

PLURALITY OF HISTORIES: NATIONAL DISCURSIVE NARRATIVES ABOUT 1971 WAR

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ABSTRACT

The research article is based on new historicist technique and presents a comparison of the 'national narratives of Pakistan and Bangladesh' about 1971 war embodying the theme of secession. Therefore, for current research work, the 'literary and non-literary texts'² of both Pakistani and Bangladeshi writers have been selected. These representative texts about the discourse of separation and liberation, and 1971 war present dissimilar and opposing 'national narratives' about the whole event and 1971 war. This contrastive comparative textual analysis has helped the researcher to note and record disparities that how issues are taken and interpreted, even manipulated, at different levels, within a single society or nation for upholding and protecting vested (personal) interests.

Keywords: Plurality, history, national discursive narrative, 1971 war.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The fictional and non-fictional narratives encapsulating a specific event always encompass sociocultural origin which has different connotative perceptions, logical associations, emotional intensity, and intellectual diversity. New Historicism has opened new vistas and provided critical thinking a new horizon for exploring and analyzing the texts both 'literary and non-literary'. The parallel placement and comparison of 'literary and non-literary texts' together, has remained helpful in (re)interpreting these from a different rather innovative viewpoint. The parallel placement of texts adopting the New Historicist approach has (re)interpreted history as a relative subjective term. It is no longer an objective, authentic and meticulous account of events recorded in the chronicles of time. It is viewed as (his)story. History is subjective and is replaced by history. Rather, it shatters the panoptican view and dogmatic nationalistic approach about past events and exposes dark and bitter realities centered round personal vested interest over national interest.

Parallel placement of 'literary and non-literary texts' about the event and 1971 war, surfaces several dichotomies in the national discursive narratives of Pakistan and Bangladesh. This episode is viewed as secession, sorrow, pain, rebellion, and loss by the Pakistanis whereas taken as liberation, political rights, equality, relief, and celebration by the Bangladeshis. The researcher has tried to explore how far the parallel placement of the portrayals of the issue, events of 1971 and 1971 war, as found in the respective textual versions, reflect dichotomous national narratives and their combative nature. In this article, the researcher has touched the single aspect from dissimilar viewpoint of sense of loss and sense of celebration in Pakistani and Bangladeshi national discourses.

New Historicism has given a new dimension to 'literary and non-literary texts' by pinpointing certain dichotomies present in them and their specific cultural background by comparing it with 'co-texts' instead of placing it in a 'context'. It has dispelled such misconceptions as that it is antithetical to literary and aesthetic value, that it reduces the historical to the literary or literary to the historical, that it denies human agency and creativity, that it is somehow out to subvert the politics of cultural and critical theory, or that it is anti-theoretical (Payne, 2005, p.1).

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² Literary text for both Pakistani and Bangladeshi discourses is *Fault Lines: Stories of 1971*

Non-literary text for Pakistani Discourse is Rao Farman Ali's *How Pakistan Got Divided*

Non-literary text for Bangladeshi Discourse is Shahzaman Mozumder's *Guerilla: A Personal Memorandum of 1971*

New Historicist approach is the rationale behind comparing fictional and non-fictional responses. New Historicism, as theory, has provided new dimension to analyse fictional and non-fictional responses through parallel comparison. The comparison, critical thinking and resultant analysis surface a new point that history – being subjective interpretation, is not a Meta but Mini narrative. The current research work, grounded in New Historicist theory, unveils contrastive subjective Pakistani and Bangladeshi national stand points about the war of 1971 and pre/ post war scenario. These representative texts about the discourse of separation and liberation, and 1971 war present dissimilar and opposing ‘national narratives’ about the whole event and 1971 war.

The disparities in the presentation of national discourses have been ignored earlier in the narrative(s) by the writers and even historicists with one sided approach centered round traditional historical texts which focused expression and protection of nationalist stance at the cost of truth, impartiality, and authenticity. The researcher has selected short fiction for current research because it deems more suitable for understanding and (re)interpreting the events and 1971 war. The anthology *‘Fault Lines: Stories of 1971’* encompasses both nationalist viewpoints and presents, to a larger extent, a holistic picture of 1971 events and war. The selected anthology had texts which sufficiently cover inferred Pakistani and Bangladeshi stance and suffice the purpose of focused research work. Neutrality and multiplicity of expression through New Historicist lens has remained the focus while (re)interpreting 1971 event without being selective.

