CHAPTER 1

REFIGURING HISTORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY AND LEGEND:

THE POLITICS OF SUBVERSION

Even in a democracy, history always involves power and exclusion, for any history is some one's history, told by that someone from a partial point of view (Appleby et al., The Post Modern History Reader 217).

If we consider history as a shifting discourse constructed by historiographers, then it is entirely possible that we need to also consider reading several accounts of the same past. This leads us to the conclusion that there can never be what maybe thought as a single, absolute and authentic account of the past. The historian at best represents the past which is a recovered past that is incomplete, fragmented and subverted. According to Keith Jenkins "the past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart" (Jenkins, Rethinking History 5).

A new reading is likely to appear whenever there is a change of 'gaze' or shift in perspective. As Jenkins observes, the past and history are not stitched into each other such that only one reading of the same past is absolutely necessary (qtd. in Appleby et.al., Telling the Truth about History 25). While writing history, the historiographer tends to move beyond the world of facts and gives an interpretation on the past in accordance with his/her perspective. Moreover, the historian is looking at the past from the present and is therefore, likely to be biased by the contemporary. As Jacques Le Goff writes, "all history is contemporary in so far as the past is grasped in the present and responds to the latter's interests" (Goff 130).
What historians do best is to make connections with the past in order to illuminate the problems of the present and the potential of the future. Historians have conceptualised their task in the past, particularly on how that task has developed from telling a simple story to answering a complex array of questions about the human experience. The ambitions of history have changed over time, expanding to include general questions of historical development. A democratic practise of history will encourage scepticism about dominant views. In a democracy, history thrives on a passion for establishing and communicating truth.

Even in democracy, history always involves power and exclusion. Since no one can be certain that his or her explanations are definitively right, everyone must listen to other voices. Therefore all histories are provisional; none will have the last word (Appleby. et. al., *Rethinking History* 217).

History today is regarded as a narrative about the past, not the past itself. The deconstructionist theorists have argued that what the historian does while narrativizing is to impose a textualised shape on the past. Poststructuralists talk about the elusive and obscure nature of the texts. A text, it has been observed, is full of gaps, uncertainties of meanings and silence. Our language is incapable of comprehending the reality and is too poor in expressing what we perceive. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the word and the world. There is no fixity of meaning either.

The postmodern predicament of history, to borrow Roland Barthes’ words, is that the historian’s description of the past reality represents a number of concepts about the
past, not the past itself. It is inevitable, therefore, that while narrativizing the past, the historian ensures “the past obeys my interpretation” (Jenkins, *Rethinking History* 12).

By imposing plots on the past, the historian indulges in the act of omission and exclusion and in the process marginalizes people, events, movements and regions from mainstream history. However this fragmented and unequal universe of the historian has opened up the unlimited possibilities of history. It has given birth to new histories like the Feminist, the Black, the Subaltern and a host of other histories which are the bold expressions of all those who have been excluded from mainstream history. History has thus given way to alternative histories making the “chorus of voices” (Jenkins, *Rethinking History* 12) audible to the world.

Postmodern historians have realized that grand narratives can provide only an aerial view, often missing all the important details. The mainstream histories with the nation as the central unit are guilty of marginalizing and subverting regions, localities and communities. In the emerging “other” (local or subaltern) histories, the communities and the regions have become the focus of analysis. In these subaltern histories, the voices of all the dalits, the women, the peasants and other silent sections who have previously been absent in history, can be clearly heard.

It is in this context of subversion and marginalization that “local histories” rise into prominence. They are histories of marginalized localities, people, movements, struggles and sacrifices. By history, I mean local myths and legends—written or oral—about the past. While some of these “histories” are formal, others are informal but they are all narrated in one form or another. Through this process of narrativisation, we witness the process in which narrators and historiographers in the
past and present have used myths and legends as political actions to create a "history" to suit their vested interests. It is the study of these histories that will help us in rereading mainstream history and looking for gaps and exclusions which will expose the politics behind this subversion.

