

“‘Itibasa’; thus it was”:
Mukul Kesavan’s
“Looking through Glass”
and the Rewriting of History

JON MEE

THE INFLUENCE OF Salman Rushdie on the contemporary Indian novel in English is widely acknowledged by both the novelists themselves and critics. “In the beginning there was Rushdie,” writes Rukun Advani, “and the Word was with Rushdie” (15-16). Irreverence, iconoclasm, and witty forms of subversion are what Advani identifies as Rushdie’s gift to his followers. However, I would like to argue that there is an aspect of the post-Rushdie novel that would seem to have a complex ancestry, that is, the rewriting of the history of India. I focus in this essay on one of the most recent novels to attempt such revisionism, Mukul Kesavan’s *Looking through Glass* (1995). But before doing so, I would like to consider the treatment of history in *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and its relationship to recent developments in Indian historiography.

Midnight’s Children could be read as a novel that “explodes the notion of the nation having a stable identity and a single history, then invites a sceptical provisional faith in the nation that it has exploded” (Kortenaar 41-42). Against the idea that “Indians are capable of worshipping only one God” (438)—the nation cast in the image of the Congress elite—Rushdie offers a history of the nation in terms of disruption and discontinuity and defines the nation not through the coming into being of some unified national consciousness but in terms of the “original one-thousand-and-one marvellous promises of a numinous midnight” (438). Alongside Rushdie’s attempt to recuperate an alternative history for India, one based on plurality rather than

on a homogenous national identity, comes a correlative interest in the position of the historian and the status of historiography. Plural history would seem to imply if not a plural historian then at least some acknowledgment of the limits of the particular historian's perspective. *Midnight's Children's* famously disrupted and digressive narrative is a form picked up and developed by a number of subsequent novelists. Among them, for instance is Allan Sealy, whose *The Trotter-Nama* offers to recuperate the history of India's Anglo-Indian community—a group that clearly lies outside of any definition of Indianness in terms of some pure ethnic identity—in a narrative every bit as digressive and disrupted as Rushdie's. No less than Rushdie's Saleem, Sealy's narrator, Eugene Trotter, does not speak the privileged language of truth. What he says is continually interrogated, interrupted, and undermined in ways that could be understood as an attempt to write a kind of newly postcolonial history, which Sealy describes as a "chronicle" rather than a history.

The history of Sealy's novel provides a corrective for those critics who would ascribe every aspect of the new historical novel in India to Rushdie's influence, since it was actually completed, but not published, before *Midnight's Children's* appearance. Sealy's explanation is that the coincidence represents "two writers responding to the same historical moment. They have read the same book, but the book is India. India is dictating, the country is doing the 'thinking.' We do not write but are written" (30). What this explanation leaves open is the question of whose India is writing these texts—the very question raised by Rushdie's vision of a nation without "a stable identity and a single history." The question of who constitutes the nation has been one which has recurred not only in recent Indian novels, both in English and other languages (Mukherjee), but in recent Indian historiography also. The two facets of Rushdie's rewriting of history—the recuperation of marginalized histories and the problematization of the position of the historian-narrator—have been identified by Gyan Prakash as essential to the recent challenge set to Indian historiography by the *Subaltern Studies* project—although what I have been calling "recuperation," Prakash prefers to think of as "retrieval." The retrieval of sub-

altern consciousness has involved the uncovering of “myths, cults, ideologies and revolts” which colonial and nationalist elites sought to appropriate and which “defy the models of nationality and social action that conventional historiography uses” (9). The emphasis on the autonomy of subaltern consciousness has produced in its turn an awareness of the limits of conventional historiography. Prakash’s particular emphasis is on the recognition that the very enterprise of modern historiography is a colonial legacy. History and colonialism arose together in India, and the awareness of this fact has led historians such as Prakash to regard historiography as a troubled form of writing that cannot be renounced by restoring some “lost form of telling and knowing,” but must be developed into a postcolonial direction which will “pick apart the disjunctive moments of discourses authorized by colonialism and authenticated by the nation-state and rearticulate them in another—third—form of writing history” (Prakash 17). The exact nature of this third form of writing remains something that is still being explored by historians, but Prakash is quick to emphasize, along with Gayatri Spivak, that an awareness of the fact that the subaltern never speaks without mediation does not invalidate the task of retrieval. Following Spivak, Prakash argues rather that “the interpreter’s recognition of the limit of historical knowledge does not disable but enables the critic to mark the space of the silenced subaltern as *aporetic*” (12).

