

Literature and History: The relationship between the two

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.*

- T.S. ELIOT

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Technically speaking, 'History' is a record of events that happened in the past. The term applies to "the total accumulation of past events, especially relating to human affairs or the accumulation of developments connected with a particular nation, person, thing, etc."¹

The historians study events and cultural developments of the past. The historians also keep revising the earlier records adding something new to it and revising answers to the historical questions: "The more we know about the past, the better we can understand how societies have evolved to their present state, why people face certain problems, and how successfully others have addressed those problems... Historians know about the past because they look at what relics have trickled down through the ages...they also consult other historians' ideas about a particular question or culture."²

The literature, on the other hand, is the art of history works. Literature when translated mean 'acquaintance with letters'. Broadly speaking, it could be applied to a symbolic record, encompassing sculptures to letters or could mean only text composed of letters. For any great work of literature, the most important ingredient is the 'imaginative power'. It is one of the subjects which evenly abounds in its history and has its regeneration from its history. It has the flair of its various segments like novels, poetry, drama, short stories, non-fictional prose, and several other sections. They have their extensive origins and successions in their regions. The history of literature is the development of writings in plays/fictions/prose/poetry which provide entertainment, enlightenment and instructions to the readers and observers.

Historians had grouped into fields like political history, social history, military history, everyday history, economic history, etc. whereas; literature is the only branch which deals with every aspect of the global history and its resources. Debates on the relationship between literature and history have a long tradition.

Literature has its world of stacks which contain works on the history of various subjects and their relevant concerns. Be it the documentation of the history of the mathematics like the one *Poem About Nothing*, by a Canadian poet Lorna Crozier (b. 1948) which justifies the significance of 'zero'. Indubitably, he might have given a thought on the history of the mathematics before putting it in black and white:

Zero starts and ends
At the same place. Some compare it
to driving across the Prairies all day
and feeling you've gone nowhere
In the beginning, God made zero.³

Literature which analyzes science like Herbert George Wells's *The Time Machine* (a novel) (1895) which proclaimed a deep relation of the history of times with their future. Again Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) is a science fiction to some extent. Based on Ronald Ross's discovery of the malaria parasite in 1895. *Dr. Faustus* (1592) by Christopher Marlowe discusses the battle between science and superstition. *Dr. Faustus* is circumvented around over ambition and avarice based on science. Shashi Deshpande's *The Miracles* (a short story) (1986) relies on the architecture of Science so hence and so forth.

We also have literature on the history of geographies like *Passage to India* (1870) by Walt Whitman (1819-92) which celebrates the achievements of engineers who have designed the Suez Canal, which links Europe, Asia, and North America. Whitman had twinned literature with Geography besides pouring geographical advancement in his works:

Singing my days,

Singing the great achievements of the present,
Singing the strong, light works of engineers,
Our modern wonders, (the antique ponderous Seven outvied,)
In the Old World, the east, the Suez canal⁴

Again, Vikram Seth's non-fictional prose *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1990) is a book which describes the journey from Turfan to Kathmandu:

The land route – for this was a hitch – hiking journey – from the oases of northwest China to the Himalayas crosses four Chinese provinces: Xinjiang (*Sinkiang*) and Gansu in the northwestern desert; then the basin and plateau of Qinghai; and finally Tibet.⁵

Khushwant Singh's *Delhi* (1990) is a historical novel and promoted as a travelogue - reading the geography of Delhi with its ancient lands and their historical esteems.

The history of Arts also has its principal influence on literature like Keats's *On the Grecian Urn*. It beautifully narrates the history of painted Urn and compares it with the contemporary world:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express,
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme,
What leaf - fringed legend haunts about thy shape,
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?⁶

Ruskin Bond's *An Island of Trees* (a short story) (1992) where Koki's grandmother talks of her father and his immense love for trees and flowers. Further, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), a novel by James Joyce, narrates the history of aesthetic and art of nature - a psychological development of a man with his physical growth.

My Last Duchess (1845) by Robert Browning (1812-1889) has a character Alfonso II, a sixteenth century Italian Duke, describes an Art, made by Fra Pandolf. He shows and praises the portrait of his previous wife to an envoy. Alfonso II shows his immense love for his dead wife, who was killed by him on the one side and the other hand he shows his avarice to marry a daughter of an aristocrat:

I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object.⁷

The history of Mythology, too, is revived and repackaged into the literature of present times widely. Toru Dutt (1856 – 1877) brought it as a validation of present era. Her poem *Sita* is a distorted composition of Sita's survival in the hermitage when Ram abandoned her. Girish Karnad too has a deep respect for Indian mythology. Despite the fact that he had lived in London for his studies for some years, he always encouraged his mythological culture and acceptance with the writings of *Hayavadana* (1971), *Angumalinge* (1978), *Nagamandala* (1982), *Agni Mattu Male (The Fire and the Rain)* (1995), *Hittina Hunja (The Dough Cock)* (1980) etc.

