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Dropping Tales, Writing Bombs: Fiction and the Challenges to History in Narayan Sanyal's *Biswasghatak*

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to examine the problematics of history and fiction in Narayan Sanyal's* Biswasghatak (The Traitor, 1974), *which chronicles the history of the development of the atomic bomb as a weapon of mass destruction while recounting the case of the theft of atomic secrets from the Manhattan Project in the narrative manner of the whodunit. Through the lens of the tenets of historiographic metafiction, this paper seeks to explore the challenges posed to the Westernized accounts of the atomic bomb by the politics of postmodernist fictional representation in Sanyal's novel. The self-conscious fictiveness of historiographic metafiction, coupled with its simultaneous claim to historicity, problematizes reality by revealing it as intertextual and experience as narrativized, thereby blurring the boundary between fact and fiction and necessitating a closer exploration of the discourses that underline the creation of both. In this regard, the study of the atomic bomb, its varied histories, their contestations and claims to defintiveness and authority remain a crucial point of entry for understanding the interplay of Western monopoly, representations and the historical complicity in the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent nuclear arms race, all of which which Sanyal's novel duly interrogates.*

Key Words: *Atomic Bomb Literature, Representation, Historiographic Metafiction, Fiction, History.*

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Introduction

In his Introduction to *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy and the Postcolonial State* (1998), Itty Abraham observes that the connection between nuclear weapons programmes and the cementing of popular legitimacy is one that is intrinsically bound up with "political culture, the power of ideas, and most importantly, the knotty relationship between events, histories and conjectures".[1] As regards Abraham's comment, two significant aspects of this relationship are immediately evoked: the first is the stake held by *conjectures* in this knot alongside histories and events which readily signify actuality; the second is the plurality of all three. As the most significant weapon of mass destruction of the twentieth century, the atomic bomb has been surrounded by a wide range of discourses originating around real historical events – events that evolved almost as if in chain reactions similar to those that drive the atomic bomb itself: the discovery of the atomic nucleus by Ernest Rutherford in 1911 and neutrons by Sir James Chadwick in 1932, for example, led to the discovery of nuclear fission by Otto Hahn and others in 1938, only to have Hitler smell the possibility of an atomic bomb almost immediately; the popular alarm among scientists around the world, including those fleeing from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, gave birth to the Manhattan Project in the United States of America in 1942, leading to the bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 towards the end of World War II; finally, espionage within the Manhattan Project, most importantly by the German scientist Klaus Fuchs, resulted in the US being stripped of its atomic bomb monopoly as the Soviet Union conducted its first successful detonations in 1949, thereby setting off an arms race as well as a popular anxiety hitherto unprecedented in world history.[2] Popular perceptions of the bomb and its assorted events, therefore, reveal the shared formative roles played by ideas, socio-political engagements, allegiances and anxieties in creating narrativized experiences. This is reflected not only in various accounts and documentations of the atomic bomb project but also in popular representations, reactions and re-imaginings in literature and other arts. Such representations inevitably question the idea of a monolithic 'truth' or a definitive 'history', bringing into focus the problematics of history-writing itself and offering a widened view of reality – a reality inclusive of both compliances and contendings.

Representations from the Third World hold particularly true as regards such a widening. Historiography here stands problematized as such representations question the 'authoritativeness' of the Western narrative of the atomic bomb and provide instead the perspectives of those who suffered from the same imperialist agenda that brought the bomb into being in the first place. Besides exploring the gravity of the 'threat' to the greater world that the West falls short of accounting for, they also reveal the fallacies inherent in the West's thought and policy behind its own pursuit of atomic might. Narayan Sanyal's *Biswasghatak* (*The Traitor*, 1974) stands out as a significant example in this regard, questioning as it does the all-too-prevalent notions regarding the atomic scientists, the making of the atomic bomb and the decisions behind using it, although significant study in this regard has tended to zero. Yet such a study raises pertinent questions as to the bomb, the centre and margins of the motives and motivations behind it, reality and represented truth, and ultimately the challenges to a

Western version of the history of the bomb and the agenda— and thereby historiography— through the elements of postmodernist fiction-writing.

