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'HIDDEN' HISTORIES AND TRIBAL RESISTANCE IN INTO THE HIDDEN VALLEY

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Abstract

Recovering histories is one of the foremost concerns of postcolonial critical enquiry. The word 'hidden' is used in this paper in two senses, first to problematize undocumented and unrecorded history and secondly in a literal sense to recover a truth that is deliberately kept a secret by the British as part of their covert plan. *Into The Hidden Valley* (2016) is an outsider's account of the British expedition of 1890 and 1894 into the remote Apatani Valley located in Arunachal Pradesh. Stuart Blackburn explores the consequences and the detrimental effects when an imperialist nation forcibly engages with the autochthonous natives and bulldoze them to submission. The result is a bloody massacre that goes unrecorded in the history of British occupation of India. Postmodern examination of history focalizes on subjectivity of historians in documenting historical events indicating that history is a construct that depends on the individual understanding of it. It also emphasizes on the interconnectedness between history and literature suggesting alternate and different ways of reading both the disciplines. Like poststructuralism, postcolonialism also opens many avenues of recovery and representation. Taking recourse to poststructuralist notion of history as subjective the paper attempts to foreground the 'hidden' or 'silenced' histories by locating this historical fiction at the center of its critical enquiry.

Keywords: Apatani, History, Poststructuralism, Orality, Punitive, Shamans,

Introduction

In his preface to the book *Oral Tradition* (1961) Jan Vansina proclaims that the proverb *Verba Volant, Scripta Manent* is proved as untrue by those communities and its inhabitants where the spoken 'word' happened to be the only source of their cultural and historical past for a long time. The memoriter aspect of oral history depends on strict adherence to modes and forms like rhyme, intonation, and other formulae so that not just copious amount of information is passed on, but it

also retains the cultural materials and tradition of the oral communities. One cannot deny the centrality of oral history in the tribal universe, it is the well spring of stories, of life lived, of faith, belief, and tradition. Oral narratives can be used to draw inspiration, to establish a continuous tradition with the present and create a link between communities.

Postmodern examination of history focalizes on subjectivity of historians in documenting historical events indicating that history is a construct that depends on the individual understanding of it.

Haydon White a famous historian challenges the distinction between historical and fictional narrative using structuralist and poststructuralist methodologies. In his 'Fictions of Factual Representations' (1982), he writes

...the facts do not speak for themselves, but the historian speaks for them...novelists might be dealing with only imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the object of a representation is a poetic process (White 125).

Haydon White suggests that analogies exist between the ways in which history is documented and literature is written particularly the process of representing events, signifying, or attaching value to something. He points to the ways in which historians take the assistance of critical and creative faculties to critique the socio-economic-political development of a particular period. Critical methods like New Historicism are influenced by the poststructuralist view of relativism and multiplicity that challenges the traditional concept of history as objective and linear. History as a discipline of a linear progression of events is deconstructed in such poststructuralist approach as espoused by Haydon White. In another of his exemplary essay 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory' (1995) Haydon White writes that the story in a narrative form is nothing but "a 'mimesis' of the story *lived* in some region of historical reality and in so far as it is an accurate imitation it is to be considered a truthful account thereof" (106). Similarly Hans Bertens also writes in *Literary Theory* (2004) "Literature is not simply a product of history, it also actively makes history" (177). These observations underline the interconnectedness between history and literature suggesting possibilities of multiple and alternate interpretations of both history and literary works. Like poststructuralism, postcolonialism also opens many avenues of recovery and representation. One of the most significant concern is the recovery of history from the annals of Western Historiography as Edward Said has done in *Orientalism* (1978) or to

rewrite history as suggested in the famous phrases like 'Empire Writes Back' and more importantly to recover hidden histories and give it the legitimacy of discourse. In line of the discussions above the paper analyzes *Into The Hidden Valley* as a historical fiction of the Apatanis where the collective oral memory defies erasure from history.

