

CHAPTER-2

Reviving the Lost Narratives: Search for Small and Erased Histories

This chapter deals with the revival of the lost narratives and the representation of small histories with reference to the novels of the four writers under discussion. The chapter first discusses the retrieval of legends and lost narratives in the context of the North-East, and then analyses the small histories of common man which are usually ignored in the official discourses of history. Fredric Jameson has theorized the literature of the nations undergoing colonial experience as essentially the allegories of the nation-state (69). The literary works which follow Jameson's aesthetic theory allegorically represent the stories of the nation. Such narratives usually engage with the dominant historiography, completely obliterating the stories of the common men and their private histories. They focus on the nationally significant events, or the serious political crises involving the lives of nationally known figures. The fictional narratives which privilege the public and the national over the private and the local are the representations of official historiography, and they ignore the need to represent the significance of the private and the local space in literature. Many critics have pointed out that in the last two decades of the twentieth century, a majority of Indian English novelists turned towards the national-allegorical mode of writing. In the backdrop of such national-allegorical framework, an alternative discourse of history started in the works of some contemporary Indian English writers like Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai. The works of these writers have shown a visible departure from the privileged and glorified representation of the public spaces and identities of history. They rather focus on the locally oriented subjectivities, on cultures and localities which are situated in and disperse the idea of the nation, as Amit Chaudhuri mentions in the Introduction to *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*. In this Introduction Chaudhuri appreciates the representation of the local and the regional in fiction, and cites the names of Quarratulain Hyder, Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee and Nirmal Verma as examples of such aesthetic concern (xxv). Chaudhuri in his own fiction evokes local spaces and projects banality to reject the idea of official historiography as the only acceptable mode of history. The official historiography in literature usually reflects a

typical postcolonial anxiety to foreground the stories of the nation-state, and valorizes the nationally significant events. On the other hand, the alternative mode of writing about the private and the untold histories of the ordinary men displays a complete freedom from such anxiety. In this chapter I am trying to show how the novels of the four writers under discussion focus on the history of the common man, and the erased and untold narratives of the nation's margins. The chapter deals with Amit Chaudhuri and Arundhati Roy as writers of the small histories of common man, and treats the novels of Mamang Dai and Siddhartha Deb from the perspective of the retrieval of erased and untold histories of the North-East. The four writers through their fictional narratives show how it is possible to question and rewrite the official version of history. The narrative strategy of these novels resonates with Salman Rushdie's declaration that "novel is one way of denying the official, politicians' version of truth" (14). Rushdie maintains that literature can, and must challenge the official versions of history. He states that "redescribing" the world is the necessary first step towards changing it. Rushdie's emphasis on "redescribing" can be found in the fictional narratives of Chaudhuri, Roy, Deb and Dai, because they question the authenticity of official and documented history and try to fill up history's gaps and silences.

The chapter examines the novels of Amit Chaudhuri and Arundhati Roy in the light of their representation of the history of common man. While interpreting the novels of these two writers from the perspective of local knowledge production, it is useful to see Arjun Appadurai's ideas on the production of local knowledge. In "The Production of Locality" Appadurai says that the local knowledge is essentially linked with the production of local subjectivities and the local neighbourhoods, where they are recognized and organized (210). In the narratives of revisionist historiography a popular public event or the history of national significance can be reassessed in the domestic domain. In Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and the Sublime Address* the character of Chhotomama appears as a producer of local knowledges as he offers the revision or reassessment of a national-political issue. The children in the novel play the roles of the freedom fighters. Suddenly the domestic and the casual game of role playing takes a serious turn – it becomes a platform for offering ideas on Subhash Chandra Bose as a regional leader in India's freedom struggle, who was deprived of proper recognition in the national level:

Eyes burning, Chhotomama began to lecture them on pre independence Indian history, quoting several historians of several nationalities. As he spoke to the children he behaved like a scholar at a seminar addressing a group of inimical scholars who had views hostile to his own. By a magical suspension of disbelief, he forgot he was talking to Sandeep, Abhi and Babla; he saw, in front of him, three conservative, pro-Congress intellectuals.” (73, 74)

While enacting local history in the domestic space Chhotomama “began to revile Gandhi, the Father of the Nation....He began to deify Subhash Bose, the brilliant, sidetracked Bengali” (74). Here the domestic space becomes the platform of revisioning history, of proving that the cultural or historical knowledge production is not dependent on official historiography alone. The peripheral voices of history can be revived through the enactment of history in the private domain. The reference to the existence of a parallel history which is erased in official historiography is found in Chaudhuri’s *The Immortals* too. There is an ironic statement about the complex reality concerning the construction and continuation of the public image of a popular figure: “It was expensive maintaining a saint, a mystic. Wasn’t it Sarojini Naidu who’d said – Apurva Dasgupta’s mind went back to his shabby, peripatetic college days and to the freedom struggle – that it cost a lot of money to keep Gandhi travelling third class ?” (289). It reveals the repressed stories lying hidden behind the popular history and myth-making. *The Immortals* centres on many eminent figures of Indian music world, whose representation in the novel shows the process of making and unmaking of a myth – the real person behind a public figure and the personal history behind the mythical construct. Mallika Sengupta in the novel goes to see a performance by a child artist whose voice bears a “Lata-like timbre” (29). She imagines that Lata herself was perhaps like this child once: “this was what Lata herself might have looked like when she was a child, and had been taken by Dinanath Mangeshkar (or so the myth went) to audition for a film-maker; and he had been mesmerized. Lata, too, would have been like this child in her orange frock, expected and unknown, the progeny of a struggling musical family” (95). So the reassessment of popular national subjectivities and public history involves both deification and demystification. A common man’s perception of history is always juxtaposed with layers of ideas that incorporate popular knowledge and local histories. *The Immortals* shows how local subjects are deleted from academic history. Nirmalya

and his friends in the novel memorize the dates of conquests and kingdoms, read *The Merchant of Venice*, learn about Edgar Allan Poe and G.K. Chesterton. But their school syllabus does not offer them any knowledge of the classical Indian writers or singers:

Khuswant Singh too sometimes materialized on their horizon in a puff of smoke, half mischievous clown, half oriental magician. But the Indian poets of antiquity and thereafter, the court poets of emperors and mendicant singers who walked barefoot through the ancient kingdoms – Kalidasa, Kabir, Chandidas, Jayadeva – they'd barely heard of, let alone read or been taught about. (125, 126)

Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* represents R.K. Laxman, the famous cartoonist as an emblem of ordinary man's perception of public history mixed with revision and re-analysis. The public realities of the nation get crystallized through Laxman's portrayal of the common man in his cartoons:

On the right hand corner of the page, there is a smaller square, in which small scale absurdities and destinies are enacted, witnessed through a window by a passerby, hapless, mustached, bespectacled, child like, in a dhoti and chequered jacket, he little knowing that millions regard him daily through this other wonderfully simple window around his world. (174, 175)