Telling the Tale to Tell the 'Truth': *Biswasghatak* and the Elements of Historiographic Metafiction

While Narayan Sanyal cannot outrightly be called a practitioner of postmodernism, nor Bengal of the 1970s decidedly postmodernist, *Biswasghatak* seems to actively incorporate, in terms of form and content, those features which are characteristic of the practice. Written in 1974 and coincidentally preceding India's first successful nuclear tests by only three months, Sanyal's novel chronicles the development of atomic research, the lives of the scientists, the threat of the atomic bomb, the Manhattan Project and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki while parallelly exploring the case of theft of atomic secrets from the Manhattan Project in the manner of a whodunit. The conscious interweaving of fact and fiction in the novel is declared by Sanyal in the very beginning. His Preface states:

> The key sources of the events described in this book are ten to twelve memoirs, biographies, works of science and official reports. I have perhaps not even exercised that degree of autonomy which may be claimed by a writer of a historical novel. All inevitable deviations from fact, moreover, have been indexed at the end of the book.[3]

What is particularly interesting to note is the incorporation of definite factual sources and, even more interestingly, the *inevitability* of deviation from the same facts— a ready point of entry into the problematics of representation in the context of atomic bomb literature. Although Sanyal advocates primarily the necessity of alternative sources of energy in his Preface and seems to stress on harnessing atomic energy for the sake of future generations, his novel delves into issues more critically at stake, revealing more serious ideological leanings. Such leanings, coupled with the earlier mentioned preoccupation with fact and fiction, might serve to align Sanyal's novel more readily to a significant postmodernist tool of representation– that of historiographic metafiction.

Coined by the Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in the late 1980s, the term 'historiographic metafiction' is used to refer to "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages".[4] Through their simultaneous self-conscious claims to historicity as well as their own 'fictiveness', the works of historiographic metafiction seek to question the authority of the boundary between fiction and history, revealing both as embedded in the world of discourse rather than being self-sufficient, autonomous objects. By examining the writing processes underlying both, such works reveal reality as well as perceptions of it as narrativized. The preoccupations of the genre with the idea of narrative are, therefore, certain. Hutcheon observes:

> In most of the critical work on postmodernism, it is narrative— be it in literature, history, or theory – that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction incorporates all these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic meta*fiction*) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past.[5]

Biswasghatak achieves this incorporation in order to arrive at a distinct questioning of the narratives that underline the history of the atomic bomb and give it the appearance of an 'authoritative' or 'definite' version of the truth. Sanyal in the novel draws primarily from Robert Jungk's *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists* (1958) besides referring to the memoirs of Leo Szilard, the letters and interviews of Albert Einstein, Samuel Goudsmidt's *Alsos* (1947), General Leslie R. Groves' *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (1962), David Irving's *The German Atomic Bomb: The History of Nuclear Research in Nazi Germany* (1968), the memoirs of Harry S. Truman, and Sir Winston Churchill's history of World War II, as well as to a number of reactions and reflections in contemporary poetry, literature and journalism in order to convey the history of the bomb as a narrative of intertexts. At the same time, the various experiences are revealed as narrativized: the Manhattan Project is shown to be created due to the response of the scientists to the threat of the German atomic bomb, with Einstein himself backing the narrative – a narrative later investigated and found to be a mere paper tiger; rumours of Pyotr Kapitsa's being detained in a Siberian gulag for refusing to build the bomb for the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin heighten the fear of yet another totalitarianism; on the other hand, Klaus Fuchs secretly supplies information to the Soviet Union out of his belief in communism and the hope of preventing another World War. Sanyal's novel, owing to its self-conscious status as a work of fiction, makes the 'inevitable' deviations from source narratives to suit its obvious purpose – to highlight the fallacies of the scientists involved in the Manhattan Project as well as the tragedy that their actions embody. The voice of Ingrid Franck, the first wife of the German expatriate atomic scientist James Franck, is brought in to reinforce the suicidal nature of such a project: she is seen to confront General Leslie Groves over the possibility of the bombing of Hamburg or Bavaria.[6] Consequently, the reader is faced with two versions of the truth competing for authoritativeness, namely the mission of the atomic scientists and the prospect of the bomb dropping on their native lands. Sanyal particularly deviates from Western accounts of the Trinity test— the first successful detonations— when it comes to the reactions of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the Manhattan Project, to the power of the bomb; Jungk writes:

> People were transfixed with fright at the power of the explosion. Oppenheimer was clinging to one of the uprights in the control room. A passage from the Bhagavad-Gita, the sacred epic of the Hindus, flashed into his mind.
>
> If the radiance of a thousand suns
> were to burst into the sky,
> that would be like
> the splendor of the Mighty One—
>
> Yet, when the sinister and gigantic cloud rose up in the far distance over Point Zero, he was reminded of another line from the same source:
>
> I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.
>
> Sri Krishna, the Exalted One, lord of the fate of mortals, had uttered the phrase. But Robert Oppenheimer was only a man, into whose hands a mighty, a far too mighty, instrument of power had been given.[7]

In Sanyal's *Biswasghatak*, however, Oppenheimer is seen to utter the following lines instead:

