Re-Storying The Past: The Use Of Archival Materials In Makam

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Abstract

Archives are not mere innocent storehouses of past events, rather, they are a claim of past state of affairs by means of a framework of shared cultural understanding. The choice with respect to what to be archived and in what manner; is predominantly decided by the privileged class, holding power over the masses. This in turn, fundamentally influences the composition and nature of archives, taking them far away from the myths of impartiality and neutrality, thus of collective memory. Even cultural theorists like Derrida and Foucault, view archive as a metaphorical construct upon which power rests. Thus, archives are not an innocent bearer of historical contents alone, but also a stark reflection of the ideologies and interests of the creator. The constitution of reality thus, based on the records of the past, is very much shaped by the modes of narratives and the representation derived from the narratives. The narrative and the agents of narration control the meaning – making site of any historical representation. Since the reality of any period from the past finds representation in the process of narration, where the process of meaning masking itself is an act of ideological appropriation, the validity of such representations becomes relative. Thus historical narratives and fictions are continuous site of contestation as well as negation of representation. This paper primarily takes into consideration Rita Chowdhury’s critically acclaimed novel, Makam (2010), to meticulously look into archival sources as instrument in the study and critique of not only the colonial enterprise but also of postcolonial nation-building.

Keywords: History writing, Archives, Colonial construction, Postcolonial nation building, Collective memory

I

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience (Said 180)

The Postcolonial collective memory is rife with the recalcitrant scars of trauma, oppression as well as resistances. In fact, the very act of attempting not to forget, is itself a stern act of resistance to the hegemonic memory politics constructed upon erasure and oppression. In this regard, History writing on the part of both the oppressor and the oppressed become a ground to put forth their respective ideologically structured justifications of oppression and resistance.

Archives on the other hand, which are concrete record of past events have always been viewed as neutral, objective and impartial, devoid of any particular ideological construct and are
therefore considered reliable sources of study of the colonial enterprise, unlike Historical writings. However, various reflections in the preceding decades have conspicuously made it visible that archives as institution wield powers and engage in powerful public policy debates over governments, freedoms or political accountability for that matter practiced in the colonial era. As Maurice Halbwachs, reminds us that no memory or record is possible outside the framework used by people in societies, to determine and retrieve their recollections. Archives are not mere innocent storehouses of past events, rather, they are a claim of past state of affairs by means of a framework of shared cultural understanding. Archives themselves being part of that claim, exert sufficient power over collective memory, which the western colonisers have time and again politicised in their favour to justify their dominance over the colonies. The choice with respect to what to be archived and in what manner; is predominantly decided by the privileged class, holding power over the masses. This in turn, fundamentally influences the composition and nature of archives, taking them far away from the myths of impartiality and neutrality and thus of collective memory. Even Cultural theorists like Derrida and Foucault, view archive as a metaphorical construct upon which power rests. Thus, archives are not a non-biased bearer of historical contents alone, but also a stark reflection of the ideologies and interests of the creator.

The constitution of reality thus, based on the records of the past, is very much shaped by the modes of narratives and the representation derived from the narratives. The narrative and the agents of narration control the meaning-making site of any historical representation. Since the reality of any period from the past finds representation in the process of narration, where the process of meaning making itself is an act of ideological appropriation, the validity such representations becomes relative. A given historical narrative becomes conditioned by the politics as well as the elements of narration. Thus, historical narratives and fictions are a continuous site of contestation as well as negotiation of representation.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had witnessed violent ‘appropriation’ and exploitation of native races and spaces’ by European powers. A close observation of the features of colonialism would provide us three prominent methods of colonising people and their spaces. When it came to governance of any non-European territory by a dominant European power, the colonial administration attempted to gain control of its existing economy, polity, and military. Along with it, the European administration and rulers also undertook the study of non-European cultures by its supposedly advanced institutes and practices of academics, scholars and scientists in disciplines such as anthropology, literature, and ‘area studies’. The European administration and its rulers also introduced various ‘transformative projects’ with an ambition of the ‘slow transformation of native societies.’

If colonialism is the political practice, then Imperialism is the ideology that endorses as well as justifies the colonial urgency to amass greater wealth. Imperialism was driven by the forces of Mercantilism and Evangelicalism. According to Ellek Boehmar, “Motives and justifications for imperialism can perhaps best be seen as having formed a complicated interlocking matrix comprising many layers. Within this matrix, justifications – such as the need to ‘civilise’ natives and the appeal to the technological superiority of the West – could transmute into the motives”(35).

The early decades of the twentieth century saw the inception of many freedom struggles in the erstwhile colonies. By the mid-twentieth century, these movements aspiring freedom from the European colonial administration had resulted in political independence for the Indian
subcontinent, at the expense of a bloody partition

In the introduction to their book, The Empire Writes Back (1995), Bill Ascroft and others write, “Language becomes the medium through which the hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which the conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established”(7). Thus, in a postcolonial text, language becomes a site of contestation, as well as the site of meaning making. Although a Postcolonial writer may write in English, he/she is in search of a voice to subvert the traditional hierarchies of power. The act of writing itself becomes a site of negotiation concerning the creator of the meaning, the speaker as well as what is represented and by whom the representation is done for that matter.