This common man perceives the hidden realities behind the public representation of national history, explores the dark corners of official historiography and forwards his perceptions to the million other common men of the country. *Afternoon Raag* also presents an interesting example of how ordinary men try to locate themselves in the narratives of popular or nationally known figures. The narrator's mother in the novel tries to locate her husband in a documentary by Satyajit Ray on Tagore. When Tagore died, millions of Bengali people gathered to offer their last respect, and one of these nameless people was the narrator's father. He says:

When Tagore died, millions flowed through the streets, some taking turns to be pallbearers, some surging forward to touch his feet or his body and then left behind while others took their place, my father was one of those who had momentary proximity to the dead poet, touching him before he disappeared from the view, so that, whenever Ray's documentary on Tagore is shown on television, my mother leans forward towards the end of the film and peers at the screen to catch a glimpse of my father. Thousands, without name or face, but known perhaps to one other person somewhere else, appeared and disappeared around the body of the dead poet held aloft, indistinguishable from each other, weaving in and out of that moment. (201)

The mother's attempt to find her husband among the anonymous faces in the film is an example how common man tries to create a foothold in history.

Chaudhuri privileges the private, domestic and local realities over the national and official account of history. His fictional narratives speak about a history which has blind spots and never present history as a comprehensive or coherent whole. Sandeep, the teller of stories from the domestic site, distinguished from the public life of the city of Calcutta, in *A Strange and Sublime Address* feels: "The 'real' story, with its beginning, middle and conclusion, would never be told, because it did not exist" (54). In his Introduction to *The Picador book of Modern Indian Literature* Chaudhuri defines Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a narrative of Indian history in a national-allegorical mode. In his own fiction Chaudhuri tries to depart from this mode of historical representation. In his novels the portrayal of the quotidian realities becomes the chief medium of projecting the local and the private histories. Saikat Majumdar comments:

While more and more postcolonial Anglophone novels focus on the dramatic narratives of the development of the postcolonial nation state, with the very good reason that these are important stories to tell, Amit Chaudhuri's fiction is a lyrical reminder that the apparent lack of aesthetic and epistemological value of quotidian fragments can be deceptive. (462)

It is true that in Chaudhuri's novels even an ordinary event sometimes bears the possibility of revealing greater truths of man's history. In *Freedom Song* there is a lot of focus on the socio-political scenario of Calcutta and the Bengali culture in the 1990s, the primary concern being the representation of the conflict between the local and the larger forces – both national and global. There is a company named Little's, the very name signifying something marginal and small in the world of big companies and industries. The company called Little's produces sweets and chocolates, gets prominence during the time of the rise of the Communist Party in Bengal. The company which was once British owned, now becomes a "family affair" (259). The families which were associated with the company start rejecting the popular brands like Cadbury in favour of the locally produced chocolates of the Little's. The company however, at last comes to see its worst times, and its products are not to be found in the market. It is a history of a local company that mirrors a larger history: "In Little's history, in fact, the history of Calcutta could be seen to have been written" (327). The company was created by a British man, then it was bought by a Bengali businessman, then taken over by the state government and the last reality about it was that it remained just as an existence in the memories of these who were associated with it. The history of the company tells the history of shifts and changes, from the colonial space to the local one, of the local being erased by the larger forces. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* it is said that the public turmoil of the nation usually devours the private desire to be heard. Various kinds of despair compete for primacy and representation: "That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then small God (cosy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity" (19). The chapter titled "Pappachi's Moth" presents Pappachi's despair over his discovery of a special species of moth, which remains unrecognized during his life. This lack of recognition is his life's greatest setback. He anxiously waits for six months to get the reply from the Department of Entomology, after his report to the department about the discovery. But to his intense disappointment he is told that the moth he claimed to discover is just a slightly unusual race of a well-known species. The real blow comes twelve years later when Pappachi comes to learn that the species he claimed to discover was really a separate species and the credit of its discovery has been given to a junior officer of the Department of Entomology. The chapter on Pappachi's failure signifies the marginalization of man's private despair by big issues of public importance. The same chapter deals with the

public narrative of Kerala's frequently shifting political life – the arrival of Marxism in Kerala, E.M.S. Namboodiripad's rise to power as Kerala's first Communist Chief Minister, the return of the Congress Party, the re-election of the Communist Party after almost ten years and the spread of Naxalite movement. This official historiography of Kerala intersects with the history of the "small" people in the novel. "Pappachi's Moth" introduces Velutha – the Paravan – who is the representative of small histories in the novel. This chapter simultaneously presents the public narrative of Kerala's political world and the private despairs of the ordinary men in the domestic space. The domestic life of the family in Ayemenem is haunted by the personal failure of Pappachi – the common man. The memory of the moth is a constant reminder of the failure: "Its pernicious ghost – grey, furry and with usually dense dorsal tuft haunted every house that he ever lived in. It tormented him and his children and his children's children" (49). Chacko defines history as resembling an old house at night with the ancestors whispering inside. Many events taking place in the novel seem to be insignificant if viewed in terms of geological time, they seem to be, in Chacko's terms, "Just a blink of the Earth Women's eye" (54). But these events get significance in the plane of small things and private desires. The desire for attaining primacy in the big order of things gets foregrounded in the chapter on Pappachi's despair over his lack of recognition in the novel.

Amit Chaudhuri, in an interview given to Anita Roy, says that in the academic discourse and cultural studies of contemporary time a centrality of nationalistic issues can be seen, but it is necessary to create an alternative outside the mainstream. Chaudhuri comments that when one sees culture as an automatic embodiment or extension of national activity, it is the continuation of the belief in the "logos". So it has become important in the fictional narrative of today to project the margin as the central voice, deconstructing the idea of the "logos" – the projection of the official historical narrative (152). Chaudhuri wants to emphasize that if present day history focuses only on the national or global issues of public significance, it will never be able to represent reality, because there are fluctuations in the borders of what is local, national and global space. The so called official history of the nation usually fails to probe into the heart of the regional and local reality, and it is necessary to produce an alternative mode of history which may privilege the local and the peripheral.

In Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* there is a reference to a Bengal which is not simply associated with freedom struggle; it is a Bengal that has its root in polyphonic realities. It is the Bengal before Partition, a more local and regional existence compared to the post-Independence Bengal:

It is a Bengal that missed the changes taking place everywhere, the middle class reforms of Brahmoism, the intellectual movements in Hinduism. More important there, than the secular nationalist figures, Rammohan Ray and Tagore, initiators of modern Bengali Culture, was a native strain of Vaishnavism, the worship of Krishna, Ganesh, Parvati, an ecstatic love of their images, sung out in unwritten songs and poems. (203)

This pre-Independence history of Bengal shows that India has history outside the history of colonialism. In the Introduction to *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* Chaudhuri says that the West projects India largely as a historical vacuum. He comments that the only way the West considers India entering history is through colonialism, whereas the real India and its history remains largely unexplored and unknown in the West (xix).