The significance of history in the globalized world with its existence in the segments of literature had found its place too, in the literary works. The poems on history like A. K. Ramanujan's *Tribute to Ho Chi Minh*:

Mohammad of Ghor,
Broke Lord Somanatha's nose;
He planted seed in northern women,⁸

Again, Khushwant Singh's *Delhi* (1990) is based on the ground realities of our historical times. P. K. Singh comments that the novel:

...is a queer blend of history, romance, and sex. The chapters of the novel contain the vivid picturization of history commencing from the Mughal period of Zahiruddin Babar and ending to the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The novel sometimes appears to be a fine travelogue when Khushwant presents the vivid pictures of various roads, lane, and historical places of Delhi in its real names, forms, and features.⁹

As for Indian Fiction in English, writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandeya, Khushwant Singh, Bhabani Bhattacharya, and R. K. Narayan and others are widely read still, because they bring in their texts history and our culture.

Up to 1977, it was found that there are 400 titles present in plays because Indian English playwrights found it difficult to decipher their understandings in The English language. But gradually the plays got their significant acceptance in the society. Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Gurcharan Das, Lakhen Deb, Asif Currimbhoy, T. P. Kailasam, P. K. Krishnaswamy and others gave way to the Pioneer plays on historical significance and cultural values. Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Nissim Ezekiel, D. L. Roy, Seth Govind Das, Girish Chandra Ghosh and others had the same approach.

In the realm of poetry, poets like Kashi Prasad Ghose, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, Ramesh Chandar Dutt brought the essence of our legendary historical facts. Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, A. K.Ramanujan, P. Lal, Pritish Nandy, Dom Moraes, Keki Daruwalla have a significant contribution to our national history. Poetry in the modern era has no lesser interest than the poetry of earlier times because they have an indispensable role in imparting cultural and historical knowledge to the contemporary society through their poems.

The history of literature has one more important segment-prose. Its roots are grounded in the deep fathoms of our nation's ground. The freedom fighters, revolutionaries, social reformer, ministers, the common man in India commuted against the British imperialism. Their endeavoring resulted into the written orations, pleads, essays and the suggestions, etc. Macaulay brought the culture of English prose in India. After that, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Madhusudan Dutt, Surendranath Banerjee, Dadabhai Naroji, Swami Vivekanand, Mahatma Gandhi, Bhabani Bhattacharya and many other men of letters presented their works in black and white on prose eventually. Later prose writings were also ornamented by women writers like Krishna Kripalani, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, who raised various issues on the burning topics that had changed the history of slavery.

The history of Politics also has its place in literature that put its potential on the history and relates it to the contemporary period like Lorna Crozier's *Poem About Nothing* which briefs an account on the politics of 'zero' besides its usage. A pornographer escapes by hailing himself Zero in the poem reveals that zero has an influence on politics as well:

Zero is the pornographer's number.
He orders it through the mail
under a false name.¹⁰

Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) is a historical play, but it mainly focus on the politics of the power:

In *Ghashiram*, power is defined 'horizontally' (in the sense in which Maurice Duverger uses it in *The Idea of Politics*, London 1966), in terms of individuals against individuals; from humiliation to revenge in assertion, to eventual victimization; played out against a background of political and moral decadence and degeneracy, with sexuality impinging on strategies of power.¹¹

Dr. Faustus (1592) also reveals the politics of Mephistopheles where Faustus totally trapped and has a devilish behavior which alludes Faustus and traps him into the temptation, distraction, and ferocious power. Faustus meekly obeys Mephistopheles:
Thou traitor, Faustus, I arrest thy soul,
For disobedience to my sovereign Lord.
Sweet Mephistopheles, entreat thy lord
To pardon my unjust presumption,
And with my blood again I will confirm
My former vow I made to Lucifer. (V. i. 74-81)¹²

The humiliation which is out in the novel *Delhi* by Khushwant Singh again is a kind of politics where Budh Singh was killed by the rioters brutally. P. K. Singh writes:

The young gangsters play a cat and mouse game with him...They have and their fun...A boy gets a car tyre, fills its inside rim with petrol and lights. It is a fiery garland. Two boys hold it over his head to his shoulders. Budh Singh screams in agony as he comes down to the ground. The boys laugh and give him the Sikh call of victory; Boley So Nihal: Sat Sri Akal.¹³

Back to Indian languages with particular attention to the historical plays, the Indian drama remained relatively away from politics in the period from 1885 to 1900. The plays were romantic in nature, and the glorification of the Hindus remained the most important inspiration. In 1886, we had Ganapatram Rajaram Bhatt's *Pratap Natak* in Gujarati and *Samyogita Svyamvara* by Shrinivas Das in Hindi.