Objectives

Taking recourse to such an approach proffered by poststructuralist notion of relativism, the paper seeks to read *Into The Hidden Valley* (2016) by Stuart Blackburn as a historical account of the Apatani's encounter with the British and the tragic consequences of this clash of cultures. As a non-scribal society, the Apatanis have a rich oral tradition which in this narrative is pitted against the written words of the British officer George Taylor. Does written word always articulate the truth? Is it authentic and reliable? What chances does oral tradition have against the power of written words? Therefore, the paper seeks to answer such questions by negotiating the possibility of locating history in *Into The Hidden Valley*, to analyze the centrality of oral tradition which is the repository of all its intangible culture and to show that spoken words can also be an enduring source of history in the absence of written records.

'Hidden' Histories and Tribal Resistance

Into The Hidden Valley is set in the years 1890-1900. It can be read as a historical narrative of the Apatani tribe presenting calamitous events erased from official documents and denied even in casual conversations amongst the British officials. The novel is also the recipient of the 'MM Bennetts Award for Historical Fiction' (2016) in the United Kingdom. The postcolonial intervention into this problem will focus on the history of imperialism in India as a grand narrative, through which the British sought to have a totalizing power over the natives. Within the politics of creating and erasing history the collective memory of the distressed tribe refuses to forget the trauma of their past. Time does not erase the agony of the dead rather they endure in the oral narratives and become embedded in their folklores. To quote Elleke Boehmer "The effects of empire on the colonized people, and colonized responses to

invasion, usually appear as mere traces in the writings of time" (2005: 21). She acknowledges the absence of the native voice in the grand narrative of the empire. She also points out how in narratives written by colonial masters the sufferings, victimization and occlusions of the natives have been whitewashed or simply erased from history.

Britain at its height of imperialism in the 1890s sought to expand its territorial as well as political hold in the North East Frontier Tract (NEFT) later known as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in the Indo Tibetan Border. The British Empire was driven by power and profit. This network which had spread its tentacles into every nook and corner of the country was run on the shoulders of trained, motivated, efficient, and most times ruthless British officers. The story of *Into The Hidden Valley* is revolved around one such young British Officer George Taylor. Stuart Blackburn's well researched book vividly brings to life the pristine Apatani Valley of 1890s and its proud people, fiercely independent and renowned for their industriousness. Theirs was a close-knit community, living in proximity with nature and practicing a faith in which spirits were invoked for prayers and blessings. The shaman had a key role to play in negotiating between the dead and the living. When the British come into this land as uninvited and unwanted guest the result was catastrophic for this peaceful community. The story is the clash between an empire's ambition of expansion and the hill tribes fighting for their ancestral land and way of life.

Gyati is a shaman from the Hage clan of Hong village. His worldview was closely based on his sensitive perception of the spirit world and the material world. He had a fascination for words and the power that elucidated from a well chanted incantation that could invoke the spirits, but he was more fascinated with the power that well spoken words had in dissipating and dispelling anger and confrontation. He sang,

I am the nyibu, on the platform
Spirits, give me a clear voice;
Grant me the skill to chant
And say one thing in ten ways (85)

'Nyibu' means a shaman or a tribal priest who can conjure words and create magic. He mediates between the real world and the world of spirits in a tribal society. Gyati was also equally fascinated with the *halyangs* (outsiders). They were a mystery to him and though he had still not encountered anyone he was apprehensive and anxious for his beloved people. Gyati was amazed at how the *halyang* could carve roads in such a difficult terrain using their money and power. He searched for answers in the ancestral wisdom, in the ancient rhapsodies and within his Tani religion which always narrated about how all human beings had a common ancestry. When he questioned the elder shaman the only answer he got was "...They have writing. We lost that when our papers fell into the river in the time of our ancestors. They have Guns. They are powerful. But they are distant kins" (55). Gyati is deeply touched by the notion of even the *halyangs* being their distant kin.