Unlike the traditional writings during the colonial era, Postcolonial writing is sensitive towards the possible as well as prevalent differences among the native people. In the words of Leela Gandhi, Postcolonialism, “can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past”(4).

II

Rita Chowdhury’s much acclaimed novel Makam (2010) originally written in Assamese is a poignant saga of Chinese origin Assamese community who had been obliterated from the collective living memory of both the Indian state and Assam as well. ‘Makam’ the word from which the name of an Assamese town ‘Makum’ is derived, means ‘The Golden Horse’ in Cantonese dialect. The title of the novel itself captures the cultural significance, a signifier of a homeland of a community whose forefathers and mothers had arrived as indentured laborers to work in British tea plantations in upper Assam. These people who had suffered abject poverty and famine, and had been traded in human market, subsequently found a homeland in Assam through cultural assimilation and inter-marriage. Generations had lived peacefully in a locality known as Chinapatty, until the Sino-India war of 1962 in which families were torn apart and eventually disowned by the State. Thus, Makam (2010) is moving tale of love and hostility, loss of family, homeland and tragic displacement of a community who were betrayed by both the people and the state of India during the War time crisis, and subsequent nationalist upheaval.

The novel in the original version opens as, “I am not the creator of this story. I am an amateur sculptor of the several manifestos of grief, hidden deep in the hearts of the helpless. My name is Arunav Bora. I am a writer” (Chowdhury 11).

The very first sentence of the text supposedly precludes the author’s approach of reaching out into the archives. The responsibility of the writer to understand archives in her attempt to re-story, retell a long forgotten past. The implied author constructs an author figure and his relationship with the archives, annals of the past.

The author re-examines the colonial archives that recorded the exploits of Robert Bruce, followed by his younger brother Charles Alexender Bruce in the independent state of Singphos. These two officials of the East India Company negotiate a pact with the Singpho chief addressed as Bishagam, and initiates the early attempts to grow tea plantation in the Singpho state. During those days, due to the high demand of Chinese expertise in growing tea, the British brought Chinese indentured labourers to Assam. Thus began the first arrival of
Chinese people to Assam. “There are coolies arriving from China today. There’s lot of them. I’m on my way to receive them. They have been brought here to work on Assam’s tea plantations.” says Lumkuwai, the communicator (Chowdhury 84).

Amongst the earliest to get sold and to arrive at Assam as indentured is Ho Han along with his younger brother Ho Yan and few other people from their province in China.

The narrator recalls, “Ho Han and his people were purchased by the agent of the owner of the tin mine in Penang” (Chowdhury 88).

Since there were no available historical accounts as such of the Chinatown and its people, the writer had to rely on various personal and archival materials. In her note to the readers, appended at the end of the novel, she writes:

“I have travelled abroad and met many of them who were once our own. Initially…they were skeptical as well as reluctant to participate…they have provided me with lot of information, personal accounts, family souvenirs like old photographs and several books. I have accumulated several books, articles and magazines of the last four years along with sources from the Assam archives, from the libraries of Cotton college and Assam assembly including memoirs, gazettes, reports etc” (Choudhury 606).

The author dexterously and uniquely introduces the narrative to us through Arunav Bora whose book is read by Lailin to gradually unleash the history of her people to us. Through her unique narratorial experimentation, the author renders us with a sweeping history of the first arrivals in the tea plantations of colonial Assam and the incredible account of starvation and slavery in a famine afflicted China in the wake of the Opium War, which led the people in pursuit of a better life, into the nascent tea gardens of Assam.

Chowdhury states:

“I learned that the story of tea industry in Assam was inseparable from that of its migrant labourers”. The parallel story provides an account of how the Englishman, Robert Bruce dies before his dream of being a tea trader in India is fulfilled, a dream which is later realised by his younger brother, Charles Alexander Bruce, who becomes the “Superintendent of Tea Culture” for the Assam Company established by the East India Company for Tea Trade” (Chowdhury 10).

Arunav’s account acquaints us with a vivid picture of a smooth cultural assimilation which began to grow when the Chinese indentured labourers were joined by bonded labourers from Central India who began working together alongside and gradually forged a bond based on friendship and love. The dark nights of slavery and suffering thus gave way for happier days when the Chinese rooted themselves in Upper Assam with their wives of Adivasi descent. Eventually, the passing year saw the Chinese becoming an integral part of Assamese life, Makum’s Chinatown growing into a bustling hub of Cultural concoction known as Cheenapatti. Intermarriages between the Chinese and the Assamese began to take place in due course of time, until the ominous Sino-Indian War broke out in 1962 to obliterate happiness and tear the families apart.