The politics of identity and the question of belonging are an integral part of history and whenever the issue of retrieving and reconstructing history comes to be foregrounded, the re-establishment of erased identity also becomes a crucial phenomenon. In Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose myth, the deification of his image by an ordinary man becomes a significant medium of re-establishing an identity lost and repressed under national historiography. Bishnupriya Ghosh has termed it as "an obsession with ghosts" (125). She has referred to contemporary history's new interest in forgotten icons, particularly the regional figures. The three boys' enactment of India's history of freedom struggle in the domestic site, and the intervention of Chhotomama in *A Strange and Sublime Address* point out that it is possible to perceive history from different perspectives. Chhotomama glorifies Bose over Gandhi and Nehru. This interventionist act shows that dominant history often erases regional and local realities through a hegemonic

suppression. According to Ghosh the truths or realities which are in a state of erasure and suppression are “recessive knowledges” in need of evocation and retrieval from the popular memory of the ordinary men (147). The glorification of the figures like Subhash Bose in Amit Chaudhuri’s fiction produces an agency of rejecting official history as the only mode of representing realities of a significant public event or subjectivity. Ghosh discerns an interest in peripheral figures of history in some recent works of Indian English writers. She particularly refers to the reassessment and reappropriation of the forgotten national icons in the recent literary discourses. She comments that such figures speak of the lost promises of the regional and micro nationalist aspiration. Ghosh terms such aesthetic engagement as “ethical spectrology” – an engagement with lost histories. She comments: “Quite literally, forgotten ghosts such as a Subhash Chandra Bose or icons such and Nathuram Godse return to public view to ‘displace’ conventional heroes like Gandhi and Nehru” (143). Ghosh considers the return of previously neglected figures of history in literary discourses as a conscious aesthetic strategy. In this context, she considers Jacques Derrida’s ethical stipulation in *Specters of Marx* as having particular relevance to the South Asian cosmopolitical writers’ grappling with social violence and post-foundationalist history writing. Ghosh says that spectres present new possibilities in undoing the opposition between life and death, presence and absence; they collapse the boundaries of present, past and future. *Specters of Marx* is the outcome of a symposium sponsored by the University of California at Riverside on the topic of “Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspectives.” It was produced in a moment when Marxism’s historical fate proved its future to be in danger. It was in 1993 that the symposium on the future of Marxism was organized and Derrida gave two lectures, later collected in *Specters of Marx*. This is a reassessment of Marx’s inheritance where Marx’s “death” and the possibility of his return have been discussed. It focuses on Marx’s possible return in the form of a ghost or phantom. Derrida proposes a rereading of Marx’s texts and refers to what he calls “hauntology” – a science of ghosts or spectres. Pierre Macherey comments: “A ghost is precisely an intermediary ‘apparition’ between life and death, between being and non-being, between matter and spirit, whose separation it dissolves. An inheritance is also that which the dead return to the living, and that which reestablishes a kind of unity between life and death” (19). Macherey, while discussing Derrida’s proposal for rereading of Marx, throws light on how inheritance can be reappropriated, as it cannot be transmitted automatically. To bring back the spirit of

Marx, to reaffirm its significance, it must be reproduced anew. The legacy must allow reappropriation and interpretation, otherwise no inheritance will be transmitted, no spectre will return. *Specters of Marx* starts with a reference to *Hamlet*, where Hamlet's father, in spectral form speaks to him and offers him injunctions. It signifies the return of a submerged voice to the present, the reappropriation of something which is neither living nor dead. Derrida comments: "It is necessary to speak *of the ghost*, indeed *to the ghost*, and *with it*, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, and *just* that does not recognize in principle the respect for others who are no longer or for those who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born" (xviii). He speaks about relocating and reviving history from its invisibilities, erasures and omissions. Derrida's appeal for turning to the spectres of history is worth mentioning as it is a fruitful praxis for reconstructing the submerged narratives and identities of history. In *A Strange and Sublime Address* not only in the act of deifying Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose as a regional hero, but also in the representation of a Bengali culture far away from colonial history, industrialization and the influence of the West, the gesture of reviving the spectres of history emerges. In the narrative of the novel there is a reiterated reference to the old, the primitive and the forgotten, which nevertheless explores the spectral realities of a modern city: "Calcutta, in spite of its fetid industrialization, was really part of the primitive, terracotta landscape of Bengal, Tagore's and the wandering Vaishnav poet's Bengal – the Bengal of the bullock cart and the earthen lamp" (34). The characters in the novel constantly turn to a past world, seemed to be remote and unreal. Sandeep is introduced by Shonamama to a world which is made of "small islands of consciousness" (59). It is a world where letter-writing was the only means of communication once, not the telephone. It is their former homeland Sylhet, made remote and unfamiliar by the cruel history of Partition. *A Strange and Sublime Address* retrieves the spectral existence of a former homeland through the memories of the characters like Sandeep's uncle, and reveals the parallel reality of the Bengal of modern times as having an otherness within it:

It was the main road; as the car turned into a narrow lane with cramped shops and rickshawallas smoking dimly incandescent beedies, lounging in the corners, they moved forward in space and backward in time simultaneously. Calcutta grew remote and unrecognizable; the city was no longer clearly demarcated from the

folk tale Bengal that surrounded it so thickly. Myths and ghosts and Bengal tigers roamed beyond an unclear boundary . . . (59)

While discussing the return of history's ghosts to the present, Bishnupriya Ghosh refers to Amit Chaudhuri and Arundhati Roy's fictional works. She says that Chaudhuri achieves uncanny textual effects through his transcription of alternative histories; she registers the revival of erased history in his novels. In Roy's *The God of Small Things* Ghosh discerns erasure of small histories in Velutha's death in the back verandah of the History House, and Sophie Mol's drowning in the river. These "small forgotten things" are the fragments of repressed memories which demand "geophysical excavation" (Ghosh 172). Ghosh defines Sophie Mol's drowning in the river as an instance of small history in the novel, the silent witness of this small history being the History House on the bank of the river. I think that it is not only Sophie's death-history which is small or submerged; the entire existence of the girl in the novel serves as a mere medium for big histories to happen. The small existence of Sophie Mol ultimately leads to big incidents: the accusation of the twins for her death, and later the punishment of Velutha. It is Rahel who defines the smallness of Sophie Mol's existence: "She has hair, legs, teeth – you know – the usual . . . only she's little tall" (210). The entire narrative of *The God of Small Things* draws a comparison between the repressive nature of the official discourses and the existences which are small and powerless. The official discourses in the novel are defined through the expressions like "History was wrong-footed" and "History's fiends" (176,177). Estha and Rahel have been told by the elders that "history collects its dues from those who break its laws" (55). The sexual abuse of Estha inside the Abhilash Talkies is an instance where the small faces the exploitation of the big, sometimes without resistance. The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man inside the refreshment counter of the cinema hall sexually abuses Estha; the small boy's experience is described as a "Little Man's first encounter with Fear" (119). Chacko defines history as a blink of the earth woman's eye, which perhaps indicates the smallness and insignificance of ordinary man's personal history in front of the big forces. It is worth mentioning that even Baby Kochamma – an authoritative voice in the world of Ayemenem – chooses an indirect medium to express her frustration over her unrequited love. When sent to a convent in Madras, she sends letters to her father mostly writing about the miseries of "Koh-i-noor", an identity that she invents, to both hide and communicate her own miseries (25). She

