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Looking Through Glass: Challenges Nationalist And Communal Histories Of India

Mr. Vishal Devidas Akkamwad
Research Scholar

Dept. of English, People's College, Nanded.

Dr. Ganesh Laxmanrao Lingampalle
Assistant Professor, Dept. of English.

Vasantrao Naik College, Vasarni, Nanded.

Mukul Kesavan *Looking Through Glass* critiques dominant nationalist and communal histories of India by presenting an alternative, fragmented, and subversive narrative of the past. Through the postmodern device of time travel, the novel allows the protagonist, a contemporary observer, to witness pre-Partition India and challenge the rigid historical binaries that sustain both nationalist and communist discourses. Kesavan separated the grand narratives of Indian independence and Partition, revealing history as a constructed and contested discourse rather than an objective truth. The novel critiques nationalist historiography, which often glorifies the freedom movement while ignoring the complexities of political as well as social realities. Which is focusing on ordinary people rather than political elite, Kesavan decentralizes history and highlights the contradictions within nationalist rhetoric. The novel challenges communal historiography, which portrays Hindu-Muslim relations in fixed oppositional terms, by depicting intercommunal solidarities and shared cultural spaces that defy the divisive narratives often associated with Partition. Applying historiographic metafiction, unreliable narration, and irony, *Looking Through Glass* exposes the ways in which history is shaped by memory, ideology, and selective forgetting. This paper argues that Kesavan's novel functions as a counter history, rejecting singular nationalist and communal narratives in favor of a multicultural and dynamic understanding of India's past.

KEYWORDS: Political use of communalism, Hindu muslim relation, Time travel as a literary device, partition narrative.

Mukul Kesavan is an Indian historian, novelist and essayist. His works that explore themes of identity history and culture in the text of post colonial India. Kesavan studied at St. Stephen's College Delhi University. He worked at Jamia Millia Islamia central university in New Delhi. His Academic work intersects with his literary interests, particularly in modern India history and the socio-political virtue of colonialism. His first book, a novel *Looking Through Glass* (1995). He writes frequently about the game of cricket. His book on cricket *Men In White*. His non fiction works *The Ugliness of the Indian male and other proposition* (2008), and *Homeless on Google Earth* (2013).

Looking Through Glass by Mukul Kesavan. He is an Indian author and this might be of his notable works. The story follows a young photographer in contemporary times who travels back to the 1940's using time travel to explore historical events. The protagonist witnesses key events leading up to India's independence

and partition. Partition was a tumultuous time with a lot of violence between Hindus and Muslims. *Looking Through Glass* refers to both the camera lens and the idea of seeing the past through a certain frame. In the Indian context, the histories of nationalism and Partition have frequently been framed through integrated narratives that emphasize either unity or division. Mukul Kesavan *Looking Through Glass* challenges these dominant accounts by offering a counter history one that resists the linear, deterministic portrayal of Indian independence and communal conflict. By employing time travel as a narrative device, Kesavan enables his protagonist (and by extension, the reader) to witness history beyond the official version, questioning the ways in which historical memory is shaped by ideology. This paper examines how *Looking Through Glass* subverts nationalist and communalist historiography through three key strategies as follows. Critiquing nationalist grand narratives by exposing their contradictions and exclusions. Destabilizing communalist histories by portraying Hindu-Muslim relations as fluid rather than oppositional. Employing postmodern historiographic metafiction to challenge the authority of historical truth.

Nationalist historiography in India often presents the struggle for independence as a singular, heroic movement, with clear moral binaries between the colonizers and the colonized. However, *Looking Through Glass* complicates this narrative by foregrounding contradictions, internal conflicts, and diverse political voices within the independence movement. The protagonist, an unnamed photographer from contemporary India, accidentally travels back in time to 1942, where he witnesses history not through the lens of official records but through lived experiences. His encounters reveal the fragmented and contested nature of nationalism, challenging the idea that the movement was unified or ideologically pure. “the site on which Babri Masjid once stood but the constitutional ground on which India is built. The argument is about India” (Kesavan 2003, 65). The role of class and caste in the independence movement was not a homogeneous struggle. The leading leaders of the Indian National Congress had different priorities from peasants, workers, and marginalized communities. Kesavan portrays ordinary people negotiating their own realities within a movement often depicted as singular and massive. While historical accounts present figures like Gandhi and Nehru as central to India’s freedom, *Looking Through Glass* offers a more ambivalent, fragmented view of leadership. The protagonist’s experience challenges idealizing representations of nationalist leaders, emphasizing that political movements are shaped by human complexities, contradictions, and regional variations. The novel suggests that the trajectory of Indian history was not preordained, as nationalist histories often imply. Instead of a linear march toward freedom, Kesavan presents an alternative, chaotic vision where history is subject to contingencies, accidents, and unintended consequences.

