



## History And Literature: An Inter-disciplinary approach

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### Abstract:

*All intellectual disciplines are interrelated. History, though a vast subject in itself has intimate relations with a few other disciplines, History keeps intimate relation with. They are closely associated. For a longtime, from Renaissance to the nineteenth century, history was considered a branch of literature. From nineteenth century history got its separate identity as a science, when Ranke denied that history was a branch of literature. Though, we saw in the earlier section of this chapter that the ancient people the primitive tribes always recorded their history and heroic past in literary genres of songs, myths, ballads, etc. However, if history is the record of life, literature is the reflection of life - the substance and the shadow shall always go together. The main theme of both history and literature is man in society. Both these disciplines use imagination as their powerful weapon, although its use is not so liberal in history.*

Nevertheless, the artistic presentation of the result of research is highly desirable. Bury himself speaks of sympathetic imagination and psychological imagination regarding the interpretation of the past. There are many cases in which the truth can only be ascertained by methods, which are not purely scientific. It is here that the imagination plays a vital part. Many historians including narrative Historians of twenty-first century like Hayden White believe that history would retain its graces by remaining close to literature. Many historians of nineteenth century and much before that, like Herodotus and Thucydides, Livy and Tacitus, Macaulay, Trevelyan, Carlyle and Gibbon have used a literary matters like Macaulay on Milton and Addison.

The writing of history has had a continuous interface with literature. Historians have obtained from literature information on what may have happened in the past, the statements then being checked with other kinds of evidences. Literature provides important determinants to social scientists. Also, for litterateurs, history provides a solid foundation of hard and fast facts, upon which the more speculative structure of aesthetic perception and psychological insight may be built. A large number of writers have started incorporating history in their writings. And historians like John Lukacs declare that reformed history "must be imaginative and humane; like poetry, like the great novel, it must be personal rather than ideological. He laments that the modern historians have made the facts an idol and they have forgotten that facts, too, are constructions- and meaningful only in association. "It is the event, rather than the isolated fact, which is the proper concern of historians. In the commendable sense, the genuine historian must be at home with fiction." Zaman Niaz, too, feels the same and says history should not be treated as infallible, and

Please cite this Article as : RAJU JAYASING PATOLE, History And Literature: An Inter-disciplinary approach : Golden Research Thoughts (July; 2012)



if fiction is a construct, history too is a construct. Similarly, in the twentieth century, history, on the surface, developed as a social science; the ascertained past; and, in a deeper and wider sense, it is developing as a form of thought; the remembered past. History, as represented in literature is/can be termed as 'Remembered History'. This consists of statements about the past, rather than history in the strict sense, and ranges from the personal recollections to living traditions of a civilization, as embodied in its scriptures, its classics and its inherited historiography. It may be described as the collective memory of a community or nation - what it or its rulers and leaders, poets, and sages, choose to remember as significant, both as reality and a symbol. Rest is recovered and invented history. Literature/Comparative literatures make reasonably satisfactory companions for history in a faculty of arts or humanities with regards to research and analysis and the writing up of research.

As said earlier, Literature besides supplying source material helps history/ historian in writing 'more nobly and more philosophically'. As Van Alphen Ernst Say, "Relations between events, beginnings and ending, causal correspondences, the systematic opposition of friend and foe, are not so much present in historical reality but are imposed or shaped by narrative structure, or by stylistic devices like metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony - devices that are part and parcel of the historian's discourse." Ancient people as well as historians like Herodotus; Livy etc. took the help of narrative structure to explain 'What happened' in their world. The kind of modern historical analysis was absent in the 'historical' awareness of ancient people. But what we now call 'causality in History' - 'what and why' - was always explicable in their narrative forms and communicable in terms of narrating a story. Lemon, at another place, argues that the logic of life is reproduced in narrative, 'there are, "out there", amidst virtual infinity of occurrences real stories to be truly told and their telling must conform to the logic of narrative explanation. In the early 1970s, A.J.P Taylor, like E.H.Carr, believed that historians impose a pattern on events in the shape of a dialogue. McCullough agrees with Taylor that historians cannot get away from language and words: "almost all descriptions of the world use language (but this)... does not prevent their being true or false." Munslow refers to Ankersmit's conclusion that it is time for us to 'think about the past, rather than investigate it.' Munslow, then says, "This wish can be filled in substantial part by acknowledging the tropic and figurative frontiers in history writing rather than by gorging on empirical science alone."