The idea of “archival continuum” (Wilson & Dutton, 1992, p. 8) remains central to the new historicist mode of thinking with reference to the textual representations of the events and experiences of the past. It means that, in the new historicist conception, the “literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight” (Barry, 2002, 172) as far as the question of authenticity or unauthenticity is concerned. Fred Chappell (1970) has rationalized the belief of equality of literature and history grounding his argument in the sameness of both versions regarding their “documentary form” (p. 514). So, the theorists of the paradigm do not consider the genre boundaries to be valid and significant.

Having got convinced with the same status of all kinds of the textual renderings, the new historicists avoid studying the literary works in isolation and prefer to place them “within the archival continuum” (Barry, p.174) for development of a comprehensive critique. Hayden White, one of the most authentic theorists of the field, puts the idea cogently:

Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same. In addition, in my view, the techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level of their texts. (1978, p.121)

White’s stance is clear that both groups of writers, of fiction and history, make use of the same strategies, forms, and techniques. Moreover, they share their aims—the point that shows the similarity to be deep rooted. Also, the apparent difference has been declared to be of “a purely surface, or dictional, level”. This elaborate declaration of the unification of the historical narratives and fictional ones is a kind of manifesto of the theory.

Thus, the belief in the equal status of every mode of textual representation is a foundational postulate for the theorists and thinkers of the new historicist paradigm. Resultantly, the demand for simultaneous study, the thick reading, of all the texts: “just as literary texts need to be read, so do the ‘facts’ of history” (Bennett & Royle, 2016, p.116). Their skepticism to the exclusive studies of the specific works is visible. So, the analyses and interpretations informed by the thought are required to be inclusive and encompassing.

Acceptance of the archival continuum and textuality of history leads to another of the contingent notions, that is, belief in plurality in the narration of the historical happenings. As Michael Payne has put it succinctly: “New historicists are determinedly suspicious of unified, monolithic depictions of cultures or historical periods” (2005, p.3). So, the commitment to the idea of multiplicity of depictions is pervasive in their new historicist writings.

DISCUSSION

Literary Text about the theme (secession) and 1971 War

Fault Lines: Stories of 1971 unveil the acts of cruelty that resulted in the separatist movement and the 1971 war. The anthology, therefore, is historiographical in nature and serves a useful purpose of introducing history through literature. The 1971 war had varying and opposite connotations of 'loss' and 'jubilation' for the anthologists. Despite different perspectives and approaches towards 1971 and its themes, there is no denial of the fact in the words of Zaman "that the stories of 1971 have to be told and heard" (p. xi).

Pakistani National Discourse on 1971 War

Sense of Loss

1971 is recalled as year of separation, loss and pain in Pakistani history. Brig(R) Karrar Ali Agha has recorded the bitterness: The month of December always evokes painful, bitter and melancholy memories of 16th December 1971; that was when the secession of East Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent, sovereign state became a tangible reality. (2011, p. 9)

One half of the country got lost amidst chaos, confusion and distrust. The dismemberment was possible due to conspiracy of (outsider) foes and with the aid of (insider) friends nourishing anti-Pakistani element. An open mutiny was launched against the state and especially against Pakistan Army which was targeted and attacked.

The year 1971 is viewed from different perspectives by the Pakistanis and Bengalis. The Pakistanis take it as a loss due to Bengali betrayal. It was like a loss of a limb for the Pakistanis. The nation mourned it but it was a hard reality to be digested. For the Pakistanis – West Pakistanis, it had bitter taste intermixed with gloom. The war of 1971, events and division of the country had different meanings for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Zaman states Asif's viewpoint, as a Pakistani, "was of double loss" (2008, p. x).

They consider the separation a loss, which is implied in story '*The Sin of Innocence*' as the migrated family describes that nothing has left for them there (Zaman and Farrukhi, 2008, p.1). '*Fork Lift No. 52*' symbolically indicates the fact that separation is due to mishandling. Asif Haroon (2005) in this connection shares that "the pro-Pakistan and neutral elements were browbeaten through the thugs while the anti-state elements were given protection and rewards" (p.109). The story apparently is about 'Fork Lift' which symbolically represents the event of 1971. 'Fork Lift' is out of order and damaged which hints towards the situation of East Pakistan. Pakistanis lament the fact that Bengalis have not valued freedom and unity; so the damage is done. '*In Versions of Truth*' the protagonist expresses his loss, while addressing the imaginary audience, through his emotional state "their eyes are desolate like my heart – and dead" (p.23). The separation has been levelled with death (emptiness or hollowness). Loss of East Pakistan in the war of 1971 at the hands of our own countrymen has been described in such symbolic words "my own hair, shorn off with my own hands, was strung across a bow. I was not sure why it had happened; the great tragedy was that no longer was there a dividing line between sorrow and happiness. I was not even sure if that was a moment to mourn or rejoice" (p.28). The protagonist is in a state of shock over what had happened. In the same connection, Asif Haroon shares that "blatant lies were fed to the people that United Bengal was traditionally rich in resources and that the people of East Bengal led a highly prosperous life prior to partition" (2005, p.109).