Neil ten Kortenaar claims that whereas the *Subaltern Studies* project is defined by its concern to retrieve the traces of subaltern consciousness, “Rushdie’s novel is a meditation on the textuality of history and, in particular, of that official history that constitutes the nation” (42). Prakash’s comments should make it clear that a self-consciousness about historiography has been every bit as much a part of the *Subaltern Studies* project as it has been of recent historical novels. Both the novel and historiography are genres whose emergence in nineteenth-century India was part of the coming of a modernity for which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, Europe continues to supply the master narrative. Whether in liberal-bourgeois or modes of production narratives of history, the modern nation is a script written else-

where for India. The crisis of representation in both the novel and historiography relates to a crisis in representation of the nation—the product of what Ranajit Guha calls “*this historic failure of the nation to come to its own*” (7). Historiography and the novel—especially perhaps the novel in English, which always bears the mark of a master discourse elsewhere—are tied together as genres which continually return to the figure the Indian nation as the site of an incomplete or fractured modernity. The desire to find some third form of writing, to use Gyan Prakash’s phrase, to reproduce this fracturing not as a grievous lack in the nation but as something different or as a supplement which challenges the authority of its master narratives of nation and modernity, has been as much a part of the novel—at least since Rushdie—as it has been a part of Indian historiography at least since *Subaltern Studies*. Indeed Prakash’s call for a third form of writing beyond the dead end of reviving lost forms, or acceding to the demands of a colonialist master narrative is echoed in Sealy’s claim that by bringing what he calls “indigenous forms” into dialogue with the novel “Indian modernism need not be a wholesale imitation of foreign objects” (29).

As its author is a professional historian and now a novelist, Kesavan’s *Looking through Glass* might be expected to be shaped by recent developments in both fiction and historiography. Significantly in terms of contesting nationalist historiography, the novel takes for its subject the culmination of struggle for Indian independence from the Quit India movement of 1942 through Partition to Independence. The Quit India movement, which raged particularly strongly in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar over August and September 1942 before being brutally repressed by the British, has itself been recently revisited, in 1994, in Vinod Chopra’s movie *1942: A Love Story*, a film in which various internal differences are overcome in the interests of a transcendent commitment to the nation. As such, the film could be understood as an attempt to suture or make good precisely the kind of fractures which, I argue, Kesavan’s novel is set on exploring. The fractured nature of the nationalist movement during the Quit India campaign has been also the focus of recent revisionist historiography which has drawn attention to the disso-

nances between the aims of the Congress leadership and the masses on whom they called to “do or die” in the name of the nation. Gyanendra Pandey and other historians associated with *Subaltern Studies* have seen the movement as a “dual revolt” in which the “appropriation of nationalist symbols . . . was the means by which the popular classes in different parts of the country forced the pace of the movement and came to leave their impress on Indian nationalism” (13). According to Pandey, Congress leaders for their part, especially prior to the elections of 1946 and 1952, sought to claim credit for what Nehru represented as the most significant event in Indian history since what was called the “Mutiny,” while at the same time warning against the repetition of what they condemned as insurrectionary excess. For historians such as Pandey, Quit India is proleptic of the relationship between the people and the ruling elite in the independent state—and thus of the incompleteness of the modern, postindependence nation. Taken together, *1942: A Love Story*, *Looking through Glass*, and these revisionist histories suggest the extent to which this defining moment in the independence struggle, which is still frequently compared with 1857 “Mutiny,” has become a point of anxiety in contemporary debates about the Indian national imaginary.

