

Darjeeling and Novels: Fictional Legacy of 1986

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to look into how the fictional narratives relating to Darjeeling Hills has been shaped by the Gorkhaland Movement of 1986. It is a comprehensive effort in understanding how the Gorkhaland Movement which is also locally known as “*Chyasee ko Andolan*” or “*Chyasee*” has been represented in the fictional landscape by local and non-local writers. The paper explores three texts: “The Inheritance Of Loss” by Kiran Desai, “The Hills are Burning” by Anirban Bhattacharya and “The Song of the Soil” by Chupden Kabimo. It is a critical effort to understand how the Movement has been represented through different local and non-local lenses in these fictional narratives. The paper will also draw from various historical accounts to provide a background of the Gorkhaland Movement of 1986.

Keywords: Darjeeling, Gorkhaland, Novel.

Introduction.

Darjeeling is a hill station nestled in the state of West Bengal. The town hosts thousands of tourists every year as a result of its breath-taking beauty and is renowned for the three Ts which is “Tea, Tourism and Toy Train”. Thousands of tourists from all over India and abroad flock to the town especially during Spring and Autumn to enjoy the flora and fauna that the town offers. Historical records tell us that this location was a politically contested location by the Kingdom of Nepal, Kingdom of Sikkim and The East India Company for its strategic location. The East India Company is said to have acquired the hill station from the Kingdom of Sikkim through “The Deed of Grants” in 1835 on the pretext of turning the town into a “sanatorium” for the British officers who worked in the unfamiliar sweltering heat of Kolkata. The Deed reads:

“The Governor-General having expressed his desire for the possession of the hill of Darjeeling on account its cool climate; for the purpose of enabling the servants of his Government, suffering from sickness, to avail themselves of its advantages, I, the Sikkumputtee Rajah, out of friendship for the said Governor-General hereby present Darjeeling to the East India Company, that is, all the land South of the Great Runjeet river, east of the Balasur, Kahail and Little Runjeet rivers and west of the Rungno and Mahanuddi rivers.” (Institutional Repository North Bengal University)

However, the acquiring of Darjeeling on the pretext to build a sanatorium for British officers of the East India Company has been a bone of contention for many historians as the Company started rapid urbanisation of the town and started planting tea and pine for commercial purposes. In fact, the popular Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is also a byproduct of the capitalistic ambitions of the East India Company. These records of the hills remain with us and the people who are interested in the narratives of the place. However, the plights of the common man belonging to the hills have always been buried under the veil of the scenic beauty of the place. The population in Darjeeling who have stood up against linear narratives of the colonisers and the state have often failed to make it to mainstream media, hence making them the subalterns in their own region. The thousands of tourists that flock to the place every year to experience the “joy ride” in the DHR or have a glimpse of the mighty Kanchenjunga are often ignorant about the complex politics that is always in play in the lives of the locals. These complexities which reached the

boiling point in the year 1986 erupted and poured out as the Gorkhaland Movement spearheaded by Subhas Ghising, the leader of GNLF.

The movement left an indelible mark on the history and politics of Darjeeling and simultaneously also became the most important topic that would go on to shape the fictional landscape of the hills that would be written in various languages and from various perspectives.

How Does Conflict Shape Fiction?

As the saying goes *“Literature is the mirror of society”* the genre of fiction is one from the many types of mirrors that literature and art happen to be. The word **“fiction”** which would mean imagined or not real cannot always be taken into face value. Many popular fictions have been shaped and inspired by real events that have occurred around the world. These so called fictional novels manage to bring to light not only the untold and unheard narratives but manage to add much empathy in them. These are often stories about real people and real incidents that may be under the veil called fiction but when read with attention manage to have layers over layers of crucial subversive narratives.

The best example of fictional narratives shaped by conflict would be dramas and novels written by famous writers like George Bernard Shaw or Virginia Woolf about the lived experiences of men during the so called Great War. Virginia Woolf created the character of Septimus Smith in her famous novel **“Mrs Dalloway”** where she de-romanticizes the idea of war and machismo. She uses the character of Septimus as an anti-thesis to the concept of a war hero;

“But Septimus let himself think about horrible things...He said people were talking behind the bedroom walls. Mr Filmer thought it odd. He saw things too—He had seen an old woman’s head in the middle of a fern”(Mrs. Dalloway).