The readers are then made to be witness to a culturally integrated community falling apart, when the Chinese settlers, most of who had by then already consigned their past to oblivion and their
second and third generation, who had never even been to China, and for whom home meant Assam solely, were looked upon with contemptuous sneer and an eye of suspicion and were further deported to Deoli of Rajasthan to suffer inconceivably and inhumanly. Families were torn apart brutally when the Chinese members of the family were separated from their Assamese partners, and even the mothers of newborns and pregnant women were deported mercilessly to the detention camps at Deoli in Rajasthan. The readers are provided with a poignant picture of the human tragedy as the separation of the Chinese from the Assamese includes, Mei Lin’s being arrested from her husband, Pulok’s house. Pulok is beaten up when he tries to enter the area where his wife is confined. “Everyone had lost someone. Every family had been divided” (Chowdhury 413).

One of the key attempts of the postcolonial text is the ‘re-storying’ of the past. For which the narrative is concerned with the task of ‘retelling’ the event(s) of the colonial past. Concerning the validity of colonial archives, both Ranjit Guha and Greg Denning have intimated a kind of skepticism. According to their erudite observation such archival “sources are not springs of meaning, but fonts of colonial truths in themselves” (qtd. Stoler 91). Therefore it must be noted whether the archival documents are trustworthy, authentic or reliably merit some academic scrutiny. Yet, the given socio-political milieu under which those documents were produced ‘what Carlo Ginzburg has called their “evidentiary paradigms” (qtd. Stoler 91) has altered the connotation of what trust and reliability might signal and politically entail.’ It is very important to observe ‘the combings of history’ to investigate the authenticity of events, and to produce archival knowledge which merits proper scholastic engagement.

According to Foucault who states in Archeology of Knowledge (1969), the archive is not an institution but “the law of what can be said” not a repository of events, but “that system that establishes statements as events and things- “the system of their enunciabilities” (qtd . Stoler 96). Postcolonial historiography could benefit from archival materials assuming that archival materials are more likely to be unbiased. Arunav’s written account in this way, deals with the Colonial settlement of Assam’s tea estates and importing of labourers from China to work in the tea plantations, so as to obtain a superior quality of tea and amass maximum profit to benefit their own homeland. This renders the narrative a critique on the economic exploitation of Assam by the colonisers like Robert and Charles Bruce, and that the supposed act of ushering in the dawn of modernity which the colonisers use as whetstone to sharpen their justification of exploitation, is actually no more than a sordid bane on the indigenous people of the land. However, at the same time, the argument of archival history not being as innocent and neutral as it is looked at, does not end here. When viewed from a Postcolonial perspective, on the account of the aftermath of the Sino Indian War of 1962, there is an all pervasive presence of the critique of the government at home and their so called liberal political ideologies, which had promised a better future for its people, with due privileges, social, political and economic rights and freedom, had in reality, drastically and miserably failed its people. The Chinese settlers including their second and third generation were not even provided Citizenship, let alone opportunities and privileges.

“It has been ten years now since you applied …they give citizenship to everyone. But not us”, resents Akou Hou (Choudhury 171).

They were rendered homeless with no identity of their own and an even atrocious plight that awaits them on their deportment to Communist China, where they would be treated as outsiders
and would be made to work as labourers for the building up of Communist China.

III

Makam traces the lives of people and their undocumented struggles that remained unacknowledged by the histories of the nations that they were a part of. The text documents the state of belonging and the act of desperately holding on to place and an identity when subjected to rejection and dismissal. Caught between the process of being discarded by recorded history of the spaces they occupied, their accounts of events and the way they experienced the country develop, have been pushed away into obscure archives and into the margins of footnotes of the historical documentation. Testimonies of their participation and exploitation were looked at as devices that could threaten discourses about the idea of nation. They are the displaced residents of a country that was keen to send them back to their “country of origin” that no longer wants them.

There were forces with influence that saw through the documentation of the struggle of a new nation and its battle against colonial forces. The histories of the marginalised and the exploited communities do not fall into place with the idea of a nation and the liberal nationalist ideals that the nation was built upon.

The archival accounts also engender an academic scrutiny concerning accredited knowledge and power that may be attributed to the dominant as well as the sanctioned agents of social indicators, political forces, and moral virtues that produce quality knowledge, which in turn disqualifies other ways of knowing about the historical events, institutions and practices. Derrida’s contention that “there is no political power without control of the archive” (Stoler 96)

The author in Makam, recognises the responsibility of re-storying the past, not just from the colonial perspectives but from nationalist strategies that sought to erase the voices of the marginal and the othered in an otherwise inglorious variation of the past in the history of their nation. Their struggle to remain visible was political as they were vulnerable to the point of annihilation as their histories were unkept. Their voices that were raw unfiltered accounts of participation in the building of a nation and their fight against colonialism were threatened with erasure.

Works Cited


