



Histories in Flux: Memory, Fiction, and the Contestation of Canonical Authority in Indian War Narratives

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Abstract

This paper examines how memory, fiction and history coexist as a heterogeneous *mélange* in the representation of the past, focusing on Stephen Alter's *Birdwatching: A Novel* (2022), which reimagines the 1962 Indo-China War. It argues that history does not operate through a binary of the 'documented' versus the 'invented,' but emerges through their continual interpenetration, as myth, memory and narrative constantly co-form historical meaning. History is not merely an act of recovering objective facts but is deeply entangled with cultural memories and the subversion of established canons. Through a reading of Alter's work, the paper explores how the novel illuminates those historical and lived experiences that are often left unarticulated in official accounts of the Sino-Indian conflict. The argument is drawn from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of assemblages which posits that history, like memory, is not a static record but a dynamic interplay between the 'factual' and the 'fictional,' the 'real' and the 'imagined.' A Deleuzo-Guattarian analysis demonstrates how fiction contests state-authored narratives while retrieving inconspicuous strands of the past. *Birdwatching* offers an alternative interpretation of the past where memory and myth together shape one's understanding of historical reality. Within this framework, history is constantly in a state of 'becoming,' and truth, much like fiction, remains fluid and contested. The study ultimately conveys that the boundaries between fiction and history are porous, continually reshaping historical understanding.

Keywords: 1962 Indo-China War, Cultural Memories, Deleuzian Assemblage, Historical Fiction, Indian Military History, National Myths

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Introduction

Since its independence from the British Empire in 1947, the Indian nation-state has witnessed numerous milestones and setbacks in the course of its military history. By undertaking an investigation into Indian war history, while perusing the confluence of history and fiction, the present study demonstrates that the past does not only exist in the ‘catalogued’ and ‘archived’ domains, but also in the ‘mythical’ and ‘fictional’ realms. The rhizomatic assemblage of the two terrains reflects a dynamic, ever-changing conception of ‘truth’ and ‘reality.’ To illustrate the above, the paper focuses on the 1962 Indo-China War as portrayed in Stephen Alter’s *Birdwatching: A Novel* (2022). To interrogate the interrelationship between fiction and history, this paper juxtaposes the novel with three significant historical documents. These include: “The Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report” (1962–63; henceforth called *The Brooks-Bhagat Report*), *History of the Conflict with China, 1962* (1992; hereafter referred to as *History of the Conflict*) and *The Sino-Indian Border Dispute* (CIA Papers, 1964). In contrast to the official traditions, the novel earmarks a version of history that collates historical fictions and fictional realities. It simultaneously underscores a model of the past that establishes the genre as a ‘credible’ source for sketching the Indian subcontinent’s military foundations.

Alter, an American author of numerous fictional and non-fictional works, was born in the Indian hill station of Mussoorie. He is known for his writings including *In the Jungles of the Night: A Novel about Jim Corbett* (2016) and *Wild Himalaya: A Natural History of the Greatest Mountain Range on Earth* (2019). Much of his writing centres around the Indian Himalayan ranges and the broader Himalayan region, including his memoir *Becoming a Mountain: Himalayan Journeys in Search of the Sacred and the Sublime* (2014). His novel *Birdwatching*, first published in 2022, contextualises the trans-historical and geopolitical backgrounds of the 1962 war through the character of Guy Fletcher, an ornithologist—a scientist and researcher who studies different species and specimens of birds.

Alter's fictional work under discussion received the 2023 'Green Book of the Year Award' at the Green Literature Festival, Bengaluru, and adds to the reader's overall understanding of India's historical past from a distinctive lens.

More than being a fictional tract that imaginatively represents the war, *Birdwatching* can be scrutinised as a text that seeks to present an 'authentic' depiction of the events of the early 1960s. Through the theoretical lens of rhizomatic assemblages, the paper examines how fluidity and fragmentation underlie structures such as truth, reality and human agency. It simultaneously unearths how "history slides into fiction" and vice versa (Sethi 1). In the context of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of assemblage, entities—both past and present—are in a constant state of 'becoming,' suggesting that the conjectural idea of a singular 'truth' remains tentative at best. Thus, history becomes as fictional as fiction becomes historical. The paper maps the aforementioned arguments through a Deleuzo-Guattarian framework and analysis.