Kesavan’s representation of the Quit India movement focuses on the rewriting of the account of the storming of the Madhuban *thana* in the Azamgarh district of the eastern United Provinces, an incident to which most historians of the revolt in Uttar Pradesh return, usually citing the account by the Anglo-Indian District Officer, R. H. Niblett. It would appear that Kesavan is familiar with Niblett’s account for “the District Magistrate of Azamgarh, its administrative chief, its all-in-all, its king” (110) appears in Kesavan’s novel travestied as Niblick. As with the rest of the novel, Kesavan’s account of the assault on Madhuban is replete with “sociological details,” which have led at least one newspaper reviewer to describe *Looking through Glass* as “not really a novel” (Ghose 2), a comment that suggests the extent to which it, along with other recent writings, has been testing generic boundaries. What is striking about *Looking through Glass* is the way these “sociological details” are framed in terms of the

Quit India movement's failure to live up to the epic image of the national struggle. Indeed the episode is introduced with the narrator's disappointment at not seeing much of the "revolutionary spectacle" as he travels through the countryside. He does soon encounter the insurrectionists, but the theatrical metaphor remains in place in a way that figures the national struggle as rehearsing a story only fully present elsewhere rather than coming in to its own through the Quit India campaign.

When he arrives in Azamgarh, the narrator first encounters a group of student activists who commandeer his motorcycle. Three different characters are highlighted among the students. There is Chaubey, the leader, a wrestler from Banaras Hindu University who, it is revealed later, tries but fails to preserve his semen for the nation in the name of Hindu virility—the unruly excess of the body suggesting the illusory nature of the nationalist desire to discipline the self to fit a single image of the nation. Then there is Bose Madam, a Bengali intellectual, who rides first class on the train commandeered by the students and unsuccessfully calls the Muslim population in the town to join them in the name of Congress and the nationalist struggle. The strident triumvirate is completed by Rat Face, who is mainly motivated by a lust for Bose, the epic conception of the nationalist struggle again being undermined by the low comedy of physical desire. As the action proceeds towards Madhubar, Kesavan develops the idea of the uprising not as an epic revolt, but as a tragicomedy made up of dissonant forces, the generic mix indicating a lack of authentic being. The student activists are supplemented by "real peasants" as they move towards the *thana*; but where Pandey and other revisionist historians celebrate the appropriation of the nationalist struggle by subaltern insurrectionists, here their motives remain opaque to the historian and it is "hard to tell if they were there out of commitment or curiosity" (106).

When Chaubey, the Student leader, meets Tojo, his opposite number among the peasants, he is delighted to be "on level terms with an authentically plebeian leader and at the head of genuine peasants, the Indian masses made flesh" (109). His attitudes are a comic rendering of precisely the differences—outlined by revisionist historians such as Pandey—between the Congress-

men and the popular movement they mobilized; but, as a rule, *Looking through Glass* renders the assault in terms of a theatre of the absurd—the fracturing of the national movement being produced as farce. From the beginning of the assault onwards, the theatrical metaphors multiply. The advance on the *thana* takes the form of a “procession” (109). When the siege begins far from the “continuous assault,” which the narrator has anticipated, he finds the action “unfolded in a curiously formal intermittent fashion, like the old plays where there was silence during a change of scene” (110). Several times the narrator draws attention to the end of a particular episode in the assault. Bose Madam, the character most closely identified with the official Congress position, is herself represented as a voyeur. On top of the elephant, safely out of range, or so it seems, “she sat hunched forward, drinking in the battle with hungry eyes . . . so consumed by the spectacle in front of her that she probably thought it natural that others would push their way up for a ringside view of the revolution.” And, with a final dig at both Congress intellectuals and, one feels, nationalist historians, the narrator comments, “like all academics, Bose Madam couldn’t tell watching from doing” (113).

