

## **Representation of History in Kuntala Kumari Sabat's Fiction: Revisiting *The Woman with Nine Voices* and *Raghu, the Orphan***

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**Abstract:** History is the record of the past events and is the story of humanity. It posits facts. Literature is an imaginative creation. It is an artistic form. Both literature and history deal with feelings, emotions and thought. Literature and history are often intertwined. There is interface between literature and the social, political, economic and cultural ethos of an age. Sometimes literature reports and represents history. It imaginatively recreates the past and its events. For instance, some of Shakespeare's plays are based on historical events. Homer's *Odyssey* interfaces literature and history. Literature explores history as well as intervenes in history in its own way. It mingles fact and fiction. So the interface between history and literature is as old as history itself. My paper foregrounds the representation of history in two novels, *The Woman with Nine Voices* (1926) and *Raghu, the Orphan* (1928), the English rendering of two Oriya novels *Naa Tundi* and *Raghu Arakshita* respectively, of the first woman novelist in Oriya, Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1901-1938). Kuntala Kumari was at once a physician, poet, novelist, essayist, fiery orator, social reformer and political activist. She lived at the high time of national struggle for freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. She was not only a witness to the historic *Swadeshi* Movement and Non-Co-operation Movement, but an active participant as well. This paper highlights how she interweaves the historic national struggle into the plot of the novels and her intervention and attitude to the mega event.

**Keywords:** *Swadeshi* Movement, Non-Co-Operation Movement, Kuntala's novels.

History is the record of the past events and is the story of humanity. It posits facts. Literature is an imaginative creation. It is an artistic form. Both literature and history deal with feelings, emotions and thought. Literature and history are often intertwined. There is interface between literature and the social, political, economic and cultural ethos of an age. Sometimes literature

reports and represents history. It imaginatively recreates the past and its events. For instance, some of Shakespeare's plays are based on historical events. Homer's *Odyssey* interfaces literature and history. Literature explores history as well as intervenes in history in its own way. It mingles fact and fiction. So the interface between history and literature is as old as history itself.

This paper foregrounds the representation of history in two novels, *The Woman with Nine Voices* (1926) and *Raghu, the Orphan* (1928), English rendering of two Oriya novels *Naa Tundi* and *Raghu Arakshita* respectively, authored by the first woman novelist in Oriya, Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1901-1938). She was at once a physician, poet, novelist, essayist, columnist, fiery orator, social reformer and freedom fighter. She was a witness to the national struggle for political freedom from British colonialism under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Inspired by Gandhiji's clarion call, she took active part in India's struggle for freedom both in body and mind. She was not only a witness to the historic *Swadeshi* Movement and Non-Co-operation Movement, but an active participant as well. Like poets Subramania Bharathi (1882-1921) and Rabindra Nath Tagore (1861-1941), she ignited the minds of Oriyas with love for freedom and nationalism. Her collection of poems *Ahwan* (Exhortation) (1930) and *Spulinga* (Spark) (1929) exhorted Oriyas to throw away their idleness and awake to the cause of freedom of Mother Kalinga (Orissa) and Mother India. *Ahwan* was an instant success. Attempt was made to ban her patriotic poem "Ahuti" by the British government. After the execution of martyr Bhagat Singh, she authored a poem in English titled, "Tribute to Bhagat Singh." Thousands of copies of this poem were distributed in the Karachi session of the National Congress. The poem she composed in English entitled "The Neglected Land" testifies to her spirit of patriotic ardour. Kuntala Kumari took active part in the Salt Satyagraha at Srijanga, Inchudi and Kaliapada in Balasore district in Orissa in 1930. In her works of fiction, *Kalibohu* (The Dark Bride) (1925), *Naa Tundi* (The Woman with Nine Voices) (1926) and *Raghu Arakshita* (Raghu, the Orphan) (1928), she interweaves the theme of the national struggle for freedom with the main plot and intervenes to highlight her reformist zeal.