The 1962 Indo-China War, a brief yet pivotal conflict, was fought between India and China. It marks a significant rupture in the subcontinent's postcolonial military history that was rooted in competing territorial claims over Aksai Chin in the west and Arunachal Pradesh (then the North-East Frontier Agency or NEFA) in the east. The war officially commenced on 20 October 1962 and drew to a close on 21 November 1962 and is recounted as one of the significant events of the Nehruvian era. This paper underpins the relative absence of the historical event in popular historical consciousness and literary representations until recent decades. This silence has, in turn, enabled a space where fiction—unencumbered by state narratives or archival limitations—can imagine, reconstruct and reframe the conflict. By situating *Birdwatching* within this lacuna, the study not only underscores the text's representational significance but also interrogates how historical voids are filled through narrative invention. It simultaneously underlines how fiction, when positioned in opposition to official narratives,

becomes a vehicle for recovering processual histories and interstitial spaces.

A Deleuzo-Guattarian Approach to Military History

This section briefly outlines the methodological framework employed by the paper to undertake a critical analysis of the Indian subcontinent's military past. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari first introduced the theory of 'assemblages' in their collaborative work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). Deleuze and Guattari's critical oeuvre constitutes a radical reconfiguration of philosophy, psychoanalysis and political theory, primarily articulated through their two major volumes *Anti-Oedipus* (1972; translated in 1977) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980; translated in 1987), which together form *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Their scholarship departs from traditional structuralist and psychoanalytic frameworks, offering instead a dynamic ontology of becoming, multiplicity and desire. Central to their project is the critique of representational thinking and the elaboration of concepts such as 'rhizome,' 'deterritorialization,' 'assemblage' and 'schizoanalysis.' Drawing from a wide range of disciplines—including Marxism, biology, literature and mathematics—they construct a non-hierarchical, immanent theory of subjectivity and social production that resists totalisation. The aim of their scholarship is "not to represent the world as it is or what it is, but to survey and map its tendencies or becomings, for better and for worse" (Holland 37; emphasis added). Their work simultaneously inaugurates new ways of thinking about power, creativity and resistance beyond static identities and templated structures.

The concept of assemblages, also referred to as *agencements* in French, underwrites a complex, dynamic network of heterogeneous elements and entities that conjoin to form a unity. These elements can range from the social, political, material, linguistic or historical tangents, which interact in non-hierarchical ways. They describe the idea of unity as follows: "An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its

connections. There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines” (Deleuze and Guattari 8). This illustrates that an assemblage is not a mere collection of parts that exist in isolation. Furthermore, it underscores how each part is connected to a larger whole. The ‘expansion’ of multiple domains results in a unit which is not fixed or permanent, but in a continuous state of ‘becoming.’ Moreover, it retains its characteristic nature of heterogeneity and open-endedness.

The theoretical notion of the assemblage holds utmost significance in the theory of rhizomatic nodes of reality wherein the epistemological and ontological foundations of human history are characterised by non-linear and multiplicative communication links. These links always remain in a state of flux—both developing and dissolving—and challenge conventional traditions of historical fixity and categorisation. The dynamic and contingent configuration of diverse elements, then, challenges the foundational conception of history as a rigid and stable organisation of narrative points. The existing multiplicity of narratives is further magnified by the “discontinuity of word and thing” (Adkins 25). This paper not only interacts with the idea of ‘multiplicity’ but also reframes the notion of the past that merely exists as a linear, chronological painting of historical events. The constellation of relations among historical and literary narratives re-establishes fiction on a pedestal where one re-cognises the entire framework of identity, organisation and power. Through a Deleuzian lens, this study attempts to “create new concepts . . . and enable readers to create their own new concepts by making new connections” (Adkins 23).

By employing the framework introduced by the two French scholars, this paper underscores that fiction and history intersect when situated on a uniform plane. It is significant to study the war through the lens of this underlying homogeneity in order to highlight an alternative version of ‘truth’ that Alter establishes through his fictional narrative. The 1962 Indo-China War stands as an appropriate example of ‘in-betweenness.’ Its textual

renderings likewise exhibit a sense of ‘middle-ness,’ as different genres blend in their attempts to represent history, which this paper will analyse in the following sections.

