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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Alter (Narrating) The Story of Nation: The Fluidity of 1971 War  
Narratives in Anglophone Pakistani Fiction**

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**PAPER INFO**

**Received:**

October, 04, 2021

**Accepted:**

December 29, 2021

**Online:**

December 31, 2021

**Keywords:**

Alter(Narrating/Ive),  
Amnesia,  
Fluidity Of History,  
Historiographic  
Metafiction,  
Post-Conflict  
Literature,  
Remembrance

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**ABSTRACT**

The present article is a critical and reflective reading across three texts produced in the wake of the 1971 War between Pakistan (formerly East Pakistan) and India culminating in the secession and making of Bangladesh. The selected texts which include Moni Mohsin's *End of Innocence*, Sorayya Khan's *Noor* and Aquila Ismail's *Of Martyrs and Marigold* are read as historiographic metafiction since they stay at the continuum of a real historical event and its imaginative narrativization. These texts unearth some interesting angles to view the 1971 conflict by offering how authors' subjective voices politicize the process of historiography and, in turn, chisel out (alter)narrative perspectives to remember and re-member the otherwise forgotten aspects of national history. The subjective albeit historically-complex angle of different authors offers the possibility of viewing differing voices which are not complicit with a mystified view of nationalist history. In this way, without subscribing to an absolute historical referent, the 1971 War fiction becomes a valid historical account that problematizes the totalizing categories of victim vs. villain in the mainstream official histories from both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

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**Introduction**

Historical narrativization, like any other conscious or spontaneous recollection, is made up of a curious tapestry where in the words of Walter Benjamin (1969) "remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warp" (p. 12). The image of a historical event as a tapestry suggests the twin working of human consciousness with the crucial role of memory and amnesia in weaving its design. The subject of 1971 conflict in the formerly Eastern wing of Pakistan and the subsequent making of

Bangladesh has been one such site where history meets memory. However, with a slight appropriation of the famous Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali where one's history gets in the way of one's memory (Ali, 2014), the discursive writings on the war of 1971 offer a fluid account of the buried past in myriad ways. Such artistic narrativization does not consider merely what is expressed explicitly but what is suggested through silence, gaps and aporia which are to be filled by looking into other (alter)narratives. This oscillation in remembrance and amnesia, articulation and silence give a unique fluidity to literary narratives by simultaneously unsettling the rigid certitude of official histories.

The imaginative narratives of 1971 War by Anglophone Pakistani writers embody the historical embeddedness by presenting the (f)act of conflict/war not merely as a background against the fiction, rather it becomes both the source and the effect of a narrative about past in which the creative writer has to conduct herself like a (wo)man digging in order to rescue the lost moments hanging loosely amidst remembrance and amnesia (Benjamin, 1969).

The article has made a conscious selection from recent Anglophone fiction with the experience of trauma and loss in East Pakistan. The texts include Sorayya Khan's *Noor* (2003), Moni Mohsin's *End of Innocence* (2006) and Aquila Ismail's *Of Martyrs and Marigold* (2012) representing three distinct ethnic categories of Bengali, Bihari and Punjabi in the 1971 conflict.

## **Literature Review**

### **Contested Politics of Historical Narrativization**

Given the broader geo-strategic significance, the 1971 War, in the words of a Bengali writer Sarmila Bose (2011), was one such complex historical event where "nothing is ever quite what it seems" (p. 51). She also highlights the conspicuous gap between "what people were telling me and the story that is emerging out of the ground, was" and "the dominant narrative" she, as a Bengali, was grown up with (Naeem, 2012). Her remarks unfold that the task of revisiting historical events is inextricably linked with the politics of those who write them by simultaneously making them the product of their own historical inquiry. Hence if the mainstream discursive representation from Bangladeshi side tends to view Pakistan's military and political apparatus in obviously negative light, it does it with an almost complete exclusion of the other side of the picture by denying the role of Bengali nationalist, or more precisely separatist groups with their reported and largely unreported violence and abuse, often attributed singularly to Pakistan military. Nonetheless, owing to the complexity of the subject, the nationalist histories from both Pakistan and Bangladeshi sides are partial and selective as they tend to focus merely on portraying

a singular representation that legitimizes their version by delegitimizing the counter view of history.