> Nabhaḥ-spṛiśhaṁ dīptam aneka-varṇaṁ vyāttānanaṁ dīpta-viśhāla-netram.
> Dṛiśhṭvā hi tvāṁ pravyathitāntar-ātmā dhṛitiṁ na vindāmi śhamaṁ cha viṣhṇo![8]
> (Having seen you touching the sky, blazing, many colored, gaping-mouthed, with enormous fiery eyes, I tremble indeed in my heart, and I find neither courage nor tranquility, O Vishnu!)[9]

Sanyal, by making Oppenheimer recite a different verse while his colleagues hear, portrays more humanely the human aspect of the anxiety that the witnessing of the explosion brought about. At the same time, it recontextualizes the narrative by wresting from Oppenheimer the 'I' and the dramatic possibilities of being a tragic hero at the centre: the bomb is reinforced as a collective effort in which all the scientists are held complicit. The fictiveness similarly explores the tragedy that the decisions of those in power – and, consequently, those who effect the writing of history – lets loose upon the world. Sanyal departs from the calm, composed tone of both Truman and Churchill in their respective documentations of Truman's discussions with Stalin regarding the atomic bomb at the Potsdam Conference in 1944. Truman, for example, makes note of the event in the following words in his memoirs:

> On July 24 I casually mentioned to Stalin that we had a new weapon of unusual destructive force. The Russian Premier showed no special interest. All he said was that he was glad to hear it and hoped we would make "good use of it against the Japanese."[10]

Sanyal, on the other hand, goes on to lend the act an air which serves to highlight the cruelty:

> Truman said, as if conveying just another piece of news, "Oh, by the way…I've learnt that my scientists have come up with some new explosive which has got tremendous power."
> He smiled, having spoken at a go. Churchill, standing beside him, smoking his cigar indifferently, as if it was just another piece of news. Stalin didn't show any excitement. He said, "Have they, now? That's very good. Use it on those Japanese shorties then!"[11]

Through his grotesque portrayal of the scene where the world leaders confer over such an atrocious decision, Sanyal, through fiction, makes their visible cruelty at par with their historical complicity in the bombings. With the focus on the fallacies that infiltrate the whole deal, the earlier voices of authority are contended and debunked, revealing a 'just' and defensive war effort – one opposed to the monstrosity of Hitler— as ultimately atrocious and inhuman as regards their actions.

The tools of representation in *Biswasghatak* explore more closely the dynamics of contending histories as is characteristic of the aims and objectives of historiographic metafiction. The discourses that characterize the versions of reality provided by those in power are questioned in the novel through the incorporation of the reality of those who suffer from it— which the former fails to take into account – through the politics of fiction-writing. Sanyal achieves this through the variations in narrative technique. While the lives and works of the scientists, the Manhattan Project, the Potsdam Conference, the shady, secret lives of men such as Oppenheimer and Fuchs or even the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima are told by an

omniscient narrator, the voice stops short of describing the actual horrors of the catastrophe. The short description of the bombing conveys a surgical precision that heightens the cruelty of the act; the effect of the bomb on the Japanese is, however, explored through the activities of the Japanese scientist Professor Nishina and his encounters with Japanese military officers who are groping in the dark, having guessed that such a devastation could only be unleashed by an atomic bomb.[12] Sanyal, through his abstinence, questions the lack of humanity that underlines objective descriptions of the horrors of the bombing, thus achieving a marked critique of the versions of the perpetrators. By departing from statistical facts, the novel implies that this confusion *is* history – the history of those who suffered from the bombings and the chaotic incomprehensibility that followed. *Biswasghatak*, through its self-referentiality, problematizes the very act of describing and narrativizing atrocities; as John Whittier Treat observes, "The problem of whether the words for describing atrocities exist is thus inextricably joined with the issue of who should describe."[13] Through its narrative acts, the novel thus calls into question the acts of narration, relocating their respective statuses from the framework of a history narrated to a history ultimately exposed as perpetrated.

Now It Can Be Retold: *Biswasghatak* and the Reshuffling of History

Yet another distinguished feature of historiographic metafiction is its potential to generate meanings from already existing social signs that it draws upon and reorganizes. This is made possible by a recontextualization of sources through self-reflexive 'fictiveness', which in turn reveals its own ideological motivations towards any type of criticism. As Robert Alter observes:

> [I]n the self-conscious novel the act of fiction always implies an act of literary criticism, but, broadly speaking, it may move either outward, to the society that supplies the materials for literary representation and that tries to dictate literary convention, or inward, to the experiencing mind that gives the literary artifact whatever life it can have.[14]

