



Re-imagining Personal Narratives and History in Binodini's *The Princess and The Political Agent*

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ABSTRACT: Maharaja Kumari Binodini's *The Princess and the Political Agent*, set during the imperial rule in Manipur, deals with the love relationship between the author's aunt, Maharaja Kumari Sanatombi, and Lieutenant Colonel Henry St Patrick Maxwell, the first Political Agent of Manipur under British Rule. The text, originally written in Meiteilon with Bengali script, is a unique blend of history and fiction as the author skilfully extracts incidents and characters from *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur: Cheitharon Kumpapa* and melds them with the eyewitness accounts and family lore to fictionalize the personal narrative of Sanatombi. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the author has written this historical fiction in the form of a biography detailing the everyday events in her aunt's life from childhood to death. However, in the original preface of the book, Binodini proceeds to disclose that this book is not biography or history, but a work of fiction after establishing the historical authenticity of the narrative. This statement presents a challenge in categorizing this narrative as biography or historical writing. By blurring the lines between history and fiction, the author brings forth an important issue which sheds light on the position of women and the Meitei social customs during the colonial rule. The liminal form of the book allows the author to historicize fictional events and fictionalize major historical incidents. Thus, by exploring the ways in which the author re-imagines personal narratives within the broader historical context, the paper aims to examine Binodini's innovative approach to blending history, fiction and biography. It also aims to explore the narrative techniques employed by Binodini to challenge traditional historical narratives. It also tries to highlight the social realities and customs of Manipur as presented by the author in her narrative.

KEYWORDS: Personal Narratives, History, Fiction, Biography, Historical Fiction.

I. INTRODUCTION

The very essence of human expression finds its avenue through the intricate tapestries of narratives, where the art of storytelling necessitates a meticulous and purposeful assembly of events within a framework. Within this intricate web of storytelling, the term 'narrative' conveys not only the mere recounting of events but also presents the crafting of a tale, complete with its unique structure and underlying purpose. This conscious structuring highlights the craft of narrative by transforming it into a vessel of communication that guides the audience through a coherent and meaningful journey. However, in the context of historical narratives, the act of interpretation takes center stage. Hayden White aptly described historical narratives as "interpretations of whatever information about and knowledge of the past the historian commands" (2). Historical fiction encapsulates the writer's efforts to decode the tapestry of events, weaving together the scattered remnants of information and knowledge in their possession. In this intricate interplay of fiction and history, the writer uses their work to bridge the gap between the past and the present. The writer's role extends beyond the passive act of relaying facts; it involves the active act of crafting a coherent narrative, wherein each choice, each interpretation, forms a brushstroke that paints the canvas of the past. Just as stories derive their significance from their structure and purpose, historical narratives derive their essence from the writer's command of information and his power to transform it into meaningful stories that shape the reader's understanding of complex and multifaceted tales of history.

II. HISTORICISING FICTION, FICTIONALISING HISTORY

Both historical fiction and history are distinct embodiments of written reflections of the past, and each plays a unique role in constructing or retelling the past. In *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Hayden White masterfully



erases the demarcation that typically separates the realms of history and fiction. To White, these seemingly distinct realms connect as 'verbal artefacts,' integrating into intricate tapestries of expression and understanding. However, Sethi defers from making history totally indistinguishable from fiction, concluding that "historical fiction" can be termed as "history imagined into fiction" and that it is simultaneously "a bit of both in both cases" (300). Interestingly, Maharaja Kumari Binodini Devi's *The Princess and the Political Agent* refuses to fit into any specific category or genre. Originally written in Meiteilon with Bengali script, translated by L.Somi Roy, this book deals with the love relationship between the author's aunt, Maharaja Kumari Sanatombi, and Lieutenant Colonel Henry St Patrick Maxwell, the first Political Agent of Manipur under British Rule. Set during the imperial rule in Manipur, this novel navigates the uncharted territory where power, politics, and personal desires come together. The novel often employs a first person perspective, allowing the readers to directly access the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of the protagonist, Sanatombi. This narrative technique offers an intimate insight into her personal journey and inner struggles. Personal narratives, as individual accounts of lived experiences, provide insight into the complexities of human emotions and interactions. In the article titled "Personal Narratives: Perspectives on Theory and Research", Kristin M. Langellier observes two peculiarities of personal narratives: first, "its long history of being invisible, inaudible, and ignored as an object of research; and second, the ideological masking that results when one of the paired terms, for example literary discourse, is privileged over the other term, social discourse" (244).

Maharaja Kumari Binodini Devi's work, *The Princess and the Political Agent* defies conventional categorization, embracing a unique and fluid structure. Within this liminal literary form, historical narratives engage in a dynamic dialogue with fictional elements, and vice versa. Diverging from the customary paths of historians and biographers, Binodini writes a historical fiction in the form of a biography. This approach intricately delineates the personal everyday routine of her own aunt. Binodini's deliberate selection of this literary genre, or her deliberate denial of definitive classification, grants her composition the capacity to traverse not solely the realms of history and fiction, but also to navigate the intricate terrains of public and private chronicles. The story of the life of Maharaja Kumari Sanatombi Devi, as conveyed by Binodini, prominently features the romantic

entanglement between Sanatombi and Maxwell. This romance results in Sanatombi becoming an outcast in her own community.

