either side of the border, this picture book does not pit the story of one nation against the other. As the blurb states, *Mukand and Riaz* is a story of shared histories through the shared memories of a daughter and father. It is the shared history of two young boys, now identified as Indian and Pakistani, whose friendship is broken up forever, for no fault of theirs. It is the shared history of the uprooting of families who considered the land they were born in, their home, until then. The shared memories of Mukand's family interweave with the untraced memories of other families to become representations of the shared histories of a

divided nation, woven, significantly, in this picture book through a shared craft - applique work - created by women on both sides of the border- Sindh in Pakistan and Gujarat in India.

The story begins with Riaz's yearning for his best friend Mukand's cricket cap. Mukand does not let him wear it, as he feels that the cap is special; he feels he can do anything when he wears it. One day, while Riaz is chasing him, Mukand falls off his cycle, and breaks his arm. Riaz takes him to a Muslim bonesetter in Karachi, who does not take fees from them. Keemarika Bhaiyya is known to be everybody's friend. The boys slip some money into the donation box instead. Mukand recovers, and continues to play cricket, while his best friend prefers to read. All of a sudden, their lives are interrupted by the emergence of a military van filled with English soldiers, one of whom asks them to go home. The boys rebel, and go to the market instead to buy their favourite buns with biscuits inside them and then on to the library.

On Sundays, Mukand looks after people's shoes outside the *gurudwara* and sells ice-water which he buys from his friend, Ladaram Faludawala. Happy with the help, Ladaram gives Mukand some kulfi to eat and a bucket of water to take home.

At home, Mukand loves to pose with his cricket cap on his head in front of the mirror, dreaming of the future. At school, one day, the teacher doesn't turn up but Riaz comes in a little later, and tells him to hurry home and pack, as the country has been divided into two – India and Pakistan. For the first time, Mukand sees people trying to kill each other. He sees blood on the streets. The illustration on the recto has a picture of Mukand's worried face placed on a background of deep red cloth, with patches depicting people shouting, their red hands bleeding onto the verso. On the left side of the text on the verso is an applique work depiction of a hanging man.

Riaz comes to Mukand's home with *kurtas* and Jinnah caps, worn typically by Muslims. Though he is not yet eligible to drive, Riaz drives them down to the harbor, where the S.S. Shirala is waiting to sail to Bombay. Mukand does not want to leave Riaz. He wonders whom he will play with in the future. As the ship moves away, Mukand throws his cherished cricket cap to Riaz. The narrator ends the tale by stating that the two friends never saw each other again, but Mukand always thought of Riaz every time he looked at the Jinnah cap. The story ends with the lines, "This is what Mukand told me. Mukand was my father."(75)

What happened to Sabnani's father, Mukand, echoes is the history of the two nations. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs had lived in peace and harmony until then. They were not conscious of their religions having become identity markers on the

political stage. These people were evicted, uprooted, raped or killed overnight. The protagonists, Mukand and Riaz, in the picture book, are the best of friends. They do not let religion come in the way of friendship. When the country is split into two, the blood on the streets does not shake Riaz's love for his friend. It only makes him bolder and more courageous, ready to sacrifice his life for his friend and his family. This is what probably makes Mukand finally part with his cherished cricket cap. It does not matter if he plays cricket in future, as long as the cap lets his best friend live his dreams.

Riaz asks Mukand's family to dress up in the clothes worn by people of his community. He becomes aware of how clothes and caps have turned into identity markers. Communal camaraderie is seen in the way Mukand spends his Sundays serving ice-water and looking after people's shoes at the Gurudwara. He also helps increase his friend Faludawala's business in the bargain. The bone-setter, significantly called "bhaiyya," meaning brother, heals all people free of cost, not just those believing in his God.

Cricket is a shared sport played and enjoyed by the two nations even today. In the picture book, Mukand dreams of becoming a famous cricketer, a dream shared by boys across the two countries.

What the professional historians see as an event that has actually happened in the past is seen by New Historicists as ‘texts’ written by human beings. Emphasizing the same, Linda Hutcheon states that the shift from validation to signification, to the way systems of discourse make sense of the past, is one that implies a pluralist (and perhaps troubling) view of historiography as consisting of different but equally meaningful constructions of past reality—or rather, of the textualized remains (documents, archival evidence, witnesses’ testimony) of that past (96). In *Mukand and Riaz*, Sabnani highlights those aspects of history important to her as a woman. Although she focuses on her father’s oral narration, the issues foregrounded by her are very different from those of a male writer.

In *Mukand and Riaz*, the fundamental rights of human beings as declared by the United Nations are foregrounded. In any war-torn nation, human rights take a back seat, especially those of women and children. In this picture book, the riven country deprives two children of the right to friendship. It takes away the right of a family to live on the land they consider theirs. It takes away their right to a home and a neighbourhood and a homeland, and throws them into a new geographical space among new people. It doesn’t matter they belong to the same religion or speak the same tongue.

While the macrocosmic world has always dominated the pages of history books and historical fiction with its grand narratives of great wars, great kings and

great kingdoms, a woman writing history is more likely to focus on other histories – the little narratives of the common wo/man. She is more likely to focus on themes closer to her heart – the rights of children, friendship among people of different religions, the courage of children and their sacrifices, the point of view of the child. Nina Sabnani goes further in that she also uses a women's craft to illustrate her work; applique work is the art of stitching together pieces of fabric on a base layer of cloth to form a richly textured, colourful tapestry. This is symbolic of Sabnani's act of sewing together the histories of two nations using patches of memories-her father's and her own. History then becomes (her)story through memory and biography; a representation of history mediated through a woman's memory of her father's narration of Partition.

In the field of children's literature, newer histories for children emphasize the story in history, while fiction, specifically historical fiction for children, paradoxically continues to offer certainty (Watkins 56-57). The only change in historical fiction has been the embrace of relativity, the idea that someone else is going to see a different part of the past, whereas history begins to suggest the possibility of complete subjectivity – that no one is seeing the past quite right and that the stories will not match up (Stevenson 27–28).

While historians now re-negotiate the problematics of history as a construct, writers of children's historical fiction delve into various texts through which the

past can be constructed in the present, bringing forth different but equally meaningful constructions of past reality. In doing so, they succeed in representing many voices muted before. The strands of memory, biography and oral narration are all woven, though not seamlessly, into multi-coloured, multi-layered works of multiple histories. In this picture book, illustration and text go hand-in-hand in weaving a historical story, a story from the past constructed through the author's memories in the present. In the process, family history gets transformed into the shared histories of two nations - a new perception of an old catastrophe; a new acuity to current misfortunes.

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