For Sanyal's *Biswasghatak*, the direction is both outward and inward, and the implication is the historical through the literary. While the novel chronicles the lives and afterlives of the atomic scientists and the nature of their quest, the outward narrative structure remains that of the whodunit, which shows the investigations into the theft of atomic secrets from the Manhattan Project. The very title of the novel suggests a traitor, and in course of looking for him the anomalies of the historical context is revealed through the literary form of detective fiction. The investigations of Colonel Pash and the FBI into the acts of espionage throws into serious problems the credibility of the atomic scientist in the West – then an asset, now a threat. Intelligence becomes a serious cause for suspicion as the possible list of suspects is drawn up based on the ability to summarize the atomic bomb plans within eight pages. Based on his past life and shady whereabouts, Oppenheimer becomes a suspect, as does Richard P. Feynman owing to his acts of playful intelligence and frequent non-compliance with the authorities.[15] However, it is the eventual apprehending of Klaus Fuchs as the real spy that really problematizes the investigation and its implied objectives. Through the incrimination of Fuchs as a spy who acted on his own accord, Sanyal recontextualizes the centrality earlier conferred

on Oppenheimer, making Fuchs's act of 'treason' the definite historical moment which changed the world forever. The act, through the lens of the whodunit, embodies a 'breach' in a peaceful, Eden-like society— an act waiting to be resolved and balance restored with the identification and removal of the criminal. Fuchs's apprehension, however, creates more problems than it resolves. Through a fictional confession recorded by Fuchs immediately before being arrested, Sanyal lends him the voice necessary to question the American monopoly over the atomic bomb and the narrativized nature of criminality:

> "Can you tell me why Gouzenko[16] isn't a traitor while Klaus Fuchs is? Didn't he supply secrets to the enemy as well? Why wasn't he tried? Is it because he is an agent of capitalism? This is probably what their law dictates! Had Hitler not been defeated, that Groves and that Truman would perhaps have been the ones on trial at Nuremberg! How are they different from Eichmann?"[17]

However, as Fuchs himself asserts, his role is not that of a twentieth-century Judas but a Prometheus, one whose actions he sees as that of the "ancient revolutionary"[18]; he invokes further the legend of William Tell, a folk hero of Switzerland, as ultimately inspiring his outlook and his actions. The relocation of Fuchs to the status of the traitor— and therefore the central character—carries within itself the prospect of new meanings: while his act triggered an arms race, it also stripped the US of its monopoly and resulted ultimately in a more ready democratization of atomic energy. At the same time, the whodunit and its leanings— and through it the monopolistic aims of the West— stand questioned; the "ideological motivation to return to a previous period characterized by stability and order"[19], a motivation characteristic of both the whodunit in case of detective fiction and the West in case of reality, is rendered ineffective, as the world has been doomed now to enter a nuclear arms race as well as destined towards a democratization of atomic energy— events that would alter the face of history forever.

Conclusion

The narrativized experience of history and its ultimate status as a 'faction' – indicative both of leanings and of a blend of fact and fiction— remains a major feature of historiographic metafiction and its preoccupations with the processes that characterize the writing of both fiction and history. It perceives both as 'received discourses', always already irremedially textualized for us, and questions, therefore, the discourses that dominate and determine the same. Sanyal's *Biswasghatak* interrogates in this regard the Western authoritativeness of the history of the atomic bomb, taking into account its own complicity and history of perpetration and rendering it inseparable from the politics of representation. What the novel challenges is any naïve concept of such a history; through the revealing of truths in contest, it brings into account what an earlier monopolized history fails to account for while yet claiming its own status as definite. By shifting attention from a single course of events to the variety of discourses that underlie the same events, it reveals more definitely the politics of disfigurement and erasure as well as that of propagation of represented truths, thereby relocating the bomb and the reality it is examined against. As a work whose long-standing popularity recently experienced a great surge during the release of Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* (2023),

therefore, *Biswasghatak* interrogates significantly the politics of looking at the history of the atomic bomb and serves to widen the angle in case of looking back, thereby providing crucial intertexts to the past as well as the present.

References:

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7. Jungk, Robert, (1958). *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists*, (James Cleugh, Trans.) San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, p. 201.
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9. The quotation used by Oppenheimer here is in fact Verse 24, Chapter XI of the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Arjuna reacts to the cosmic form of Krishna, and his feeling of friendship and fraternity towards the latter now gets engulfed by fear. *The Bhagavad Gita*, (2009). (Winthrop Sargeant, Trans.) New York: State University of New York Press, p. 476.
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16. Igor Gouzenko (1919-1982) was a Soviet intelligence officer working at the Soviet Embassy to Canada, who defected to the Canadian government with evidence of Soviet espionage activities in the West— activities which included Soviet efforts to steal atomic secrets. The event, popularly known as the "Gouzenko Affair", is considered a triggering event of the Cold War.
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