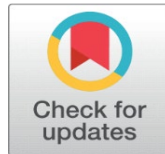
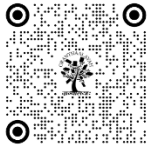


'VIA BYPASS': HISTORY, FICTION AND METAFICTION IN ALKA SARAOGI'S KALIKATHA: VIA BYPASS (1998)

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v2.i2.2021.5393](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v2.i2.2021.5393)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

In her debut novel *Kalikatha: Via Bypass*, Alka Saraogi takes the reader on a journey of interwoven narratives of Kishore Babu, the Marwari community, the city of Calcutta and colonial India. Through a mix of historical, fictional and metafictional narratives, she portrays a complex view of the past, mingled with interventions from the present. This paper examines this mix and presents the nexus between the various elements of storytelling in this path-breaking post-colonial novel.

Keywords: History, Biography, Autobiography, Marwaris, Calcutta, Metafiction, Translation

1. INTRODUCTION

Alka Saraogi published her debut novel, *Kalikatha: Via Bypass* in 1998, for which she received the acclaimed Srikant Verma Award in 1998 and Sahitya Akademi Award in 2001. *Kalikatha* was received with great enthusiasm in the Hindi literary circles and was hailed as a new milestone in Hindi literature. Several critics even pointed out its comparability with *The God of Small Things* (1997). Though the comparison might be valid if we take the experimental narrative technique, the intermingling of the public and the private and the post-colonial nature of the narrative, yet there are vast differences between the canvases and concerns of the two novels. Raveendra Tripathi emphasized in his critical essay on *Kalikatha* that "Few such novels are written, especially in Hindi, which involve such a complex synthesis of the ups and downs of history and personal lives...one must also underline the fact that in Hindi, the line of women novelists capable of presenting life on a wider canvas which was getting extinct after Krishna Sobti and Mannu Bhandari, seems to be reviving again." (Tripathi 90)¹ As mentioned earlier, this novel was applauded for its post-colonial tone and its mature handling of complex themes of colonial, communal and national history. The next novel *Shesh Kadambari* also presented a similarly intermeshed narrative which juggled with the themes of feminism, communalism and idealism. The protagonists and narratives of both the novels show remarkable similarity at several levels though they are very different in subject matter.

¹ My translation.

The canvas of *Kalikatha* stretches from the beginning of colonialism in the later half of the nineteenth century to the onset of the twenty-first century. It revisits the social fabric and the politics of all the intermediate phases through the incidents in the personal life of Kishore Babu. For instance, we get to know of Bose's failed rally at the Holwell monument because it explains the painful lump at the back of Kishore Babu's head. Similarly the poverty of his nurse triggers off a long and detailed account of the Great Bengal Famine of 1942, and so on. It is a racy, interesting and straightforward evaluation of fifty years of India's independence through the life of Kishore Babu. *Shesh kadambari* also employs the same technique of Kissagoi² in which the story follows the chain of thought and not the time line. Yet it is different because the theme of feminism overrides all other themes. It presents Saraogi's take on love and freedom, the two themes which as the author confides in the 'apni baat' or preface to *Kahani ki Talash Mein* have attracted her since childhood because she was born and brought up in a community which was excessively repressive on its women and where thus, both these values were fraught with multiple tensions. Saraogi's first literary offering, *Kahani ki Talaash Mein* also contends with these themes. In case of Kishore Babu's story, there is a clear cut tripartite division- his life before 1947, between 1947 and 1997 and post-1997. A particular lifestyle is adopted by Kishore post-'47 because of the burden of responsibilities. Post-1947, he is shown to have forgotten his pre-1947 self and settled in daily, monotonous, middle-class routine of social climbing (symbolized, among other things, by the gradual replacement of mosaic by marble in his Ballygunge house). Then, in 1997, his bypass surgery opens the floodgates of memory and his attempts hence, to get back to his pre-1947 self are generally labeled as madness. Therefore, 1947 and 1997 become the interfaces between Kishore Babu's colonial and post-colonial selves.

