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HISTORICAL POETRY FOR HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

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Abstract

Where historical texts present records and interpretations of history, literature offers imaginative, subtle and oblique ways of familiarizing the reader with the untold stories of history. Historical poetry goes a step beyond historical fiction to evoke multiple discourses and build possibly subliminal connections between historical information and its subjective processing thus gaining an advantage in its capacity to subsume psychological and social responses to history. This paper proposes that the dissemination of history through commissioned historical narratives customized for young adults and adult students need to be integrated with historical poetry to affect Transformative Learning. The underlying hypothesis is that young adults and adult learners need to synthesize prescribed historical information with subjective representations of history to form a humanistic understanding of the interaction between the public and private spheres of experience. The paper analyses historical poetry suitable to supplement the teaching of history in the spirit of Humanistic Education. Selected samples from the poetic works of the Caribbean Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott and the Welsh born, Portuguese author and critic, Landeg White are examined as supplements to the teaching of history syllabi. Employing stylistic and discourse analysis poetic schemes and tropes are explored to see how poetic texts can structure multiple ways of connecting historical events with individual experience stimulating Transformative learning.

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1. Introduction

The teaching of history is mandatory in schools across the globe. The traditional syllabi are designed as per the state narrative of history. For instance, the genocide of the Sioux in America ordered by Abraham Lincoln does not find its way in the American history text book any more than the treatment of the Sheedis, of African slave descent, at the hands of the local powers in the history text books of Sindh, South Asia. The discourse of the history text book is characterized by dates, measures, names in the general cause and effect sequence of the rational historical discourse which remains a structural imperative of the taught historical discourse. The prescribed history text books are enlisted in what Althusser calls the Ideological State Apparatus. They are icons of state sponsored, or in weaker, debt-bound states, Liberalist sponsored education. They serve to build and strengthen the rational subject whose subjectivity is constructed by the non-humanistic historical narrative. This practice, detrimental to the holistic development of school/college going young adults, continues uninterrupted to this day. It continues notwithstanding the proclivity of the twentieth century for alternative, marginalized histories which attempt to give voice to suppressed and neglected histories.

This paper will use History (singular with 'H'), to refer to the History text books taught as part of the curriculum for young adults/adults and history/histories (with 'h') to signify alternative histories, marginalized, repressed or silenced. This practice I borrow from the historical poetic epic, *Omeros* by Derek Walcott which is also employed as a sample for study in this paper.

1.1. History in Fiction and Non Fiction

Where Historical texts present records and interpretations of history, Literature offers imaginative, subtle and oblique ways of familiarizing the reader with the untold stories of History. Historical fiction has made considerable contribution to efforts at recovery of lost histories for the reader but has not yet been treated with regard by History syllabi for the eternal debate between fact and fiction and the precedence of fact in the binary. Historical travelogues have made some dent in the non-inclusive attitudes of History text books as far as the teachers taking the trouble to recommend their reading to the students is concerned. One popular writer thus recommended in Pakistan is William Dalrymple who has worked extensively upon the history of the Indian subcontinent. Historical poetry goes a step beyond historical fiction. It evokes multiple discourses and possibly subliminal connections between Historical information and its subjective processing thus gaining an advantage in its capacity to subsume psychological and social responses to multiple histories.

1.2. Argument for Poetic Discourse

This paper argues for teaching History supplemented by historical poetry on the basis of the capacity of the poetic discourse to evoke multiple discourses in its reading. The poetic discourse is essentially holistic, a feature taken into account in the poetic texts of the Bible and the Quran not to mention teachings of Rumi, the narratives of Homer or the discourse of ancient Orientals and African *griots*. All stand in testimony to the beauty and power of the poetic discourse in fear of which poets were ousted from Plato's

Republic. Cutting across the barriers of rational prose, poetry is a transgressional art -followed by poetic prose-that has the power to reposition existing discourses by destabilising their established hierarchies.

1.3. Poetry and Transformative Learning

Poetry shares its Transformative and ennobling agenda with humanistic learning whose ultimate agenda is self-actualization as indicated in Maslow's pyramid of the hierarchy of needs. Wordsworth in his 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* and Seamus Heaney in 1998 in his *Redress of Poetry* both allude to the ability of poetry to elevate the reader's plain of experience. Heaney claims that it is the privilege of poetry to balance out the deficiencies of both the existing narratives offering its reader what the world leaves out. Both these poets acclaim poetry as a high art form that can transcend the word of the industrialist, the politician and the propagandist. There is an understanding among the community of poets that poetry is an instructive art providing the readers the ground to empower themselves.