Stephen Alter’s *Birdwatching*: Reconceptualising War in Fiction

Stephen Alter’s *Birdwatching* is set against the backdrop of the 1962 Indo-China War. It is one of the few fictional texts which narrate the conflict amongst works including Jon Cleary’s *The Pulse of Danger* (1966), Rita Chowdhury’s *Chinatown Days* (2018) and Rupa Srikumar and A. K. Srikumar’s *Mahaveer: The Soldier Who Never Died* (2019). *Birdwatching* is narrated from the perspective of an American Fulbright scholar who, while on his fieldwork in India, gets exposed to the phenomenon of military and ideological warfare. The book introduces Guy Fletcher, who returns to India after attending college in the States to study the migratory habits of bar-headed geese in Bharatpur. In the novel, Fletcher, trained as an ornithologist, undertakes research and fieldwork on this species during the early 1960s.

The fictional text begins in the “unruffled universe of New Delhi in early 1962,” as Fletcher receives an invitation to an American ambassadorial reception held in honour of the visiting First Lady of the United States, Jacqueline Kennedy (Sengupta, 2022). However, during a birdwatching excursion on Delhi’s Ridge, Fletcher unexpectedly discovers a corpse, an incident that subsequently exposes an elaborate cover-up orchestrated by both the Indian and the American intelligence agencies. Soon after, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—a civilian foreign intelligence service of the United States federal government—approaches him, “telling him his fluent Hindi and his cover as an ornithologist are very useful assets” (Sengupta, 2022). After his formal training, he is sent to Kalimpong, West Bengal. Having joined the CIA, Fletcher “mostly follows instructions, but every so often charts his own course . . .” (Sengupta, 2022). He eventually navigates the upheavals of the 1962 war alongside characters such as Captain Imtiaz Afridi of the Indian army,

before the novel reaches its denouement in the remote forests of Bhutan. As the narrative unfolds, Fletcher becomes increasingly entangled in geopolitical affairs and structures of power.

In many ways, the novel engages with broad global contexts, foregrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis, the coordinates of the Sino-Indian War, the competing interests of the United States, the Tibetan resistance movement, and the bilateral relations among nation-states of the subcontinent in the aftermath of the conflict. It resurrects a period from human history that could have concluded in a nuclear Armageddon. The fictionalised account of Fletcher's transformation from an ornithologist to a CIA operative exemplifies how individual subjectivities are subsumed into grand historical processes, yet these processes are themselves mediated through narrative choices. By embedding archival fragments, geopolitical references and temporal disjunctions within the literary form, the novel blurs the boundaries between historical documentation and literary imagination.

The text constructs a hybridised narration where the reader is constantly made aware of the 'constructedness' of both history and stories. This not only destabilises traditional notions of historical objectivity but also illuminates the ontological and epistemological labour involved in narrating the past. Literature, in this framework, becomes a site where historical meaning is contested, produced and continuously reinterpreted. The interface between history and literature reveals how both the disciplines rely on narrative structures to make sense of the past. While history seeks to document events, literature imaginatively reconstructs them, often by illuminating the affective and ideological dimensions that traditional historiography may bypass. Together, they form a dynamic space where fact and fiction converge to produce richer understandings of historical experiences. It would now be of significance to highlight some of these instances which ultimately result in the intersection of the two spheres of knowledge.

History, Fiction, and the Rhizome

This section examines the rhizomatic assemblages that exist between history and fiction. To undertake such an analysis, it is pertinent to highlight Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical formulations regarding the nature of assemblages. On a horizontal axis, an assemblage comprises both 'content' and 'expression.' Meanwhile, on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both "territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and cutting edges of deterritorialization, which carry it away" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 88; emphasis original). This distinctiveness underlined by the two French critics can be traced in Alter's novel. In many ways, the author underwrites the war in a unique 'literary' way. Contextualising the narrative in 1962, the story highlights:

October 22, 1962. Listening to radio broadcasts in the evening, Fletcher learnt that fighting had broken out between Chinese and Indian troops in two separate regions of the Himalayas. The armed conflict had begun three days ago, on 20 October. One theatre of conflict was in NEFA, on the Thagla Ridge, immediately to the east of Bhutan. The other was in Ladakh, along the perimeter of the Aksai Chin and in the Galwan Valley, adjacent to disputed border areas of Pakistan. In both cases the fighting was at high altitudes, between 12–14,000 feet above sea level. (276)

The above extract from the novel illustrates several important details about the war. First, that the conflict took place in two theatres: the Western and the Eastern. Secondly, it underlines the transient and unsettled nature of boundaries and borders. Thirdly, it illuminates that the event was one of the most prominent instances of mountainous, high-altitude warfare. And, lastly, it underscores the temporal and spatial dimensions of India's past. The war between the two nation-states officially commenced on 20 October 1962. Yet, it is pertinent to note that during a Rajya Sabha debate held on 20 February 1961, the then Prime Minister noted that one of the earliest and a "major

advance of the Chinese forces into Indian territory in Ladakh took place in the summer of 1959, about a year and [a] half ago” (“Statement in Rajya Sabha” 381). It is quite evident that the official timeline of the war exists within a disputed domain; the armed operations did not ‘begin’ on 20 October and hostilities continued even after the ceasefire was declared. Although the dates remain historically contested, the novel bypasses this uncertainty around extant ‘objective’ facts and statistics. Instead, as seen in the above paragraph, it mentions in retrospect that fighting began ‘three days ago, on 20 October,’ before shifting its focus to more significant concerns, particularly the transformation of ‘borders’ into ‘theatres’ of conflict—and consequently into broader metaphorical constructs—and the harsh weather conditions endured by soldiers. The novel’s evocation of contested borders and zones of conflict maps itself onto Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of ‘deterritorialization.’ The two thinkers argue that territorial representations always imply ‘vectors of deterritorialization’ (A Thousand Plateaus 382). They further posit that ‘deterritorialization’ is not the contrary of territory, it is a result of creating territories itself (A Thousand Plateaus 433). Alter’s tale further narrates:

In Ladakh the situation was also dire, though Indian troops had been able to hold back the Chinese at several points despite heavy shelling. The arid terrain provided little cover and, as winter was approaching, temperatures had dropped below freezing. Much of the Aksai Chin had already been occupied by the Chinese, through earlier incursions. This area consisted of desolate, high-altitude desert and salt plains, with a few lakes like Pangong Tso to the south. In Ladakh, it was easier for the Indian Army to supply their troops because of airfields in Leh and Chushul as well as a seasonal highway from Kashmir. (277)

It is relevant to note that the Indian ‘Forward Policy’ played a significant role in intensifying hostilities within Sino-Indian bilateral relations. Sanctioned by the Government of India in July 1954, the Policy—which aimed to counter Chinese

advancements by positioning military checkpoints in disputed border areas—initially focused on the Western Sector before being extended to the Eastern Sector in December 1961. Official interpretations of the policy, however, remain contested. While The Brooks-Bhagat Report characterises the Policy as a military initiative undertaken without adequate political backing (10), History of the Conflict presents it instead as a political strategy implemented without the necessary military support (415). Furthermore, these state-authored texts bypass any sustained engagement with the CIA’s considerable involvement in exacerbating tensions that culminated in the war. Such instances point towards deeper structural and institutional contradictions within the civil-military apparatus. In contrast to dominant strategic narratives and political shibboleths surrounding the 1962 war, the paragraph cited above from the novel foregrounds the ‘lived’ realities of the conflict, revealing the human, emotional and experiential dimensions often absent from official histories and military analyses.

The above excerpt from Alter’s work explicates the past and the present by juxtaposing temporal and spatial realities being faced by soldiers of the Indian armed forces. In copious ways, the text not only underlines the historical sphere but also unfolds the ‘lived’ tangents of the war. It states how the “Indian soldiers in NEFA were heavily outnumbered and outgunned by the PLA [People’s Liberation Army, China] forces, estimated as two battalions, equipped with artillery and mortars” (276). It further notes that “[a]ccording to the limited information available from military sources, an Indian detachment had been routed, with many casualties” (276). Situating the text amidst such granular details helps in charting out the political and experiential tangents on a uniform plane of existence. Deleuze and Guattari rightly note that although every assemblage is territorial, it is also deterritorialized; it is in a constant state of ‘becoming’ (*A Thousand Plateaus* 10). The novel sketches the war as much more than a closed historical fact; it highlights its ongoing multiplicity—connecting topography, policy, memory and narrative form. As Fletcher returns to India, in November 1962, the fictional narrative further recounts:

By the time he returned to India on 4 November, there was a lull in the fighting along the Himalayan frontier, though tensions remained high. Neither India nor China had actually declared war, even if that was what the international press was calling it. Mounting casualties on both sides proved that it was anything but an ordinary border skirmish. The PLA had pushed the Indian Army back in both theatres and there were reports in the papers that Nehru and Chou En-lai were exchanging letters, attempting to reach some sort of ceasefire agreement. (303–04)

It is germane to emphasise that the novel underscores how the two countries never ‘declared’ a war. Placed alternately, a recently declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) document, originally written in 1964 and released for public scrutiny in 2007 by the United States of America, underpins how the Hong Kong Communist newspapers were instructed that on “no account was the border fighting [between India and China] to be described as ‘war.’ In discussions, only such words as ‘conflict, fighting, and dispute’ indicating a localized engagement were to be used” (The Sino-Indian Border Dispute: CIA Papers 1964 p.63). Emulating and foregrounding history through such ‘real’ events, the novel contextualises the past in a much more ‘historical’ vein, rather than in a fictional or ‘imaginary’ way. It highlights the role of the media and the international press in accentuating discourses and politicised conversations around the phenomenon of warfare. In the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis (16–29 October 1962)—a thirteen-day confrontation between the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union—the novel further stresses the ‘futility’ of wars, paradoxically noting that most “people [do not] realize how close we came to global annihilation” (308). In its discussion of the Sino-Indian War, while highlighting the unilateral ceasefire that was declared in November 1962, it states:

It looked as if the war would stretch on into December, with temperatures dropping steadily in the mountains

and the risk of snow blocking the high passes. But then, on November 22, the Chinese took everyone by surprise, declaring a unilateral ceasefire, effective within twenty-four hours, and promising to withdraw from most of Indian territory by the first of December. (313)

The paragraph above clearly exemplifies the history-literature continuum which the text attempts to uphold. By injecting minute instances, even if fictional, such as contextualising the ‘first of December’ as an important reference point to access the past, the novel transitions itself from being a mere literary episode to an expansive re-presentation of the war. This is not to contest the objectivity of history; however, the broader argument underlines the unequivocal stance that the past always survives in a tendentious state. A Deleuzo-Guattarian lens helps in identifying that a fictional delineation of the war is “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, [and] susceptible to constant modification” (A Thousand Plateaus 12). Fiction, then, emerges as a form of mapping which is open to reconfiguration, unlike the archive. The historical moments of the 1960s are not static points, but rather nuanced and layered formations of history that are open to reinterpretation and fictionalisation.

The modern practice of ‘bird-watching,’ or ‘birding,’ first became popular as a scientific sport in the 20th century, which included the observation and identification of birds in their natural habitats. Its modern form was made possible largely due to the development of optical aids and resources that enabled humankind to study wild species without harming them. The symbolic resonance of the title *Birdwatching*—including the act of ‘bird-watching’ itself—lies in the novel’s fusion of ecological observation with geopolitical espionage. Fletcher’s identity as an ornithologist is inseparable from his role as a CIA operative witnessing and mediating the war. Furthermore, the chapter titles—drawn from specific bird species including the ‘Asian King Vulture’ and the ‘Great Himalayan Barbet’ amongst others—mirror the shifting phases of the conflict and the

protagonist's inner transformation. Each chapter of the book "begins with a bird description and the bird finds its way into the chapter, often just a flutter of wings, but a happy distraction from the combustible geopolitics of the moment, a sign that the natural world goes on even as men get ready to kill each other over many kilometres of frozen land" (Sengupta, 2022). Through the metaphor of 'birdwatching,' Alter transforms the act of observing birds into a symbolic reflection of the culture of suspicion and surveillance that defined the Sino-Indian frontier conflict. As the protagonist "maintains the fiction of studying birds [after his recruitment as an agent] . . . real and fictional characters intermingle" (Sengupta, 2022). The novel astutely employs ornithological imagery to expose the intrusive and problematic presence of the CIA within the larger machinery of conflict. It simultaneously rewrites the 'recorded' and the 'forgotten' aspects of the 1962 war.