The experiences of Kishore Babu and Rubydi are predominantly and conspicuously post(-)colonial (where post-colonialism is a purely temporal concept) – they have witnessed the freedom struggle, partition, 15th of August 1947, the phase of nation-building and then the phase of neo-imperialism. But there are overlaps. For instance, Kishore Babu's life from 1947 to 1997 certifies that for him history was a matter of fact. It was also a matter of shame and disgust. That period of his life maybe clubbed together with the lives of his children and even Kadambari in the other novel, for all of them fall in the other category of postcolonial subjects for whom the colonial reality is history. "As the memory of independence struggles recedes, and global capitalism in its latest avatar dominates our lives...postcolonialism in its unhyphenated variety, will become the dominant 'post-colonial' practice." (Mishra in Patrick 288) This prophecy is characterized through the lives of the children, for whom colonialism is a matter of the past which they've never seen. For Kadambari, colonial history is a matter of intrigue, an issue of enquiry and research. For Kishore Babu's children, it is a matter to be ashamed of. Their attitude is revealed in their description of Kishore Babu's earlier abode being "somewhere in the north" of Calcutta. (Saraogi, *KaliKatha* 7) It confuses them thoroughly to find their father 'bypassing' fifty years of his 'normal' and successful life to get back to his older self. Several moments in *Kalikatha: Via Bypass* point towards this confusion of post-colonialisms. For instance, on meeting his childhood friend Shantanu after sixty years, Kishore Babu is so much stunned by his wealth and prosperity that he finds Hindi inadequate to communicate with him. He switches to English in order to relieve the tension in the atmosphere caused by the inequality between their material possessions. He thinks, "Perhaps anything spoken in English would be less obtrusive. 'Its good to see that you have made a success of your life', he ventured." (Saraogi, *KaliKatha* 255) The expression loses the edge when it appears as it is in the English version.

In Prabha Khetan's *Peeli Aandhi*, the description of Calcutta is conventional. In the words of a Marwari in the novel, Calcutta is "hell". He says, "Living in Burra Bazar is no living. Four to six people in one single room. When you elder son gets married, you simply mount a curtain and make a room within that same room. Every morning you have to queue up in front of the lavatory with a lota in your hand...rotting stink everywhere....one keeps longing for just a little fresh air...Though we were poor at home..." (Khetan 38). The sentence abandoned midway expresses the agony of a community forced into exile and a pitiable life in Calcutta. Saraogi's novels offer a contrast to this. Calcutta is perceived there as a city made prosperous by the diligence of the Marwaris. They love the city and in their later generations, there seems to be no nostalgia at all for that *des* which their ancestors left behind. Their Calcutta is the land of opportunity, riches, greenery and above all, national history. Calcutta here becomes a microcosm of the nationwide freedom struggle, throbbing with a range of nationalist sentiments- right from the extremism of Bose to the non-violence of Gandhi.

² The Kissagoi tradition is part of the oral culture associated with Hindi and Urdu languages. It is the art of telling a 'kissa' which may be translated as 'incident' (which may or may not be a story). The saying of the 'kissa' may involve many digressions and it may not necessarily follow the time line of the narrative. Kissagoi honours the thinking process of the sayer more than narrative detail.

The journey of Kishore Babu in *Kalikatha* is a microcosm of several other journeys- the journey of India to freedom via partition, the journey of Calcutta to cosmopolitanism via famines and colonial maneuvering and the journey of the Marwari community to modernity via *satta*, *fatka* and profiteering. These journeys meander around the grim portions of the route and emerge successful at the end. The ups and downs of the paths to freedom, prosperity and success are the focal points in the novel. Hence, in case of India, a chapter on the partition becomes indispensable. In case of Kolkata, the great famine of 1942 is dealt with in detail. Finally, in case of Marwaris, the role of some businessmen in profiteering during the Second World War and the treatment of women in the family form integral parts of the narrative. So one can say that Kishore Babu's tramping on the roads of Calcutta and the by lanes of his memory is actually a journey via those routes which were once tread upon but have been selectively forgotten today in order to project a sanitized picture of history (at national, communal and personal levels) and a complacent attitude of self-righteousness. The story of the hideousness hidden under the pretence of beauty and balance seeps through the conscience of Kishore Babu after his bypass surgery and finds its way to the narrator's pen. The words 'bypass' and 'via' in the title thus, are significant pivots for any analytical reading of the novel.