The separation of historical narration from historical happening had significant consequences: the reduction of history to its discourses had the effect of leveling him distinction between 'history' and 'literature'. Munslow differentiates the past and written history and says as we cannot directly/physically go back/revisit the past,"... we employ a narrative fulfilling a two-fold function, as both a surrogate for the past and as a medium of exchange in our active engagement with it: History is thus a class of literature." As a text or series of texts - evidence and interpretations - history can be understood only when it is situated, as the philosopher of postmodern history, F.R. Ankersmit said in the late 1980's, 'within present day civilization as a whole.' Hence, studying both the content of the past and its interpretation in its narrative form becomes necessary. The 'high' Narrativist historians/philosophers like Dominick La Capra, Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur, maintain that because of its essential narration form, history cannot be categorized as anything other than a kind of literature. They view history as a literary construct. If history occurs as a succession of events without beginning or end, then a narrative structure would have to be imposed in order for history to appear as story. These narrative structures help produce a 'history-effect'. For Roland Barthes (1915-1980), though not a historian, History is just another kind of literature. His concern with the production of culture inevitably generated an interest in history. The history that Barthes was eager to uncover was not the history of things that have happened, but history as a textual construct. He argues that historical narratives function like novels: 'in both we find the construction of an autarkic world which elaborates its own dimensions and limits, and organizes within these its own Time, its own Space, its population, its own set of objects and its myths'.

To Hayden White, the emphasis on the literary character of philosophy and history was not a problem. Indeed, for White the salvation of historical writing was seen to lie in literature and 'in its origins in the literary imagination'. For White, the function of history is to produce stories, which will disclose the condition of the present time. The 'truth' of these stories is for him not the issue. The point is to enliven our vision of the world by offering new perspectives and for the historian 'to participate positively in the liberation of the present from the 'burden of history'. Instead of dealing with empirical data ordered via social theory, history for White is created through poetic, emplotment, ideological and moral decision. Historians, he insists, necessarily employ the forms and devices - rhetoric, narratives, metaphor, and so on - of literature. Thus, history is simply a branch of literature, in which the 'narratives' of historians do not significantly differ from the novels of novelists. In his 1973 text *Mata history*, Hayden White argued that all history writing is basically a linguistic and poetic act. And if we approach history as literature we may even write better history, as we may deploy an additional range of critical apparatuses to the established rules of contextualized evidence. What White is saying is that it is the function of the historian to explore the



employments that may already exist in the past: "The meaning of the plots...by which the events that those lives comprise are endowed with aspect of stories having a discernible, beginning, middle, and end. A meaningful life is one that aspires to the coherency of story with a plot. Historical agents prospectively prefigure their lives as stories with plots." Hayden White agrees that historical events differ from fictional events. But the issue is not the nature of the event. The issue, in 'the fictions of factual representation', is the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble or correspond with each other. He says although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same. According to White, "There are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories.... viewed simply as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in... Both wish to provide a verbal image of 'reality'." The only difference is that the novelist may do it by figurative techniques than by registering a series of propositions supposed to correspond point by point to some extra textual domain of occurrence or happening, like the historian. The domains of human experience are dealt with the both. Similarly, every history, apart from meeting standards of correspondence, should also be coherent; logical or aesthetic, connecting the ' list of confirmable singular existential statements' one to another. So, too, every fiction must pass a test of correspondence and it must be adequate if it is to depict the human experience of the world. Finally, to quote the American historian David Carroll's words on the impact of Hayden White's *Metahistory*: "It would be fair to say that the history profession as a whole has refused to take seriously any approach to history that has the appearance of being too 'literary' or rhetorical. Historians have for the most part ignored or simply rejected the critical possibilities opened up by White's...work... influenced by critical strategies associated with poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories of discourse and textuality."

