

Book Review

Title:	<i>Red River</i>
Author:	Somnath Batabyal
Publisher:	Context
Year:	2024
Pages:	353
Price:	INR 699/-

Somnath Batabyal's third novel, *Red River* (2024), is a significant work of postcolonial trauma literature that vividly portrays the turbulent and traumatic period in Assam during the 1960s-1980s. The Assam sub-nationalism movement, violent incidents, such as the 1960s "Bongal kheda" movement, the emergence of militancy with the rise of ULFA waging war against the Indian state for the freedom and sovereignty of Assam, the 1971 Liberation war in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), and Operation Pushback are intricately connected through the two generations of characters and their tragic lives. The novel focuses on conflict, migration, uprooting, belongingness, identity, memory, and ethno-linguistic division. The sufferings and anxieties of the traumatised minority migrant Bengali Hindu communities who were considered as 'outsiders' during the xenophobic 'Bongal kheda' movement during the 1960s-80s are represented through the tragic life of Lucky Ganguly, Amol Dutta, and Samar Dutta. This movement that led to ethnic cleansing, mob lynching, and property damage in Assam targeted the non-native Bengali Hindu middle class that had an influential social and economic standing in Assam.

The influx of refugees from East Bengal and later newly formed East Pakistan added fuel to the already going ethnic tension among the indigenous Assamese population and the Bengali Hindu Population in the state which slowly gave rise to these attacks. The indigenous Assamese, Madhob Kalita, and Rizu Kalita express their disapproval of the Indian Army due to its contempt and inability to understand Assamese sentiments as

well as their various inhuman atrocities, going so far as to support the indigenous militant group ULFA and join them. The viewpoint of central India is shown through the perspectives of the Indian army represented by non-Assamese characters Major Kabir Singh Choudhury and his son Rana Choudhury, who play significant roles in the counter-insurgency operation throughout this tumultuous period in Assam. Two other disturbing and traumatic events that are mentioned but not majorly emphasised are the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and the 1983 Nellie Massacre which have also been simultaneously connected through the interlinking of the characters in the novel. Batabyal continuously switches the geographical backdrop, transitioning between actual and imaginary locations, in response to the plot's requirements. This brings the readers a diverse range of characters and their distinct perspectives on the violent events and conflicts in the novel.

The novel is primarily structured in two sections: Book One and Book Two. Book One is categorised in four sections: Our Parents' Stories, Our Stories, The Clocks Stop, and Samar's Story. Book Two consists of a single part titled The Return. There are multiple named chapters in each of these sections. Batabyal has skilfully classified the novel, with each section highlighting a crucial element in the storyline that is then included in the interconnected narrative. The story adheres to the conventional structure of having a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the introductory segment "Our Parents' Stories", the reader is introduced to several first-generation individuals, including Lucky Ganguly, Amol Dutta, Kabir Singh Choudhury, and Madhob Kalita. Every one of these characters undergoes distinct catastrophic experiences, which are later passed and linked to their successors. The succeeding generation, comprising the novel's central protagonists Samar Dutta, Rizu Kalita, and Rana Choudhury, inherits their parent's experiences of trauma, insecurities, longing, burdens, and desire for revenge. Samar, Rizu, and Rana develop a profound friendship regardless of their linguistic and ethnic disparities in the 1980s as St. Joseph School students in Guwahati. Nevertheless, their disparate sociocultural backgrounds and a few tragic events profoundly influenced their personal lives and interpersonal connections leading them to have distinct mentalities and ideologies. Even among the three central protagonists, the major focus is given to Samar Dutta, the son of two migrant Bengali-Hindus who constantly carry the anxieties and fear of not knowing his position and status in Assam. Even the emphasis given to Lucky Ganguly, mother of Samar Ganguly and wife of Amol Dutta is greater than the rest of the mentioned first-generation individuals.

Batabyal's depiction of resilient female characters with absolute determination, who have gone through unexpected personal tragedies and collective struggles, is particularly commendable. This is evident in characters like Lucky Ganguly, Geeta from Gopalpur Rajbari, Gita Sharma, and Leela. Batabyal demonstrates a comprehensive description of the growth and transformation of both the primary first and second-generation characters in the novel. The writer also gives significant attention to the external and internal factors that shape their mindsets and ideologies of these characters. He adeptly portrays perplexing situations encountered by the characters, preventing readers from developing any prejudice towards any character, as most of them can be perceived as being influenced by a socio-political system that surpasses their agency.

Batabyal has framed the complex details of the volatile times in and out of Assam in this novel, which is set in parallel with actual events, and demonstrates his investigative and creative abilities. Instead of using the horrible and traumatic events as merely the backdrop for a novel, he meticulously explains the onset, impact, and aftermath of such occurrences that continue long after the event has ended. The bittersweet and confusing ending suggests that the cycle of violence and its consequences will persist beyond the novel's conclusion. Batabyal's assertion regarding the cycle of violence becomes relevant when we comprehend how all the characters are linked within larger socio-political contexts, regardless of their traits or characteristics. As exemplified in *Red River*, the emergence of violence rooted in language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality is a significant element of postcolonial historical novels as well as postcolonial trauma literature. The presence of multiple layers of meaning with varied uses of symbolism within the realist frame is an additional element of the postcolonial historical novel that *Red River* becomes a part of. By alluding to the incomprehensible circumstances endured by numerous minority groups such as the Bengali Hindu migrant communities, which are often overlooked in mainstream discourse, the novel emerges as a significant contribution to postcolonial trauma literature. Through the various explorations of traumatic experiences, perspectives, and voices, the novel offers alternative histories that challenge dominant narratives. The novel's fictionalised scenarios, closely aligned with real events, compel readers to adopt and understand multiple perspectives that challenge dominant and hegemonic narratives surrounding the major themes.

Manabjyoti Biswas