Gandhiji advocated not only political freedom from the hands of the British, but social freedom from the clutches of superstitious beliefs and outdated practices. He said that political freedom was meaningless without economic and social liberation for the masses. India would achieve real freedom when freedom reaches the poorest of the poor village of India. In the words of Gandhiji, "Swaraj for me means freedom for the meanest of our

countrymen. I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever.” Gandhiji’s concept of freedom was broad, encompassing all aspects of life.

The National Congress was formed in 1885 to liberate the country from British colonization. Political consciousness had been growing in Orissa because of spread of modern education, rise of new middle class intelligentsia, publication of newspapers and periodicals, the formation of socio-political associations and development of means of communication. The Oriya people were enlightened and were aware of the socio-political developments taking place elsewhere in India. But its impact could not be felt in Orissa till 1905, the year of the “*Swadeshi* Movement” in the neighbouring state, Bengal. This movement called upon the people to boycott foreign goods. In Orissa, in August, the same year at Cuttack, Madhusudan Das inspired the people with patriotic and nationalistic feelings and urged them to boycott foreign goods and to use indigenous goods. Gradually the *Swadeshi* Movement spread to other districts of Orissa like wild fire. People spontaneously boycotted foreign clothes and Liverpool salt and used indigenous salt, sugar and handspun clothes. Even students gave up their studies at schools and colleges in order to avoid English education, education of the colonizer, and moved from village to village spreading the message of the “*Swadeshi* Movement.” People made use of hand-woven saris and clothes made at Maniabandha, Sambalpur, Berhampur and Cuttack.

The Non-Co-operation Movement which started in 1920 had a tremendous impact on Orissa. Its flame engulfed all parts of Orissa within no time. Gopabandhu Das, known as *Utkalamani*, the gem of Orissa, conveyed to the people of Orissa the pledge of the Congress to boycott foreign clothes, schools, provincial legislatures, government titles and jobs. Thousands of freedom fighters picketed in front of shops dealing with foreign goods, courts, offices, post offices, schools and colleges and almost paralysed the British government machinery.

When Gandhiji visited Orissa in 1921, he called upon both men and women to take active part in the national struggle for freedom. He urged for the uplift of women, untouchables and other marginalized classes of society through spread of education and training in order to bring them to the mainstream without which attaining freedom would be a distant dream. He stressed the need for rooting out untouchability, which was the bane of orthodox Hindu society. The response to Gandhiji’s call was overwhelming. Women like Rama Devi, Sarala

Devi, Malati Devi, Janhavi Devi, Kokila Devi, Kiranbala Sen, Bhagyabati Pata Mahadei, Sarojini Chaudhury, Kuntala Kumari Sabat showed indomitable courage and played significant roles in the freedom movement. They took up activities of social reform as a part of the national struggle for political freedom. In *The Woman with Nine Voices* and *Raghu, the Orphan*, Kuntala Kumari foregrounds the issues of women as a part of the contemporary issue of national struggle for freedom which laid emphasis on social reforms for the uplift of the marginalized people in general and women in particular who were victimized by the unjust social practices based on superstitious beliefs.

In *The Woman with Nine Voices*, Kuntala lays stress on economic and social reforms as a means of attaining political freedom of India. But unlike Lakshmi in *the Dark Bride*, here the heroine Ratani is not fettered by social conventions. She is bold and courageous. Being the daughter of a poor day-labourer, she has nothing to lose so far as honour in society is concerned. She is more concerned with earning her livelihood than anything else. She is neither frightened of humans nor scared of ferocious animals. She is not afraid of even the zamindar of the village and his followers. She cares for nobody. She is ready to do any menial work in order to earn her livelihood. Here Kuntala Kumari lays emphasis on the dignity of labour and capabilities of women. She shows how economic freedom leads to social freedom. The only drawback in the character of Ratani is her quarrelsome nature. But zamindar Krushnachandra appreciates her boldness and marries her. He educates illiterate Ratani and trains her in many other skills like spinning thread, singing and drumming. The quarrelsome Ratani is transformed into a docile, disciplined, skilled and intelligent leader of the womenfolk in the village like her husband. She instructs the village women about spinning thread and weaving clothes with the help of the spinning wheel. She instructs them in various simple ways to improve their lives and the lives of their children. In this novel, Kuntala depicts how education and economic liberation of women would pave the way for their social liberation and ultimately the political liberation of the country as women constitute almost half of the population.