The Anglophone Pakistani fiction is a myriad site where different narratives “borrow from, alter, or otherwise invent new structures to represent” their sense of belonging to nation – either Pakistani or Bangladeshi or both (Cilano, 2011, p.10). Contrary to the earlier instances of silence and amnesia towards this crucial episode of national history, the contemporary Anglophone Pakistani fiction has been a site of a renewed interest showcasing many authors who have assumed the burden of representation by speaking on what was left unsaid or partly said on the subject before them. For instance, a Pakistani American author, Sara Suleri questions the geographical logic of Pakistan by referring to the pre-1971 territorial remoteness between its East and West wings and calls it a “*stupid idea...separated by a thousand odd miles of enemy territory, like a bird without a body*” (Suleri, p. 108, italics mine). Another expression of skepticism about the legitimacy of two-nation ideology can be seen in the words of Indian historian Ayesha Jalal (2013) for whom the religious idiom was “utterly irrelevant... to the political dynamics that led to the emergence of Bangladesh” in 1971 (p. 6).

### Material and Methods

This intertextual study of the selected novels of 1971 Waris premised upon a realization of the complex textuality of historical narratives implying that “our approach to...[history]...and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization” (Lentricchia & Lauglin, 1995, p. 220). However, this textuality does not preclude the possibility of assessing the historical narrative against the collective political and ideological grains which constitute it by privileging one version of narrative to another. In this way, the otherwise meta(narrative) of history contains multiple mini-narratives which tease out diverse interpretations of past and present. Such historically-engaged view of history allows us a more critical revision of the past making it “all the time present behind the contemporary ongoing” (Eagleton, 2003, p. 202) in the backdrop of many characters whose destinies are interwoven in these different temporalities simultaneously.

### Discussion

#### Fluidity of War Narratives in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction: (Alter)narrating National History

Moni Mohsin’s *End of Innocence* (2006) and Sorayya Khan’s *Noor* (2003) offer curious entry of extra-ordinary yet less privileged characters (Rani and Noor respectively as the protagonists) that complicate the discursive field which is usually crowded with antagonistic ethnic identities fashioned under nationalist euphoria.

Mohsin presents an unusual bond between two girls with an eight years old Laila and a fifteen years servant girl Rani who offer interesting site of West and East Pakistan's mutual relationship based on love and estrangement, trust and mistrust and most of all power and marginalization respectively. Khan, on the other hand, presents the tragedy of 1971 from the perspective of Noor, a blind girl gifted with the extraordinary insight to excavate the buried memories of past.

*End of Innocence* makes constant reference to the heteronormative standards of gender, class and morality in the story of Rani who has a strong impulse of what her feudal lady Sardar Begum ironically calls 'going above her station' and making choices which are constantly jeopardized by her poor and disadvantaged social position. Abandoned by her mother Fatima and living with her grandmother as the trusted servant of the Feudal family of Sardar Begum, Rani's underprivileged background makes her a metaphor of the Bengalis who were subject to the macro-politics of West Pakistan's elite in the twin form of powerful landowners and military-bureaucratic regime. Despite her marginal position, Rani appears before us as a self-willed individual who "wants to be adored and sung to and smiled at" like Heer (Mohsin, 2006, p. 33), the folk Punjabi character that she feels an absolute infatuation for. The compulsive urge for love and recognition that Rani lacks in her real life takes her to experience it in her secret love affair with an anonymous boy, whose brother is out there in East Pakistan "smashing the scrawny Bengalis' faces" (p. 40).

The personal story of Rani unfolds strong parallels to Pakistan's political history showcasing how she becomes the victim of her own "naivety" (p. 292) by trusting her unnamed lover who leaves her pregnant and forsaken at the end. The subsequent events in the novel show Rani's disillusionment with her imagined ideal and present, albeit indirectly, a parallel disillusionment of the Bengalis towards the collective national imaginary which denied them the rights of equal citizenship and belonging. The oppressive power structures which constitute the exploitative circle against Bengalis' rightful demand for political autonomy can be seen in the form of a feudal-bureaucratic alliance that Mohsin deftly shows through Sardar Begum's son Tariq and his choice of marrying Fareeda. As the only child of a diplomat, Fareeda's refined breeding and discreet outlook clash with her mother-in-law's authoritarian feudal norms, which she cannot change as Sardar's Begum's *Haveli* remained as autocratic and old-fashioned as its inflexible owner. Metaphorically, the complex web between Fareeda and her mother-in-law points to the overwhelming ascendancy of the West Pakistan's feudal structure in the then national politics. Nonetheless, Fareeda, with her "prim, polite upbringing" has been responsible for safeguarding her separate house in *Sabzbagh* (p. 51) - a trope for the control and authority of Pakistan's bureaucracy in matter of state, far "beyond the range of Sardar Begum's interfering arm and critical gaze" (p. 56).

