

Research Article

Re-reading History, Re-membering the Nation: Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass*

Vinita Chandra*

Department of English, Ramjas College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Post-colonial fiction by Indian authors writing in English attempts to recover the marginalized history of the struggle of minority populations which has been rendered invisible in the dominant historiography of Partition and Independence. Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass*, published by Ravi Dayal in 1995, attempts to recover and re-member a history that is not easily available to his generation, yet one that plays a powerful role in shaping the nation's identity through its very unavailability and suppression. One of the problematics that he interrogates in his novel is that of the disempowerment that results from unquestioningly accepting the historiography that has been constructed for the nation by the ruling powers. Kesavan attempts to disturb the settled national historiography through his narrative technique of 'fabulous realism' through which he aims to revise history in order to probe its potential for possibilities for change other than those emerging in the present. The novel attempts a re-vision of the events from 1942-1947 from a different angle, using the trope of the camera and zoom lens, through the sensibility of the post-colonial/post-Independence/post-Partition citizen who is living through the aftermath of these events but chooses to disregard the weight of the past in the shaping of his present identity. Kesavan is emphasizing the need to understand, or experience, the past as opposed to simply knowing the facts in order to construct knowledge about the nation, and to make a dynamic connection between the past and the present. Kesavan re-constructs history by literally putting it back together piece by piece, re-membering it, illustrating how the present has been slowly and painstakingly built on the sites created by the past. By alienating the readers from the taken for granted familiarity of mundane, everyday landscape (and events) he is forcing them to deconstruct its present form and re-vision it as rising out of the past.

Keywords

Mukul Kesavan, *Looking Through Glass*, Post-colonial Theory, Constructing National Identities, Re-reading History, Camera Trope

1. Introduction

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now. [1]

What are the consequences of selectively remembering the past; of highlighting some events in the nation's memory of its history while consciously attempting to suppress others?

Post-colonial novelists writing in English in India explore issues of religion and nationality, of belonging and displacement, and of the necessity of suppressing memories that threaten to disrupt the tidy narrative of history and national identity after Partition. Through their fiction they attempt to recover the marginalized history of the struggle of minority

*Corresponding author: vinita.chandra@ramjas.du.ac.in (Vinita Chandra)

Received: 2 June 2025; Accepted: 13 June 2025; Published: 25 June 2025



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populations which has been rendered invisible in the dominant historiography of Partition and Independence. One such post-colonial novel is Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass*, published by Ravi Dayal in 1995, which attempts to recover and re-member a history that is not easily available to his generation, yet one that plays a powerful role in shaping the nation's identity through its very unavailability and suppression. One of the problematics that he interrogates in his novel is that of the disempowerment that results from unquestioningly accepting the historiography that has been constructed for the nation by the ruling powers. Kesavan's aim in writing *Looking Through Glass* seems to be to realize Benjamin's directive to "blast open the continuum of history" by literally stopping time in the present, and by dislocating the eternal flow of time, providing a "unique experience with the past" by unsettling the "homogeneous, empty time" of dominant historiography. [1]

Looking Through Glass begins in Kesavan's contemporary India of the 1980s. The protagonist, an aspiring freelance photographer who is excited with his new zoom lens that eliminates distance, is travelling from Delhi to Benaras to immerse his grandmother's ashes in the Ganges, and then on to Lucknow on his first photography assignment. As he looks through his zoom lens while standing precariously on a railway bridge, he loses his balance and falls off the train into the river below and wakes up to find that he has accidentally eliminated time instead of distance. He is now in the Lucknow of August 1942. After a failed attempt to travel back to the present, the protagonist concentrates on surviving and adjusting to the 1940s while waiting, with the terrible faculty of knowing the future by hindsight, for 1947 and Partition, along with the Muslim family that has given him shelter. With this storyline Kesavan seems to be targeting an audience that has no first-hand experience of the freedom struggle, Independence or Partition, yet which inhabits a country whose psyche is built in many ways on these formative events. Through the dislocation of time, which makes the past contemporaneous to the reader, Kesavan forces history to come alive and confers upon it an immediacy that is absent for the audience born after Independence. The reader is forced to grope her way hesitantly through this alien-familiar territory along with the protagonist, and to strain and test the memory for facts culled from history books to assume firm footing in the constantly slipping narrative.

