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HISTORY FROM BELOW: A REVISIONIST APPROACH OF WRITING HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

History from the traditional viewpoint was regarded as a subject dealing specifically with great figures and momentous events of the past. Such one-sided view of history disregarded the perspective of the marginalized people and gave undue importance to powerful and historically important people. But modern historiography has rectified its mistake in having made history a lop-sided subject and attempted a re-examination of the past in the form of new thoughts, new perceptions and an altogether new interpretation of the bygone days. The contemporary trend of studying history is more democratic and balanced in so far as it seeks to re-read such aspects of history as have remained neglected and forgotten in the conventional historiography. 'History from Below' has emerged as an approach that has sought to bring to the fore hitherto hidden aspects of history. The terms 'History from Below' and 'Subalternism' have been used interchangeably and synonymously as both these schools laid emphasis upon unearthing such facets of history as had remained buried in oblivion due to one reason or another. The present study focuses upon the emergence of the perspective of 'History from Below' that due to advent of postmodernism and postcolonialism evolved into a potent tool to study history from a completely distinct angle that foregrounded what had otherwise gone unnoticed.

Literature is indeed concerned with writing about what otherwise remains unexpressed; the agony, the pain, the collective unconscious, the desolate realities, the hidden woes and the indelible imprints of tragic events on human life. Literature acts by questioning and challenging the irrevocability of history through re-interpretation. Literature, an imaginative form of art, can work as a means to break the barriers created by a painful past and give voice to the silenced voices of past. Literature is essentially a vehicle for the representation of history, and it contains insights into the formation of historical moments. It reveals the process and tensions by which historical changes come about. Historical periods are by no means unified entities. Their episodic nature defies comprehension and hence the need to convert the incomprehensible fragments of history into something understandable. Thus history is not a monolith. There are discontinuous and contradictory histories. Historians can no longer claim that their study of the past is detached and objective. We cannot transcend our own historical situation. The past is not something that confronts as if it were a physical object, but it is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds. Explaining the relationship between literature and history, John Brannigan says we should see "literatures as constitute and inseparable part of history in the

making and therefore rife with the creative forces, disruptions and contradictions, of history” (170). History is always a matter of telling a story about the past, using other texts as inter texts. History is not a matter of dates and great events but of politics, ideology, power, authority and subversion.

The term ‘History’ is derived from the Greek word ‘istoria’ that means exploration, inquiry, research or quest for information. The Greeks were the first to define history. Thucydides was the one who put forward the idea that history is philosophy teaching by appropriate examples (Thucydides Web). What he meant by this was that history seeks to provide the quintessence of human experience that has universal value. When lessons are drawn from real life, and when these lessons are ordered to form a coherent whole, history is formed. History thus indicates the growth of the human mind in which the unique facts of life are collected, categorized and interpreted in a scientific way. Aristotle holds the view that “History is an account of the unchanging past” (qtd. in Sreedharan 9). Polybius and Thucydides maintain that history is a story of events worthy of being remembered (qtd. in Surti 31), thereby suggesting that all and sundry events do not go into the making of history, and that only unique, significant and remarkable happenings would figure in it.

Traditionally, history was seen in the nineteenth century “as an empirical search for external truths corresponding to what was considered to be absolute reality of the past events” (Onega 12). History, for ordinary men, means a study of the past of a country, dealing mainly with its political history. It is generally supposed to deal with kings, rulers and monarchs who ruled over a country at a particular point of time. But for the last fifty years or so, there has been a noticeable change in the perception towards the nature and scope of history. Distinguished philosophers and thinkers from time to time have defined history differently and their views on history enlighten us about it.

Juliet Gardiner describes it as “an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (Gardiner 1). Arthur Marwick presents three levels of history in his work. The first level shows that history represents the human past in its entirety as it actually happened. In the second level, history connotes man’s attempt to describe and interpret the past. And the third level evinces history as a systematic study much like a scientific discipline” (Marwick 15).

Carlyle holds the view that history is nothing but the biography of great men, and that it is a record of human achievements, particularly of great people (qtd. in Jayapalan 2). What history requires, according to Carlyle, is geniuses and not masses. Ordinary people who busy themselves with their routine life do not figure so much in history as those who are strong-willed, powerful and intelligent with a clear perception of their destiny and future. Only such people stand a chance to live in history, as those who live valiantly, who send out their ships to unexplored seas, and who live constantly in a state of war. Kant, on the other hand, divides history in two categories, empirical history and rational history. According to him, empirical history is a record of past events written without any preconception. Empirical historians merely look at past actions and ideas and draw their conclusions from the evidence they have found. In contrast, rational historians try to find an intelligible pattern in the apparently chaotic human past. Ostensibly, the rational historian’s task seems more difficult, because world history appears to be woven together from folly, childish vanity, even from childish malice and destructiveness (qtd. in Enoch 31).