In this manner Virginia Woolf uses the character of Septimus Smith to shed light into the traumas of soldiers who suffered from PTSD(Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder) because of the violence of the so called Great War.

Another similar example could be the very elaborate canon of African-American literature written by writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison about the history of slavery and the struggle for freedom. **“The Color Purple”** is a novel by Alice Walker written in epistolary format where the main protagonist writes about her struggles as an African-American girl to God. **“Beloved”** by Toni Morrison also delves into the themes of slavery and African-American identity. The novel falls under the genre of magic realism where Morrison blends history, fiction and fantasy to address the question of slavery. In the Indian context we have writers like Salam Rushdie, Amitav Gosh and Mahashweta Devi.

Hence, we can argue that great fiction isn’t born out of thin air. They are often results of conflict between two parties. Similarly, much of the fictional narratives about the Darjeeling Hills revolve around the conflict between the interests of the state and the people of Darjeeling. This conflict manifested itself in the form of the Gorkhaland Movement of 1986 and features itself in many fictional novels about and from the region.

How the Gorkhaland Movement of 1986 has Shaped the Fictional Narratives of Darjeeling.

The Gorkhaland Movement of 1986 was a movement spearheaded by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) whose leader was Subash Ghising. The movement was an outcry of the demand of a different state that was to be carved out of West Bengal. The main conflict here was between the state and the people of the Darjeeling hills. The demand for statehood was a result of cultural and linguistic differences between the Bengalis of West Bengal and Indian Nepali community of West Bengal. The Movement is regarded as one of the most significant ones in the historical context of Darjeeling for it dealt with complex political questions of identity and alienation which are still relevant today. The movement of 1986 has been a defining feature of the region’s history and impacted the literature produced henceforth. The Movement can be seen as a cornerstone when exploring the literary landscape of fiction related to

Darjeeling. The Gorkhaland Movement of 1986 ended with the formation of the Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC).

Official records state that around 1,200 people died during the Movement but the locals of Darjeeling believe that the lives lost were more than the recorded numbers. These experiences of the locals and how it was perceived make much of the books that have been written about the region. Writer like Chupden Kabimo have managed to capture the feelings of the people from the locals' perspective while writers like Kiran Desai and Anirab Bhattacharya give us the perspectives of the non-locals'. By including the movement as a backdrop for their fiction the writers have been able to explore the historical and cultural complexities of the region. Besides the above mentioned novels other popular novels like "The Fruits of the Barren Tree" and "Gorkhaland Dairies" are also inspired by the Gorkhaland Movement.

"The Inheritance Of Loss" and "The Hills Are Burning"; Non-local Perspectives.

"The Inheritance Of Loss" by Kiran Desai and "The Hills Are Burning" are novels which have The Gorkhaland Movement of 1986 as their backdrop. The common thread that binds these novels is that they are both written from the perspective of non-locals. The novelists are people who are not from the Indian Gorkha community residing in Darjeeling. They both have tried their hands at weaving narratives of fiction keeping the Movement as their backdrop. The two novels are immensely popular in Darjeeling and are among the bestselling fiction novels in the town. This also bares testimony to the commercial value as well as the interest that people hold in fiction that encompass the Movement which is one of the most integral historical event for the Darjeeling Hills.

"The Inheritance Of Loss" is an award winning novel written by the renowned writer Kiran Desai. The Movement finds itself as a very crucial ingredient in her narrative because it helps scholars and critics understand the other themes of the novel to a greater extent. The book is put under the microscope by various scholars, critics and reviewers to understand it in the context of post-colonial theory and intersectionality between the local and the global. When we place the novel in the context of The Gorkhaland Movement of 1986 we come across the interesting themes of identity politics and intersectionality between the local and the global vis a vis the elite and the lower class.