Myths and legends or local narratives, many of which were oral, led to political responses by influencing how events were ultimately reported, recorded and translated into sources for written histories. Also, the language used in these narratives revealed some of the forces that produced them and certainly the audience for whom they were intended. It is significant to note that along the way this has resulted in the adding or condescending of meaning of the "history" that happened.

Myths and legends as local sources of history reveal their implicit assumptions and demonstrate the way in which events are filtered through the interpretations of their authors. By examining a variety of these interpretations, we might piece together a refracted image of the past which will ultimately present a history of "what actually happened". This approach is common in cultural studies in which historians read against the mainstream texts to reveal the histories of the peasants and the lower castes. Equally critical are the history of interpretations themselves, which is, the processes through which myths and legends of the past were constructed. One comes across various issues while examining this politics of subversion. There is an attempt to create a single narrative supported by various sources that claim to reveal the truth in political and social terms about what may have happened there. There is also the problem that stems from confining oral sources that are, by nature, transient and dynamic to a more restrictive medium like the written one. Equally prominent is the
difficulty of translating back and forth from several cultures and finding words that make useful associations from one language to another. There is also the necessity of interpreting events from accounts produced at different times.

It is the process of myth/legend making that sustains the continuity of human existence and helps in transferring knowledge from one generation and from one culture to another. The way sources narrate an event (in a myth or legend) brings to light the intellectual modes of understanding that have shaped different versions of history. When we identify what the history makers and the compilers of legends chose and choose to tell, it provides lasting lessons of the past and the politics that influence historical memory.

According to Foucault, we need to know who produced them in order to evaluate the products of history. Foucault’s (Foucault 210) contention is that texts immortalize their authors and connects our belief in the unchanging truth of the past to our belief in the authors who wrote about it. By emphasising this unreliability of authors and the constraints of contemporary discourse on the production of knowledge, Foucault has used a humbling weapon against the powers of hegemony and has influenced current scholarship.

By focussing on the construction of history through the local narratives or legends, I have attempted to look at these questions:

1. How do narratives and legends located in sources of the past, portray the politics behind the legend making?
2. Whose interests do they serve? How do legends influence historiography?

3. What information do they hold other than an account of past events?

4. How can they be interpreted/narrated in a postmodern literary scenario?

The answers to questions such as these which are integral to what is now called postmodern scholarship, will help in refiguring historiography and bring out the politics behind "history making". These questions lie at the basis of most historical narratives and show the effort to find out what happened. In a sense that is "the postmodern conundrum" as Singer (12) puts it: "is there any point to our intellectual endeavour if we are all trapped as Michael Foucault would claim, in the prisons of language and discourse?"

Refiguring history

Etymologically, 'history' is derived from the Greek word "istoria" meaning inquiry, research, exploration or information. History, in its broadest sense, is a systematic record of the origin and development of humankind, the unique events and movements in its life. It can also be seen as an attempt made by people to reconstruct, describe and interpret the past. In the present postmodern age, it has come to mean the attempt to reconstruct the past in "a scholarly fashion, sticking to certain definite rules of establishing fact, interpreting evidence, dealing with source material" (Marwick 14).

The term 'history' has been defined by scholars in different ways, ranging from the conventional to the postmodern, giving different connotations to the discipline and the
concept. Cicero (qtd. in Warrington 161) has commented on Herodotus’ Histories that in history “everything is meant to lead to the truth, but in poetry, a great deal is intended for pleasure - although in Herodotus, the father of history...there are countless numbers of legends.” Marc Bloch points out that history is the science of men in time. He attacks those who lose themselves in the study of politics and origins and erect barriers between the past and the present (Bloch 28). R. G. Collingwood (qtd. in Warrington 42) says, “It (history) is a science whose business is to study events not accessible to our observation, and to study these events inferentially, arguing to them from something else which is accessible to our observation, and which the historian calls ‘evidence’ for the events in which he is interested”. Historians like Hobsbawm are of the view that history can do harm because the past can be used to legitimise actions. It can be the ‘fertiliser’ for nationalist, ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies. Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1) thinks that “if there is no suitable past, then one can be invented”.