The apotheosis of the revolt as comic-grotesque comes when the peasant leader, Tojo, takes a portrait of George VI and shits on it in front of the *thana*. Again picking up a point made by such historians as Pandey, Kesavan’s student leaders are disgusted as the colonial policemen are outraged by this particular subaltern “excess.” Goaded by the desecration of the imperial visage, Niblick tries to shoot Tojo only to have his rifle explode in his face—something which the peasant leader immediately regards as justification of the popular prophecy—again widely referred to in the historiographical literature—that Gandhi had promised the revolutionaries they would be invulnerable to British weapons. At this point, the tone of the narrative changes as comedy turns to tragedy with the peasants, abandoned by their student allies, dying under British guns:

Except for one or two, the students didn’t go though they cheered the others on and lent their voices to the swelling frenzy. And then fell silent when they saw them die. For of course they died. Sitting on

elephant back, I watched Niblick, holding a pad to his eye, direct the killing. This time the garrison held its fire till Tojo's whooping men were less than a hundred feet away before they fired, once, twice, thrice. The battle for Madhuban was lost in those minutes. I don't know how many died. More than a hundred fell but of those some were injured and some others just tripped. Tojo died clutching his groin: someone avenged his king by shooting low. (116)

At the end of this paragraph, with Tojo "clutching his groin," the representation of the assault as tragicomedy reasserts itself and the chapter describing the uprising closes with the stampeding of the elephant, which launches Bose Madam directly into the action she has been watching. Above all, Kesavan's representation of the assault foregrounds its theatricality, his metaphors capturing what Guha calls "the historic failure of the nation to come to its own" (8). The differences between Bose Madam's high-flown rhetoric and the events at the *thana* produce a tragicomedy in which historical events travesty the "tryst with Destiny," which Nehru believed had been met on the eve of Independence (362). Revisionist histories have tended to locate this disparity in the dissonance between popular action and the Congress Party's conception of the Quit India movement. Kesavan's chief concern is not with recuperating subaltern consciousness. Tojo in the novel is not exactly granted any autonomy, though perhaps he does appropriate a kind of agency which is grotesque in its abrogation of the heroic conception of the coming of the nation into being, but with the absence of the Muslim population from the national struggle. The curtain-raiser for the low theatre of the assault on the *thana* is the rejection of Bose Madam's appeal to be "Indians first" (99) by the Muslim population of Azamgarh. Their absence renders Kesavan's portrayal of the assault on the *thana* as tragicomic rather than epic.

It is the history of the Muslim population in the final years of the struggle for independence which *Looking through Glass* tries to retrieve. The central character of Kesavan's novel in this respect is the young Muslim Congressman Masroor, who opposes the Quit India movement because it leaves unsolved the question of the relation of the Muslim population to the nation-to-be:

Only six months ago Gandhi himself had said that he wouldn't start a civil disobedience movement without a settlement of the Hindu-

Muslim question. But now, said Masroor agitatedly pouring himself another cup, he's asking us to do or die! He shook his head and drank the tea. If they go ahead with this Quit India business, he said more quietly, Jinnah will have his Pakistan by the end of the decade. (38)

The fate of Masroor and his fellow Muslims is brilliantly captured by Kesavan in a rhetorical ruse which speaks of Rushdian influence. Critics have recognized that in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie seizes on the dead metaphors used by historians and brings them to literal life. So, for instance, the memory of Indian Muslims who opposed Partition has been "swept under the carpet" and it is to a cellar under a carpet that their representative in *Midnight's Children* flees (Kortenaar 43). It is precisely this memory which Kesavan retrieves in *Looking through Glass* but with a different governing metaphor. Kesavan traces the history of a group rendered invisible by history by making them literally invisible in his novel. On the morning of the announcement of the Quit India program, Muslims all over India who oppose Partition become invisible—including Masroor who disappears into the picture at the side of a British army recruitment van. Having re-emerged into history as Partition draws closer, Masroor later explains to the narrator:

For the Muslims we weren't Muslims—we were Congress lap-dogs. For the British we weren't politically important enough to notice. That left the Congress; so when it went ahead on the eight of August as if it weren't there . . . well, we suddenly weren't there (247).

Rushdie's use of this kind of device has been recognized to be part of the way "*Midnight's Children* thematizes the larger metaphorical processes at work in the construction of historical narrative" (Kortenaar 44). At the very centre of Rushdie's novel, of course, is the body of his narrator, Saleem, born at the midnight hour of independence and indissolubly linked to the newly independent nation. Through this linkage, Rushdie foregrounds the metaphor of the body politic and critiques the notion of the nation as having some kind of organic coherence. Saleem's body is nothing if not grotesque. Parts are lost as the plot proceeds, and by the end he sees cracks appearing all over his body. The literal disappearance of Masroor and his fellow

Muslims is only the most graphic instance of a parallel critique of restrictively nationalist conceptions of the body of the nation in Kesavan's novel.