However, with the partition of Bengal in 1905 patriotic literature culminated in 'full'. The beginning of the 20th century witnessed political ideas emerging as a major motivation for the historical plays. Bhikhari Charan Pattanayak's *Katakabijay* (1906) in Oriya, Muttuswamy Iyer's play *Vicuvanatm* (1906) in Tamil, which depicts an episode from the Nayak period and Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Gadadhar* (1907), in Assamese. However, the nature of:

...the historical plays were determined partly by a strong presence of the influence of Shakespearean tragedies – interestingly, not of his historical plays – and partly by the patriotic vision of Indian history, particularly of the role of Hindu heroes. Krishna Ji Prabhakar Khadilkar (1872-1948), the celebrated Marathi Playwright provides an excellent example. His first play, *Savai Madhavarava ca Mrtyu* (1895), is based on a historical episode but the construction of its story and character- portrayal strongly resemble Shakespearean tragedies, both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. P. Srinivasa Charyalu's Telugu play *Sivaji Charitra* (1897), on the other hand, is an illustration of the patriotic projection of the Maharashtrian hero. Both these trends reached their highest points in the Beginning of the twentieth century, the heroes now are Pratapaditya (*Banger Pratapaditya*, 1903, by Kshirod Prasad.), Sirajudulla (*Sirajdaulla*, 1905, by Girish Chandra Ghosh), Rana Pratap and other Rajput heroes (*Pratap Singh*, 1905, *Durgadas*, 1907, *Mevar Patan*, 1908, all by Dvijendralal Ray), Chand Sultana (*Cad Bibi*, 1907, by Kshirod Prasad and *SultanaCandu Bibi* by K. Shrinivas Rao) and Maharaj Nanda Kumar (*Nanda Kumar*, 1908, by Kshirod Prasad).¹⁴

Other historical plays to name few, we have Gurcharan Das's *Mira*, *Larins Sahib*, Girish Chandra Ghosh's plays *Siraj – up – dowla*(1906), *Mirkasim* (1906), *Chattrapati Shivaji* (1907). Laxmi Narayan's *Maharana Pratap kaDeshodhar*, Jyotiridranath Tagore's *Puru Bikram*, Seth Govind Das's *Ashoka* (1947), *Bhikshu seeGrahstaurGrahstse Bhikshu Tak*, Jayashankar Prasad's *Skandgupta*,(1928) *Chandragupta* (1931), *Rajyashri* (1921), *Vishakh*. Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1962), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2000), *Tale – Danda*, Kshirode Prasad Vidyabinode's *Alamgir*, T. S.Gill's *Asoka*, V. V. Shirwadkar's *Dusra Peshwa*, C. Y. Marathe's *Honaji Bala*, *Lokancha Raja*, Indira Parthasarathy's *Aurangzeb*, etc. Even Alfred Dryden could not escape with our nation's history and produced *Aurangzeb* (1675).

Now the question is why we bring history in literature? Beverley Southgate writes:

The first answer to the question of why we make history – why we write about the past or study it – must be as David Hume asserts in the quotation –“What amusement either of the senses or imagination, can be compared with it?” that it provides incomparable ‘amusement.’ It is intrinsically interesting, and we want ourselves and others to be entertained by it. This is probably the earliest of motivations.¹⁵ He further speaks of the morals of history and its teachings which teach us the rights and wrongs, and their effects on the generations by its incidences:

Moral teaching, though, usually goes beyond a simply attempted presentation of the truth' it additionally seeks to provide good examples from the past for Emulation in the present. This program was set for the subject as early as the first century BC when Dionysius of Halicarnassus made the often repeated claim above, that ‘History is (moral) philosophy teaching by examples.’ By that he meant, like Herodotus and Thucydides before him, that history gives evidence of some universal moral order, in the context of which bad people punished and the good rewarded;...For we can benefit from looking back at what happened to good people and to bad; we should naturally emulate the virtuous and successful; and we may learn from past mistakes.¹⁶

David Hume calls history "as an amusement that brings interest to our senses and imagination. It motivates us, what else we require gaining grounds in our studies. And here lies the power of the imagination (however limited): the imagination of both author and reader, of producer and consumer. Without this, history is ‘Dead Knowledge’.”¹⁷

Historical plays follow two lines of development - one which evokes the past and the glories of the dead Empires and two which creates national heroes and give birth to ideas of the glorious past. There may be many events which are meant to be presented through ‘history’ intelligently, whereas literature has freedom to create the feeling of togetherness through writer's creativity and imagination. The emphasis is related to politics/social scenario and to awaken the latent and dormant national consciousness apart from teaching cultural and moral values.

The historical resumption has been taken care of to study the relevance of literature and history. The segments impart the knowledge of the history of various subjects which develop a globe as an ‘Acme’. Every segment delivers its courtesy on the history of important issues besides reflecting the style and mode of their stories.

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