Lawrence Stone (74) has rightly said that “historians have always told stories”. It is seen that until the 1960’s, philosophers did not pay serious attention to the contents and forms of historical narratives. But is an element of story or narration essential to all history? All stories describe a sequence of actions and experiences of people, real or imaginary. The characters are usually portrayed in a typical human situation and then are shown changing it or reacting to changes which affect that situation from outside. It is through the transformations and reaction of the characters while encountering these that the hidden aspects of the characters are delineated. It also results in a dilemma which calls for urgent action or thought from one or more of the main characters in the story. It is their reaction to it and the effects of their reaction on
the other characters that brings the story to its final conclusion. It is rather easy to
follow a story at the superficial level as it involves only an understanding of words,
sentences and paragraphs which are set in order. However, at a deeper level, one
needs to understand the successive actions, thoughts and feelings of certain characters
and understand the motives and interests because the climax of the story depends on
it.

Historians are also story tellers. They are expected to do their research and so should
naturally have a great deal of knowledge about the past. In short, they know what they
are going to say and in all probability they are likely to construct their account in a
manner that will capture the attention of the readers. Since such events fit into a
chronological order, the historians, like the traditional story tellers will normally
attempt to follow the order rather than move forwards and backwards in time. The
final product of their research is therefore, history in a narrative form.

Furthermore, like storytellers, historians may relate the events and relationships in a
subjective manner, so as to appeal to an audience in a particular way. They may be
biased, prejudiced and may also be didactic, pointing out moral or prudential lessons.
Since the historian is aware of the probable outcome of the events, be it past or
present history, it is only natural that those events which are considered to be relevant
to the outcome will find a place in the narratives.

So what is the connection between the ideas of history and narration? Gallie (qtd. in
Roberts 26) is of the opinion that history is “a species of the genus story” and because
of this, the idea of historical narrative is “logically prior” to almost all other questions
of critical philosophy of history. Danto (ibid) feels that all history “presupposes” narrative, the story form providing the historian with an organizing scheme just as theory provides one for the scientist. According to Morton White (ibid), narrative is only “the typical form of discourse employed by the historian”. Glenn Morrow supports White’s (ibid) view, saying that “history is narration”. A. R. Louchis (ibid) is among the extreme narrativists who claims that narrative techniques are “essential to the business of historical exploration”, not just an “incidental, stylistic feature”. It has been pointed out that even Maurice Mandelbaum, (ibid) who has expressed some of the most serious misgivings about philosophical accounts of history as narrative implicitly equated historical description with historical narration.

Are narratives central to the analysis of history as a form of inquiry? It is believed that history is narrative or that it is essentially narrative or that history in any form narrates. It is considered that it is through narration that historians achieve whatever is specifically historical about historical understanding. We can also say that historical explanations get their distinctive structure because they occur in the course of historical narratives. Recent attempts have been to show that narratives can be logical and explanatory by themselves. However there is scepticism too as to whether narratives can be said to have a "logic" of their own.

Historians write stories about the past mostly as a serious venture. Although they analyse the theory and philosophy of narrative history, their conclusions differ considerably. However most historians are of the opinion that narrative history is a legitimate form of knowledge, at least on par with other approaches to the study of the
past. According to them, it constitutes a discipline as theoretically and philosophically sophisticated as any other in the human and social sciences.

Viewing history or historical narration from this perspective, it is difficult to say that all historical works are primarily narratives. Also, it is interesting that the immense variety of literary production and contribution—books, articles and discussion notes—are bracketed under the common umbrella term called ‘history’. There is also a claim that every successful work of history must have unity like a story. However, we can see that it does not hold good in the case of themes that have a succession of characters spread over generations and related at every stage through the working out of the unifying idea. The Orestes cycle with its theme of recurrent inter-family guilt and revenge or the story that runs from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob to Joseph are examples in this regard (Gallie 48). In these themes, we find an overlapping of dominant interests from story to story and the conclusion is usually the beginning of another story.