The First British expedition into the Apatani Valley is precipitated by a turn of events that involved a British man, few Apatanis working for him and a Nyishi middleman. The Nyishis are one of the dominant tribes sharing geographical territory with the Apatanis. Taru the Nyishi mediator for a British tea planter lure few Apatani boys to work as farm laborers for his boss Mr Crowe. He informs Gyati that the *halyangs* paid him well and they paid with a special paper which could buy land, livestock, and even costly beads. Further he tells Gyati "They're strong. They have money and guns. Soldiers come when there's stealing or a killing" (92). This information gives Gyati some hope for the future of his first-born son Komo. Having lost his mother early Komo had grown distant from his father.

For a long time Gyati had feared the *halyang*, and their recent advance alarmed him, but now he saw another possibility. Although the journey was not without danger, he thought that going to the land of the *halyang* might somehow protect Komo, that making contact with powerful forces might render him safe (93).

Gyati decides to send Komo along with Taru to work in the plains. Komo is taken to work for Mr

Crowe who employed almost 200 men mostly from Orissa and local Assamese in his tea estate in Harmuty. He also employed around a dozen Nyishis and handful of Apatanis. Taru worked as the intermediary between them. On 20th November of 1889 Mr Crowe is informed that Taru had been killed by few Apatanis who had accused him of cheating them of their wages. They had fled from the place taking two more Nyishis as captives along with two rifles of Mr Crowe. One of the men who had fled was Komo, Gyati's son.

George Taylor was the Deputy Commissioner posted at Lakhimpur and the incident fell under his jurisdiction. He realized that a 'palavar' had to be undertaken to catch the killers and rescue the captives. 'Palavar' the word is taken from Portuguese meaning 'speech' or 'discussion'. It was used to refer to the negotiations between the Portuguese traders and the west African natives. In English 'palaver' was used to refer to the negotiations between the British and the natives. Being in charge George garnered momentum and resources for the 'palaver'. He is driven by the desire to emulate the success of the British empire even in this remote part of the empire. Till date no British had entered the Apatani Valley and so this was his chance to venture into the Apatani valley which will be his masterstroke. He writes in his diary,

The murder on Crowe's estate will mean an expedition to the Apatani Valley. This could be my chance to make a name for myself. No one has been there yet. I'll be the first. If all goes well, I will bring back the murderers. (103).

The First Expedition to the hidden valley takes place in the year 1890. The retinue is described by the narrator as,

...330 men. Led by George, a Captain Norris and a Lieutenant Graham, it consisted of a medical officer, his two Indian assistants, a transport officer, six Indian army officers, the required 300 Gurkha soldiers, 450 porters, four cooks, two Nyishi gude-cum- interpreters, an Assamese interpreter and four Bengali bearers to cater for the British officers (106).

The column of men stretched for more than a mile. The journey from Lakhimpur to the Apatani valley is long and arduous which takes more than five days and by the end of it they are forced to leave most of the retinue on the way. They enter the Apatani valley with fewer than hundred men. The first village they enter is Hong where they march in through the fields and make their base at the outskirts. Though George is ready for the 'palaver' he is confounded with the peculiar and strange way of negotiating by the Apatanis. Gyati the shaman represents the Apatanis. He begins with a long rhapsody about their story of origin, about their ancestors and how they had come to this valley from Tibet. After a whole day of chanting, he finally arrives at the contentious issue of the Taru clan. For many years the Taru's owed the Apatanis eighteen Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*), ten Tibetan bells, pigs, four "metal dishes"- brass plates, four valuable necklaces, plus they were holding half a dozen Apatanis as slaves.

George is perplexed at the Apatani method of negotiation. The contention is trailed back to a historical time in the past and any quantum of punishment can only be spelled by taking into context the antecedent dispute of both the parties. Retribution will involve a structure of give and take avoiding violence at any cost. It is only 'words' and the power it carries that can achieve it. Therefore, the role of the shaman or the tribal priest is very crucial during such negotiations. George finally makes a breakthrough in the 'palaver' and after consultation with his colleagues and in view of the dispute as presented, he decides on the penalty for the Apatanis. Thus, the villages of Hong and Hari are fined one adult female *Bos Frontalis*, the release of two Nyishi captives along with the return of Mr Crowe's gun. He warned them that the failure to comply would result in swift retribution.