Looking Through Glass is challenging the communalist historiography that portrays Hindus and Muslims as inherently opposed. The novel does this by illustrating how religious identities in pre-Partition India were more fluid and syncretic than later histories suggest. **Depicting Intercommunal Relationships** Unlike historical narratives that focus on communal violence, *Looking Through Glass* portrays a world where Hindus and Muslims coexist, share cultural practices, and form friendships and alliances. The protagonist’s experiences expose the constructed nature of religious divisions, which were not natural or inevitable but politically manufactured over time. “[t]he August rebellion became a black hole in her memory that sucked in everything that ever happened to her afterwards, that collapsed her entire life into a single non-event” (Kesavan, 6). Communalist histories often depict Partition as an unavoidable consequence of religious tensions. However, Kesavan’s protagonist, who comes from a post-Partition world, experiences pre-Partition India in a way that contradicts this deterministic view. By immersing him in a time when Hindu-Muslim relations were more complex and intertwined, the novel critiques the simplistic binaries that underpin Partition historiography. The novel highlights how communal divisions were exacerbated by political interests, both colonial and nationalist. British colonial policies of divide and rule, as well as the strategic instrumentalization of religious identity by political elites, contributed to the eventual rupture of Partition. The protagonist’s perspective deconstructs the myth that communalism was an inherent historical force, revealing it instead as a constructed political tool.

“in the name of the nation the discontents of a poor country was harnessed against the colonial state that had, ironically, consolidated the territory the would-be nation wished to occupy. Gandhi’s campaigns of mass defiance and solidarity were important not only because they helped to throw out the British but because they demonstrated that India’s bewilderingly plural population was capable of purposeful collective action.” (Kesavan 62)

A pre-Partition world of blurred identities and shared spaces, *Looking Through Glass* resists the post-Partition narrative that views Hindus and Muslims as irreconcilably divided. Instead, it urges readers to consider the alternative possibilities of history possibilities that were foreclosed by the politics of Partition. Kesavan employs historiographic metafiction, a postmodern technique that blurs the boundaries between history and fiction to further critique nationalist and communist histories. The novel highlights how history is a narrative construct, shaped by memory, ideology, and the act of storytelling itself. The protagonist, as a time traveler, is an outsider in history, viewing the past through the lens of his own biases and limited knowledge. His confusion, misinterpretations, and shifting perceptions emphasize that history is never an objective record but always mediated by the observer's perspective. The novel deliberately blends historical reality with fictional elements, questioning the authority of historical narratives. By inserting an anachronistic observer into the past, Kesavan suggests that historical accounts are always reconstructed, shaped by contemporary needs and interpretations. Through irony and metafictional play, the novel critiques how nations remember and forget. Selective memory erases uncomfortable truths, and *Looking Through Glass* serves as an act of counter-memory, recovering narratives that challenge dominant historical frameworks.

had prayed so hard that the Congress wouldn't pass the resolution, said Masroor through egg and toast. For the first half of the year, he wasn't worried because each time some radical asked for mass civil disobedience, Gandhi said no. There was to be no direct action to push the British out till the Muslims had agreed. Then suddenly, he changed his mind. Suddenly the Muslim Mind became closed to him, suddenly the masses became irresistibly urgent. Inspired by him, the members of the Congress Working Committee met in Bombay and passed the Quit India resolution, which sidestepped Muslims in favour of the masses. Like a bunch of yogis fired by the power of the mind, they concentrated on the Hindu-Muslim problem and made it vanish. Along with the problem, said Masroor, we vanished as well. (Kesavan, 247)

Mukul Kesavan *Looking Through Glass* presents a powerful critique of nationalist and communist histories by challenging the idea of a unified, linear history of India's past. The novel's time-traveling protagonist views pre-partition India through a contemporary lens, and serves as an outsider-observer, exposing the complexities, contradictions, and fluidity of history that are often overlooked in dominant historical narrative. Undermining nationalist historiography, the novel reveals that the Indian independence movement was not a singular, monolithic struggle, but rather a diverse and contested space with competing ideologies and social hierarchies. Challenging communalist historiography, the novel rejects the deterministic narrative that Hindu-Muslim divisions were inevitable and instead portraying a more nuanced reality of intercommunal coexistence that was later disrupted by political forces and colonial strategies. Kesavan employs historiographic metafiction, irony, and unreliable narration to demonstrate how history is constructed, remembered, and manipulated. The novel questions who gets to tell history and how memory is shaped by ideology, selective forgetting, and contemporary political needs. In *Looking Through Glass* affects both nationalist glorification and communalist polarization, advocating for a pluralistic, multifaceted understanding of India's past. Kesavan's novel serves as a counter-history, offering an alternative vision of historical truth one that is dynamic, contested, and open to reinterpretation, rather than rigidly fixed in nationalist frameworks.

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