Emerging in the creative trials and tribulations of the 1970s, a period marked by political turbulence in Manipur and the ascent of nationalist and insurgent movements, Binodini's literary work echoes the sociopolitical backdrop of the era. It intricately entwines two pivotal 'public' historical junctures of national significance in Manipur. These historical events are juxtaposed against the backdrop of the protagonist's romantic journey. One such event is the First Anglo-Manipur Conflict, an outcome of the Palace Revolution of 1891. This upheaval saw Sanatombi's uncles rise in rebellion against her father, resulting in the British assuming control over the Manipuri kingdom. This transition prompted the British to nominate Sanatombi's cousin, the 7-year-old Chura Chand (later Binodini's father), as the monarch, necessitating the appointment of a regent. Consequently, Maxwell, the inaugural political agent under British administration, became a fixture in Sanatombi's life. The book also delves into another historical occurrence of considerable magnitude, the first of the two Nupi-lans – significant women-led protests. The first Nupi-lan assumed exceptional importance as it directly impacted the Sanatombi–Maxwell relationship. Binodini's narrative strategy deliberately situates an ostensibly personal tale of love relationship amidst the grand tapestry of major events, exhibiting a deliberate foregrounding of intimate emotion against a broader historical backdrop.

The narrative's liminal structure appears to have arisen from Binodini's struggle to commit to a single genre. Evidently, she embarked on a path that fused the elements of fiction and biography, interwoven with historical contours. The narrative's biographical essence is discernible as it chronicles Sanatombi's life journey from childhood to demise. Simultaneously, historical facets are woven into its fabric through the inclusion of historical personages, occurrences, and facts. Binodini's ambivalence about the ongoing debate between history and fiction is reflected in the Preface of the literary work. Here, she openly expresses her dilemma over the book's form. On one hand, she asserts that the work is rooted in history, and that she treats historical figures with reverence, intending no distortion or defamation. Yet, in the next section, she declares that the work, being fiction, has assumed a particular portrayal. This results in the assertion that the book can neither be classified as a biography nor a history, a stance she believes everyone should accept.



Throughout the Preface, any assertion she makes about the book's historical basis is swiftly countered by her own statement that it is "not biography, it is not history, but a work of fiction" (Binodini xxi). The Preface embarks with an account of her personal struggles while composing the book, and recollections of her mother, who personally witnessed Sanatombi and Maxwell, lending the work an air of eyewitness testimony. She then mentions *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur: Cheitharon Kumpapa*, providing evidence of the historical roots of the text. Binodini further highlights in *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur: Cheitharon Kumpapa* segment detailing Maxwell and Sanatombi's visit to Lamangdon for a feast, followed by another eyewitness account of Maxwell's ambitions to erect a house there. This cascade of historical references lays a foundation for the book's historical authenticity. Gradually, she introduces a contradictory note by reiterating that the book is fiction and can't be classified as a biography or history. These statements underscore the inherent challenge in categorizing the work as a straightforward history, historical fiction, or biography. The complexity of the book lies in its unique ability to inhabit all three genres while ultimately eluding strict classification within any.

Binodini ventures into a literary journey to capture the life of her own aunt. This biographical foundation provides readers with a clear point of entry into the narrative, shaping their expectations for the upcoming content. Implicitly, readers acknowledge the candid narration of an individual's life, notably that of Binodini's aunt, Sanatombi. The inherent closeness of their relationship implies an intimate understanding that extends into the 'private' facets of Sanatombi's existence. This aligns with the central focus of the book, which extensively unravels the intricacies of the romantic liaison shared between Sanatombi and Maxwell. To support this intimate portrayal, Binodini skillfully employs a distinctive approach, incorporating personal correspondence, telegrams, and secret letters exchanged among three pairs of lovers featured within the narrative. These artifacts serve as channel of genuine emotions, offering a poignant glimpse into the innermost sentiments of the characters. Importantly, these personal correspondences underscore the personal narratives of the main protagonist, contributing to a rich tapestry of emotional revelations. The narrative design includes two additional love stories, functioning as subplots that augment the overarching romantic tale of Sanatombi and Maxwell. The first subplot delineates the romantic journey of Sanatombi's aunt, Maharaja

Kumari Sanaphandong, entwined with the king's adviser Meeri. The second subplot traces the romantic connection between Maharaja Chandra Kirti and his third wife, Maharani Chongtham Chanu Kosheswori. These interconnected subplots collectively enhance the multifaceted emotional landscape of the work.

III. CONCLUSION

By constantly avoiding classification, the book elegantly dissolves the boundaries that traditionally segregate different disciplines. This deliberate choice not only grants the work a unique stance but also propels it to inhabit a realm of dual liminality – poised between the realms of history and fiction, and delicately balanced upon the line separating public and private spheres within an individual's existence. This intermediary expanse further emerges as a dynamic arena, wherein histories converge, contest, and harmonize in the intricate dance of inter-history and intra-history. The book's liminal structure, gracefully straddling the intricate terrain of history, historical fiction, and biography, empowers Binodini with a distinctive agency. In the introduction of the book *The Modern German Historical Novel: Paradigms, Problems, Perspectives*, David Roberts writes,

Since the interpretation of history is itself historically situated, the historical reference of the historical novel is double: not only is the past seen through the prism of the present, it also serves present interests. (3)

The intricate narrative structure, nuanced character development, and thematic exploration of the work contribute to the broader understanding of colonial encounters and the social realities and customs of Manipuri society. She provides a platform for marginalized voices and perspectives, allowing characters to articulate their, experiences, desires, and challenges. These narratives serve as a counterpoint to the official court narrative, highlighting the humanity and agency of individuals who are often overshadowed by larger historical events or characters. Through this re-imagined historical lens, Binodini invites readers to critically examine the complexities of history and consider the diverse voices that shape our understanding of the past.

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