A historical narrative is a story of a historical event. Although the people and the places maybe true, the narrative is written as a story. It is true that to be historical, a narrative should be one that can be followed or is intelligible. However, it should also rest upon evidence by dealing with events that can be shown to have actually happened at roughly assignable places and dates. By showing its interconnections with other historical evidences and results, a historical narrative will usually succeed in making its subject matter more intelligible.
Typically the readers of historical narratives will know the broad course of events which it covers and something of its consequences. This initial appreciation directs and sustains their interest as they read but they also receive jolts to their previous beliefs or expectations as to what “ought to happen” at this or that point in the narrative. Historical narratives therefore, give the reader lessons in liberation from inborn prejudices and parochial feelings. An important part in accepting a historian’s judgements is that one should be ready to question, to probe and to criticize them. Gallie (qtd. in Roberts 51) observes, “Let the critical, doubting, questioning, assessing attitude of mind, lapse or rise into the sheer joy of following an absorbing narrative and the historical narrative has passed into the land of story, and is heading towards the land of dreams”.

Refiguring historiography

In simple terms, historiography is the art of writing history. It is the history of history, that is, the history of historical writings. It employs historical methods and applies tools such as authorship, interpretation, style, sources, bias and audience in its focus of study. While history proper is the historian’s reconstruction of the past, historiography, says Arthur Marwick “is really the history of historical thought – it is only the theory or practice of history. Ultimately it comprises the study of the development of man’s sense for the past” (qtd. in Butterfield 464).

Historiography is believed to have its origins in the Greek and Chinese traditions during a period when the system of chronology and critical methods were at a nascent stage and therefore complicated and inaccurate. From a traditional perspective,
historiography is a simple representation of what actually happened. It is an almost exact account attempted by a historian through a selfless and objective study of existing sources and evidences. From Thucydides in the fifth century BC, historians have always been different from creative writers of fiction and poetry by virtue of the methods and approaches they adopt, namely scientific. This has been emphasised by Leopold von Ranke in the nineteenth century and this perception of historiography has remained till the present time. Beverly Southgate says that in these terms historiography has been valued as “providing supposedly reliable foundations for personal and national identities and where religious belief has been eroded and it is seen as supplying a secular replacement for the conveyance and confirmation of existential meaning” (Tucker 540).

The term historiography has also changed and now it cannot be encompassed under an umbrella definition. Historiography has come to include the evolution of the ideas and techniques associated with the writing of history and the changing attitudes towards the nature of history itself. With the transition in the tools of historical investigation over the decades, historiography has evolved into a complex and sophisticated academic discipline. This is of significant value to the researcher and professional more than the general reader, as a guide that holds up models of how history has been written through the centuries. Historiography can be studied in ways that are both challenged and challenging. The reader is expected to question the “doxa” which states that the “proper” study of the past is a study “for its own sake”: that the only legitimate study of the past is one which disinterestedly and objectively understands it “on its own terms” and that “proper” historians should always attempt to get to “the truth of the past” (Tucker 2).
Postmodernism has perhaps been the most challenging approach to traditional historiography. Postmodernists consider mainstream history as “realist, empiricist, objectivist, documentarist, orthodox and extremely problematic and demonstrably ideological”. Hayden White in his hugely influential book *Metahistory* clarified how the historians necessarily chose the narrative form to relate their accounts of past events. White says that “of themselves, events have no inherent meaning, meaning can be ascribed to them only within the value system of a certain context; and that context in turn takes its meaning likewise from another context” (qtd. in Southgate 541).

The postmodernist view of history is “aporia” meaning difference, discontinuity, disparity, contradiction, ambiguity, indeterminacy and so on. As White says, “we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption and chaos is our lot” (qtd. in Himmelfarb 170). Therefore, the postmodernist attempts to destroy “this ‘totalizing’, ‘universalizing’, ‘logocentric’ history that is said to be the great evil of modernity”. Jean Francois Lyotard (Southgate 541) says that postmodernism characterises the incredulity towards grand or metanarratives, a denial of the progressive stories that had been so long central to the philosophies of history in the metaphorical sense.