2. Post-colonial Novels and Magic Realism

In giving his novel the title *Looking Through Glass* Kesavan is playing on the title of the well-known children's book *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll. Like Kesavan's protagonist in *Looking Through Glass* Carroll's beloved character Alice also falls through empty space into

another world. Alice walks through the looking glass of her drawing room to fall into an inverted world which is a mirror image of her own, while Kesavan's protagonist is pulled by the weight of the glass of his zoom lens to fall through time into a past which is mirrored in his present. Carroll's genre of children's literature puts in simple terms the complex Benjaminian idea of the perception of history which Kesavan's novel for an adult audience is founded on, as reflected in Alice's conversation with the White Queen:

"That's the effect of living backwards," the Queen said kindly: "it always makes one a little giddy at first —"

"Living backwards!" Alice repeated in great astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing!"

"—but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways."

"I'm sure *mine* only works one way," Alice remarked. "I can't remember things before they happen."

"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the queen remarked.

"What sort of things do *you* remember best?" Alice ventured to ask.

"Oh, things that happened the week after next," the Queen replied in a careless tone. [2]

Carroll's White Queen from the 'non-sense' world of children's literature becomes Kesavan's protagonist with a "memory that works both ways" in a novel that falls in the tradition of post-colonial authors like Amitav Ghosh [3] and Salman Rushdie [4] who experiment with distorting realism to make sense of their world.

Kesavan attempts to disturb the settled national historiography through his narrative technique. Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks that "Of all the novels *Midnight's Children* has spawned in the past 14 years, *Looking Through Glass* is the closest to the original [5]". Of Rushdie's formative influence on the new breed of Indo-Anglian writers like himself, Rukun Advani writes in *The Stephanian*,

in the beginning there was Rushdie, and the Word was with Rushdie.... Within the subcontinent's literary history, Rushdie and his epic novel [*Midnight's Children*] seem symbols of a significantly different way of experiencing life and writing about it.... Irreverence, iconoclasm, and witty forms of subversion in relation to institutionalized, fossilized and dominant forms of thought and power characterize his fiction. [6]

Kesavan, a teacher of history in India, subverts the "institutionalized, fossilized" writing and reading of history by following in Rushdie's footsteps to irreverently distort reality in order to make the past experiential and show its interconnectedness to the present.

Kesavan's narrative technique is that which Kumkum Sangari terms "Rushdie's fabulous realism", in which the real and the not-real coexist rather than being in binary opposition, according to her. Sangari discusses the significance of this technique as an interrogative mode, and thus points to the *political* implications of non-realist representations in the

context of the Third World. She argues that if the real is structured historically so as to make the "foreign locus of power" invisible, then magic realism can be used to "press upon the real at the point of maximum contradiction [7]". Addressing the relation of history to non-realist representation in her discussion of Marquez's use of marvelous realism, Sangari writes,

[Marquez] realigns the notion of history as a set of discoverable facts with the notion of history as a field of diverse human and cultural possibility. His narratives figure a dynamic relation of past to future in which the present is seen in terms of its potential and in which the varied creative abilities of his culture are embodied in the very capaciousness of the narrative itself. The act of perception is relative yet historically determined; indeed, reality is alterable *only because* it is both relative and determined. The recognition of such relativity is precisely the recognition that the world is open to change: it is necessary to prevent a foreclosure by a single meaning so that different meanings may become possible. [7]

Kesavan's aim in revising history is to probe its potential for possibilities for change other than those emerging in the present. He is not just interrogating the past to search for causes for current problems, but rather to relativize the fixed construction of the real, and thereby to open different avenues for interpretation and change. His focus on the marginalization of Muslims during the freedom struggle arises out of his sense of disquiet over the crisis in secularism that contemporary India faces. By juxtaposing the unreal presence of the modern protagonist with the real conditions of the 1942 Quit India Movement, - or perhaps from the reader's point of view, juxtaposing the reality of the post-Independence citizen with the unrealized Muslim experience of 1942 - Kesavan is able to "figure a dynamic relation of past to future in which the present is seen in terms of its potential". Thus, Kesavan's project in using fabulous realism is a political one; he is asking a different set of questions of the present through the impervious protagonist who plunges into a river and emerges to find a very different, disorienting reality.