Non-Literary Text on 1971 War '*How Pakistan Got Divided*':

History according to new historicist perspective, is subjective; hence, a relative term. On the theme of 1971 war and secession of East Pakistan, for the purpose of current research work, '*How Pakistan Got Divided*' as non-literary text has been taken for analysis. The book is a critique and eyewitness account of the 1971 situation, events, happenings, political incapacity, violent agitation and civil war, betrayal of East Pakistanis, guerilla war of Mukti Bahini rebels and other separatists, violent agitation and gruesome atrocities of Bengalis, Indian involvement and international war in the eastern province culminating in "the tragic dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971" (p. xiii) and creation of Bangladesh.

Current non-literary text about the 1971 war highlights the national loss caused by the painful dismemberment of East Pakistan. After, the dismemberment of the country, the people in West Pakistan mourned "for the loss of half of the country" (p. xi) but "there were many shared families and friendships that were irrevocably broken" (p. xii) and "there was a huge sense of loss, sorrow and pain at losing an integral part of us, both as family, and as a nation" (p. xii). The wound is deep and "many

of us ... still mourn for the manner of it, for the senseless loss of lives, for the families whose lives changed forever, and for the wound that may never heal” (p. xii). According to Ikram Sehgal and Bettina Robotka (2020), “it took many years for West Pakistan and the Pakistan Army to come to terms” (p.203) with the secession of East Pakistan.

Bangladeshi National Discourse on 1971 War

Sense of Celebration

History demonstrates that the Bengali army plays a pivotal role in the liberation of Bangladesh. For Bengalis it was a liberation, victory and the creation of a new nation. S. E. Finer opined that this army was “the insurrectionary army”, i.e. an army working for the liberation of the national territory or for the overthrow of the social order” (1988, p.190). The Bengali army can be deemed the army of national liberation because the armies who fought for the liberation, according to Masoom Abdul Latif are the “armies of national liberation” (1996, p.94). Moudad Ahmad shares that “a large number of officers and jawans, throwing aside all their professional rules and service norms, and breaking most indignantly the canons of military discipline and chain of command and joined the Liberation War” (1979, p.43). He opined that the role of Bengali army in the liberation war was revolutionary step. Thus, the Bengali army appeared as a people’s national revolutionary army on the surface of the globe.

Year of Iron Dog in Fault Lines: Stories of 1971 depicts sense of celebration of Bengalis after liberating East Pakistan from the clutches of West Pakistan. Shyla- the narrator of the story- throws light on the marginalization and alienation of East Pakistanis and then their reemergence in order to take revenge on the West Pakistanis. The Bengalis sacrificed their near and dear ones, their homes, towns and villages during the liberation war of 1971 and then after achieving independence they celebrated it wholeheartedly because they had paid price for that. Shyla’s family sacrificed Muneer mama, Rasheed, their own house and city during the liberation war. The news of the arrival of the Indian Army for the help of Bengalis gives a life to the lifeless people of East Pakistan. “Then the first air raids from India sounded over East Pakistan, announcing India’s entry into the war on the side of the Bengalis. Now life centered on rooftops as people recklessly came up to watch the dogfights of fighter planes” (p.151). The Indian support and help during the liberation war gives them a ray of hope; Brigadier Jagdev Singh accepts that “resistance needed planning, weapons training and leadership and only India could provide them” (cited in Latif, p.8) and then “the morning of December 16 dawned with the surrender of Pakistani forces, and the city erupted into goose-bumps of victory” (p.151). “When the morning of December 16 dawned with the surrender of Pakistani forces, and the city erupted into goose-bumps of victory” (p.151). The common masses of Bengalis congratulate the freedom fighters of muktijoddhas from their house’ rooftops “Shayla’s cousins were making the new flags to wave at the passing army vehicles full of muktijoddhas, from the rooftop of Khala’s house, yelling the triumphant “Joy Bangla!” (p.151). Bengalis celebrate their victory wholeheartedly because they liberate themselves from exploitation, violence, marginalization and alienation. Yasmin Saikia states that “today, the war of 1971 is remembered in various ways in history books...in Bangladesh, it is celebrated as the war of liberation” (p.3).