Paul Ricoeur, another 'high' narrativist, in *Time and Narrative* (1983-85), argues that narrative is the literary genre that provides the best analogy for the actuality of life, as both take place in time. He does not claim that narratives mirror history. Nor he wants to dissolve the difference between fiction and history. He argues, instead, for 'interweaving' of the two. When one tries to think historically, one inevitably has to construct the past in his/her minds like a novel. Thus our historical thinking calls upon the device of fiction. On the other hand, when we make up a story our narration inevitably proceeds 'historically' as if we were describing an actual past. In this way our fictive thinking calls upon the device of history.

From the above arguments, one can closely see the complementary relationship between history and literature. However, use of literature as source material and use of literary tropes in the writing of history does not go unopposed. Scholars raise questions over the use of 'subjective', 'imaginative' and 'fictitious truth' character of literature into writing 'objective' and 'realist' history. The famous English Litterateur Mathew Arnold said any idea of using literature of understands the past or of using historical criteria to assess the significance of great literature is wrong. Scholars say history is a scholarly matter and literature and forms of fiction are a creative matter. Historians, unlike litterateurs, need to develop a structure before them being serious writing. They raise the issue of the fundamental duties of historians - to make contributions to knowledge about the past in as accurate and well-substantiated a way as they possibly can - which are very different from those of novelists. One of the most important points of debate on the relationship between history and historical fiction was the treatment of 'truth' and 'reality' in both history and historical fiction and their respective abilities to arrive at this truth regarding the past. As Hari Narayan Apte put it, "Truth is always a consideration for the reader of both history and literature, but while on watches out for how little the former strays from the truth, it is how close the latter can get to the truth that is important....." Wilhelm Von Humboldt (1767-1835) said the truth, i.e. historical truth is much more threatened by philosophical than by artistic handling. He said intuition, inference and guesswork need to be added for a holistic understanding of an event. A historian needs to take help of historical 'imagination' to reveal the truth. However, his 'imagination' will only be subordinated to experience and the investigation of reality. He calls such imagination as intuitive faculty or connective ability. Thus somehow or the other, in the historical process of 'revealing' a 'truth' the historian does take help of literary tropes like imagination, intuition, etc.

Another argument against the nexus between history and fiction is that the writer of history recounts what actually happened, but a writer of fiction, on the other hand, invents it, which may not be truthful or objective. The historian, unlike the novelist may not invent imaginary characters and attribute motive to them. The historian must proceed on the basis of the primacy of actions and evidences. If the approach of both the disciplines is different "is it proper to use the novel to understand politics and society?" Social scientists search for objective truth and historical significance. The historical fact claims truthfulness, independent research methodology, support of notes and references etc. Roland Barthes, the



French cultural critic, as Munslow observed, goes on to suggest that this illusory correspondence between plain language, historical evidence and historical truth is also to be found in realist novels which similarly appear objective because they too have suppressed the signs of the 'I' in their narrative. One can never attempt to claim that drama and fiction can provide a substitute for history 'that has been painstakingly assembled from the best available evidence and analysis', but one must accept the fact that drama and fiction inspire and entertain and they often teach important truths about the human condition.

Bhabani Bhattacharya builds a strong case on literature's ability to depict social reality. He gives example of Ramayana and Says, ".... none but a shallow-witted critic, caught in the net of his own glib slogan, would indict a great epic of the past such as the Ramayana as being devoid of objectivity. The Ramayana reflected a cultural outlook which is now a matter of historical perspective. The material of this work was true for the age that produced it. More, that truth has had wonderful vitality, enough to make the work survive through the many changing patterns of culture, age after age." He says that the litterateur's duty is to reveal the truth and he does his duty through life, narrating through the devices of dramatization, unlike the cold statement of dogma of philosophers. Art is a vehicle of truth and it must teach and preach. He also appeals to a writer to not fear the word 'tendentious', i.e. promoting a particular cause or point of view, and to continue with his deals, to make life better and keep denouncing injustice and oppression. 'And his pen is a powerful weapon for his fight.' Literary/fictional works are artefacts related to cultural production and consumption. According to Romila Thapar, every narrative has a context derived from a world view and an ideology. Though one can certainly not authenticate a story as history, it can reveal perspectives of a particular time and society. 'A fictionalized narrative cannot be treated as history but it can be an indicator of a past condition.' Walter Benjamin said: 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ' the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."

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