3. Viewing History through the Zoom Lens

In her review of the novel, Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, "as the title indicates, the camera is meant to be an organising device of storytelling ("watching through the view-finder didn't really mean involvement") [5]." Indeed, Kesavan hardly ever lets the reader forget the symbol of the camera. The novel starts with the protagonist's obsession with photography and the purchase of the new zoom lens, and ends with the photograph of Intezar's family, in which the protagonist appears as a blur. Throughout the novel there are a number of references to films, black-and-white vision, sepia prints and fading images. In his essay, 'The Work of Art in the

Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin focuses on the role of the camera and lens, and its implications for reviving, and revising, history. Of the camera and photography, he writes, "process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will [8]." And more significantly, on the function of the zoom lens in changing the way that reality is perceived, he notes, "The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject [8]." A revision of history, too, as Benjamin suggests through his interpretation of historical materialism, requires not just a closer look at the past, but a process of changing the angle through which the past is perceived, as well as one of eliminating the distance between past and present in order to make a dynamic connection between contemporary circumstances and their history. Thus, Kesavan's protagonist, who had naively been excited by the "potent length" of his zoom lens because it would allow him to capture the ornamental details of "column capitals or unclimbable domes [9]", finds to his dismay that the potent zoom lens is capable of eliminating temporal, as well as spatial, distance.

4. Paying the Debt of the Past: Dadi and the Protagonist

The choice of subject matter from the last years of the British Raj into the first few days of Independence of *Looking Through Glass* may thus seem somewhat incongruous. The main bulk of Indian English fiction written in the 1990s such as the iconic *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth [10] turned its attention to the more contemporary issues of communalism, casteism, corruption, alienation of a western educated elite etc., and has dealt with Independence and Partition in an indirect manner, as material from the remote past which has already been worked enough. So, it is initially a disappointing discovery that when Kesavan's nameless protagonist plunges back in time he finds himself in 1942 in the thick of the Quit India Movement, for it seems we are going to be treated to yet another lesson in India's nationalist history. But as the novel progresses it is easy to see that Kesavan is not simply narrating yet another tale of colonialism and Independence; rather, he is consciously using this well-rehearsed material to alienate his audience from its ossified familiarity and force them to look at it anew.

The sort of fossilized, pedantic narration of history to the post-1947 audience that Kesavan is writing against is symbolized by Dadi, the protagonist's grandmother, always seen sitting usefully employed behind her charkha, the spinning wheel, recounting a hundred times the tale that is already "family folklore", of her involvement in Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha movement. Dadi's narrative, apart from being self-indulgent, has a lesson to impart: "It was also her way of

teaching me that I, like the rest of her grandchildren, was amongst the first citizens of free India - because she had paid my dues [9]". Dadi, then, becomes an embodiment of the dominant secular, nationalist historiography that locates the freedom struggle led by national figures at the center. Being forced to listen, with bored indifference, to Dadi relive and recount her version of history innumerable times was the price that the protagonist paid for compiling a portfolio of photographs of the wrinkled old woman and her ancient house which gave him a start in life as a freelance photographer.

Kesavan, then, emphasizes the interwoven relationship of needs and desires between the two generations: the older generation's desire for an audience that must listen respectfully to the narration of the history which is responsible for its existence as "the first citizens of free India", and at the same time give relevance to this history by its very presence; and the younger generation's more materialistic exploitation of this past. The problem in this mutual relationship arises when Dadi abandons her role of the freedom fighter responsible for India's Independence and is instead consumed with guilt because she realizes, forty years later, that she did not participate in the 1942 Quit India Movement from which "the empire trembled. That's why the British left five years later, explained Dadi. They have been taught their lesson in 1942 [9]". Dadi has earned a medal and a small pension from the government in recognition of her role in the freedom struggle, but she now wants to return the medal and money as she feels she does not deserve it. Her grandson, however, needs the money that she is getting as pension in order to buy a camera and lens to launch his career, and so persuades her to *lend* him the money with the assurance that he will repay it as soon as possible. The asymmetry of their needs for each other acts as a drain on Dadi's life and she dies soon after under the burden of accepting an unearned pension.