finds it difficult to be honest about her feelings for Father Mulligan, and at the same time feels an irresistible urge to reveal it somehow. Baby Kochamma's act of disclosing her psychological state in ambiguous terms through the creation of a non-existent, imaginary identity reveals the difficulty of communicating or expressing the apparently insignificant predicaments of small existences. Moreover, irony lies in the fact that the History House in the novel stands as a silent setting to the burial of small histories – its name goes against its reality. The house carries the history of Sophie Mol's drowning, Ammu and Velutha's union, and Velutha's death – which remain small and insignificant in the plane of big things. Its existence later gets subsumed by the five-star hotel established in its place. The history of History House in the novel metaphorically signifies the suppression of ordinary existences by larger forces. The larger forces are the patriarchal, caste-oriented society of Kerala, the traditional and confining values of the society in Ayemenem, and capitalism, which encompass both the domestic space and the public domain.

In Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* it is the character of Sohanlal who stands as the symbol of the forgotten past: "Sohanlal is one of those few people who remember the darkness of what was there before, the old language and its life" (216). He sings in a language called Avadhi, an older version of Hindi. The language has a poetic quality that endows it with the power of bringing out or representing places and spirits before the eyes of the listener, even through the most common expressions. This spectral language carries within it a power of relating the glorious past: "Its discontinuous grammar and incomplete sentences are a product of the consciousness that existed before there was any difference between the past and present" (217). Chaudhuri's *A New World* on the other hand presents Jayojit and his father as characters living among the spectres of the past. Jayojit's mind, according to the novel's narrative, is framed primarily by his teachers at school and his father's world, which in turn was largely shaped by the late colonial world. He and his father Ananda Chatterjee are identities trapped in an in-between cultural space. Yet Jayojit laments not witnessing India's freedom struggle and its history of becoming a nation-state; he feels that "given a choice of being born at any time in India's past, he'd have chosen to be born in the thirties, so that he could have a taste of the first years of post Independence India" (148). Chaudhuri's latest novel *Odysseus Abroad* addresses the issue of lost identities: the identities which are lost in the

foreign situation. This novel is also set in England like *Afternoon Raag*. The narrative focuses on Tagore's position in London as a literary figure. The novel's protagonist Ananda feels that Tagore has become an exotic signifier in the West. He finds a house in London where there a plaque containing the words "Indian poet stayed here in 1912". The abandoned and deserted look of the entire ambience force Ananda to conclude that Tagore's time was long gone, whereas his uncle believes in Tagore's immortality. Ananda's uncle claims that "a whole generation had been minted and fashioned by the bearded one" (173). In reality Tagore has become a lost history and a spectre in the Western situation, whose identity needs retrieval at the present moment. The dominant ideology of the West in the present context is more consumerist than artistic. Ananda feels that to be a Bengali in London meant being the owner of a Bangladeshi restaurant, rather than a poet or artist. Ananda feels that the Englishmen now are interested not in poetry, but in "India". Tagore is treated by them "as if he were an exotic annual ritual or an ailment" (173). This emphasis on the present exoticization of the Tagore figure in the West signifies the fact that a legendary literary figure may become a marginal subject or a lost identity in need of retrieval.

In Roy's *The God of Small Things* similar attempt of retrieving the spectres of the past, of filling up the gaps and silences of the official historiography can be found in the reference to the old grandeur of the Kathakali dance. In earlier times the Kathakali dancer's body was his soul – the instrument of telling the stories of the gods. But the present status of the dance has no connection with the spectre of the dance – its past – as now it has become as condemned object in the world of global market. Kathakali performance now has been commodified: "In despair he (the Kathakali dancer) turns to tourism. He enters the market. He hawks the only thing he owns. The stories that his body can tell" (230). Many critics have discerned in Roy's novel the politics of rediscovering the small voices of people from the margins. Pranav Jani asserts that in its engagement with the ordinary lives, Roy's novel can be termed as a "literature from below" (50). He also uses the phrase "recovery of the small" to signify the novel's privileging of small things and ordinary lives over big things (52). Roy's novel presents Velutha as a representative of ordinary man positioned in the extreme pole of powerlessness. Jani says that the novel "explicitly narrates the story of Velutha as an allegory for the working of history (the big) in relation to histories (the small)" (53). In

Velutha's history in the novel, the history of an untouchable in the backdrop of Kerala's caste-system, Jani finds a metaphor of an ordinary man's history situated in the periphery of the social system. There are many critics of Roy's novel who think that the "big" things of the novel are the official discourses and the "small" things are the marginal voices of the people like Velutha, Ammu and the twins. The marginal voices of the novel are those situated in the periphery, for their gender inferiority in patriarchal Kerala, or for being an untouchable in the stratified society of Kerala. They try to rewrite their history: Ammu and Velutha defy the established social system; they meet in the History House and break the laws. This act of defiance stands for their refusal to accept the official discourse of the society, and a possibility emerges that ordinary man's history can be rewritten. The histories of ordinary man silenced by official discourse can be revived: the History House stands as a metaphor of that possibility. Even the twins – the marginal figures in the family of Ayemenem – defy official discourses. They enter the History House, explore it, give it a name and accept Velutha in their circle. Cara Cilano observes that in *The God of Small Things* the possibilities of a better future are represented. Cilano too draws on Derrida's *Specters of Marx* to focus on the issue of "haunting" in the novel. She states that haunting marks the traces of the past on the present. She says that haunting also suggests a kind of inheritance: "An inheritance by its nature looks into the future; it is a passing along of something to the next generation" (25). Kari Saipu's house – an Englishman's house in the novel – undergoes several phases of transformations: it was the old plantation house during the colonial period to several historical moments; it becomes the twins' History House and later becomes a resort named Heritage. The house becomes the witness particularly to the moments of Kari Saipu's sufferings who commits suicide after being separated from his lover and of Velutha who is beaten in its back verandah. Cilano quotes *Specters of Marx* where Derrida introduces the figure of the spectre for its deconstructive potential. She comments: "The invisible or spectral amounts to the destabilization any recognition of the other enacts; the invisible is that which disrupts epistemologies of presence, as well as any sense of the present such epistemologies seem to generate" (27). Cilano observes that in Derrida's introduction of the spectre lies a future promise, as expressed in the words like "where?" and "whither?"; she says that Roy's novel also ends with the word "tomorrow", which is a statement of a promise for the future (29). It can be stated, following Cilano's argument that it is a promise for rewriting the silenced histories of the ordinary man. Another

interesting aspect of Kari Saipu's history in the novel is that although he belonged to the category of colonizers, the people of Ayemenem do not remember him as an authoritative figure. He is remembered as a man who suffered and killed himself. So an Englishman's private history has been perceived by the local people of Ayemenem as the history of an ordinary man, not as the history of a colonizer.