I have suggested above ways in which bodily excess undermines a nationalist vision of the disciplined body politic in the description of the assault of the *thana*. This theme is expanded upon in the next episode. Chaubey, the Hindu strongman and Congress nationalist leader, takes the narrator to Varanasi to recover from the wounds he receives in the assault. It transpires that Chaubey is a member of a wrestling academy devoted to Hindu physical culture where the nation is identified with "the manhood of the men of Aryavarta," and the assembled company is forced to listen to a "daily sermon on the importance of celibacy and that sapping evil, masturbation" (125). Chaubey's self-control is undermined by sexual desire and eventually explodes when he tries to rape a woman who is taking refuge in a hostel across the way. It is particularly over the body of this woman, Parwana—whose name signifies the moth drawn to the flame of the candle, a recurrent image in Hindi film songs—that different ideas of the nation are contested. She has been brought to Varanasi by a Brahmin priest who wants her to star in his photographic and pornographic version of the Karma Sutra with Chaubey. The narrator, who helps in her escape, thinks that she is a widow and that the scars on her back reveal her to have escaped from a *sati*. In fact, it emerges, she has escaped from a reformist film director, whose desire for realism had left her tied to a pyre with the flames licking at her back while the cameras continued to roll. The importance of *sati* in nationalist-reformist discourse has been discussed by Gayatri Spivak in an essay which stresses that the voice of the women themselves is never directly heard in the struggle over the fate of their bodies. Parwana loses her own voice as her body is passed between these men who try to write their own meanings on it; but when she does speak she reveals a history that the narrator has never suspected. Indeed the history of her body is one of resisting the singular name of the nation. We learn that she has been named in three different ways, Chandrakanta, Ruth, and Parwana—each name associated with a different Indian community from her first five years. In her

adult life, she reveals desire to be more complex than the narrator imagines, scandalizing Masroor's family when she is discovered kissing his sister. Thrown out by the family, the narrator takes her to his grandmother, who once more tries to reform her in the name of the nation, taking her into her home for fallen women and dressing her in *khadi*; but her body revolts and breaks out in rashes. She resists every attempt to fit her body in with the destiny of the nation, "having nearly died once, she was quite emancipated from history, from the habit of seeing time as a series of events, tending to an ending." If historiography imposes patterns on history, including the metaphor of the body politic itself, Parwana stands for the limit of that patterning, the subaltern whose silence reveals the limits of the discourse of history.

The most spectacular fate suffered by any single body in the novel is that of the narrator's, for he is literally borne across history. It is by being translated across time from the 1990s to the 1940s that the narrator, who is never named, exposes himself to histories that he had not imagined, and in the process, comes to experience the instability of his own body. Battered and bruised in the assault on the *thana*, he has been "shanghaied in the name of the Nation and pressed into serving a doomed rebellion" (103-04). Recovering in Varansi, he is cast as Sita in the nationalist Ramlila, where he is pressed into another staging of the nation: dressed as a woman, he is threatened with rape by the frustrated wrestlers. By the end of the novel, he has been circumcized—losing part of his Hindu self—and finds himself part of Masroor's family with the other Muslim refugees, sheltering in Delhi's Old Fort from the riots outside. At the beginning of his adventure in time, Kesavan's narrator had felt "omniscient . . . like a historian" (52); by its end, the privilege of the historian has been stripped away and the limits of historiographical discourse laid bare. The novel's title, of course, suggests a commitment to what one recent critic of revisionist Indian historiography has called "old" history—that is, the possibility of simply presenting the unmediated truth—but as the story unfolds, the privileged gaze of the historian is gradually undermined, revealing the irony of its title. The irony is made richer when we know that

Kesavan himself is a professional historian, but within the novel the most obvious referent for the title is the narrator's profession. He is a photographer, not a historian—but, of course photography, like some kinds of history, is a medium which flatters to deceive so that it can offer an unmediated window into reality while, as any number critics have pointed out, creating the pictures it presents by framing and selecting its subjects. From the very beginning of *Looking through Glass*, this aspect of the novel's governing photographic metaphor is stressed.