Kesavan is at pains to underline the relationship between Dadi's past and the protagonist's future. The protagonist thoughtlessly, materialistically and selfishly uses the pain and experience of Dadi's past to establish his future career as a photographer. He has made the last payment on his zoom lens due to which he has bagged his current assignment. "Dadi's last pension cheque had closed that chapter neatly", he remarks smugly, and goes on to say, "She died at a convenient time because I was already headed east for the Lucknow commission. I volunteered to take the ashes - I owed her a debt and this was a good way of squaring the books [9]". The grandmother's death is of little consequence to his own fast progressing life and the debt he owes her is easily and conveniently repaid by taking her ashes to Benaras. But, as it happens, while leaning over a bridge and straining to take a photograph with his new lens, the protagonist, who is carrying Dadi's ashes in a thermos strapped to his back, is weighed down by his lens, and tipped over into the river below, and into the past:

And then... well, it wasn't any one thing. It was the whistle going as I made to click; that clap of thunder in the distance,

the flask rolling round my behind - it was all of these. But most of all it was the weight of the lens. I had braced myself and allowed for its weight, but as I tensed to shoot, it suddenly became twice as heavy and in the nanosecond that it took to squeeze the shutter button, ten times its normal weight and more, as it dragged me downwards. [9]

With this opening episode of the novel Kesavan neatly outlines the problematic that he will further explore - that of the crucial formative influence of the past on the present, of the disjuncture between dominant historiography and the multi-layered complex histories, of the continuities and disruptions in the narrative of the nation's identity. The novel attempts a re-vision of the events from 1942-1947 from a different angle, through the sensibility of the post-colonial/post-Independence/post-Partition citizen who is living through the aftermath of these events but chooses to disregard the weight of the past in the shaping of his present identity. Kesavan is emphasizing the need to understand, or experience, the past as opposed to simply knowing the facts in order to construct knowledge about the nation, and to make a dynamic connection between the past and the present. *Looking Through Glass* then is not so much a novel about the dying era of the Raj or the success of the Independence movement as one about the consequences of these events in postcolonial India, and an interrogation of personal and political decisions made about and during Partition from the point of view of the present.

5. Decentering the British Raj in Colonial Historical Narrative

Robert Young writes that one of the objectives of post-colonialism is to "reconstruct Western knowledge formations" and Kesavan does that by decentering the British colonial power from his narrative. [11] Similarly, Shehla Burney refers to the "Western cultural imperialism and Eurocentricism" in language through which knowledge, including history, is manufactured. [12] For a novel set in the 1940s Kesavan shows a remarkable lack of interest in the British who were ruling, and then partitioning and decolonizing India/Pakistan. The one chapter set in Simla that concentrates on British activities portrays them as impotent players in the political arena, removed and actually isolated from the turbulent decisive activities of the larger than life Indian leaders, Jinnah and Nehru. All the grandeur, anxiety and burden of responsibility of the British in the process of decolonizing, as symbolized, for example, by Mountbatten's impressive figure in movies and books such as David Attenborough's *Gandhi* [13] or Collins and Lapiere's *Freedom at Midnight* [14] on this period are notably absent here. There is also an absence of any critique of the British; of their policies, handling of anti-imperial battles, of their legacy, even of their divide-and-rule policy that is often regarded as responsible for Partition. In the very few references to the British rulers in connection with politics

they are seen as merely playing out a role of necessity:

The fighting (WWII) done, His Majesty's Government took India out of cold storage and found that the body hadn't kept too well. Tens of thousands of demobbed soldiers - Hindu, Muslim, Sikh - returned to their villages with their army surplus weapons and their war-honed killing skills. There was murder in the air so the Viceroy did the statesman-like thing: he called a political conference. [9]

It is the common masses - the demobbed soldiers returning to their villages - who are vested with the power to act and influence. The unnamed Viceroy is only a puppet.

Instead, Kesavan turns his critical gaze inward, to the Congress and the Muslim League and the sweeping, hollow rhetoric of nationalism. Kesavan's apolitical, secular, disinterested, modern protagonist finds himself gripped by the urgency and import of religious and political affiliations in the charged atmosphere of pre-Independence. "I wanted to know how they felt about the Muslim League's call for a separate Muslim state," he says of his adopted Muslim family. He does not ask them because

like other secular people in Independent India I had been brought up to believe that religion was a private matter confined to the inner space between brains and bowels.... I was also taught that differences were unimportant since we were all identical in our essential humanity. [9]