Humanistic Learning focuses on the experience of the individual as does poetry. Both attempt to compensate the deficiencies of the established narratives, traditionally taught to young adults/adults, by prioritizing the human spirit and its essential need and function to actualize itself. Both have a redressing function which is approached through constructing reality in ways that shift paradigms of thought for the subject. The power to learn lies with the experiencing learner (Merriam 2007) thereby minimizing the influence of what is taught in prescribed text books.

1.4. Transformative Learning: purpose, limitations and possibilities

Transformative learning is a branch of Humanistic Learning that translates the humanistic paradigm into the learners' living practice. It is "The process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p.162). Mezirow proposed the theory of Transformative Learning utilizing learner motivation and readiness to reflect and shift paradigms of thought and action in ten stages starting from learner disorientation to assimilation of acquired change into daily living.

Peter Jarvis in his keynote lecture at International Transformative Learning Conference Athens 2011, comments on the rational and somewhat unconvincing nature of the rationally charted organization of Mezirow's ten points of Transformative Learning process. Jarvis presents Mezirow's ten stages of transformation and records Mezirow's stress on 'critical reflection, or critical self-reflection and participating in a 'dialectical discourse to validate a best reflective judgment' (*ibid.*). Jarvis' objection on Mezirow's process is based on its rationality.

Andrew P. Johnson in his essay Education Psychology: Theories of Learning and Human Development (2014) draws attention to the spirit and purpose of humanistic education. He summarizes his key ideas:

- According to humanistic learning theory, education should focus on human development and personal growth
- According to humanistic learning theory, humans have a natural tendency to learn, grow, and develop fully
- Education works best when it is aligned with humans' natural tendencies

- Humanistic learning theory derives much from humanism or secular humanism
- Activities related to humanistic learning, when correctly implemented, complement and enhance all forms academic learning. (Humanistic Learning Theories 8, 9)

His understanding of Humanistic Learning is what poets like Wordsworth and Walt Whitman have ascribed to poetry. Wordsworth in his *Preface to The Lyrical Ballads*, 1805 sees it as the function of the poet to speak to the mind and heart of the reader addressing what is good and natural in the human. He also talks of nurturing habits of the mind indicating the link between poetry and transformative learning.

1.5. Historical poetry: A Holistic and Humanistic supplement to History

The historical discourse is rational and uses language ostensibly only in its referential function i.e. to convey information. However, it performs an implicit conative function in the inscription of its political relations and historical cause and effects. In that it determines its logicity and validity. Language used in the referential function lays claim to truth. There lies its deception or limitation.

Historical poetry may approach learning from a holistic stand point. The target of the poet -not the politician or propagandist-as Heaney argues in *Redress of Poetry* (Heaney 1998) is to forge new ways of perceiving and thinking hence to stimulate self-actualization. Humanistic learning taken to practical proportions targets experienced and learnt paradigms to be assimilated and practised to humanistic and socially valued ends. When this happens, the learning has been transformative which learning poetry stimulates subtly and surely. Poetic discourse with its schemes and tropes celebrates irrationality and transgression. It is iconoclastic of prose structures and well suited for the shifting and dismantling of frames of reference. It is therefore a productive supplement for reconstruction of thought and a field for the prioritizing of otherwise neglected frames of reference. Poetry facilitates Humanistic learning in being attentive to imagination, religion, cultural affiliations and personal experience. This capacity of poetry qualifies it for humanistic/transformative learning of history.

2. Problem Statement

There is insufficient interdisciplinary teaching of history to young adults, leaving the historical record discipline-dependent and holistically incomplete in the minds of the students.

2.1. Control upon the Versions of History to be taught

Structuring and dissemination of history is crucial to the maintenance of the hegemony of the state upon its people. Where it is not the state it is the education funding body that has the power to dictate history and ethics. This hegemony can be countered only in favour of alternative funding authorities. Needless to say, humanity is not the concern of hegemonic forces looking to construct amiable conformists to political authority. Human beings, and their physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological wellbeing is not the target of school/college syllabi. History is taught to inculcate divisions within human beings of different religio/socio/political affiliations. This creates the need for the learning of history centralizing the fostering or violations of the dignity of the human being.

2.2. The Marginalization of poetry in the school and higher education syllabi

Poetry finds no room except in readers for children and Literature Syllabi for adults. It is a marginalized discourse considered fit for the literature student only. Although lyrics and music are an accepted part of most urban cultures poetry as a subject of serious study for young adults is not a norm. Its deliberate marginalization by rational discourses, among those: History, is a cause for concern especially in times that are prepared to allocate resources to the development to the music industry with its reliance on the lyric.

