

FOLK LITERATURE AND HISTORY: A SURVEY OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

In this article the writer has reviewed relevant literature to describe the relation between folk literature and the history. In the beginning of the article the writer has discussed what history and its sources are. After that the theory of oral history has been discussed. At the end of the article the writer has discussed the parallels and apart between folk literature and history. Folk literature reflects the political, cultural, and social lives of the people of any area. It has guided the people in the field of psychology and sociology. But some historians say that there is too much subjectivity in folk literature. So it cannot be considered an authentic source of history. The history which is derived from folk literature represents the common thoughts of a nation. People get awareness of the past through it.

What is History?

History, in nationalistic terms, is such a type of knowledge which persuades a nation to gain power. So the knowledge of history is honored. Through this knowledge man can know his past and is also linked with it. The knowledge of history helps man to understand his present. Any nation can get guidance through her history and the coming generations get lessons from it. Various historians have defined history in different terms. According to K.B Smellie: "History is knowledge about the past which is to be found from records which now exist" (1947, p. 73).

James T. Shortwell gives a more prescriptive definition of history as he is of the view: "The word "history" itself comes to us from sixth century Ionians and is the name they gave to their achievement. It meant, not the telling of a tale, but the search for knowledge and the truth." (1922, p. 6). For Archibald Robertson, history is the knowledge of joint part into

whole. "History is a link uniting each of us as an individual with a whole greater than ourselves" (1952, p. 1).

According to The Encyclopaedia Americana' experiential definition: "History is the past experience of mankind" (1829, p. 226). On the other hand The New Encyclopaedia Britannica defines it in disciplinary terms as: "History [is] the discipline that studies the chronological record of events" (Guinn & Swanson, 1974, p. 949).

By keeping in view the above definitions, we can conclude history is such a type of knowledge in which we can study the past. Present always knows the past. We can make our present better by keeping in mind the past. History plays an important role in the ups and downs of a nation. History is such a teacher which tells us about our past mistakes so that those past mistakes may not be repeated. We know the deeds of our forefathers through history.

Sources of History:

Today sources of history are challenged by many critics. It is argued that sources cannot be equalized to law because in history there is role of historians, their own opinions, affiliations and passions. So it is necessary to analyze the sources and historical biographical context of the historians before making a final decision on the authenticity of a work of history. Besides this, government documents, letters, secret reports, commands and personal memories should be studied realistically as they help the historians in writing the history. Contemporary records are also considered the basic source of history. By using them, a historian makes writings a part of history.

A contemporary record, according to Gottschalk is a document intended to convey instructions regarding a transaction or to aid the memory of the persons immediately involved in the transaction. The instruction document may be in the form of an appointment notification, a command on the battle field, a direction from foreign office to the ambassador, etc. Usually such documents have little chance of deceit or error. However,

it is absolutely essential to ascertain their authenticity before accepting their contents. (Rahman, 2005, p. 20)

Another type of historical sources is secret reports. Although their importance is less than contemporary records, yet they are considered a source of knowledge of history.

The confidential reports are not intended for the general audience and are less reliable than the contemporary records. Usually they are written after the event to create a particular impression. The military and diplomatic dispatches are an example of these sorts of reports. (p. 21)

Personal letters are also considered reliable sources of history. As the writer of a letter expresses his personal feelings, so the historic value of the letter is less. But a historian gets help from letters in authenticating history.

The personal letters, which lack the testimony of a skilled observer, are another credible source of history. These letters are usually meant for a particular person, or a family and deal with all sorts of matters. Usually personal letters possess the quality of politeness and esteem which may mislead a reader not conversant with the customs and traditions of the persons who has written the letters. Further, there is also a possibility that these letters may not contain entire truth. (p. 21)

European historians of 17th and 18th centuries have acknowledged the government documents as a basic source of history and has stressed upon the importance of Egyptian written materials. As a result of this, historians have considered that the history which depends upon government records and basic materials is authentic.