George's decision for swift settlement is not just an innocent desire for justice. His action is also guided by the colonizer's condescending attitude towards the natives as the arbiter of justice. In many ways his actions can be viewed as a colonizer collaborating with his own image as a savior and ruler to the natives. His role is also that of a reconnoiter with the aim of surveying and exploring

the land to further the British expansion. But these ventures of the British did not take into consideration the unalienable rights of the tribes. The aim was to legitimize colonial rule through manipulation and force. The official account of the first expedition is treated as an administrative success. Under the garb of maintaining good relationship with the tribe the British interest is furthered through the act of 'palavar'. The official report of George reads "...Apatanis are a peaceful tribe, without a warrior class. Weapons include daos, bows and spears. We saw no guns in their possession. The people I would define as dignified and loquacious" (133). The final paragraph notes "This fertile and sheltered valley, midway between Tibet and Assam, would be an excellent location or a forward base in friendly territory. The abundant food and docile population would, I believe, support at least one more platoon" (133).

George realizes the strategic importance of the valley suggesting it as a forward military post for the British. Further he maintains in the official records the success of the 'palaver', undermining the free spirit of the tribes and ignoring the underlying tension and resistance amongst them. He gets his desired promotion and believes that his report of the first expedition had a lot to do with his promotion.

Though the first expedition had been a successful one the seeds of distrust and fear had already been sown in the minds of the Apatanis. But the main reason for the resentment among them was the forced portage by the British and their interference into their internal matter. Famous Anthropologist Verrier Elwin who had done extensive study in this part of the country wrote that tribes disdained working as porters. Further he wrote "...although the people do carry them, they do not really like doing so, and every additional officer appointed, and every new outpost opened increases demands upon them and diverts them from the essential task of agriculture" (1957:114). By now the British had established a camp at Joram, a Nyishi village but to carry equipment and provisions from the plains to Joram they needed more and more porters. Not wanting to antagonize their Nyishi hosts they began to seize Apatanis and forced them to

carry the heavy loads. If they refused, they were sent to Lakhimpur in Assam, chained, and put into filthy prisons. This was an absolute horror for the free spirit tribals who couldn't comprehend this brutality towards them. The narrator writes,

Apatanis never worked for others, only for themselves, or in voluntary groups. Even if captured by Nyishis, they were treated with respect and ransomed, as part of a give-and-take negotiations. But the halayang were outsiders, without countervailing debts or obligations, and their seizures were degrading. Worst of all, people felt powerless to stop them (145).

Forced portage was an insult to their dignity and it was against their spirit of freedom and independence. As a result of the shimmering anger and resentment the Punyo clan held meetings in the year 1892-1893. They decided to attack the post at Joram. Gyati in his wisdom suggests negotiating with the British but his move is opposed, and his clan too joined the war. Around 120 Apatani men attacked the post in Joram killing Sepoy Bahadur a British soldier. The Apatanis lost three of their own. This daring attack fueled by their desperate attempt to save their rights was no match for the brute force of the guns.

The British considered this as an audacious attempt at undermining their authority and power. It was an attack on the Raj itself. This led to the 11nd punitive expedition to the Apatani Valley. Punitive expedition is a military expedition that is carried out against a state or individuals as retribution. As a result, the expedition was on a military footing. The expedition soldiers were put at 700, four artillery pieces, 24 native officers, twelve British officers, half a company of royal British Engineers, two British doctors and six Indian assistants. The strategy was to burn the village of Hong and Hari as a warning for immediate surrender of the men involved in the attack at Joram. Houses, granaries, crops in both the villages were burnt to cinders. Men, women, and children ran towards the forest to save their lives. In the ensuing chaos George witnessed something that the narrator describes as "What happened next he recorded that evening in his notebook. But he never

spoke of it to anyone, ever" (185). What happened is revealed only fifteen years later when George's son Charles reads his father's diary after he is killed in the 1910 earthquake at Shillong. During the burning of Hong and Hari the soldiers captured twelve Apatani men who had surrendered voluntarily. One of the men captured was Komo. Komo had insisted that the Apatanis wanted to talk but couldn't talk to guns. He demanded that the *halyang* leave the valley and if they did so there would be no attack from the Apatanis. George who was in charge insisted on further interrogation of the captives. But Lieutenant Needham and Captain Byng lead the young men towards the edge of the forest and executed them in a cowardly manner. George did nothing to stop them. They then filed a report stating that the men had died in the fire at Hong and Hari. George's diary read,