While Anirab Bhattacharya writes from his experience while he was a student in Dr. Graham's Homes it is believed that Desai had come to Kalimpong and spent a month or two in the hills in order to give a touch of originality to her narrative. Many critics believe that Desai has taken a very objective stance in her work while others scrutinize her for misrepresenting the Movement as a separatist movement. Her representation of the locals in the form of characters like Gyan is often are under scrutiny for her writings have been considered as the writings of a person coming from an elite class who could possibly never be able to portray the lower class layman of Darjeeling. Kiran Desai belongs to cosmopolitan elites in both her home and host society, and in both sense places her at a remove from the lives of the downtrodden she seeks to represent, in both senses of the word (Spivak, 1994: 70 , The Journal of Commonwealth Literature).

Desai has embodied the movement in the character of Gyan who is the representation of the common lower class Indian Gorkha living in Kalimpong. He tutors the granddaughter of an ex-judge Jemubhai Patel who is the epitome of an anglophile(hybridity, Homi K Bhabha). The relationship between Gyan and Jemubhai's granddaughter Sai helps highlight the intersectionality (Kimberly Crenshaw) between class privilege and the question of identity which was the main objective of the Gorkhaland Movement. Readers belonging to the Indian Gorkha community often disagree with Desai's characters like Lola who is a good representation of an outsider's reaction the movement,

"Noni: They've been here ,most of them , several generations. Why shouldn't Nepali be taught in schools? Lola: Because on the basis they can start statehood demands. Separatist movement here, separatist movement there,terrorists,guerrilla, agitators,instigators...the Neps have been encourages by

the Sikhs and their Khalistan, by UFLA, NEFA, PLA... Kashmir, Punjab, Assam...” (The Inheritance Of Loss). Lola’s reaction was a common one where people labelled the demand of a separate statehood as a separatist demand and the state records labelled it as a terrorist activity.

Sai who has been raised in a household which is teeming with colonial hangover can also be seen as a product of the same history and her disagreement with Gyan on the question of civilization highlights the intersectionality between global and local vis a vis class: **“Civilisation is important , she said. That is not civilisation , you fool .Schools and hospitals. That is”**. Much of the discourse between the characters belonging to different hierarchies of the society reveal the attitudes that they would have had during the Movement. For example Desai writes about the emotions of the locals in the following manner: **“This is where we were born, where our parents were born, where our grandparents were born. We will run our own affairs in our own language. If necessary we will wash our bloody kukuris in the mother waters of the Teesta. Jai Gorkha”**. (The Inheritance Of Loss). Their miserable condition also causes for their demand of their own homeland. Their deplorable condition compels them to take very strong action. Vandana Sharma in her essay entitled, “Longing and Belonging: Search for Homeland in Kiran Desai’s “The Inheritance of Loss”” rightly observes that – “By presenting the deplorable living conditions and semi-servitude of these migrants, Desai has revealed their pains, loss of dignity and displacement and their desire for a homeland” (Kiran Desai and Her Fictional World, p.212). These emotions have been realistically paralleled by her through the apathetic reaction to the Movement through a character like Lola whose dream of a safe haven in Mon Amini is shattered by the Movement: **“Parallel lives were being led by those—Budhoo, Kesang—for whom there was no such doubleness or self-consciousness, while Lola and Noni indulged themselves in the pretence of it being a daily fight to keep up civilization in this place of towering ,flickering green”**. (The Inheritance Of Loss).

Anirab Bhattacharya takes a more personal and empathetic stand in his novel **“The Hills Are Burning”** compared to Desai whose fiction is more objective. Bhattacharya writes in his “Acknowledgment” that his book **“is a journey that all the characters in the following pages experienced. Some events have been abridged and some have been expanded for creative and narrative purposes. A few of the characters are a portmanteau of two people for creative purposes, and certain names and events have been changed. All of the political events mentioned in the book are true. It was a rite of passage—our wonder years. Let’s travel back to 1986”**. It can be said that while Anirab Bhattacharya is not a local his fiction has been shaped by the experience he had during his stay in Kalimpong as a student during the 1986 agitation.