The postmodernist wave in historiography can be seen not just in the denunciations of conventional history but also development of its own genres of historical writing like local narratives. These are a kind of historical work which has come into being as a result of the postmodernist rejection of grand or master stories told by those in power.
They are hegemonic accounts of forms of resistance – individual stories told by prisoners, students, peasants and others. This critique of social history has had a liberating and enriching influence on social inequality.

Postmodernism has also transferred the focus of historical writing, from the social bases of nationalist movements to the sources of national identity and individuals in history. As Evans points out, "it has done a great deal to reestablish the place of individual men in history though these are not 'great men' of the political historians, but the little known men of ordinary life" (qtd. in Sreedharan 307).

Postmodernism has also given rise to a whole range of alternative perspectives under the term “post colonialism”, most importantly post colonialism and feminism. Interestingly, in the Western world, historiographic perspective was for the most part determined in relation to a centre in Europe. This fixed geographical point became a reference point from which “the past was perceived, assessed and evaluated; that the winners and losers, imperialists and colonists were defined and described” (Southgate 542). The most significant example of post colonial critique was Edward Said’s Orientalism in which it was argued that "the Orient" itself is a Western construct with little resemblance to what it claimed to describe. Said’s argument challenged “the terminology, structure and above all, ‘objectivity’ of previous narratives and foregrounding such characteristic postmodernist themes as perspective, linguistic representation, bipolar categorization, ideological intrusion and power” (Southgate 542).
Feminist studies have also widened postmodernist historiographic studies. The feminist critiques have pointed out the fundamental problems within the discipline of history when viewed from a feminist perspective, like women's absence from the historiographical record or the linguistic usages heavily biased towards the male and masculine. Women's historiographies have often been accused of subjectivity, emotional involvement and excessive attention to and reliance on "feeling" as opposed to "reason" and so failing to conform to the criteria specified in the dominant modernist model of the subject and they have been relegated to a class of writings inferior to "proper" historiography.

With traditional history being discredited, the postmodern historiographers find themselves with a _tabula rasa_ (clean slate) on which they may inscribe whatever interpretation they like. By deconstructing both the "text" of the past and the "texts" of all previous histories, new histories can be created in accordance with political and ideological interests of the creators pertaining to race, class/caste and gender.

My contention in this thesis is that there is a politics behind the subversion of "other histories" (local or subaltern) in order to establish the hegemonic history through a romantic and conformist compilation and reading of myths and legends. I have substantiated my argument drawing examples from Kerala legends from the compilation of legends, _Aithihyamala_ (Garland of Legends). It is difficult to ascertain historical truth in the legends. The compilers' language or politics decides the interpretation of legends. This is true even in the case of Kottarathil Sankunni's _Aithihyamala_ (The Garland of Legends), a pioneering and exhaustive collection of the
legends of Kerala, compiled and published between 1909 and 1934. Sankunni is not a historian or a social critic. However, his *Aithihyamala* is widely read as a social and historical document of the period.

When historians of a dominant race attempt to write the history of the province, principles of historiography are ignored and facts are subjected to a great deal of distortion, misrepresentation and misinterpretation. Sankunni’s compilation of legends also falls into this pattern while narrating the local histories and stories. There has been an attempt in compiling the “popular legends” in order to establish a hegemonic history and in the process what has happened is a deliberate marginalisation of the subaltern (anyone outside the upper caste/class/gender hierarchy) and denigration of their “histories”. So the history of the ruling classes has becomes a homogenized cultural past of Kerala.

In the process, Sankunni has created an “imagined community”, to borrow the term from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* where he has tried to give an account of the history of the period in a homogenized framework, regardless of the actual hegemony and inequality that existed then. Benedict Anderson (6) says that the nation (here a region) is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation prevalent in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. The Kerala legends can therefore be read in this light where a conscious attempt can be traced out in constructing an “imagined history” of the dominant classes/castes (even resorting to a divine validation as in the mythological references) to subvert the local history/legends of the other communities.