3. Research Questions

The main research question for this study is to find a way to fill up the discursive deficiencies of the prescribed teaching of history.

3.1. Assumptions

The study begins with the understanding that the history text book, its teaching and the testing of knowledge is deficient when weighed against holistic education. It is rational and lacks the emotive and empathy factor. It provides political knowledge and understanding but discounts the human factor which may lead to the transformative learning. The lessons learnt from history give little consideration to individuals and their emotional and psychological needs. This leads to the world being trapped in historical cycles of war and misery.

3.2. Question

The question is how to construct historical knowledge in a way that the statesmen of the future place primary consideration upon human welfare by circumventing situations that lead to trauma and general human destruction. Also, how far does the discourse of historical poetry have the capacity to fill up the deficiencies of the History text book along humanistic lines to bring about transformation in the learners' mind-set?

4. Purpose of the Study

This paper proposes that history syllabi for young adults and adult students need to be integrated with historical poetry to affect Transformative Learning. The objective is to devise methods by which to shift the Historical paradigm in the mind of the learner from the History text book with its concern with political power to the history of the human beings living and experiencing those political decisions.

5. Research Methods

The paper will present for comparison certain features of historical discourse and historical poetry. It will go on to analyse brief samples from the historical poetry of the Welsh born Portuguese writer Landeg White and the Caribbean Nobel laureate Derek Walcott to explore the hypothesis that Historical Poetry can

fill up the humanistic gaps in the History taught to young adults and can therefore affect Transformative Learning.

5.1. A Comparison of the form and objective of the History and historical poetry

Table 01. Comparison of Form and Objective of History text book and Historical poetry

Form of the History text	Form of historical poetry	Objective of the History text	Transformative objective of historical poetry
Linearity	Non-linear possibilities	Information	Empathy
Rational cause and effect	Irrationality in tropes	Political understanding	Humanistic understanding
Pretence to fact/objectivity	Subjectivity	Presentation of political relations	Presentation of the human cost of historical events

Table 01 displays the differences between history texts and historical poetry with regard to their form and objectives

Through the poetic methods of juxtaposition and contrast and the use of irony, Landeg White questions the subject of history in his poem ‘Riddle’:

The history of that land is
 no Roman set foot there
 the turbulence of rivers
 not being history.

The history of that land is
 they did not invent the wheel
 the baobab’s elephantiasis
 not being history

The history of that land is
 they had no sacred texts
 conjuring the first rains
 not being history

History discovered them,
 spiriting away their past
 today their stories
 are of dispossession. (White, 290)

The poem is a challenge to the definition of history and an ironic statement to its omissions. In its form however, it refers to both recorded and the unrecorded history, content that is too irrational, as the rain dance, or apparently non-political, as the sad African reality of elephantiasis, to find space as history is nonetheless an integral component of it.

5.2. The capacity of poetry to address narratives silenced or marginalized in History for young adults/adults evokes multiple historical events/references simultaneously or in close succession to stimulate/forg new links in the understanding of History

Historical poetry stimulates non-linear understanding of historical patterns and draws attention to historical patterns through verse patterns. The following examples are drawn from Omeros (Walcott 1995) from its third book which chronicles the protagonist Achilles' return to Africa the land of his once enslaved ancestors.

Table 02. Features of Poetic Discourse that Challenge Expectation

Metaphor	Simile	Repetition	Allusion
Branches of their river-rooted lives (149)	The river was sloughing its old skin like a snake in wrinkling sunshine (135)	The chained wrists couldn't forget (150)	The men sat with the griot singing from the brass bowl (146)
The parchment overhead of crinkling water (155)	A Ghost Dancer like that smoke (164)	Irons singing round their ankles (151)	To the white sand they remembered, to the Bight of Benin, to the margins of Guinea (149)
Achilles' palm brushed off centuries of repose (164)	An uplifted oar is stronger than marble Caesar's arresting palm (159)	The tinkle from the coins of the river, the tinkle of irons (146)	One elegy from Aruac to Sioux (164)

All examples have been taken from Derek Walcott's Nobel winning epic historical Poem *Omeros*

The above table offers a sample of the schemes and tropes that are characteristic of the poetic discourse. These along with the poetic form and syntax construct the discourse that cuts across the hegemony of prose upon the written discourse and rational organization of human thought.