The novels of Chaudhuri and Roy represent the spectral realities lying beyond the officially recognized historical past. They show how it is possible to retrieve the repressed knowledges or historical contents. Chaudhuri and Roy point out the necessity of recognizing non-academic knowledge which is usually suppressed under the officially recognized knowledge. Their novels represent small histories repressed by the official discourses of history, and signal the possibility of rewriting and retrieving ordinary man's histories. Saikat Majumdar compares the representation of ordinary man's history in Amit Chaudhuri's novels to Njabulo Ndebele, a South-African writer's aesthetic position. He says:

Chaudhuri's position as both fiction writer and theorist is something like what Njabulo Ndebele's had been in apartheid-era South Africa. Ndebele's critique had been directed towards contemporary South-African literature's obsession with the valorized events of mainstream public history as a means of apprehending the ethics and politics of racial oppression....Chaudhuri and Ndebele seem to share a similar critical detachment from the fascination with the spectacular in mainstream public spheres of their nations' histories. (450)

This comparison appropriately defines Amit Chaudhuri as a writer of small and marginalized local histories.

Siddhartha Deb and Mamang Dai's novels deal with untold histories and lost narratives: they represent official and documented history as inadequate and partial. In Deb's *The Point of Return* the narrator as a child had the idea that a good story always and must have a beginning, middle, and an end, like a good essay. But to his

disappointment his father tells him a story where nothing happens, which comes to a conclusion with uncertainty. Later the narrator feels that such stories are the natural outcome of their painful memories, revealing only a small part of the whole. The real story is never told: “It was not a story he could tell me that day. Not then. And not now” (146). It is a kind of deconstructive mode of reading and perceiving history, where history appears with ruptures and blind spots. History projected in this way makes it possible to retrieve spaces and tales which are otherwise erased in official historiography. Deb’s *Surface* alludes to a memoir of the years 1940 to 1946, of colonial India by an Englishman called Euan Sutherland, the acting editor of the paper *Imperial* at that time. Sutherland’s account of history in India, the narrator finds, is extremely partial – he mixes up the names of Gandhi, Hitler and Mountbatten in an incoherent order. This memoir which claimed to be a faithful account of history of that time turns out to be a partial account of history, fails to capture the significances of the fleeting moments of life. On the contrary “Sutherland had spent a whole paragraph complaining about a Chinese man who had vomited down his back on a flight to England” (70). Moreover, Sutherland gives his memoir the title “Eastern Eyes”, which reflects his own consciousness of being a detached observer of the realities of a region, and positions him as a historian from the West with its typical ideologies. The novel presents a story of a writer called Greene Graham, told to the narrator by a man in a guest house in Manipur. A writer who was locked up for not having a permit to visit the area, was told to write a story, on the condition that if the story turns out to be a good one he will be offered the special arrangements in the prison already demanded by him. But the story was found to be “a complete artistic failure” (82). The events described in the story were found to be out of place and suitable only for children’s story. This story stands as a contrast to Sutherland’s account of history. Whereas Sutherland’s history remains partial but is accepted as part of officially recognized history, the imprisoned writer’s story is not an officially accepted discourse as the events described in it are apparently incoherent. Yet this story metaphorically stands for the possibility of a narration which may reveal a parallel order of reality. It challenges the accepted order of things, including the art of storytelling. In Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* too, Hoxo – the man with a mythical aura, the teller of the community’s stories – leaves his narratives open-ended, in an in-between space. He represents the Adi community’s cultural spirit and life-philosophy, as the very word “Pensam” signifies a middle ground.

In Deb and Dai's novels, the portrayal of the realities of Partition and the North-East with the politics of border, leads to the essential conclusion that there are ruptures in the idea of the imagined community or the unified nation-state. The protagonist and her tribal friends in Dai's *Stupid Cupid*, the narrator and his father in Deb's *The Point of Return* suffer from a sense of displacement. They are displaced from their roots and at the same time their attempts to belong to the centre become futile. The larger political community termed as the nation-state considers them as the "other" and as a consequence the act of homogenizing their peculiar history under the label of national history seems to be impossible. Dai's *Stupid Cupid* engages with the theme of the peripheral existence of the North-East in the geographical construct of the nation: "From Delhi, the North-East was like a map of mountains and rivers on another planet" (8). The constant desire among the new generation of tribal people to look beyond the hills, to merge with the centre is often thwarted by the centre's perception of them as outsiders. The narrative of *The Point of Return*, framed in the structure of a backward journey, tells the hidden stories of Partition, the problem of insurgency in the North-East, the destiny of men whose roots lie in East-Bengal and who remain outsider in the place where their present lives continue. The narrator here is a historian, an observer – "poised uncertainly between past and future" (218). He laments the erasure of the remote regions like Aizawl, Kohima and Imphal in the geography classes of a school, as if these places do not exist in the map at all. The students are told only about the big industrial cities, political centres and trading ports. The names of these places remain in a way "as if there was something about these destinations that could not be revealed to the world at large" (196). There are places in the representation of the subcontinent in the world map, which have been erased and whose people and their histories have been deleted. The narrator in *The Point of Return* feels that history dragged far from the metropolitan centres, like the history of the North-East lies defeated and untold, often misrepresented: "When I do turn to history, it offers me little in return, sometimes only a meaningless account that does not seem to further my own story" (211). The officially accepted history of the nation does not offer a faithful account of the history of these peripheries. Like *Surface*, which tells about the incoherence of the historical account given by Sutherland's memoir and the incomplete story of Greene Graham, *The Point of Return* also alludes to an instance of official history-writing by Henry Walters. Walters serves as a voice from the West which tries to offer a glimpse of the North-Eastern history, giving many conclusive

remarks and failing to arrive at a true account. On the contrary, Dr. Dam's way of storytelling in the novel signifies the real nature of history as fragmentary and incomplete. In the section titled "A Tale about Tigers" the narrator as a child is ready to listen to his father's story and says: "You can't leave anything out. It must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, like a good essay" (138). However, the father tells a story to his son where nothing happens, and which remains fragmentary. The narrator too terms himself as "the teller of tales, the inapt archaeologist of memories" (248). Like Sandeep in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the narrator here feels that the narrative he offers has gaps and silences.