The representation of the 1962 war within the novel also draws attention to the historical silences that surround the conflict in India's collective memory. By giving a narrative form to an event often marginalised in mainstream historiography, *Birdwatching* occupies a critical space between remembering and reimagining. In this sense, fiction becomes not merely illustrative but also constitutive of history—participating in what Michel Foucault would term the 'discursive' formation of knowledge. The Deleuzian conception of the rhizome, with "neither beginning nor end" but always a 'middle' or milieu (A Thousand Plateaus 21), helps in understanding this fictional intervention as non-hierarchical and horizontally expansive, capable of producing meaning through 'connection' rather than 'origin.'

War Narratives and Public-Cultural Assemblages

This section probes into the rhizomatic structures that exist in the public-culture sphere and are demonstrated by Alter's novel. While situated within the sheltered confines of an academic scholarship, Fletcher's journey charts the psychological transition of a young researcher as the war progresses and he is

recruited as a CIA agent. The text not only revisits a neglected episode of history but also interrogates the complicity of academic spaces in reproducing, silencing and weaponising narratives of war. As ‘geopolitics’ gets entangled with the ‘social’ realm, one gets to scrutinise the role played by academic landscapes during national and international conflicts. Fletcher returns to his research towards the end of the book and remains within his secure academic space, even though readers realise that knowledge-production is never neutral.

Despite being a fictional text, the novel *Birdwatching* contextualises the role of literature in creating a ‘safe space’ that, according to common perception, is embodied by academic traditions. War, as a seminal part of human history, finds an ‘authentic’ narration in the novel because the genre has the capacity to accommodate both the cultural and militarised aspects of war. Studying the text as a ‘trans-historical’ verbal object, thus, is significantly influenced by the discussions propagated by Foucault, with the poststructuralist practice carving “full correlative connections between literature and history” (Weimann 263; McGann, 1988).

Fletcher’s transition from an academic observer to an Intelligence agent typifies the fluidity of identity within rhizomatic structures wherein roles, spaces and ideologies are not fixed but constantly shifting. In Deleuzian terms, such a transformation signals the movement from one assemblage to another—where the university, the intelligence agency and the war zone function as overlapping yet discrete territories of power. Deleuze and Guattari rightly observe that there is no cultural ideation or representation, only “operations of reterritorialization that stabilize the aggregate at a given moment” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 88). Fletcher’s complicity, therefore, is not merely individual but symptomatic of larger cartographies of knowledge that operate through connections between statecraft, academia and narrative production.

The academic space that the protagonist occupies is not immune to militarised influence; it instead functions as a

deterritorialised zone where fiction and policy converge. This aligns with the notion that an “assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari 23), demonstrating how even ‘safe’ intellectual spaces are embedded within the affective and operational logics of war. The novel’s portrayal of Fletcher’s academic retreat thus transforms into an instance of ‘reterritorialization’—an epistemic anchoring that, paradoxically, continues to be shaped by the very conflict it seeks to study. As such, the retreat does not signify withdrawal, but rather a reconfiguration of certain epistemologies within academic discourse.

The protagonist’s scholarly practice, far from existing in isolation, becomes complicit in the very structures it attempts to critique. This complicity exposes the porous boundaries between knowledge production and geopolitical power, underscoring how institutional frameworks—such as schools, universities and other educational architectures—are shaped by broader authoritative imaginaries. Moreover, it underwrites the history-literature interface that this paper illuminates, in which history becomes textual and literary texts become historical. The resulting entanglement problematises disciplinary distinctions—including broader issues of nationalism and patriotism—inviting a reconsideration of how narratives of conflict are both constructed and consumed.

The convergence of history and literature in Birdwatching also resonates with the foundational assertion that historical narratives are inherently constructed and shaped by the same tropological and emplotment mechanisms that govern fiction. It highlights that “[n]arrative, or the syntagmatic dispersion of events across a temporal series presented as a prose discourse . . . would represent the ‘inward turn’ that discourse takes when it tries to show the reader the true form of things existing behind a merely apparent formlessness” (White, “Historical Text” 96; emphasis original). Historiography is not a transparent reflection of the past, but rather a narrative act that organises events into coherent, often ideologically charged, storylines. In this sense, Alter’s novel does not merely represent historical events like the

Indo-China War or the Cuban Missile Crisis—it enacts the process of history-writing through narrative entanglements.