In this novel, inspired by the Non-Co-operation Movement of Gandhiji, Zamindar Nabin puts on khaddar even during the scorching heat of the summer. Kuntala pleads for the use of indigenous products through the words of Nabin. He says, "If you don't like the food and clothes produced in your own country, you are traitors" (51). His brothers, Krushnachandra and Hari, and their friend Lokanath do not want to learn English, the language of the colonizer, and leave their colleges. They devote themselves to spreading the message of

spinning thread by spinning wheels, weaving clothes, using indigenous goods, establishing village schools for low-caste children and setting up of village Panchayats. Zamindar Krushnachandra tries to convince the upper-caste people regarding the worth of the lower class people:

Now, look, we look upon these hardies, panos, mochies, chamaras as “low castes” and we become impure just by touching them . But, think it over, who can do the work they do for us? If they do not perform their duty, we cannot make do it. It won’t do if we keep our great benefactors and call them; untouchables. Will the Providence bear it! (63)

In other words, they leave no stone unturned to uplift women and low-class people economically and socially in order to bring them to the mainstream.

In *The Woman with Nine Voices*, Kuntala Kumari depicts ideal characters modelled after the great social reformers of her time. Zamindar Krushnachandra, Hari and Lokanath follow the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi for the uplift of the marginalized classes like women and untouchables of society.

Kuntala Kumari has made the nationalist movement an integral part of her plot in her major fiction *Raghu, the Orphan* as well. At that time, the education of women was a part of the great mission of the nationalist struggle for freedom and Kuntala Kumari was an ardent supporter of the cause as well. Social transformation was her primary goal. At that time women’s education in Orissa was at its lowest. There were few schools for women. Social taboos and superstitious beliefs prevented people from sending their daughters to schools or educating them. A few zamindars and well-to-do families appointed tutors at home to educate their daughters. Like Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir, Kuntala Kumari makes an urgent plea for educating women in order to arouse their consciousness and to put an end to social evils perpetrated by male dominance. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) argues that women are not inherently inferior to men. Lack of education was the root cause of their inferiority. In the words of Mary Wollstonecraft: “A rational examination reveals the real cause of the retarded state of many women’s minds to be not their sex but their poor education.” Kuntala Kumari believed in educating women in order to subvert the social evils perpetrated by dominant patriarchal conventions.

In *Raghu, the Orphan*, Kuntala Kumari portrays Jagannath *kabiraj* himself teaching his wife Taramani, going against the wishes of his parents and the criticism of others. Further, Kuntala Kumari portrays Raghunath's wife Maya, a highly educated young lady, as one who is broadminded, intelligent and practical in her attitude to life. Unlike illiterate women, she does not feel jealous of Sita, her husband's one time beloved. She knows that her husband loves Sita still and cannot forget her, though Sita is married. Like other educated women, Maya is concerned about the plight of other women and works for their uplift and the uplift of her motherland. Chemanlal's widowed daughter, Tuka, is saved from disgrace and suffering as a widow because of her education. Tuka devotes herself to the cause of the freedom of the nation. In the words of Kuntala Kumari:

Tuka was no longer the woman she used to be, she had wholeheartedly devoted herself to the service of her country. On hearing her lectures and reading her articles published in the *Hindustanki Samachar*, the ordinary people of India were inspired with feelings of patriotism. Tuka moved from village to village and town to town and spread the message of patriotism. (393)

Though Kuntala Kumari advocates education for women, she never suggests that they should compete with men or neglect their domestic duties and responsibilities. She portrays all educated women like Maya and Tuka as proficient in domestic chores and management of their households. She depicts them carrying on their activities of social welfare and participation in national struggle for freedom along with their household responsibilities.