The approach known as ‘History from Below’ refers to a particular way of studying history that is quite different from the traditional methods of history writing. Traditional historiography laid emphasis upon the presentation of the dominant ideologies that shaped history. In other words, it dealt with the history of rulers, monarchs and powerful elites. Thus history came to be regarded as a subject dealing with important historical figures and momentous events of the past. What is significant to note is that traditional historiography treated history as something objective and unchangeable. The role of kings, emperors and famous historical figures is no doubt important in the making of history but equally important is the contribution of common folks and ordinary people in shaping history. For instance, in Indian struggle for independence, major political leaders and freedom fighters had contributed a lot to make India free from foreign rule but equally true is the fact that these leaders were supported by the common people whose role in earning India independence can never be forgotten or cast aside. As an approach, ‘History from Below’ seeks to bring to the fore the contribution of such

common people in the making of history. It aims at highlighting something that had remained buried in oblivion due to one reason or another.

History writing has undergone a radical transformation over the last fifty years or so. With the advent of critical and literary theories like Post-colonialism, Post-modernism, New-Historicism and Subaltern Studies ; history writing too has come to be deeply influenced owing to a change in the outlook upon life and its realities. 'History from Below' as a movement originated in 1960s in England with the growing concern amongst people about the lot of workers and labourers toiling in factories and industries. Its proponents such as Eric Hobsbawm, Franz Cannon, E.P. Thompson, George Rud and Shiro Brizand were considerably influenced by the theories laid down by Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci and gradually after enjoying its heyday in England for a couple of decades, this approach came to be adopted by writers of other countries though in a somewhat modified form. In India, its effect came to be viewed in Subaltern Studies group spearheaded by Ranjit Guha who felt the need to give vent to the voice of the suppressed and the marginalized. Important it is to mention here that the approach of 'History from Below' and 'Subaltern Studies' resemble each other in so far as the focus of both the schools is on common people, lower classes, underprivileged, exploited and weaker sections of a society. Both the terms 'History from Below' and 'Subaltern Studies' are used somewhat interchangeably because of their common goal that is to highlight the plight of the poor and the suppressed.

'History from Below' has been variously termed as 'grassroots history' that deals with the lives of the common people, 'people's history' and even 'history of everyday life'. It had begun as a strong reaction against the traditionally documented histories that were exclusively concerned with the political, social and religious elites. It was Ranke and his followers who had established the conventional historiography about the great achievements of the ruling classes on sure footing. A major trend and force in the twentieth century historiography, 'History from Below', is an attempt to write the history of the ordinary people. Peasants, working classes, minority groups, women and their issues, and the unsung heroes of the past become the principal concern of this revolutionary historiographical tradition. It seeks to make history-writing democratic and broad-based by looking into the lives of the marginalized groups and individuals and it further aims at exploring new sources of reinterpreting the past.

Krishna Sobti in an article, "Some Thoughts on Writing, Partition and *Zindaginama*, maintains that a writer must know the difference between official history and 'history from below':

There is a history that is preserved in the archives and there is also a history from below. That too is history which is located through the people who have lived through the passage of times, in the era that official history talks of. The archival papers, accounts and official reports are official establishment versions of the happenings but sources beyond these are also immensely valuable. The common people who live through a certain age are also witness to the passage of history. This is what is meant by the history from below. A historian can record the collective memory and consciousness of these people. (Jain 25)

History is no more viewed and interpreted as a study of the lives and experiences of the powerful rulers and the affluent elites. It has rather emerged as a systematic study incorporating the lives, participations and contributions made by the ordinary people in a particular time of history. The traditional historiography has by and large failed to register truthfully and justifiably the history of unhistorical people. Post-Colonialism, New Historicism and Subaltern Studies have a great distrust for the apparatus of traditional historiography. They find it as an incompetent medium of capturing and representing the bruised memories of human beings, tried and perplexed in real life situations. They attempt to render a more authentic, consistent and interpretative version of history, which is contradictory to the mainstream discourses or official documentation of history. Theirs is a perspective determined by foregrounding the inaudible, marginalized voices in the narrative.