However, as the story unfolds, Fareeda's failure in understanding the predicament of Rani points to the sheer inability and eventual collapse of Pakistan's bureaucratic structures to understand the problems of Bengalis in East Pakistan. Her ostensible claim to be "like an umbrella over the women" of her village (p. 141) becomes unsubstantial as she does not acknowledge sister Clementine's recurrent attempt to inform her about Rani's tragedy, let alone save her later from the terrible mess of an unwanted pregnancy. This failure, eventually leads the way for the tragic murder of Rani and a simultaneous severing of Pakistan's East wing into Bangladesh. That side by side with Rani's brutal killing by her stepfather, the novel indirectly mentions the separatist group gaining momentum in East Pakistan, resulting in the outbreak of a full-fledged civil war which had to be curbed by the military regime of Yahya. However, both Tariq and Fareeda do not see this "ferocious military crackdown" as a "panacea" (pp. 102-103) and are extremely concerned about the "rumors of rape camps, of pillage and slaughter" (p. 102) leaked through international media and the subsequent arrest of Bengali leader Sheikh Mujib by the military regime. Surprisingly, both husband and wife, despite their different background, tend to view Military singularly responsible for mishandling Bengali people as Fareeda expresses her sense of "sleepwalking into a war (p. 212) which is totally rejected by Colonel Butt who represents the statist version by viewing the conflict in East Pakistan as a "plot hatched by Mujeeb and Indra" along with "mukti bahini thugs" (p. 103) in "whipping" all 'bingos' into an "old frenzy" (p. 192).

The novel dramatizes the parallel stories of Rani's desire for being loved, being "someone who matters" (p. 66) with that of Bengalis' struggle for their political and constitutional rights. However, when this legitimate desire is not fulfilled, this makes Rani, like Bengalis "angry and unkind" (p. 67). Likewise, the micro-politics of Rani's family with her mother Fatima's second marriage to Mashooq – an ugly looking social outcast and her eventual separation from her daughter coalesces with the macro-politics of the country as the novel mentions, albeit indirectly, the role and stake of world's superpowers (especially USA and USSR) in worsening the conflict in East Pakistan.

On the other hand, in the backdrop of Rani's tragic life and more tragic death, the novel highlights the wrestling of power and control among the powerful elite – the feudal, bureaucratic and military structures of West Pakistan, each blaming the other for the looming disintegration of the federation. An unambiguous illustration of this can be seen in the story when Rani's mutilated body is found on the same day when war breaks out between India and Pakistan and Colonel Butt holds Tariq directly responsible for the tragic end of Rani who was "exposed to radical influence" of Tariq's family's "worthy but misplaced" liberal values (p. 207). On hearing his sarcasm that all "those who encouraged" people like Rani "before are nowhere when these girls most need them" (p. 292) infuriates Tariq who shifts the burden of this guilt by saying that Rani did not die because of her ideals but became "victim of her

own naivety" (p. 292), on which Colonel Butt responds rather acidly that this will let him (Tariq) "off the hook" from the guilt and burden of being her purported custodian.

From a broader political angle, this conversation represents the blame game that started immediately after Pakistan's disintegration implying that instead of squarely facing their role in the tragedy, all three stakeholders in the conflict (politicians, military and bureaucracy) were trying to shift the responsibility on each other, as Tariq, in another instance, reprimands Fareeda by saying "so you failed to help the one person who needed your help the most" (p. 261). In this way, the novel ends the conflict of Rani's mysterious murder by placing her act of making love in the metaphor of honor, shame and guilt. Hence, Sardar Begum, despite knowing that Rani is killed by her stepfather in the name of honor, does not allow Tariq to pursue the case anymore and let Mashooq be relieved from police. In a dramatic comparison to how the facts regarding the fall of East Pakistan and the role of West Pakistan's political and military bureaucracy in it were never exposed, Sardar Begum justifies her decision of freeing Mashooq by saying that Rani made a mistake that brought shame to her family and Mashooq helped wash that stain (p. 331).