Byng ordered Naik to take the Apatanis into the jungle. We stood and watched as they were led away, not far, only forty or fifty yards, just inside the first line of trees. Then they were shot, all of them. But they didn't all die immediately. Some crawled and screamed, until more shots were fired. Then there was no movement and sound. We left them there and marched back to camp (246).

Charles's realized that his father had colluded in the murder of twelve men who had voluntarily surrendered and had deliberately hidden the truth. The three documents related to the expedition, i.e George's diary, his handwritten official report and the file report had entries entirely as George had written but he had omitted the massacre of the twelve men in his official report. George deliberately distanced himself from the implications of manslaughter. He committed to himself that if any of these come to light, he would deny it and flatly refuse to acknowledge it. He promised that "My report will always be the official one" (220). George's reputation as an able administration in the North East was hailed amongst the British corridors of power. It was because of his 'success' in the pioneering Apatani expeditions that he was rewarded by the British Government. It was disquieting that "No one had disputed his account of the 1894 expedition, and over time that adventure

took its place alongside others in the saga of empire" (226). George was haunted by the incident no matter how deep he had buried it within his memory. He could never forget the incident and as a 'catharsis' he wrote it in his personal diary which he kept under lock and key.

Back in the Apatani valley the villagers often talked about the death of the young men. Gradually their names and circumstances of death became a part of their oral history. Their story embodied the tragedy of the Apatanis, eventually taking on the form of collective trauma and pain. The whole tribe mourned the loss of their young men. Gyati's questions about his son denied him any sense of closure. His duty as the priest called for him to chant for the souls of the dead. The author writes "...singing his son's life was the hardest thing he'd ever done as a shaman"(188). George Taylor's face, his writing box and his papers continued to haunt him. Writing as he rightfully recognized was a tool through which George enforced rules, collected information, and exercised authority over them. The narrator writes,

His words and the *halyang* writing box had achieved something, and it might have lasted. They could have negotiated another settlement. But the fragile rapport between the two men who didn't share a language had been shattered, first by the humiliation of the seizures and then by the ferocity of the reprisals against Hari and Hong (209).

For Gyati the only potent weapon against oblivion were the 'words and its power over time. He yields to orality and memory where the story will continue to survive. At the end when the guilt-stricken Charles makes a journey of penitence to the Apatani Valley and meets Gyati, an old man now, he is astonished to hear him narrate the story of the missing twelve men who had never returned alive. Gyati tells him how his son dies "I didn't see. No one saw. But your father knows" (258). It survived in the collective memory of the tribe. To put it into context, even today Apatanis believe that there is a part of the forest which is avoided as haunted because long back many young men had entered it and never returned. They also narrate events that had been

passed on from their great grandparents who narrated how they were forced to carry sacks of sugar, salt, and pumpkins for the British. These accounts continue to survive in the oral tradition though they have been expunged from official records of the Government.

Conclusion

To conclude, the history 'hidden' in the official account of the IInd expedition defied erasure and continued to exist in the social memory of the community. Memory occupies a special place in postcolonial discourse where it is given the legitimacy of oral literature. In this novel the history of the Apatani is recovered and foregrounded using scholarship and academia, it is converted into textuality for posterity. With great empathy and critical appreciation Stuart Blackburn has negotiated colonialism and historical authenticity to re-present the past of this indigenous group. Thus, the text and the written word, as Gyati recognized becomes the agency through which the past is narrativized and in the process history is both reclaimed and re-presented. In the final scene when Charles meet Gyati he deliberately left behind instruments of writing and recording. He desired for words to work their magic. Gyati finally peers through his mind and he is ready to talk to Charles who had come without the 'box' and without soldiers.

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