Historians have generally been more interested in making an epistemological break with the past to create the protocol of objectivity, than in producing the "touch of the real". Counter-histories, in the forms of autobiographies, biographies, interviews, oral history, archives, survivors' accounts and most importantly literary narratives oppose not only the dominant narratives on history, but also the prevailing modes of historical

thought, methods and research. Subaltern Studies primarily deal with the history of the losers, with the envisioning of counterfactuals and provisional historical worlds, with delayed and alternative chronologies, with the reality of unrealized possibilities. It has made a noteworthy contribution to the discourse on the representation of history. As a form of “counter-history”, it is very often placed in contradiction to mainstream discourses on history like Nationalist narratives, Orientalist images, ethnic stereotypes, and Hindu majoritarianism. It specializes in representing individual and collective histories ‘from below’. Though basically it originated as a theory of social science in order to re-define autonomous, radical class struggles in modern times, I think that it can also be applied to the literary, cultural and historical studies. It inspires bottoming up the studies of people whose history had previously either been subdued or evaded. Though it primarily focuses on peasants’ insurgency, it also takes into consideration the process of reading history from ‘below’, which invariably incorporates the significance of individual and collective histories. Such individual and collective histories are recollected and conjoined with the present with the help of the synthesizing power of creative imagination and memory, amidst the dynamic flux of larger historical forces and events.

The poststructuralist theories claim that language both creates and shapes reality and their concept of the split between the signifier and the signified have influenced all subjects of study and there has emerged a rather different view of the historical novel. Raymond A. Mazurak makes a pertinent remark when he says, “What is ‘new’ in the historical novel is its treatment of history as a form of discourse” (Mazurak 194). Conventional history writers’ claim to represent historical events truthfully and objectively is no more acceptable and their historical writings are claimed to be shaped ideologically by the dominant discourse. There is no denying the fact that an ideologically conditioned historian cannot see reality in its true perspective and is always blinded by the dominant ideology of his time. In the words of Arun Srivastava, “The act of creating histories, then, is an ideological act, designed to support political and moral systems” (Srivastava 66). On the other hand, the poststructuralist view entails the idea that there are plural meanings and truths as opposed to one meaning and single truth.

Rightly does Greenblatt and Gallagher say in *Practising New Historicism* (2000) that literature has become more historicized and history more literary as a result of the peculiar postmodern condition. The age-old barrier between these two fields of study has weakened due to the postmodernist theory of history. Now history has come to be treated like a fictional work in which the author selects, rejects, arranges and orders the available historical record as per his requirement. Postmodernist historical novels too like historical works attempt to insert history into fiction to subvert historical facts and rewrite them from a perspective distinct from the accepted interpretation. In such postmodernist historical novels, a new interpretation of the past is attempted which highlights the role of the marginalized and the suppressed people in the making of history. Hitherto hidden and silenced histories of the common people also come to be foregrounded through the rewriting and subverting of historical material. The historical novels written in the postmodern era evince the influence of the poststructuralist thoughts which impart a new direction to the understanding of history. Postmodernism has had a powerful influence on several disciplines and history too is one of them. It writes off the fixity of language and text and also the assumed connection between language and reality. In the words of Gertrude Himmelfrab, postmodernist theory of history seeks to achieve “a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past”(Himmelfrab 72).

Hayden White elucidates this new concept of history mainly in his *Metahistory* a treatise on history founded on the theories of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and Genette. White asserts that the only form of representing history is the narrative form. In his *Metahistory*, he lays down the theory of narrative that foregrounds the similarities between history and literature. He avers that traditional historiography makes use of the narrative form to depict past reality and makes it more like a literary work than a work based upon haphazard incidents. Hayden White elaborates on this likeness and parallelism between history and literature in his “Historical Text as Literary Artifact”. He highlights the process of “emplotment” in historical writings turning mere chronicles into stories. To him it is a necessary operation for “histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles”(White 223). Quite clear is the fact that historical records and chronicles seem to be fragmentary and haphazard when seen all alone. The task of

the historian has always been to impart sense to this seemingly confusing and incomplete material and in this sense historian comes quite close to a literary writer for the latter by dint of his imagination imparts plausibility and meaning to what was earlier incomplete and baffling. According to White, a historian is obliged to make a plausible story out of facts through “the encodation of facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures”(White 223). Making stories out of historical events necessitates imparting structural unity to such historical facts. White throws light on how these elements turn an historian into a literary author by affirming that:

... the events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies and the like – in short, all of the technique that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. (White 223)

What gets manifested in the above words is the freedom and liberty possessed by a historian like a literary author to give some structure to the facts he has to make stories out of the chronicles. It is further suggested by White in the above lines that historical facts can be employed by the historian according to his choice which results in the presence of a number of different versions of the story made by the historians out of the same material at their disposal. Past events, according to White, can be traced in documents and texts of historical significance but what is all but impossible to achieve is the representation of the contexts of past events in any definite way. The historian, therefore, too has to invent contexts in order to make past events significant and meaningful. Hence the representation of the milieu in which the historical events take place is as much invented as found. E.H. Carr too subscribes to the view that historian takes recourse to his prowess of imagination to give the structural unity to past events. He asserts:

It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is of course untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order and context... [The] only reason why we are interested to know that the battle was fought at Hastings in 1066 is that historians regard it as a major historical event. It is the historian who has decided for his own reasons that Caesar’s crossing of that petty stream, the Rubican, is a fact of history, where as the crossing of the Rubican by millions of other people interests nobody at all. (Carr 11-12)

Documented history has come to be viewed as the history of the dominant power which leads to the conclusion that the history of minority people has been suppressed. Rightly does Elisabeth Wesseling state that “the absence of ethnic minorities from ... history does not result from some sort of natural, automatic process, but from deliberate exclusion” (Wesseling 66). Postmodernism has emerged as a movement to release literary writing from the influence of dominant patriarchal and totalitarian ideologies. Postmodern fiction seeks to render voice to the history of the suppressed and the subjugated. Postmodern historical fiction does not exclude the role played by the suppressed in the events of history.

Thus, there is much in common between ‘History from Below’ and postmodern view of history as both lay emphasis upon the perspective of a common individual. Postmodernist novelists aim at studying the events of history by subverting historically important events and figures and in this process, a refreshing and distinct picture of past emerges that highlights the concerns and viewpoints of the ordinary people. There is no denying the fact that ‘History from Below’ too seeks to make a study of the past by stressing the perspective of the suppressed, the marginalized and also the common people.

Both Feminisms and Postcolonialism work on the basic premise that women and the colonized are represented as others and so are marginalized. Both try to fight tooth and nail the methods of thinking that silence women and the colonized. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1979) refers to “the historical and ideological process whereby false images of and the myths about the Eastern or the ‘Oriental’ world have been constructed in various western discourses, including that of imaginative literature.”(qtd. in Murfin and Ray 262). Though Said’s preoccupation is with the representation of the Middle Eastern people, it is argued that through representations of non-western people in writings by Europeans, a dichotomy is created between Europe and the Orient very similar to the one created by patriarchy between men and women. What is peculiar about these

European writings is the fact that the Orient is described in negative terms while the West is shown superior. This prejudice on the part of the European writers led to the image of non-western being shown as a 'construct', as the West's 'Other' which suggests the West's superiority. "The Orient was therefore not Europe's interlocutor, but its silent Other," states Said in "Orientalism Reconsidered" (Said 131).

History has come to be viewed as a field wherein women have been silenced. Patriarchal ideology has been preponderant with the hegemony of male and his experiences over female and her sentiments. Woman has been conspicuous by her absence from historical discourses. When history is analyzed from feminist point of view, it comes to the fore that historical records are the narratives of 'great men' and the wars they fought or the feats they achieved, which clearly shows that men have always been at the centre in historical narratives with the all but complete exclusion of woman and her concerns. They are either absent in the accounts of the past or always projected from a male point of view in the monolithic discourse of history that does not allow their difference. Therefore, feminists criticize the traditional historical accounts for being male-centric.

Feminist questioning of history as the grand narrative and Postcolonial historiography work on the same lines in so far as both are founded upon the suppression, and marginalization of the weaker by the powerful. Postmodern feminist thinkers stresses on the fact that women are excluded from history, which further foregrounds the hegemony of patriarchy. Denigrating traditional history for having silencing the voice of women, Gerda Lerner emphasises the necessity to re-write history:

Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centered terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history which are inappropriate to women. To rectify this and to light up areas of historical darkness, we must, for a time, focus on a woman-centered inquiry, considering the possibility of the existence of a female culture within the general culture shared by men and women. History must include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women's past. This is the primary task of woman's history. The central question it raises is: What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define? (Lerner 178)

'History from Below' became popular with Indian scholars specifically because of its challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy. Historical study, particularly of the colonial period, was dominated by a mix of Stalinism and Nationalism. Nationalists viewed the anticolonial struggle in terms of a 'unitary movement' under the leadership of the Gandhian Congress. Communist historians, such as Bipan Chandra, broadened the parameters of 'acceptable nationalism' to include the 'revolutionary terrorists' and the left. Nevertheless both nationalists and communists shared the supposition that the masses of India were awakened to political life by Gandhi and the rest of the Congress High Command. However, the impact of 'History from Below' in the Indian academy concurred with another import from the west - post-structuralism and post-modernism. This collision was significant in that it produced a new and specifically Indian approach that came to be known as the Subaltern Studies group. The exponents of subaltern studies group worked on the same lines as Thompson, et al, in so far as both these literary and theoretical methods sought to foreground the lives and experiences of the suppressed and the silenced voices of society whose concerns and voices were relegated to the margins in the officially sanctioned and approved writings of history, politics, economics, etc.

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