If memory plays a crucial role in weaving the plot in Mohsin's fiction, it is no less crucial and complex in shaping the narrative in *Noor* who as a young girl becomes a "translator", reminding and reminiscing the "repressed experiences" of her family's past" (Waterman, 2015, p. 203). She plays the role of a bridge between past and present by exhuming the long-buried history of her life, which eventually becomes analogous with the collective history of the nation. The narrative describes the vision of Noor's mother Sajida before her birth by highlighting the urgency to re-interrogate past in order to redress present with its pain and trauma. Likewise, Khan's dramatic presentation of Noor's frantic and "deafening" cries, which make everyone flee from her presence (Khan, p. 51) suggests that if past with its lingering memories remains unresolved, it will continue to haunt its survivors in their unconscious. Nonetheless, the "excruciating pain" (p. 51) that Noor suffers is the only means to remember and redress the collective amnesia of the people, particularly in West Pakistan, regarding the tormenting events of 1971 War.

Hence, Noor's frantic remembrance can be posited against the other two characters of the novel - Ali and Sajida with their silence and denial personifying the response of West Pakistan regarding this dark episode of national history. Unlike their attempt to "limiting" themselves to the "boundaries" they had "drawn" for themselves (p. 45), Noor acts like a "postmemory generation" who remembers the events happened to prior generation in order to open the doors of reconciliation between past and present (Hirsch, 2012). Her attempt to demystify the past through her uncanny paintings which excavate the buried memories helps re-connect Sajida

with her past as it was “unclear and unspoken, forever lingered just beyond her touch” (Khan, p. 11). In this way, Noor, as a child figure, liquidates the common perception that all children are innately innocent, hence without any perspective towards past or reality. However, Noor, with her contaminated memory and frantic recollection via her cries and canvas, seems to blur the distinction between memory and fiction as well as between private and public experiences as if “the past and present...were shifting course, and were...inextricably...rushing towards each other” (p. 103). Assuming a central position in the narrative, Noor’s innate innocence is replaced by her “ripe eye of maturity” and her paradoxical self with the appearance of a nine years old child is merged with her later posturing of a mature, serious and “divine seer” (Waterman, 2015, p. 203). With this blurred distinction between past and present, childhood and maturity and most of all between memory and amnesia, Noor is able to explode many myths and fears of her parents. Her remembrance, in this way, serves as a microcosm of national healing that must take place in collective history suggesting the public dimension of what was experienced privately (Sweetjrc, 2016). Throughout the narrative, individuals’ efforts to repress or ignore their past can be taken as self-conscious amnesia of the nation-state which is interrupted and intruded by Noor’s imaginative reminiscing of bygone history. The uncanniness of her drawings problematizes the totalizing narrative of nationalist history that underwrites a binary view of presenting one side as absolutely victim against the other side as absolutely villain.

Aquila Ismail’s *Of Martyrs and Marigold* (2012) highlights fissures in a totalistic historiography by foregrounding the complex question of how, during 1971 War, people were “targeted for the most meaningless differences” (p. 122). The rampant acts of terror which took place in the wake of a devastating Cyclone and Civil War created no less horror than the war itself as it broke out in the last days of 1971, enabling us to see many unacknowledged mini battles inside a well-thought-out mega war. Ismail problematizes this neat binary structure of absolute victim or villain when she shows a few men from the so-called army who break into the house of Suri for looting and plunder by greedily ‘leering’ at her (p. 189). However, on hearing the warning of some fellow men who inform them that “the captain is on his way” (p. 190), they all leave Suri’s house voicing scorn and resentment. Here the word “captain” refers to the exception that the narrative highlights in the otherwise (over)generalized and singular representation of Pakistan army with its purported violence against Bengalis. It also underscores the possibility of viewing violence from another grounded, yet largely ignored angle by referring to individual acts of abuse and violence without seeing them an officially-sanctioned policy of the whole institution, let alone branding it state-sponsored war crimes. By projecting this side of the picture, Ismail’s narration seems to negate a unitary or totalizing view with its insistence to see perpetrators in a specific ethnic group. This is further qualified when the narrative refers to the sense of relief that the local community has on seeing Pakistan army taking control of their area as it would protect them from the violence

and pillage of Bengali nationalist groups (p. 190).

