

Rewriting the past: Literature myth and History

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Abstract: For the prehistoric people, all knowledge derived from history, because there was nothing else that could be depended upon for the validation of their claims but their lived experiences recollected from the past. Frank Kermode says that we can “no longer assume that we have the capacity to make value-free statements about history, or suppose that there is some special dispensation whereby the signs that constitute an historical text have reference to events in the world”. Devy states that “history is ideally speaking, an interrelationship between facts and narratives, between the course of history and the discourse of history” Derrida’s criticizes Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the ‘end of history’ which points toward the loss of privilege of the discourse of history as a comprehensive genre which is unable to put in perspective the evolution of societies in terms of their future. The pride people take in their family names and heritage is sufficient proof to validate the importance bestowed upon history in the workaday world. The institution of British Monarchy which has no role in the actual administrative mechanism of the country only extends an icon from history which caters to the pride of the British people. Liberal democracy is the one end to which the world was striving to, and it has been reached, and “the ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved upon”. In the Book of Genesis in the Bible, Adam constructs a history for himself for the first time when God asks him where he is, after he had eaten of the fruit of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden.

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The word *history* has its origin in the Greek *ἱστορία* (*historia*), from the Proto-Indo-European *wid-tor-*, from the root *weid* ‘to know, to see’. This root is also present in the English words *wit*, *wise*, *wisdom*, *vision*, and *idea*, in the Sanskrit word *veda* and in the Slavic word *videti* and *vedati*. The Ancient Greek word *ἱστορία*, *historía*, means “inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation”. It was in that sense that Aristotle used the word *Historia Animalium*. The term is derived from *ἱστόρ*, *hístōr* meaning wise man, witness, or judge. The form *historeîn* ‘to inquire’, is an Ionic derivation, which spread first in Classical Greece and ultimately over all of Hellenistic civilization.

It was still in the Greek sense that Francis Bacon used the term in the late 16th century, when he wrote about “Natural History”. For him, *historia* was the knowledge of objects determined by space and time, that sort of knowledge provided by memory. The word entered the English language in 1390 with the meaning of “relation of incidents, story”. In Middle English, its meaning was “story” in general. The restriction to the meaning to “record of past events” occurred in the late 15th century. In German, French, and most Germanic and Romance languages, the same word is still used to mean both “history” and “story”. The adjectival expression “*historical*” is attested to from 1661, and “*historic*” from 1669. “*Historian*” in the sense of a “researcher of history” has been in use since 1531.

‘History’ has always been central to discourses concerning people and society. It had been widely apprehended as a claim of knowledge even in the so called ‘prehistoric’ times when knowledge was disseminated through oral narratives or folk art forms, though not under the rubric of ‘history’. History figured as an important adjunct of philosophy, the earliest known provenance of all epistemological categories. For the prehistoric people, all knowledge derived from history, because there was nothing else that could be depended upon for the validation of their claims but their lived experiences recollected from the past. Since philosophy has its basis in life experience, records of the past were the greatest proofs for the validation of claims regarding right and wrong. History retained its elevated status in the course of time when philosophy split up into multifarious disciplines and discourses.

Each individual constructs concepts of identity and selfhood in relation to the history into which one is born or that which one fabricates. To have a history is a matter of pride for most people, wherever they are. People also look down upon those who do not have, or do not claim to have a history. In the Bible, detailed descriptions of the genealogies of the ‘chosen’ people are found, in the attempt to endow them with concrete identities. The gospel of St. Matthew commences with the ancestry of Jesus, and locates him in the line of Abraham who is revered by the Jewish community. It is thereby hoped that the respect conferred on Abraham would also pass on to Jesus as he is a descendant of Abraham. It is a fact that even the seemingly apolitical act of giving a self introduction is firmly rooted in notions of history. For, when one speaks of oneself, one has to locate oneself in space and time which are the most vital ingredients of history. Stuart Sim claims that “history is the equivalent of humankind’s memory”. Gyanendra Pandey addresses history as “a sign of self consciousness”. It could also be argued that history is a byproduct of self consciousness. In the Book of Genesis in the Bible, Adam constructs a history for himself for the first time when God asks him where he is, after he had eaten of the fruit of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. In that specific instant he reminisces about his own existence and of the things that had happened in his life. He becomes ashamed and self conscious. He realizes his ‘nakedness’. The historian Arthur Marwick says:

[I]t is only through knowledge of its history that a society can have knowledge of itself. As a man without memory and self knowledge is a man adrift, so a society without memory (or more correctly, without recollection) and self knowledge would be a society adrift.