Besides, Chemanlal's family is entirely devoted to the cause of the freedom of the nation. His house is truly Indian in spirit where no differences of caste and religion exist. After the Hindu-Muslim riot, Chemanlal's family does not hesitate to give shelter to Abdul Aziz, a Muslim, and his family in their house. Kuntala Kumari writes:

Raghunath was surprised to see that the house of Lachhman was a sacred meeting ground of the Hindus and the Muslims. There, those who believed in Islam and those who did not, were bound by one chord of love, like two brothers and the Aryas and the Yavans were each others' friends. (393)

After Maya passes away and widowed Sita refuses to marry Raghunath, he comes to Chemanlal's family for solace. Inspired by Lachhman, Raghunath takes the great vow to devote the rest of his life to the cause of his motherland, Orissa.

Gandhiji preached against caste distinctions which divided the Hindus. He called the untouchables, “Harijan,” that is, God’s people. He encouraged inter-caste marriage as a means of ending caste distinctions. Inspired by liberal western education and the call of Gandhiji, Kuntala Kumari comes down heavily on casteism which was acute in her time and depicts the changing attitude through the character of Jagannath *kabiraj*. Jagannath *kabiraj* does not follow caste distinctions and purificatory rituals associated with it. He gives shelter to a low-caste orphan girl, Rupa, when she becomes an orphan. He does not care, though he is ostracized from the community on account of it. He also welcomes Raghunath who is married to Maya, a *Brahmo* woman. Besides, Raghunath, a pure *Brahmin*, stays and eats in the house of Kewalkrushna Haldar, a fisherman by caste who is converted to *Naba Vidhan Brahmo*. Raghunath, who is educated, does not bother about upper and lower castes. Kuntala Kumari highlights the changing attitude of Raghunath in these words:

Raghunath was no longer the Raghunath one knew earlier. He now thought about his country and her people. The ignorance, superstition, poverty and suffering of his country hurt him. Nowadays his thoughts centred on how his country could be rejuvenated and how society could be reawakened. . . .He no more bothered about the fact that he was a Brahmin and that the members of this family were untouchable fishermen. He had already realized that it is not a man’s caste, but his humanity which makes him great. (266)

Kuntala Kumari was herself a Christian and was later converted to *Naba Vidhan Brahmo*. She did not bother about caste distinctions. She was an ardent follower of Gandhiji and his ideals and teachings. Sachidananda Mohanty rightly comments:

Kuntala’s record in the national freedom struggle is equally noteworthy.

She took part . . . in the various meetings in leadership roles at the national and the state level. However, her untimely death in 1938 cut short her further contribution in this regard. Even so, many of her literary works are an eloquent testimony to her sense of patriotism. . . . Her poem “Nari Shakti” suggests the role she envisaged for women for the liberation of the country. (72)

Though Kuntala Kumari took active part in India’s national struggle for freedom, basically she was a social reformer and feminist. She was always worried about the uplift of women

and her country. So in these novels she highlights the issues like illiteracy, child marriage, widowhood, polygamy that plagued women in general and Orissa women in particular. Like many other social reformers of her time, she strongly believed that illiteracy and ignorance of men and women was at the root of all social evils. So she finds out remedies for the uplift of women in these novels and interweaves these with the larger issue of India's national struggle for freedom. Kuntala Kumari portrays idealized characters modelled on the great social reformers and nationalist leaders who strove to uplift the depressed classes of society for the overall progress of the nation and inculcated patriotism among them. As a whole, Kuntala Kumari imaginatively recreates the contemporary historical events of her time mingling with fictional characters and places while her reformist zeal and social concerns remain as the backbone of the plot.

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