In investing the postmodernist skepticism about the totalizing claims of historical narratives, Ismail's novel highlights that the human cost of 1971 conflict, like any other conflict of similar nature, was heavy since everybody somehow got entangled in this spiral of "revenge and counter revenge" in one way or the other (p. 181). Likewise, the narrative, with its myriad details questions the homogenizing tendency of 1971 war-narratives by historicizing this tale of human sufferings, guilt and responsibility beyond a singular ethnic or political identity. It also revisits an inflated and one-sided representation that shows Pakistan army guilty of rape and murder while Bengalis are predominantly portrayed as a peace-loving and non-violent race. In view of Bose, such skewed angle in the fixed and celebrated war narratives (from Bangladeshi side) has further strengthened the impression about Bengali victimhood which was used by secessionist groups to fan their lingo of separatism and hate for the West Pakistan.

On the other hand, while one cannot deny the colossal loss of human life and honor in 1971, we can assess such discursive representation by situating it against certain historical events of similar nature. If the only possible means of resisting the hegemonizing view of violence is to historicize its scale and complexity, then the violence in 1971 can be seen as an inescapable outcome of war itself unleashed by both federationist and secessionists against each other. In other words, we can understand the inevitability of violence and abuse of war and civil conflict without categorizing it into neat categories of non-Bengalis against Bengalis only and always as Ismail asks the tormenting question where "everyone has gone mad...[so]...who would you blame for all that?" (p. 159) since/as everyone was "capable of atrocities when circumstances permitted" (p. 224).

The dominant discursive notion of Bengali victimhood and sufferings against (West) Pakistanis' violence and brutalities necessitate the extreme and skewed notions of ethnic cleansing, genocide and mas-rapes attributed to Pakistan army. Such discursive angle tends to exclude, rather absolutely, the counter images of violence from Bengalis against Non-Bengalis, especially against Bihari community which is a sorry and sad part of the historical archive on the subject, albeit its shelving in the background.

Ismail's *Martyrs and Marigold* is unique as it presents one slice of this largely-ignored yet historically-valid angle of 1971 War by referring to the loss of home and belonging suffered by the Bihari community. The text portrays Biharis as a third party whose ethnic and spatial identity did or does not position them in the explicit categories of both ethnic and nationalist history( West Pakistanis/ Punjabi, Bangladeshi/ Bengali ETC.). Needless to say, their unique position as a third party



offers an added dimension to the literature written in the backdrop of troubling national identities as Cilano argues how the trope of Muhajir Exceptionalism – with its positive and negative genealogy is problematized in the context of 1971 War. The ambivalent potential of this muhajir identity with reference to Bihari's experience during and after the 1971 conflict impinges on the dominant nationalist histories of Pakistan and Bangladesh as Ismail (a Bihari herself) narrates the sad tale of displacement, violence and exclusion faced by her family and many other Bihari families during the 1971 conflict. Unlike the "conjuring of Muhajir exceptionalism" in Partition historiography (Cilano, 2011, p. 34), it does not present Muhajir as an unproblematic original/ary myth of Pakistaniness, rather questions and even displaces the dominance of such national mythos in collective history. Moreover, on the basis of their double migration for Pakistan, one in 1947 from Bihar (West Bengal) to East Pakistan and then from East to West Pakistan after 1971, the figure of Bihari can be seen as an "inverse" of the nationalist moorings with their preference for those "securely emplaced within the nation" (p. 40) and easily recognized in official history. Ismail presents these Biharis as scapegoats of national unity when Suri and other women of her community gather in a Refugee Camp and feel as if they "have been abandoned" since "there is no one here that can tell us anything (Ismail, 2012, p. 215).

Such myriad remembrance of past problematizes the erstwhile certitude of nationalist histories with their one-sided valorization of victor's perspective or absolute demonization of the so-called enemy's perspective. At the same time, it points to the possibility and presence of victims and villains in both sides of the conflict by highlighting the fact that war, with its inevitable loss of life and honor, is not a clean sanitary affair. Probably for this reason when Sajida, in *Noor*, remembers the dead bodies floating in the river, she is not sure about "who were they?" and "who killed them?" (Khan, 2003, p. 163) as the complex nature of abuse during war and civil conflict has made it almost untraceable to draw lines between justified violence when it is used in retaliation against some blind and brutal expression of abuse.