5.3. The Capacity of historical poetry to usher in multiple discourses: sample study

In book III of the long historical epic in terza rima *Omeros*, Achilles in an unconscious state makes a trip from the Antilles to Africa to meet his ancestors. His name is as were given to slaves once they were imported to the Caribbean. They were named to suit the ease of pronunciation of the slavers. The griot/bard/teller of historical and local tales spoke to Achilles' in 'a note, long drawn/ and endless in its winding like the brown river's tongue:' (ibid).

The character's name, his ancestry, speak of the dispossession of the African slave. The griot himself is an exponent of the oral tradition whose song of its people is natural to the land as its rivers. The history of slavery and dispossession is recorded in terms of the memory and loss incurred by the African. The pain is so deep it that its memory is buried in the unconscious. In an unconscious state, the collective longing (Jung) of his race draws him to Africa. The verse is evocative of race, memory and pain of dislocation the narratives disregarded in any history text book.

Further on the griot's song takes up the Middle Passage, the trans-Atlantic journey of cruelty, mutiny, death and disease from the Bight of Benin to the West Indies:

Our eyes showed dried fronds in their brown irises,
And from our curved spines, the rib-cages radiated
Like fronds from a palm-branch. Then, when the dead
Palms were heaved overside, the ribbed corpses
Floated, riding, to the white sand they remembered,
To the Bight of Benin, to the Margin of Guinea. (Walcott 1990)

The departing slaves are seen in terms of the landscape they leave behind. Their eyes dry out like palms removed from sight withering in the eyes. Their spines curve as they are packed in the low ceiling hold of the ship, so tight they couldn't turn nor breathe, getting a few hours on the deck for air each day. The death rate was so high that the slaves were 'heaved overside' regularly. The verse records the history in terms of the natural environment where the human body is seen as one with the elements. This makes the voyage a crime against nature and therefore utterly evil.

The use of nature in historical poetry serves the other purpose of sensitizing the reader to the rights of the environment. The eco-poetic perspective is a discourse that is prominent in the entire poem. It draws attention not only towards the sanctity of nature but sees nature non-anthropomorphically, a system existing in its own right, on its own principles.

The worst crime is to leave a man's hands empty.
Men are born makers, with that primal simplicity
In every maker since Adam.....(ibid)

The verse inscribes the anxiety of the slaves whose hands were chained and rendered useless though 'The chained wrists couldn't forget' (ibid) the crafts they were used to. The iron smith, the potter and the painter, each longed empty-handed for the material of his craft.

The humanistic discourse is persistent in the historical poetry of Derek Walcott. There is a constant reminder of the money made from slavery and the cruelty done to the slave, to nature itself and to the natural connection between man and nature which capitalism then as now is blind to. These perceptions silenced by the political narrative in history books rings loud and persistent in Walcott's historical poetry. History is recorded not in terms of dates and events but in terms of landscapes and human response to political invasive action. The prioritized narrative is humanistic, cultural and subjective.

6. Findings

Historical poetry encodes historical experience in psychological and cultural dimensions offering narratives that support or challenge history as taught in schools and universities thereby constructing students capable of empathy and critique of prescribed representations of history.

6.1. Relationship between multiple discourses

From the samples of historical poetry above we see that the poetic discourse because of its capacity to state and evoke narratives is rich potential for a holistic learning experience of history. Its focus on the

subjective response to historical decisions and events elicits sympathy from the reader. Emotional and aesthetic engagement of the reader with the art form, style and content ensures a lasting understanding of the human impact of historical events makes history a personal experience.

6.2. Transformation

The humanistic narrative is foregrounded to forever revise and detail the narrative of slavery presented by History. The direct human connection that the learner makes with history makes it a personal experience then understood at its cost to individual and social/racial groups.

7. Conclusion

Transformative learning in the humanities can be significantly enhanced with the use of texts and teaching methods that are inclusive of the rendering of subjective experience with reference to the subjects concerned as historical poetry to develop a comprehensive understanding of history.

7.1. Poetry for Transformative leaning

Poetry because of its stylistic and formal stimulus is best suited for an empathetic understanding of history. Historical poetry then would serve as comprehensive supplement to history text books and classrooms.

7.2. Long term impact of Historical Poetry serving as a companion to the historical text

Historical poetry being inclusive of multiple narratives is a holistic discourse in being that it may corroborate or challenge the history recorded in the history text book but it certainly creates a holistic paradigm of which the historical discourse is only a part. This may well serve to create a holistic vision in the learner's mind who may become the qualified candidate to cut across the repetitive patterns of history to chart a paradigm of peaceful coexistence

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