Numerous government documents are compiled, which are a source of vital importance to the historians. For example, the government compiles statistics about fiscal, census, and vital matters which can be made use of by the

historians. But properly speaking these complications do not constitute a primary source because they have been compiled by persons who are many steps removed from the actual observation. Yet it cannot be denied that there reports are of first hand importance. (p. 22)

Historians have also found sources of history in the form of autobiographies, agreements, charters and pamphlets. With the help of these they can write better history. According to Charles Oman: “History is to be studied from many other sources—all modern history mainly from written sources—chronicles, autobiographies, speeches, pamphlets, collections of treaties, charters, statistics, codes of laws, and so forth” (1939, p. 26, 27).

Speeches, as stated in the quotation above, also help a historian in documenting history. A historian can reach on conclusion by knowing the psychology of speaker. “Collections of speeches are, as everyone must acknowledge, the most tedious section of historical sources. Their chief use is to throw light on the psychology of the speaker rather than on the course of events” (p. 30).

Finally, folk literature, though somewhat controversial, is also considered an important source of history as it represents the collective thinking of a nation. That is why for writing the real history of people, folk literature is considered the authentic source. “The folklores, which tell us the stories of legendary heroes, are also an important source of history in as much as they tell us about the aspirations, super stations and customs of the people among whom the stories developed” (Rahman, 2005, p. 23).

This means that personal letters, diaries, secret reports government documents, contemporary autobiographies, agreements, charters, pamphlets, speeches and folk literature, are some of the sources that can be invoked by a historian to document authentic history. While all these sources are important, the present paper focuses only the role of oral history particularly the one informed by folk literature in shaping the course of history in general.

Theory of Oral History:

The knowledge of history which is transferred from one generation to others orally through person to person without writings is called oral history. Oral history is as much old as history itself because history develops through lives. Always the old family members have been telling the deeds of their forefathers to their next generations. In this way oral history develops. When we read the basic books on history of the east and the west, we see the deep effects of oral history. We can find easily the oral traditions in the historical books of Herodotus and Thucydides. David Henige writes:

Only the works of Herodotus and Thucydides have survived intact and the work of both, each in its own way, presaged much later historical investigation. Both combined the use of oral tradition with information collected personally from informants. By his own account Herodotus travelled widely throughout Asia Minor and the Near East collecting stories about the past and investigating monumental remains there, so that much of what he included in his work purported to relate to periods many centuries before his own time. (1982, p. 7, 8)

Herodotus collected Egyptian stories and folklorespecially he searched out information about South Asia. The work of Thucydides is different and unique. In the words of David Henige:

Thucydides started recording almost as soon as the war began and continued throughout the 27 years it lasted, wandering from one Greek city to another interviewing participants using these data helped him to include numerous speeches in his work, about which he admitted that he did not aim for 'strict accuracy' but preferred instead to describe what he felt were 'the sentiments most befitting' the occasion on which the speeches were delivered. (p. 8)

They used the oral evidences as basic sources. Their predecessors have also used oral effects in their writings.

European historians of 17th and 18th centuries have considered the government documents as a basic source of history and writings of that era are considered important. As a result of this historians considered that history an authentic one. For a long period of time the criteria of history was government documents. And it is clear from the above writing that the concept of oral history is present in all areas and eras. But this credit goes to Professor Allan Nevins who put the oral history into a separate discipline. He laid the foundation of this separate discipline in Columbia University.

The oral history began at Columbia University in 1948 under the leadership of Professor Allan Nevins. The object was to seek accounts that were never recorded, explanations of motives that do not appear on paper, and other elusive elements of history. (p. 9)

Herodotus has gathered the Egyptian stories and folklore. After Thucydides, many Greek and Roman Historians have used written and oral traditions in their writings. The writings of European historians of middle ages are heaped with the use of oral tradition. Traditional families of Bhat and Dhhadies were present in Europe in that era which knew about the important matters of royal family.

An important early group of what we would call traditional historians were the bards and poets of the Celtic world wales, Scotland and especially Ireland. Like many historians of the day, these people spoke about the past as a way to earn a livelihood and to gain prestige within their own society. (Kachroo, 1985, p. 257)

Those dictator powers who set up their reigns on other lands, they wrote the history of slave nations by keeping in view their own benefits so that they can prolong their rule in those areas. By keeping in view the folk customs of these reigns, history is being reviewed. Allan Nevins calls the folk literature as mirror to history.