On a related note, the inevitability of violence in and after 1971 War once again highlights the banality of certain acts of violence and abuse as Ali vents to his feelings rather frantically that going into a war zone is not going to be in a "party" (p. 175). The fact that those involved in war abuse were not trained in the business of human wrongs, rather were exposed to it during war with the instinctive fear that they "were fighting for [their] lives...in the fucking swamps, fighting stingers, Indians and Bengalis alike" (p. 177). Nonetheless, the fictional accounts on 1971 War with their representation of human wrongs run counter to the metanarrative of nationalist histories (from both Pakistani and Bangladeshi side) with their singular focus on numerical details which are inflated and disproportionate. The ambivalence between a potential victim or villain that the 1971 fiction offers seems to contest the

mainstream Bangladeshi history with its blanket portrayal of exaggerated numerical estimation of the loss of Bengalis' life and honor with some grave episodes of denial and effacement of violence committed by Bengali against non-Bengalis. On the other hand, in resisting the flat and sweeping representation of Bangladeshi nationalist version which presents the events of 1971 War in a largely misleading vocabulary of genocide, war crime and ethnic cleansing by ignoring their historical specificity, the imaginative writings on 1971 War unmasks their mistaken imbrication in the discursive field of 1971. The humanist and emotive nuances of these texts bring into light the human toll and trauma of this historical event by questioning that to see how many people gets killed during war is not a human way to peep into the untold memory and misery of war. It is not surprising or unusual to see how this lingo of hate and mistrust eventually morphed into an inflamed discourse of victimhood from Bangladeshi side and prevailed in the academy leaving the counter perspectives (of Pakistani or Bihari side) either missing or submerged and hardly viewed as legitimate and grounded (alter)narratives of a tangled event like 1971 conflict in former East Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

This article has concluded that the monolithic representation of 1971 War literature can be questioned by reading both fictive and historical accounts in a parallel and intertextual fashion. Such critical reading can be made more comprehensive by considering the historical and material dimension of the conflict which brought about serious centrifugal fissures between East and West Pakistan, dampened the Bengalis' strong sense of filiation with the idea of a separate homeland for Muslims and resulted in a vertical cleavage between the so-called privileged West and underprivileged East with the eventual loss of a gravitational pull "at the center of Pakistan's polity" (Mujahid, 2001, p. 87). Such perspective will also enable us to resist the simplistic assertion of viewing the emergence of Bangladesh as an absolute failure of Pakistan's ideology itself, rather the dismemberment of East Pakistan was in fact the failure of the political leadership to translate the emancipatory vision of a shared religious and national ideology that could keep the federation intact. It is crucial to note that many fictional accounts written in the backdrop of 1971 War tend to ignore this vital point by not considering the material bases of this conflict in the tangled political history of pre-1971 Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistan's political and military apparatus can learn many lessons from 1971 conflict provided it is open to re-interrogate the past with a greater willingness in coming to terms with the collective responsibility of what went wrong with Pakistan's political and institutional structures that it could not keep the federation intact just after 25 years of its creation in 1947?

On the other hand, the real potential of a literary text can be invested by using

the war narratives of 1971 War as they embody the complex and myriad experiences of traumatized individuals and communities faced with many ethical and human dilemmas in order to address the complex issues of remembrance, responsibility and reconciliation on the part of all those involved in it. The imaginative fiction of 1971 denudes its therapeutic potential by offering a means to go beyond conflict by investing the possibility of literature to heal the emotional and psychological wounds of individuals and groups.

To approach history with such purposeful and purposive remembering and retelling enables us to hold, though “weekly and loosely” what Benjamin has called a “few fringes of the tapestry of a lived life” (1969, p. 202). In other words, the paradoxical relation of literature and history in postmodern historiography, with its square rejection of grand-narrative with their certitude, is likely to produce a narrative possibility that in remembering mini and micro- histories will be able to offer and create better political alternatives as the saying goes ‘if you want to live, you have to remember and retell the story in your own way’.

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