His novel is about a young Bengali boy who comes to the hills with his parents because his father has been transferred. The young Bengali boy whose name is Tukai Chatterjee joins Dr. Graham’s Homes and is soon swept in the whirlwind of the Movement. Tukai is not an Indian Gorkha but the bonds that he develops with his fellow local classmates leads to an emotional reaction towards the Movement. Anirab Bhattacharya’s novel is interesting because his is a fiction that has been shaped by what the so called enemies who were the Bengalis and what the locals of the hills perceived of one another during 1986. While Desai’s fictional representative did not find acceptance in the hills for its otherisation of the locals as violent Bhattacharya’s perspective was welcomed for its empathetic yet practical representation of the Movement.

At a recent event in Siliguri, Bhattacharyya said he once believed the “bad guys” were the revolutionaries killing people and destroying property in pursuit of a separate Gorkhaland, and the “good guys” were the police and paramilitary personnel trying to prevent a bifurcation of West Bengal. It made me realise that I, too, had grown up with a simplistic view of things, just that in my belief system the “good guys” were

the brave Gorkha revolutionaries who were ready to lay down their lives for a land of their own and the “bad guys” were the government agents that crushed the uprising.(Himal South Asian).

His is a novel which has been able to show both sides of the coin:

“The realization hit him hard ... the rumours were true ... These CRPF jawans were not soldiers ... they were cold-blooded killers ... he [Tukai] was seeing them shoot unarmed people!... It wasn't just the CRPF who were having a free hand at killing people. The two factions of the GNLFF and GVC [Gorkhaland Volunteer Corps, the militant wing of GNLFF] clashed and claimed lives as well. If ‘outsiders’ were to be held responsible for the destruction of the hills and the claiming of lives ... so were the insiders who went on an ego-fuelled killing spree to prove their superiority in a futile mission of claiming an eye for an eye.”(The Hills are Burning)

He shows the brutality that ensued during the Movement by the political leaders but also doesn't shy away from showing the brutality of the state machinery which acted under the pretence of vanguards of peace. The interesting dichotomy is very much present in his novel. On one hand we have the representation of the empathy of Tukai towards his friends which made him realise the atrocities of the state and on the other we have his realisation of how politicians managed to manipulate the innocent locals in order to justify their own violence.

Thus, in the two novels we see a very interesting representation of the Gorkhaland Movement of 1986 through the eyes of two non-locals. Both the writers chose the “*Andolan*” as their backdrop but created two different narratives that can be studied from various angles. Desai's novel throws light into how the Movement acted on different levels of the society whether it be on the levels of identity on global and local intersectionality or on the levels of class. It is a complex exploration of intersectionality between history, identity and class. Bhattacharya takes a different route where his viewpoint portrays the dynamics between a Bengali boy who has befriended local Kalimpong boys. This development allows Tukai to have a more nuanced opinion about the Movement than just blindly believing in one side of the narrative. This becomes very important in understanding how narratives of the marginalized can be framed by more powerful and privileged .

“The Song of the Soil”; A Local Perspective.

Chupden Kabimo's “*The Song of the Soil*” is a novel which was originally written in Nepali with the title “*Fatsung*”. The novel was nominated for the JCB Prize giving it national recognition. It follows the story of the return of an unnamed protagonist to his village after the news of the death of his childhood friend Ripden in a landslide. This news of his childhood friend takes the unnamed protagonist back in time which happens to be the Gorkhaland Movement of 1986. He reminisces the days when he and his friend were adolescents and experienced the “*Chyasee ko Andolan*” first-hand. It is a harrowing tale of love, trust, friendship and betrayal with the Movement as its backdrop. It not only captures the zeal of the *Andolan* but also the disillusionment that came after it. That disillusionment is still a driving force behind the contemporary aspiring writers of the region.

By tapping into the untold history of the many young men and women who believed in revolution and blindly followed a leadership that was fractured over selfish political gains, the novel brings alive the Gorkhaland movement, the ferment of revolution, and what it does to passionate young people who dive headlong into its abyss as foot soldiers, discovering fear when it is too late.(The Scroll). Kabimo uses his skill to write about the unwritten narratives of the Movement. Kabimo was born in Kalimpong after the Gorkhaland Movement when the DGHC was formed. His childhood was filled the morbid tale of murders and burning libraries instead of fairy-tales. He has used these tales in order to de-romanticize the romantic image of the hill station through tales about the common people who suffered in the grassroots.