Allan Nevins, the founder of Columbia University's oral history program in 1948, is among those who feel that

folklore mirrors history, and he points out that folk songs and legends should be considered in the study of American history. (Motell, 1996, p. 179)

Can folk literature be considered the oral history? According to historians it is also a controversial topic. George Laurence Gomme has given to folklore the status of historical science. He says there is deep relation between folk literature and history. We have found its evidence like this.

It will be seen that the problems which the two sciences, history and folklore, have to solve in conjunction are not a few and that they are extremely complex. They cannot be solved if history and folklore are separated; they may be solved if the professors in each work together, both recognizing what there is of value in the other. History in its earliest stages is either entirely dependent upon foreign authorities, or it has to follow the practice of the earlier and unscientific historian and to deny that there is any history, or at all events and history worth recording, before the advent, perhaps the accidental advent, of an historian on native ground. History in its late stages is dependent upon the person assets of or ability of each historian for the record of events and facts. (1908, p. 35, 36)

Relation between Folk Literature and History:

Philip Jordan, Y.M. Sokolove and many other historians opine that we can express the real picture of a society by viewing its folk literature. According to Motell:

Russian historical songs have been excellent sources of history when approached by the discarding scholar Y. M. Sokolove described how the tendency of the people to idealise Ivan the Terrible led to a departure from historical truth in one of their songs. In the year 1581 Ivan the Terrible, in a fit of wrath, murdered his son Ivan, but in historical song describing the incident, the anger of Ivan

was vented on another son who had been accused of treachery. Other than this one radical departure from reality, Soklov contended the song preserved a great many of the real circumstances surrounding the event. (Motell, 1996, p. 179)

Philip Jordan who is a cultural historian presents his opinion in the following words: "Folklore grows out of the national experience, Jordan states, and an understanding of oral tradition would greatly contribute to those who wish more clearly to understand the historical narrative."(as cited in Motell, 1996, p. 180)

The folklorist Knut Liestol studied the origin of the Iceland Sagas and persuasively argued that under favoring conditions oral history can preserve its core of reality over long periods of them. By a close analysis of oral radiations that originated during the period 930 to 1030 and later were written down in the record-keeping, different from written historical accounts (Motell, 1996, p. 181). According to David Henige, it is impossible to write the history of any era without the help of folk literature. Every single item of folklore, every tradition, had its origins in some definite in the history of man(Henige, 1982, p. 7).

Criticism of Theory of Folk Literature as History:

Motell describes Robert Lowic's criticism of folk literature saying that folk literature can be used in other social sciences but it cannot be considered as history.

He further stated that stories of war and quarrels are not records of actual occurrences but are folklore, as attested to by their geographical distribution. Lowic conceded the point that tradition narratives are significant in the understanding of psychological, social and religious phenomena associated with a tribal culture, but he categorically refused to allow any historical credence to the details of the narratives. (Motell, 1996, p. 177, 178)

Homer Hockett also goes against oral history and says:

Historian can make nothing of them of any positive value, in the absence of corroboratory evidence of a documentary, archaeological, or other kind, for the simple reason that they cannot be traced to their origins. And without knowledge of origins the ordinary critical tests cannot be applied. (as cited in Motell, 1996, p. 177)

Lord Raglon has also expressed similar thoughts by asserting that characters in folk stories are not humans but gods.

Conclusion:

So in conclusion,we can say that folk literature expresses the political, cultural,and social lives of the people of any area.So we can say, to reach the collective thinking,we have to study its literature. Folk literature has guided us in the field of psychology and sociology. But some historians say that there is too much subjectivity in folk literature.Man expresses his own thoughts in it, so it cannot be termed as history.

We can say that folk literature expresses our feelings. The history which is derived from folk literature represents the common thoughts of a nation or culture. We get awareness of the past through it.The people who study other branches of knowledge can take advantage of folk literature. So, folk literature, in part, is history.

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