The Marwari community spread to different parts of India because of lack of opportunity in their own land. The movement intensified in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because the avenues of successful business were reduced by the British who were the bigger competitors for profit. Bombay and Calcutta were the biggest centres of trade and commerce. In order to succeed in the extremely competitive trade environment in these cities, the Marwari men moved east, worked very hard, saved every single penny and lived in subhuman conditions. They were always forced to look out for places where not many traders had reached.³ In *Peeli Aandhi*, when Kishan asks for advice, this is what his seniors tell him:

So you are with your wife and children...that means you have left home for good," the baniya friend asked. "I'm from Bisau. I also own a shop in Raibaxgunj but nowadays, the business is down, there's very little sale...take my advice and go to Bengal. Not many Baniyas have reached there yet and you can open a shop in little money. The profits are good there. (Khetan 25)

The road to success and wealth hence, went through rigorous competition, hard work, bad health, loneliness and staying away from home for very long periods. Saraogi relates in *Kalikatha* the story of Ramvilas' mausi who waited for sixteen years to see her husband (who had gone all the way to Assam for business) again and died minutes before he actually came back. The migration from the dry and arid lands of the present day Rajasthan to the fertile and prosperous lands of Bengal, Assam and Bihar even changed the mindset of the traders who sometimes fell in love with the rains and the beauty of the host land. In *Kalikatha*, Ramvilas' father left his soul in Calcutta when he returned to the deserts forever. He revered Calcutta, the city of the Ganges till he breathed his last. Ramvilas also pledged to live in Calcutta, make it his home and even die there. Such instances emphasise the fact that the Marwaris preferred becoming a minority community in Calcutta over starving to death in their own land. Hence, Saraogi seeks to undo the stereotypes that abound about this community in Bengal and even elsewhere. The opportunist, profiteering and miserly image of the Baniya is reworked in a more sympathetic and informed way. But this does not mean that Saraogi unconditionally sides with her community. She criticizes all that needs criticism and at the same time puts forth the truth behind several stereotypical representations prevalent about Marwaris.

The novel is also a portrayal of the tremendous change their personalities and thinking go through when they migrate to alien places. Ramvilas loved his wife and homeland so dearly that he did not want to go anywhere for business. He was literally forced by his ambitious wife into exile. But once he reached Calcutta, he never looked back. Not only did he succeed immensely in business but he made Calcutta his homeland and left his beloved wife in Bhiwani where she died without having visited Calcutta even once. Calcutta is shown as the maker and breaker of fortunes. Ramvilas, who had never even stepped out of his village for the first forty years of his life, made friends among the British who contributed to his success. The city of Calcutta is the symbol of progress and prosperity of immigrants- the British, the Eurasians, Parsis and Marwaris. At another level it is also the place where all the desires of Ramvilas find fruition. Saraogi makes this point very subtly through small details. She portrays his childhood as a series of unfulfilled desires:

³ V.K.Taknait. *Marwari Samaj*. Jaipur: Indian Institute of Marwari Entrepreneurship, 1990.

Ramvilas also wants to see what a river looks like. How much water can it contain? More than a well? Even more than the big pond? Babuji can not draw the Ganga. He just draws two lines at the ends of the slate parallel to each other. One can not make out from these lines, how much water the river contains. (Saraogi *KaliKatha* 36)

Much later, after his father's death when he himself undertakes the journey during the famine of 1899, his parched soul takes in all the details of the wet earth of the east hungrily:

As Ramvilas went further east from Bhiwani, the shadow of the famine also faded. Seeing the land from the window of his railway compartment, he wondered about the variety of flora and fauna on earth. From the sand dunes to the seemingly endless spread of the green. There is so much difference between the once-in-a-year green of the peepul, vat, neem, Khejra, jant trees in Bhiwani and this endless green with no break anywhere. And the difference between the skies too. (Saraogi *KaliKatha* 40)

When the discord between him and his son Kedar increases, he finds solace only near Ganga. "His heart was not in his work any more. He frequented the Ganga very often now. He looked at the clouds for a long time. He remembered Ma. And Babuji. It was as if he had been in a daze for years and could see things clearly only now." (Saraogi *KaliKatha* 64)

Interestingly, this is exactly the state of Kishore Babu after he retires from business. What Kedar's attitude and his own reflections on the slave-like status of Indians under the British rule do for Ramvilas, the bypass surgery does for his great grandson Kishore. The history of Ramvilas hence comes a full circle with that of Kishore who successfully comprehends the changes occurring in him and does what he thinks he needs to do to compensate for his deeds that were done when he was in a daze. It is also significant that Kishore Babu reads his great grandfather's diary when he emerges out of the daze. He understands and evaluates his own position via Ramvilas' diary. "The inevitable intervention of the narrator" at the beginning of the chapter 'If exiled, be it Calcutta', drives Kishore's mother's point home that history lives in us and therefore, instead of shunning it, we must accept it as it is:

Kishore Babu has taken to narrating a story of times bygone (1860-1926), based on the personal diary of his great-grandfather Ramvilas Babu alias Bade Babu. He holds that the quintessence of his narrative lies in the shred story of a community and a city: the community of Marwaris, who like migratory birds, left their native place and the maha-nagar or the metropolis of Calcutta where they flocked. The narrator feels that Bade babu's story, at best, is a marginal narrative or a sub-story. But loitering on the roads after the bypass, Kishore Babu's perspective has surely changed. For a person used to insisting on talking to the point, he has come to believe that truth lives, but in the irrelevant. But however much man may change, something of the old order always remains...nothing can ever stand out clear without a background. (Saraogi *KaliKatha* 31)

History and its treatment is a matter of concern in this novel. How history shapes us and how we shape our history, are the two major points of departure here. Ramvilas follows history while going to Calcutta. He encounters it at the Kaalighaat temple where the priest recognizes him without having seen him before. His father used to visit the same temple and Ramvilas' mannerisms were similar to his father's. Following his father's footsteps, he meets the young John Hamilton, gets to know about his father's relationship with John's mother and goes to Firangi Kaali Mandir and to all those places where his father had been once. History unfolds itself in front of him, and he comes face to face with the facts he was unaware of for forty years of his life. Much later, his great grandson Kishore reads his diary and relates to his times, his dilemmas and his conclusions about life. This history shapes Kishore's conscience and his perception of the Marwaris, of Calcutta, of the British and of India on the whole. Both Ramvilas and Kedarnath live in young Kishore's conscience. While Ramvilas tells him to consider his circumstances and be a good businessman to support his family which consists of two widows- his mother and Bhabhi, Kedarnath urges him to take a plunge into the freedom struggle, to rebel against Mamaji who does not mind profiteering even during the famine and war, to break the shackles of Marwariness and dream to breathe free. The conflict is however, relatively short-lived because Kishore finally sides with Ramvilas and goes on to become a successful businessman and an absolute patriarch. But later, after his bypass surgery, he understands that Ramvilas became critical of the British and the foreign rule in his old age, only after losing his son Kedar. He finally understood what Hamilton was trying to tell him that after all it is the love of the near and dear ones we must aim for because it is possible to live without power and money but not without love. Kishore also finds out finally that though his family and relatives respect him, they do not love him. He ceases to be valuable once he discards his materialistic values. This is the point where he reverts to personal histories of those who had loved him when he was nothing but an insignificant, reluctant and struggling clerk in his Mamaji's shop. Hence, he goes back to Bhabhi's diary which he had never even bothered to open, he goes back to meet Banwari, his poor and ugly cousin, Shantanu, his nurse,

etc. Woven along with the history of Calcutta, these lesser histories form the complex mesh of this novel. The overriding message regarding history is spelled out by Kishore's mother. Kishore feels ashamed of the fact that Bade Babu or Ramvilas was a close friend of Teggart, the tyrant British officer:

"Ma, you don't know this man Teggart. He was no less vicious than General Dyer...For God's sake Ma, never tell anybody that Bade Babu even knew Teggart."

Ma kept quiet for some time. "I did not know all this...What I know is that our ancestors did what they thought was right and we will do what we think is right. Why try to hide things and wipe out the past? If you do not approve of something, stay away from it. But can you erase something that did take place in history?" (Saraogi *KaliKatha* 30)

Kalikatha is a detailed comment on the history of India vis-à-vis colonization. It looks at history in an analytical and evaluative way. However, the fact that it is after all a fictional piece is stressed throughout the novel. It has its own moments of metafictionality where the narrator jumps into the narrative to comment on the aesthetics and purpose of Kishore's biography. S/he also provides us with information that may not be valuable from the narrative point of view but which does contribute in one's understanding of the writing of Kishore Babu's book and of the nitty-gritty of Kishore's character. For instance, before Swami Ramananda Krishna's entry into the novel, the narrator peeps in for a brief moment to reveal the fact that "Kishore Babu wishes to have this part of his story written without any predetermined form. Even at the risk of the story straying too far, he proposes to narrate it with the same words, form, flavour and fragrance with which it had come to him." (Saraogi, *KaliKatha* 162) The narrator also gives us some critical information about Kishore Babu, the 'writer' of this story which sheds more light on what he became in the course of his life and how he yearns to go back to his original sensitive self again. S/he produces pieces of Kishore's own writing about Partition, about his office employees and such things that do not directly relate to the story per se and yet throw some light on the thought process of the protagonist. For instance, in the Sukh-sagar instance, the narrator comments on Kishore Babu's conventional thinking by writing in parentheses that "Kishore Babu does believe that no translation can be as sacred as the original" (Saraogi *KaliKatha* 184)