The pride people take in their family names and heritage is sufficient proof to validate the importance bestowed upon history in the workaday world. The institution of British Monarchy which has no role in the actual administrative mechanism of the country only extends an icon from history which caters to the pride of the British people.

It is often obfuscated that history can never be an objective, impersonal account of the past. History can be viewed as a strategic location manufactured for the construction of identity, as nothing has any significance in a historical vacuum. An entity, when it assumes/accepts a name, inscribes itself in history because even a name has political insinuations. Nothing can be understood or thought about without a relation to history. As meaning is a historical and linguistic construct, anything and everything has a historical significance. So, construction of a history becomes imperative for manufacturing and maintaining an identity.

It should not be overlooked that every re-presentation of the past has certain ideological implications. Frank Kermode says that we can “no longer assume that we have the capacity to make value-free statements about history, or suppose that there is some special dispensation whereby the signs that constitute an historical text have reference to events in the world” (The Genesis of Secrecy). No phenomenon is free from value judgment, and everything is coloured by one ideology or other. G. N. Devy states that “history is ideally speaking, an interrelationship between facts and narratives, between the course of history and the discourse of history” (‘Of Many Heroes’ 157). Nothing becomes a fact unless someone makes a statement about it. Facts are not prearranged but are made by people. And, if facts are made by people, they can also be reconstituted or redefined. This is the logic that is central to projects of revision and rewriting of history.

Plato held history as the highest form of knowledge. Literature was considered to be radically at loggerheads with history. This traditional view of history as a compilation of facts which is accurately verifiable and representable is put on trial by post-structural thinkers as well as narratologists. Narrative history can rightly be said to belong to the category of ‘grand narratives’ or ‘metanarratives’ as Jean Franco Lyotard points out. Derrida’s criticizes Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the ‘end of history’ which points toward the loss of privilege of the discourse of history as a comprehensive genre which is unable to put in perspective the evolution of societies in terms of their future. Fukuyama conceives of humanity and the discourse of history as in their final stage of evolution, and posits the present state of affairs as a dead end. Fukuyama’s thesis on history is in a way a rejection of the foundations of history itself, as for him history can no more re-present beyond the present. Liberal democracy is the one end to which the world was striving to, and it has been reached, and “the ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved upon”. The provisional nature of all historical narratives has been clarified by Michel Foucault’s exploration of the epistemic shifts over centuries.

What the contemporary diasporic writers do through their fictional reconstructions of Indian history is the very act of presiding over the ‘dissolution of history’s claim to autonomy’. The ‘history versus literature’ paradigm is no longer taken as valid. Fiction is expected to participate in the truth of history. Fiction and history are not exclusive domains; instead, they are complementary genres. In Ian Watson’s Chekhov’s Journey (1983) we come across the following comment which equates history with fiction:

Past events can be altered. History gets rewritten. Well, we’ve just found that this applies to the real world too... May be the real history of the world is changing constantly? And why? Because history is a fiction. It’s a dream in the mind of humanity, forever striving...towards what? Towards perfection (174).

The comment ‘history is a fiction’ reveals an important insight. It also points toward the motives of writing literature. It is the writers’ urge for ‘perfection’ that fans the fire of imagination, and subsequently leads to fictional universes. History and fiction meet and merge in their search for ‘perfection’.

Myths about the past have always been a fertile ground for the making of literature since the time of oral narratives and folk songs. The elders assumed authority over new generations claiming to know the past, or the myths regarding the past which they historicized through their narratives. Any narrative of history permits the narrator to assert power over listeners or the audience. People of the past were fond of singing the exploits of the mighty warriors, kings and queens which later generations accepted as history. The old English poem Beowulf is in the form of a historical narrative epic. With the formal alterations that literary structures underwent, the manner in which history figured in them also altered in significant ways.

References

The etymological analysis attempted here is mostly drawn from The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed. Clarendon Press, 1989), Dr. Ernest’s A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Co, 1971), Robert K Barnhart ed. Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology (H.W. Wilson Co. 1988) and also from Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History>) which have highly researched entries for the term ‘history’. However, only those details that appertain to this study are retained, and some unnecessary data have been omitted.

The Holy Bible. Genesis, Chapter 3.

Sim has quoted it from Arthur Marwick, The Nature of History (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1970) p. 13.

The similarity between the forms of fiction and history has been instrumental in making fiction a powerful tool in the hands of diasporic writers. Their fictions assume power enough to compete canonical versions of history as shall be seen in the subsequent pages.

See Jean Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

See Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992) and Stuart Sim’s *Derrida and the End of History* (London: Icon Books, 2000).