Kesavan is interrogating and challenging the correlation between essential humanity and secular nationalism; the manner in which the appeal to secularism in nationalism is based on the appeal to common humanity. He is disturbing the discourse of nation that constructs a seamless progression from universalism to nationalism, a move that serves to idealize secular nationalism by locating it outside the scope of socio-political formations, in the sphere of universal, essential humanity. Neelam Srivastava writes, "Secularism is a fundamental component of Indian postcolonial identity as it became a state policy adopted by Nehru after Independence, in the aftermath of Partition. In this historical context, these novels draw on the Nehruvian model of secularism and pluralist democracy to contest the erosion of the secular public sphere, though in different ways [15]". Kesavan's fabulous realism moves the focus back in time and forces the protagonist to challenge the received ideas of the seamless connection between secularism and nationalism that was the dominant ideology in his formative years.

6. Building Cities and Constructing Identities

Throughout the novel Kesavan makes repeated allusions to the effects of the march of progress on the geography of the places he visits and inhabits. The protagonist always re-locates himself in his alienated surroundings through familiar landmarks or through their absence. When he reaches Kalka he realizes that "the bloated little township of the

'eighties simply didn't exist [9]"; similarly, "Corbusier's nightmare", Chandigarh, still hasn't been built. The changes in landscape are much more evident in Delhi, the capital of the country and one of its fastest growing cities:

The great newspaper buildings of my time between the old city's walls and Hardinge Bridge weren't yet built and when we turned left after the bridge on to Mathura Road, there was silence. No Supreme Court building on the right and on the left a scrubby forest where the pyramids of Pragati Maidan should have been. [9]

By referring to the construction of these buildings in postcolonial Delhi, Kesavan is of course pointing indirectly to the rise of the press, the Indian judicial system, and in Pragati Maidan, India's entry into modernity through trade and commerce, industry and technology after gaining Independence. India's model of progress after Independence was one in which development of commerce and industry was intrinsically linked to justice and to a free press to act as a watchdog. This was the framework within which the newly born country constructed its future aspirations and national identity: right to justice, freedom of expression, scientific enquiry, infrastructure for technology, economic development for all Indian citizens, Post-colonial India was very consciously discarding its feudal, casteist, hierarchical past and taking its place as an equal in global politics as it enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution adopted in 1950: "JUSTICE, Social, Economic and Political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity and to promote among them all; FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation;". However, half a century later Kesavan, using the trope of the zoom lens, examines and challenges this national identity constructed through dominant ideology and exposes the fault lines.

7. Conclusion

Kesavan is then re-constructing history by literally putting it back together piece by piece, re-membering it, illustrating how the present has been slowly and painstakingly built on the sites created by the past. By alienating the readers from the taken for granted familiarity of mundane, everyday landscape (and events) he is forcing them to deconstruct its present form and re-vision it as rising out of the past. The free citizens of the Independent Sovereign Republic of India have constructed for themselves a national identity of modernity and secularism based on a historiography that selectively remembers the past and suffers crucial lapses of memory. This disruption between past and present naturalizes contemporary problems in the rhetoric of dominant political ideologies rather than exploring and locating causes and perhaps resolutions for them.

Looking Through Glass ends with the protagonist continuing to live in the time warp, moving to Lucknow with his adopted Muslim family that opts to stay in India after Partition. Kesavan refuses to give his novel a neat ending where all the

messiness of time travel is tidied up and the reader is given an easy resolution made available from hindsight, one that charts a path to negotiate the complexities of the future/present post-Independence nation. He leaves us in the end with the image of a blurred photograph reminiscent of Benjamin's angel of history whose "face is turned toward the past". Benjamin writes of the angel that he

would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole that has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress [1].

Thirty years after the publication of *Looking Through Glass* Kesavan's reversal of chronology in narrating the history of the birth of the nation becomes more urgent for imagining alternatives to the storm that is progress, an alternative that accounts for debris on which its post-colonial nationhood is constructed.

Author Contributions

Vinita Chandra is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Vinita Chandra is an Associate Professor in Ramjas College, University of Delhi, India, and has been teaching English Literature there from 1986 to present. She has done her Bachelors, Masters, and M.Phil in English Literature from University of Delhi, India. She has done her Masters in English literature, and PhD from Rutgers University, USA. Her Doctoral Thesis is titled 'Constructing National Identities: Indo-Anglian Fiction'.

Research Field

Vinita Chandra: Post Colonial Theory and Fiction, Feminism, Women's Writing