The reader is reminded on and off that what s/he is reading is actually a chunk from the biography and that its writing has been appropriately supervised by Kishore Babu. While Kishore Babu is apparently in total control of his biography, the narrator does enjoy some space. But even this autonomy is given by Kishore Babu himself. It does not arise out of the narrator's own will. According to the narrator,

This is Kishore Babu's story and the presence of this narrator in it will only be as much as is needed for pure, unadulterated story-telling. Actually, after studying the latest trends of story-writing in the world, Kishore Babu made the narrator promise that he would write a story of 22 by 22 carat purity, just like the ornaments made by the celebrated goldsmiths of Bengal. In other words, the narrator on his part can only blend to the extent of two carats of other elements in a sterling pure story of 24 carats. Kishore Babu knows well, that as with gold ornaments, no plain narrative can be cast without this adulteration. (Saraogi *KaliKatha* 8)

The role of the narrator is thus not only to narrate the story but also to regulate and pattern it in the fashion of an authentic biography. The narratorial comments justify the style of story-telling and also the reason behind the telling of the story. For instance, when Kishore Babu's wife takes to read out to him the holy Sukh-sagar, he listens to it, according to the narrator, not to purify his thoughts and soul as his wife would have it, but "to see if any old form of narrative can help him to take his own story further". Actually, his flow of thoughts getting stuck somewhere has generated all sorts of misgivings within him. He wonders if it is meaningful or worthwhile at all to get his story written." (Saraogi *KaliKatha* 184) Through metafictional instances such as this, Saraogi instills awareness about the complications behind the seemingly simple act of writing. She also lingers in the narrative as the narrator who narrates and yet has no control over the end product. So this becomes a story in spite of the narrator. At some points s/he also ponders over the purpose of the telling of this particular story. For instance, while explaining Kishore Babu's reason behind penning down his story the narrator says:

Surely, there is nothing in Kishore Babu's life in terms of contribution to this world, his country or even the community. Yet, Kishore Babu feels that every person's life encompasses, at least partly, the story of every other life. Since most people are interested only in themselves, whenever they find a part of their own lives in any story they read, they undergo a transformation. For that span of time, they are liberated from the gravitational force of the earth- they soar, they soar upwards- beyond space and time, beyond their miniscule limited selves. This is liberation and what is the

purpose of any story-teller, if not this liberation, which the reader attains on finding his own life- real, imagined or even of his dreams- portrayed in any work of fiction? (Saraogi *KaliKatha* 143)

The narrator's statements tend to comment on the larger reality- a reality that lies beyond the immediate world of the characters of Kishore Babu's story. A discussion as this one, regarding the purpose of literature and story-telling also lends a perspective to the reader as to what kind of reading and interpretation is expected out of her. This technique from the 'kissagoi' tradition makes sure that one feels involved in the story because it is indeed the story of our times, of our national history and the freedom struggle. Though it has the face value of the biography of the displaced Marwari community and the dilemmas that spring out of such displacement, it has deeper currents of universality as is stressed in the above example. At one level perhaps, Saraogi is seeking a compassionate reading of her first novel and the narratorial voice is a ploy to facilitate the desired reading.

The role of the narrator is however shortened and even toned down in the 'rewritten' version in English. For instance, in '1942: A Love-story?', the narrator intervenes in the middle of the chapter, just before the entry of Swami Ramanand and acquaints the readers about Kishore Babu's feelings regarding this section of his narrative. S/he says:

Kishore Babu wishes to have this part of his story written in a grand manner. He wants to present in his story all that which had then seemed to him the essence of life, with the same words, form, flavour and fragrance with which it had occurred then- no matter even if the story digresses due to this and goes all the way to Murshidabad. What kind of a story is that which does not give its readers a chance to peep inside his conscience as Swami Ramananda would have given? (Saraogi, *Kalikatha* 122)⁴

In conclusion, Saraogi forges a connection with the reader by creating a metafictional web in the novel which enmeshes the fictional, intertextual tale of Kishore Babu. History, biography and autobiography alternate with each other in making an appearance in the narrative, creating a rich mix of the private story of Kishore Babu, the communal tale of the Marwaris moving across the country for livelihood and the larger political narrative of Calcutta and colonial India.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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⁴ My translation.