M.S. Prabhakara defines the secessionist tendency of the tribal communities of the North-East as an ethno-nationalistic assertion by which they reflect a constant fear of being subsumed by the large Indian nationalist assertion (259). Such polarization with the unitary, crystallizing tendencies of nationalist ideology leads to a radical challenge to the apparent coherence of the nation-state and a parallel assertion of identity begins, where history becomes the primary medium of intervention in the dominant ideology. In the works of the writers under discussion, history becomes equivalent with a search for power – cultural, social and political. The revival of repressed and erased history signifies an attempt which is revolutionary and interventionist. In Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, for example, the entire narrative aims at finding out the existence of erased times under the official historiography. The life-world of the Adi community comes alive in the narrative, which turns to the repressed, hidden stories and myths, dances and songs. The tales of the community have become a medium of localizing praxis here: the Adi community's unflinching love of their history, memory and myth shows that it is important to cling to one's past to reject cultural hegemony of the nation state. Bishnupriya Ghosh defines the textual practice of embedding the fragmentary local in the process of reviving untold local histories as "grafting" (125). The novels of Deb and Dai reflect that official history always serves the politics of the national and the global hegemony, and marginalizes the local. On the other hand, through the representation of the heterogeneous fragments of lost history and untold legends it is possible to privilege the local. It is generally believed that national history may be projected through cultural representations. Similarly regional culture and ethnic histories re-enacted through the

telling of tales, performances of songs and dances also may bring about the possibility of constructing local history and identity. This localizing politics is beautifully enacted in Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. The mythical story of a man falling from the sky, the mysterious aura of his personality, and the tales that he carries with him – all are part of a discourse which challenges the official historiography of the world outside the tribal life-world. The shaman or the rhapsodist in the novel guards the stories and the memories of the community in a gesture of protecting its local history from erasure and repression. The ritual of memorizing the legends of the community, the act of carrying them from one generation to the next through repeated performances have created a phenomenon in which enactment of culture becomes a mode of preserving one's past.

Partha Chatterjee in an essay titled "Claims on the Past: The Genealogy of Modern Historiography in Bengal" identifies the desire to recall the past with the desire for a "power to represent oneself" (3). He mentions Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's urge for creating an alternative historiography in Bengal by reclaiming the pre-British past of India, as a desire for a history of power. Chatterjee's definition of the desire to reclaim one's past as the desire for a history of power can be identified with the tribal communities of the North-East and their continuous struggle to assert their separateness from the larger historical, social and political realities of the nation-state. Siddhartha Deb's *Surface* deals with the journey of a reporter from a city to a dark corner of a region, far away from the centre, in search of a woman and her unexplored story to be published in a newspaper. It is a search for, in the language of the man behind the newspaper – "A portrait of the mystery and sorrow of India through the story of the woman in the photograph" (5). It is a mission of finding out a hidden truth and an untold history in the backdrop of the insurgency-ridden Manipur. This region in the North-East is haunted by the spectre of secession, the prevailing phenomenon of the territory which poses a question to the idea of homogeneity of the nation-state. The history of this territory is a special one, something which is not incorporated in the official historiography. The narrator feels the same:

It seemed to me that the region had been forgotten by the world, and in the absence of connections with what lay beyond, an entire society was trying to

create itself from selected memories and incomplete knowledge. The people were like that too: provisional, uncertain, their responses taking place within single, discrete moments, their personalities determined by the whimsy of immediate acts, so that no story taking place in that region was ever complete, no individual a rounded figure, and the outline of the region itself was traced by blurred, fluid boundaries that shifted back and forth with each fresh incident. (8)

The narrator feels that history fails to capture the events and people of this region. He wonders whether it is possible to produce comprehensive wholes out of the disparate materials that he finds in the region. The narrative division of the novel – Shadow, Darkness, Light and Fire – signifies a historian’s movement from uncertainty and confusion to some shocking revelations where the story gets finished, but is not complete and coherent. A man from the region, Robiul suggests the narrator to remain detached in the process of observing the realities of its people. He says: “You are coming from the outside, you say? Good. Detached observer. Find your subject, interview subject, get out. No involvement. No further complication” (45). However, the narrator fails to remain detached from the object of his search. He gets involved in the story of the woman in the backdrop of insurgency-ridden Manipur, finds that the region is haunted by highest rate of educated unemployed, drug use, promiscuity, AIDS and ethnic clashes. The history he encounters here is fractured; it is a “patchy history” and the narrator’s attempt to fashion a coherent story remains futile (39). After coming to Manipur the narrator starts reading Euan Sutherland’s memoir of the North-East and finds a chapter on the region. The chapter tells about the experiences of those who are strangers in the region. Amrit wonders, if there is not something uncanny about Sutherland’s tale, as his own experiences in Manipur resemble some of the details given in the chapter. However, he feels that it is something told from the perspective of the Englishman, could have been different if told by another. Like Henry Walters’ partial history of the North-East as referred to in *The Point of Return*, Sutherland’s history proves once again that historians from the West are capable of perceiving only some part out of the whole – their historical accounts of the North-East reveal only partial realities. The stories here carry blind spots, which can be filled up by local voices only. The local people help the narrator in *Surface* to unravel the story of the woman in the photograph. In the process of the search the woman no longer remains “an ambiguous face with an unclear story, but

someone of flesh and blood” (156). Yet the story fails to turn into a complete whole; the story of the woman in the photograph, of the region as a whole seemed at first sight to be deceptively simple, but proved to be extremely complex with layers of significations. The narrator arrives at the end of his account of the woman – Leela’s story – but he feels that there are perhaps more areas to be explored: “The story is finished, if not complete” (214). He compares his perception of history with that of the German. For the narrator it is not easy to shape the incoherent materials of history into a comprehensible narrative:

But it was the meaning Herman would impart to experiences, whether his own or mine, that delineated the difference between us. He saw possibilities where I did not, and I don’t mean merely in the crude sense of turning these stories into articles. He saw experiences as important, as possessing a shape, whereas for me they were merely transient moments fleeting by as they transformed into memories. (26)

Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill* is a reconstruction of historical gaps and silences. This novel is about undocumented history – history that is lost and misrepresented, and is to be reappropriated. The narrator comments: “If anyone were to ask me where I heard this story, how I found it, I would have no answer” (ix). It is a layered narrative, telling the story of the complex relationship between the colonizers and the local people of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, of a French priest who comes to the region to fulfill a mission, of the life of the Mishimi man Kajinsha and his wife Gimur. The narrative ultimately leads to the conclusion that “The past is a mysterious place” (292). It is proved that history can not offer any conclusive statement about its events and characters.