The narrator's first subject, his grandmother, a subject redolent with suggestions of Mother India, is an icon of nationalist historiography. She is a hero of independence, receiving a pension as a freedom fighter who is "a social worker in the field of fallen women." The narrator takes a picture of her "sitting behind the blurred wheel of a charkha," again situated as a symbol of nationalism. In return, he receives her own account of the struggle for independence in the language of photography, which changes to the language of history as the narrator describes her stories:

In the early days it was an epic tale; she gave me a wide-angle picture of the Gandhian decades, but after the first few visits she zoomed in on the great Salt Satyagraha led by the Mahatma in 1930. There, in the high theatre of civil disobedience, Dadi replayed, with ever more detailed props, the single scene of which she was the heroine. (2)

Here in embryo are the guiding tropes of *Looking through Glass*. Alongside the vocabulary of photography is the language of the theatre which, as I pointed out earlier, also structures the description of the Azamgarh revolt later in the novel. As the narrator's grandmother retells the tale, what has been "epic" becomes "high theatre." Whereas epic suggests the rendering of a glorious fullness of national being, "high theatre" begins to suggest performance and inauthenticity. By the time the narrator finds himself in the middle of the nationalist movement, "high theatre," which still perhaps implies the authenticity associated with tragedy, has degenerated further into the lower, mixed forms of tragicomedy and "spectacle." In the process, the metaphor of photography is one which is revealed to be less about looking through a pane of translucent glass than through a variety of

different lenses which refract and distort in different ways so that the object-in-itself is never seen. The received understanding of the parallels between historiography and photography has been turned on its head.

It is a photographic assignment which first brings the narrator of Kesavan's novel face to face with history. He receives his first ever professional commission when he is asked by an Indian magazine to "illustrate an essay on the Use of Lime Plaster and Stucco in Nawabi Lucknow" with "blown-up details of moulding and ornament and glaze" (6). The assignment itself is suggestive of a situation where Muslim culture is nothing more than mere ornament in the modern Indian nation state; it is the focus of an orientalism practised on India's own people, a dream of Lucknow's nawabi past and the decadence of Moghul buildings. A new zoom lens, which holds the promise of capturing the past "in all the detail I wanted, mine without the risks of proximity" (8), is his passport to the commission. He has bought the lens with his grandmother's pension, which she has given him to return to the government because she feels guilty at not having assisted "the martyrs of 1942" (7). The zoom lens brings him closer to the Muslim past than he could possibly have expected and reveals Dadi's epic version of the past as having another side. Her shame at not being among the heroes of 1942 is replaced by a different kind of shame: the shame of the nation's exclusions which is paralleled by the shameful things done to the body of the narrator in the course of the novel.

The narrator's train stops on a bridge on the way to Lucknow. He clammers out of the window and on to a support to take a shot. He sees "a man in a white kurta . . . looking up at the train through a little telescope." He sees a potentially wonderful picture but "the weight of [his own] lens" (10) causes him to topple into the river. He wakes up in 1942 in Masroor's household. It was Masroor who was looking at him through the telescope, through some kind of warp in time.

The narrative proper begins with the photographer-historian losing his safe vantage point and entering history himself at a moment when history is staring back at him. Initially his response to his predicament is to pin his faith in history itself, that is, in the

knowledge that events will be carried on in a certain way without the historical record mentioning his appearance in the past. He imagines that if he keeps out of the way of historical events, all will be well; he will return to his own time and his intervention in the past will be "sifted" by historians since "not everything that happened in the past was history" (16). But slowly he comes to be drawn in to the everyday lives of Masroor's family. His feelings for the family come up against his own historical knowledge taken from the textbooks of thirty years later. Knowing their fates he feels "like a historian brought up face to face with some lost cause." They seem to him like "cardboard figures playing bit roles in a tightly scripted play" (52). Dadi's epic version of the Quit India movement is brought into collision with his own tragicomic experience of being there, of knowing the events are a spectacle that has already been rehearsed.