The novel's protagonist, Guy Fletcher, becomes an emblematic figure and a postmodern subject—caught within assemblages of scholarship, espionage and affect. His progression from an academic researcher to a CIA agent reveals the entanglement of intellectual spaces with geopolitical machineries where knowledge production is not isolated from, but deeply embedded in, the ideological structures of war. Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the assemblage foregrounds this argument, highlighting how academic, political and personal spaces are never discrete. Fletcher's eventual return to the academic realm does not signify a resolution but a 'reterritorialization' where his scholarly detachment becomes a mode of engaging with—and perhaps rationalising—his complicity. The novel thus underpins the obfuscation of neutrality in fiction and history alike, as both are shaped by forces of political power, social perception and cultural positionality. It simultaneously emphasises the varied strands of 'fiction' that are always contained within historical discourses.

Assembling the 'Ideas' of Reality: A Conclusion

This paper not only explores *Birdwatching* as a tract that portrays the past but also as a rendition that represents India's military history. By examining the porous boundaries between myth, memory, history and fiction, the novel situates narrative shibboleths within the theoretical frameworks of Deleuze and Guattari's scholarship and the broader poststructuralist discourse on historiography. The novel's portrayal of the 1962 Indo-China War illustrates how literary fiction can intervene in historical memory by constructing affectively resonant modes of accessing 'mythical' and 'real' pasts. By doing so, Stephen Alter challenges the sanctity of the archive and reclaims the 'imaginative' space as a legitimate site of knowledge production. Rather than framing the novel as recovering an alternative or marginal history, the paper reads it as an event—a fructification on the surface of historical possibility—through

which multiple strands of the past become visible. By tracing what the historical record documents and what it necessarily filters out, the analysis underscores how these ‘lines of flight’ are taken up and fictionalised within the novel, in turn revealing how subjective fiction adds texture and information to lived reality. Thus, history is approached not as a repository of objective facts but as an assemblage in which the ‘factual’ and the ‘fictional’ continually shape one another.

Angsar Nünning highlights that such narratological categories are “particularly helpful in the attempt to come to terms with the epistemological, historiographic, and ethical implications” of historical novels representing the phenomenon of warfare (359). Through its treatment of spatial and temporal multiplicities—from the Eastern and the Western theatres of war to the high-altitude topography of the Himalayas—Alter’s text mobilises a ‘rhizomatic’ structure of storytelling that resists linear, state-sanctioned narratives of conflict. The novel, while representing a war that ‘wasn’t’ (Verma 2016), underscores ‘contemporaneity’ and ‘history’ side by side on a uniform plane of reference (Anjaria 20). It simultaneously traces the historical specificities of the 1960s through lived ‘historical thought,’ thereby highlighting the cultural sagas that are encased within India’s national history (Collingwood *The Idea of History* 244). This study further argues that the most significant aspect in the conception of language—whether historical or literary—is the connection between its parts, rather than the parts themselves. It simultaneously contends that these connections emerge from the interactions between history and literature in the public-cultural sphere, that is, from a wider socio-historical context. Ultimately, *Birdwatching* demonstrates that the past can neither be fully archived nor completely imagined; it oscillates between documents, memories, silences and stories.

India’s military history, therefore, is not only represented but revived, reimaged and re-narrativised through Alter’s text. It realigns history with the experiential terrain. The novel neither asserts fiction as superior to history nor collapses one into the other; it instead presents a dynamic interaction between the two.

This interplay underscores how histories constantly remain in a state of flux. It simultaneously undergirds the ways in which fiction always carries some part of history within itself. In reading the text through a Deleuzo-Guattarian lens, this paper thus foregrounds how ‘multiplicity,’ ‘deterritorialization’ and ‘assemblage’ function as critical tools for unravelling not just the representation of the 1962 war, but the mechanisms through which knowledge about the past is produced, circulated and critically contested in contemporary public-cultural discourses.

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