Non-Literary Text: *The Guerrilla: A Personal Memorandum of 1971*

The personal memorandum of Bengali freedom fighter entitled as *The Guerrilla: A Personal Memorandum of 1971* has been examined in order to extrapolate the Bengali perspective in a non-literary text on the liberation war of 1971. The book is a critique and eyewitness account of the war of 1971. In this connection, Sanjib Kr Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi share that “the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 is one of the cruellest wars in world history” (2019, p.155). *The Guerrilla* is a moving account of the liberation war of 1971 and Mozumder’s vivid and lucid descriptions bring every moment alive in front of our eyes.

The liberation war of 1971 is the most important event in the lives of East Pakistanis. It is glorious as they achieved independence and tragic as they lost millions of their countrymen and women. The book explores that in the month of December allied forces and the West Pakistan Army began to retreat as “Rolling Back the Beast”. Just before the victory the East Pakistanis guerrillas searched for enemies, but “we found only a large number of corpses but no live Pakistanis” (p.161). At last Bengalis came to know that the West Pakistan Army surrendered, and they have succeeded in liberating their country. Sheikh Mujeb ur Rehman was arrested from his home, He declared, “Today, Bangladesh is a sovereign and independent country. The Bengalis are fighting the

enemy with great courage for an independent Bangladesh. May Allah (Synonymous word of God used by the Muslim) aid us in our fight for freedom. Joy Bangla (Victory of Bangladesh)” (Sen, 2012, p.35; Ranjan, 2016, p.135). Mozumder expresses the feelings of East Pakistanis at the declaration of freedom and records that “we were ecstatic, jubilant. We were like children, firing our weapons in the air as if they were toys, we hugged each other, danced in wild celebrations, and our joys knew no bounds. Our country was finally free, independent, and we had thrown off the yoke of the Beast” (p.163). This event/war, “is named as the “Liberation War of Bangladesh,” and Bengali gave it a title of “Mukti Juddho” (Sen, 2012).

Mozumder shares that “We, the regular troops, exhausted from battle, the sleepless nights at the front, and most suffering from malnutrition, looked pale in comparison” (pp.166-67) to the fake claimants of freedom fighters. The real freedom fighters, after independence, took rest as they were extremely tired and exhausted from fighting for nine months.

CONCLUSION

Sorrow vs Celebration

1971 is a significant year in the history chronicles of (united) Pakistan and the newly emerged state of Bangladesh. In this connection, Asif Farrukhi shares that event of 1971, “led to the dismemberment of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh” (2008, p.xxi). A remarkable and eventful year in many ways for eastern and western parts of Pakistan. The efforts for reconciliation met with (violent) confrontation. East Pakistan had practically rebelled after 25th March 1971 and openly demanded separation. Therefore, the year, civil and international war of 1971 have different associations for both Pakistanis and Bangladeshis – the then East Pakistanis. From civil disobedience to violent agitation; from mutiny to war and separation; 1971 remained an eventful year. Overall, the split which occurred had mixed but entirely different feelings for both nations.

Pakistanis did not want and like the separation of the East Pakistan. Therefore, in Pakistani National Discourse the atmosphere is that of sorrow and sadness. A gloomy picture of situations, events, secession of East Pakistan and war is delineated. East Pakistan gets liberated after as a result of mutinous attitude, civil disobedience and the 1971 war. The West Pakistanis lament over the loss (secession/separation), take it as cutting of a limb and are unhappy, and hold Bengalis (East Pakistanis) responsible for it. Asif Haroon (2005) opines that the Bengalis were “infected with the germs of separateness” (p. 309). He elaborates further that “with constant doses of separation administered by India, the radical Bengali leaders felt convinced that East Pakistan no more had a stake in the federation of Pakistan and thus opted for confederation as a first step followed secession” (p. 309).

Expressing a sheer disagreement about the Pakistani version, Bangladeshi presents an opposite scenario of celebration and relief. They are jubilant as they consider it a golden era in the history of Bangladesh. They have won their liberation after making great sacrifices in a war waged against the oppressive rulers. In this connection, Niaz Zaman shares that, “Even though Bangladesh won its independence, that independence was baptized in blood” (2008, p. xvii).

The disparity is observed in the episode of dismemberment of (the united) Pakistan which occurred due to national and international war. The emotional responses to the 1971 war and the secession of the East Pakistan are different. The Pakistani reaction to the secession of the East Pakistan is that of sorrow, pain, dejection and loss; but, on the other hand, the Bangladeshi response to the division of the country reflects delight, contentment and joy.

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