“**The Song of the Soil**” is a narrative which manages to bring out what actually happened in the grassroots levels during the 1986 Movement. It tells the harrowing tale of innocent boys getting trapped under the myth of liberation by cunning politicians and how the Movement which was a resistance towards one single force turned into an internal conflict between the people fighting against one single force. He writes about the ground level problems like Malbung not having a single teacher while the politicians promised swimming poles and Switzerland like infrastructure. He also throws light into the internal conflict between the people themselves which lead to betrayal and bloodshed. Under the guise of humor there is also representation of characters like Surya who followed the political leaders blindly; **“Why are you doing this? For the land! He (Surya) replied”**.

“The Song of the Soil” has vivid representations of the violence and struggle. The section where Surya gets betrayed along with his friends by an old man belonging to a different party is a reference to the internal power struggle that was going on between GNLf and the Communist Party. Kabimo has used humor to satirize the promises that were made during the Movement by the leaders. He does not explicitly use names but the witty dialogues and references to real events make it easy for the readers to connect the dots.

Kabimo has taken the narratives that he collected from people who experienced the Movement themselves and intertwined them in his novel. **“I wrote the middle part, which heavily focuses on the political history of the Gorkhaland Movement by talking to around 50 to 60 odd people. Based on discourses, conversations, and content analysis, the middle section was ready. It was a hefty task to embellish the book with a suitable beginning that would not bore the readers. I needed the book to connect with the reader,”** (Katmandu Post).

Hence, “**The Song of The Soil**” provides a strong insiders’ or the locals’ perspective and experiences about the Gorkhaland Movement of 1986. It shows the ground level realities through the characters like the unnamed narrator and Surya whose intentions and aspirations were in tune with the multitude of the young locals but was hijacked by political greed and alternative intentions. It asks difficult questions about identity, history and unity. It shows how the Movement which has been has a monolith has its own levels and layers of complexity which remain unaddressed to this day. The novel has been widely acclaimed as an effort to reclaim history and the power of narration.

CONCLUSION

The Gorkhaland Movement of 1986 indelibly shaped the fictional narratives of Darjeeling Hills, serving as a crucible for exploring themes of identity, power, history, and belonging. Through the lenses of Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, Anirban Bhattacharya’s “The Hills Are Burning” and Chupden Kabimo’s “The Song of the Soil”. This paper examined how local and non-local authors represent the Movement’s complexities and its impact on Darjeeling’s socio-political landscape.

Non-local authors like Desai and Bhattacharya approach the Movement through outsider perspectives, highlighting intersectional tensions between global/local, elite/subaltern, and anglophile/Gorkha identities. Desai’s portrayal of characters like Gyan and Sai underscores the fraught intersections of class, colonial legacy, and ethnonational aspiration. Bhattacharya’s semi-autobiographical narrative humanizes the conflict through a Bengali protagonist caught in local solidarities and state repression. In contrast, Kabimo’s “The Song of the Soil” rooted in local experience, unearths grassroots disillusionment with political leadership and the Movement’s unfulfilled promises, centring subaltern voices often side-lined in elite or outsider accounts.

Together, these novels reveal the Gorkhaland Movement as a polysomic event — simultaneously a struggle for recognition, a site of internal fracture, and a catalyst for interrogating whose narratives shape Darjeeling’s history. By embedding the Movement in fiction, authors complicate monolithic

understandings of identity, territory, and resistance, inviting readers to grapple with the hill station's layered pasts and contested presents.

As Darjeeling continues to grapple with questions of autonomy, identity, and development, the fictional narratives analyzed here underscore literature's role in memorializing conflict, voicing subaltern agency, and probing the fault lines of history. Future research might expand this inquiry to other genres (poetry, film) or explore how newer Darjeeling writers reframe the Movement's legacies amid ongoing struggles for justice and representation.

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