In the author’s note Dai mentions that the first recorded contact of the British with the Mishimi tribe was in 1825. Lieutenant Philip Burlton, while exploring the upper course of the Brahmaputra River, returned with a report of the “Mishimi Hills”. He claimed that the inhabitants of the territory were very averse to receiving strangers. Father Nicolas Krick visited this territory, while trying to execute his Tibet mission. He left a written record of the place and its inhabitants: “They seem to possess much of

child's simplicity, and Mimbo is undoubtedly less corrupt than Paris . . . ” (291). Dai wants to explore the details of Krick's visit in the region, but in Mebo she is told that there is no one at present who remembers the priest. She comes to the conclusion that “lives are ended, but a story – never” (294). *The Black Hill* is the outcome of Dai's attempt at retrieving lost and erased narratives. The novel focuses on the parallel stories of Kajinsha and Gimur and of Father Krick, which are interconnected by chance and circumstances. The narrative, while recounting these stories, emphasizes the fact that no one can tell a story in its complete version, and that written records often fail to offer an authentic history. In the Prologue to the novel it is said: “Every dawn I think the stories of the world are connected. At night another voice tells me – no, there are more stories yet that are silent and separate. There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a thousand years ago” (ix). The narrative engages more with the unwritten past than with the documented history, while exploring into the stories of Krick, Kajinsha, Gimur and other local inhabitants of Arunachal Pradesh. A long closed chapter opens up, revealing the layers of the past: a nineteenth-century story of a stranger from a distant land and of a tribal couple suddenly gets a voice.

The very beginning of *The Black Hill* defines the “miglun”, as perceived by the local tribal men: they are the “strangers from the faraway world” (3). It reveals the story of colonial ideology intruding into the peaceful world of the tribals, although internal conflicts among different tribal groups also have been simultaneously stressed on. The union between Gimur – the Abor woman and Kajinsha – the man from the east, from a village beyond the Dau River in the Mishimi Hills is not accepted easily by their people. The narrative reiterates the internal conflicts among diverse tribal groups and among men of the same clan: “Claims over land, possessions of rivers and streams and ownership rights to hunt and fish, regularly erupted into bloody, inter-tribal feuds and no one knew when the fighting would end” (7). The novel presents how such internal feuds lead to further complexities as the white men take advantage and are aided by men of rival clans. According to the historical details, Kajinsha's father tries to stop the white strangers from entering their land and some other tribes also share the hatred of the British. In the backdrop of such complex sentiment of the local tribal men, the young French Jesuit priest Nicolas Krick enters the territory. The narrative gives exact historical dates and years, yet makes it clear that history has its own gaps and silences.

An Abor woman named Moi is given an English spelling book by an American lady; simultaneously there is an attack on the British by a group of Khampti rebels, aided by Singpho and Mishimi tribes. In Mebo, the tribal people say: “The British may conquer the world but they will never take our land. The words of the migluns are like fleabite” (25). In the backdrop of such a turmoil-stricken time, the gift of the spelling book given to Moi stands as a difference, as a possible sign of positivity in the relationship between the locals and the strangers. The book later comes to Gimur as a legacy and remains a leitmotif throughout the narrative. Moi forgets the name of the American woman, although later in the narrative it is mentioned that her name was Mrs. Cutter. Gimur feels that “among the migluns two, a woman’s name is forgotten so soon” (29). This erasure of human memory somehow relates to the larger gaps and erasures of the entire historical moment, which the narrative finds difficult to revive, reappropriate and restore.

For Father Krick the visit to Tibet was a dream mission, although it seemed almost unattainable, because an anti-Christian movement in China closed its doors to the outside world in 1745. Krick entered Assam first and decided to fulfill his Tibet mission through the Mishimi territory of Arunachal Pradesh. He was warned by everyone that beyond the Assam plains was terra incognita and he might encounter serious danger if he tried to transgress those limits. The narrative of *The Black Hill* offers the details of Krick’s journey into the Mishimi territory, of the adverse situation he faces there and his subsequent disappearance which remains a mystery. The life of Kajinsha and Gimur gets associated with the priest’s life, due to a complex political situation. The inter-tribe relationship between Kajinsha and Gimur becomes a part of larger politics – internal feuds among tribes and the suspicion of all foreigners. Krick and his fellow priest Augustine Elienne Bourry are murdered and the mystery behind their death remains unsolved; their bodies are never found. The date of their murder also remains uncertain along with the identity and motive of the murderer. Some define it as a matter of greed, some as a case of mistaken identity. Although several interpretations are offered regarding the murder of the two priests, Kajinsha is hinted at as the culprit. The narrative offers a detail of the Assam Secretariat papers where it is stated that a Mishimi man was the perpetrator of the crime; he killed the French priests because his mithun had been killed at their instigation for making too much noise, The story of the priest, of his

disappearance becomes an ambiguous, layered one: “Every breath of wind that blew across the hill whispered a new story” (252). The British arrest Kajinsha with the help of some rival clans, showing a “great show of British might and authority” (264). The words recorded in the official papers tell several stories: many of Kajinsha’s relatives and sons were killed in an open combat, a young son escaped and reappeared many years later etc. The written records, however, completely delete Gimur from the entire history: “About the Abor woman, Gimur – there was not a trace of her in any record of the period” (293). The narrative of *The Black Hill* on the other hand, shows Gimur as someone entrusted with a message: in Dibrugarh jail Kajinsha urges Gimur to tell everyone of his innocence. His last words are: “Tell them about us....Tell them we also had some good things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories” (288). The novel ends hinting at several possibilities of the story:

Perhaps Lendem would fight in those wars and die like Kajinsha. Perhaps Gimur too would fight and perish, or move to another village. And many years later she might hear, perhaps from another villager, that Kajinsha’s relatives had killed all Lamet’s family in a war of revenge for betraying Kajinsha to the British. No one knew what the history books would say. Perhaps everything would be forgotten and people and names disappear, with Gimur’s name lost, even in memory . . . (287)

Nicolas Krick, lost in history’s gaps and silences, tries to serve as an agent of history: he writes about Mishimi dress, food and customs; makes sketches of prayer wheel, women’s jewellery, implements etc. He is, however, sceptical about the appreciation of his work in future: “Will someone read my words?” (142). The narrative points out the uncertainty of man’s knowledge in future, about the fate of the priest: “Who would ever know what he was going through? How would anyone in Europe ever be able to imagine what kind of world he had entered here?” (142).

The Black Hill is a historical project that attempts to retrieve lost or erased words from undocumented history. In Gimur’s village, the woman named Nago starts speaking words in a language unintelligible to the villagers. The old miri recognizes it as the

sacred songs of the past. Nago's chanting of the archaic language and recounting of past incidents continue, which can be interpreted as the act of relocating and reappropriating the spectres of the past. The entire narrative of *The Black Hill* centres on the reappropriation of lost narratives. In *The Legends of Pensam* also Dai deals with the gaps and silences of official or documented history. In the chapter titled "songs of the rhapsodist" the submerged history of the murder of a British man named Noel Williamson is represented simultaneously with the Adi community's cultural performance of retelling the stories from the past. It has been stated that an angry Adi killed Williamson in the village of Komsing. Williamson was a British political officer who came to the region in 1911 to explore the course of the river Siang. His murder was interpreted in diverse terms: for some it was a lack of communication between him and the Adis, for some it was the consequence of long-suppressed anger of the Adis for all British men, because a story of romance between a local woman and a white man created disturbances in the region few years back. Noel Williamson's story has similarity with the story of Nicolas Krick, as both the stories offer layered narratives with the possibility of interpreting them in different dimensions. The massacre in Komsing led to the arrival of the Abor Expeditionary Field Force in 1912. The region experienced the brutality that the expedition brought with it:

It was a fearsome column that hacked its way through the chaos of virgin forest to capture the culprits and send them away to prison in the Andaman islands. A memorial stone to Williamson was unveiled in Komsing, where it stands to this day overlooking the village longhouse. The villagers still look after the stone, just as the British had instructed. (48)

This is a story of assault on the virgin hills and it tells the painful experience of the tribal people, being misinterpreted and misrepresented in official history. The actual reason behind the murder of Williamson never came to be found and the people of the region paid the price. The narrative depicts the arrival of the soldiers in the region which was once pristine; it calls the entire episode of expedition an "assault on the hill". A soldier wonders: "What world was this, and why was he here?" (53). The story of adultery brings about larger consequences in the region. It is a story of a man who comes there to

trace the source of the river Siang, gets trapped in a relationship, and gets punished in return. The narrator feels that written records and official history can never grapple with the truth: “Lines would be traced on paper. A new picture would appear. Words would be written. A story would come to life in song and shining ink. But no one would ever know the other words, the secret whispers, tender, intense, spoken at first light” (55). The old headman of Komsing also feels how they are misinterpreted; he says that the story of the white man’s murder has created a wrong picture of their village. Their village is considered a village of horror, which is not true. *The Legends of Pensam* presents the story of Noel Williamson through the performance of the rhapsodist. The history of the man murdered in the region bears fissures and silences. On the other hand, the rhapsodist “travels the road” and retells the myths and memories of the community. The historical narrative that the rhapsodist creates in the process of guarding the stories of the community has no written form; it is not the official history which he narrates. His only intention is to restore the stories of the community and to guard the memories of the past in an undistorted form. The narrative focus of this chapter in Dai’s novel is the restoration of the past. It is shown that official knowledge or record of an incident sometimes fails to grapple with the truth, resulting in fissures and gaps in the historical narrative. It happens in case of Noel Williamson too. Official history has failed to represent his story in appropriate terms. On the other hand the rhapsodist restores the history of the community, its legends and myths in a form of narrative which is dependent not on written records, but on the respect for one’s past. The narrative deliberately juxtaposes official history’s failure, with the attempt of the rhapsodist to restore the untold histories of the past. It signifies the need of rewriting official histories and the rich connotations of a community’s myths and legends, which are marginalized by official narratives of history.

The basic feature of official historiography in India is that it projects history in a colonial context and homogenizes the culture and literature of the nation as a whole. Walter Mignolo has assessed both Fredric Jameson’s claim on third-world literature as essentially a national-narrative and Aijaz Ahmad’s criticism of such homogenizing of literature in the post-colonial situation. Mignolo points out the necessity of decolonizing history and literature. He refers to Martinican writer, philosopher and cultural critic Edouard Glissant, who insists on distinguishing *History* from *history*, the former

signifying official and academic history and the latter including local and subjugated knowledge (155). Mignolo talks about “multiple voices and multiple layers that makes of history a polyphony rather than a monotopic narrative controlled by an omniscient narrator” (157). It signifies that official histories are based on power, and they can be questioned and rewritten by producing a kind of history which is polyphonic and multi-layered. The histories of the margins have the intervening power to create disruptions in the dominant historical narrative accepted officially. Ranajit Guha too, questions why any particular event or deed should be regarded as historic and not others. He comments that in most cases the nominating authority is an ideology of “statism”, which authorizes the dominant values of the state to determine the criteria of the historic. There are small voices of history which are drowned in the noise of the statist commands (3). Guha comments that colonial education in India first created the condition of perceiving Indian history merely as history of the country’s colonial experience. He says:

Education, the principal instrument used by the Raj to ‘normalize’ the study of history in India, was limited to a very small minority of the population, and correspondingly, the reading public too was small in size, as was the output of books and periodicals....Statism in Indian historiography was a gift of this education. The intelligentsia, its purveyors within the academic field and beyond, had been schooled in their understanding of the history of the world and especially of modern Europe as a history of state systems. In their own work within the liberal professions therefore they found it easy to conform to the official interpretation of contemporary Indian history as a history of the colonial state. (3)

Guha points out the colonial politics of wiping out the indigenous histories of India and shows how small voices of history are submerged under colonialist project. In fact these small voices do not necessarily refer to subaltern voices alone; they may refer to the parallel existence of submerged histories of private spaces and the local domain. The submerged histories and the need to rewrite them strongly emerge in *The Point of Return*. Dr. Dam reads a newspaper – there he goes through the passages on the stories of the nationally known subjectivities – the stories of the Gandhi family, the presidential

candidate and controversies associated with it. In the same newspaper there is the news, nevertheless politically placed by the opposition parties, of an eighteen year old woman in Haryana who gave birth to a still-born child, was gang raped by the medical students of the hospital where she was admitted. Ironically the news points out the Defence Minister's boasting about the buying of a new fighter aircraft to challenge Pakistan. The narrative says: "The nation created by the Gandhi family was starkly signposted by the headlines: the oppositional presidential candidate was lamenting the 'decline in political values'" (79). Although used politically, this news of the suffering of ordinary people reiterates the truth that ordinary man's history is submerged in the larger paradigm of official historiography. Dr. Dam is interested in a project of supplying quality milk, discusses it with ministers and officials and ultimately encounters with the fact that the national interest is greater than the local. Two persons from Denmark come as a part of the project, and are suspected as spies from America. Dr. Dam is told that "The security of the country cannot be compromised for the sake of milk and eggs. National pride is more important than food" (133). This small incident, apparently looking banal and insignificant, narrated with a detached irony obliquely refers to the hollowness of the idea that the national is superior to the local, whereas the latter is a constituent of the former. The history of the former without incorporating the latter is incomplete and inauthentic.

Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Siddhratha Deb and Mamang Dai's fiction engages with the act of filling up gaps and silences of official historiography with local voices and histories of the private space. In Chaudhuri it is the representation of alternative histories, in Roy it is the unraveling of the small histories of ordinary men, whereas in Deb and Dai it is the focus on the peculiar historical realities of the North-East, through which the rewriting of history has become possible. Priyamvada Gopal distinguishes between the narrative focus on the "public-national" and "private-familial" (155,156). The "public-national" was popular after the publication of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, betraying an "anxiety of Indianness", in the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee. On the other hand, the "private-familial" engagement with history leads to a revisionist history-writing in fictional narratives, which is more evasive and less conclusive.

Bishnupriya Ghosh speaks about a politics of localism to reject the privileging of the national and public contexts in literary history (11). She particularly emphasizes a linguistic localism, which is a kind of intervention into the stable national-global cultural dialectics. Such intervention is also possible through the reviving of the local history, through the retrieving of the untold and repressed spaces of local history. The alternative mode of fictional narrative in Chaudhuri, Roy, Deb and Dai attempts to make history visible from its erasures, to fill up its blind spots.

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