The representation of the assault on Madhuban as tragicomedy comes not only from the absence of the Muslims in the revolt, which introduces a lack into the epic of the nation, but also from a confidence that he knows what will happen. As a visitor from the future, he thinks he knows the script of the past and feels caught in a "command performance of some endless period play" (14). Here is history literally repeating itself, as Marx said (398), the second time as farce. "Hindsight," he recognizes early on in the novel, "makes cartoonists of us all" (39). However, this confidence in the repetition of history is progressively shaken as the novel goes on, for in the experience of Masroor and his family, he discovers that history is more complicated than the account given in the history books he studied at college. The lack in the nation reveals a theatre that is more as well as less than the colonial master narrative of national identity which privileges identity over difference. "Like other people in secular India," the narrator tells us, "I had been brought up to believe religion was a private matter . . . taught that differences were unimportant since we were all identical in our essential humanity" (175). The discovery of the excision from Indian history of Masroor and his family brings about a loss of his secular enlightenment faith in the history of the nation. Congress, Masroor tells him, "bleaches us with secularism till we are transparent

and then walks through us" (189). The narrator learns to love the difference of his Muslim friends. Towards the end of the novel, this love has to contend with the growing knowledge of the imminence of Partition and the violent fate of many of India's Muslims. He seeks to protect them from history, seeking a safe place in which they can be "off stage when the curtain went up" (294). History is still theatre, but now the tragicomedy is not empty repetition but a story with a new urgency of its own. A photographic assignment in which Muslim culture was the dead history of architectural ornament has become of intense and messy importance to the narrator. Gathered with his new family in the Old Fort at Delhi, he waits to see if they will return to Lucknow or go to a new home in Pakistan. Their choice of India is a choice for a tragi-comic over an epic idea of the nation.

Apart from the Mukul Kesavan's *Looking through Glass*, the other publishing event widely heralded by the Indian press in 1995 was the appearance of Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. I would like to end by drawing what seems to me an instructive contrast between two novels which in many ways seem alike. Both novels bring the magical into conflict with the historical—Chandra warning his readers not to "think that this story is untrue, because it is *itihasa*; thus it was" (23)—the warning which provides the title of this paper. In Chandra's hands, history becomes an endless circulation of narratives—adapting a Hindu paradigm, "Leela, the great cosmic play" (104), as the authority for its own postmodern playfulness. In many ways Chandra's novel is a more impressive imaginative tour-de-force than *Looking through Glass*, but what it lacks, I think, is Kesavan's sense of the tension between an awareness of the status of history as narrative, and the political desire to retrieve hidden or suppressed histories. Not that Chandra seems unaware of the way certain kinds of narratives have authority over others; he is far from ignorant of the complicity of historiography with colonialism and the entire Enlightenment project with which it is associated. At one point a character even asks, "what superstition is more local than reason" (105)? This remark itself indicates a willingness to simply disregard the modern rationality as irrelevant to an India made up of beguiling, narrative surfaces. The opening of *Red Earth and Pour-*

ing Rain is significant in this respect. It begins with the foreign-returned Abhay's father beating out "yet another urgent missive to a national newspaper about the state of democracy in India" (1). Its opening move is to clear the ground of politics, privileging the novel over historiography in order to dispense with the questions of citizenship and democracy—the questions that modern rationality asks in India. Full of recuperative "sociological detail" as well as an awareness of the theatricality of history, Mukul Kesavan's novel explores the tension between the politics of narration and the narration of politics. Historiography may not be able to escape the framing of the photograph or the theatrical staging of events in *Looking through Glass*, but that does not mean that the task of retrieval is simply to be transcended. The historical project of colonialism denied history to the colonized. To conceive of history as simply endlessly circulating narratives or a theatre of tragicomedy is to disavow the radical task of retrieval and fall into a postmodernist limbo. Kesavan and Rushdie represent a different attitude to the realization of the status of history as narrative—that is, one which continually returns to the tension between recuperation and narration without resolving one into the other. If the narrator is a "blur" caught in a photograph surrounded by his new family at the end of *Looking through Glass*, a body caught between two temporalities, then it is fixed there because the nation cannot be narrated out of this tension.

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