

ARCHIVES AS MANIPULATORS, DECODERS AND RETRIEVERS OF HISTORY: A CRITIQUE OF *CATACHRESIS* IN HISTORY AND HISTORY WRITING

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Abstract:

In 'Metahistory' Hayden White reiterates that the very process of writing History is all about interpretation - act of interpretation of the lost times. This process of interpretation is one where the historian engages in the arrangement of the collected evidence or facts which he finds in certain order /hierarchy. This hierarchy in the narrative of history is solely not dependent on such facts which are collected by the historian, rather it is all dependent on the historians' interpretation and evaluation of such facts- an act of re-vision, re-interpretation and decoded re-codified subversion of whatever comes in his hand. History thus becomes a process of decoding and re-coding of facts. The last couple of decades have been a witness to the kind of response from history researchers who dive into history and history that is drawn largely from the archival sands. Archives present to the historian with a platter full of facts which are then given a fictionalized character by the historian as per his selective representational approach. My point of argument is that the archives can lead to catachresis (an act of reading otherwise, differently from what is intended in written or said form). I therefore aim to look at archives as a place of uneven dialogic. Are they really the retrievers and decoders of history? Or are they manipulators which can present to the reader / researcher facts some clear, some hidden and mostly unarchived. We therefore should look at archives from our positions of contact zones. As a post-colonial female subject my paper specifically aims to read history (other) wise and attempt to recuperate the "biased catachresis" done on the part of the writer in the process of reinterpreting history thus questioning the very authenticity of the archival evidences and facts.

Key Words: Archives, catachresis, deconstruction, recuperate.

Introduction

(His)story v/s History

[F]acts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation.

E.H. Carr, What is History? (1961)

Among the historians, history critics and the readers of history there always have occurred debates around the dicey status of history and the very act of writing this history. The primary question in all such debates is - What really history is? What is the status of history when it comes to the productions of historical narratives that claim to tell stories of the lost times in a complete form? Also the debate calls for another important dealing - whether we can really ever have a genuine knowledge of a real past and especially a real shared past?

Way back in 1973 Hayden White in his magnum opus of history entitled *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-century Europe* remarked that History writing is a process which deals with

the act of interpretation and re-interpretation of the past. By re-interpretation he meant: revision of texts, of records and any such evidence which was found by a historical researcher/historian. In trying to get to the understanding of the dynamics of this field of exploration, it becomes all the more important for one to understand the historians' technique of writing and assigning the status of truth to all that existed sometime before. Hayden White remarks that the thought processes of a given historian derives not solely from the evidence which he has found, rather on the contrary this thought process encapsulates in advance that which shall constitute the relevant tools from a conscious bent of mind which eventually guide the historians framework. Here what plays an important part in giving reliable definitions to such occurrences of the past are the sources on which the historians' history is dependent for a strong foothold. These sources may vary from chronicles to records to archival dossiers. But again the big question is how true these sources are?

Archives have always been at the intersection of the past present and the coming times ahead of us. They serve a middle path on which one may tread to find meanings of the lost times. "Archive" by and large is a term that stands for the entire extant historical dossiers which are otherwise not easily available to anybody. These dossiers which are remnants in the government buildings stored in heavy files are often the foundation on which many researchers / writers of history rely heavily upon when they embark on their journey of writing history. Eventually all these records which occur as traces in the holdings of the governments treasure troves (the archives), act as the passive material which the historian /researcher/ writer relies and exploits in the order that best suits his historical and cultural purposes. Therefore to a historian, his novel findings in the archival laboratories become imperative in order to write both History and His-story.

Evidence revisited in History: From desk, to shelf, to print

The first step in the writing of history of any subject entails collecting information regarding the same. For this the historian / researcher dives into the archives in order to investigate the traces of truth left behind by those about whom the historian wishes to write. In the process of this diving into the informational ocean of this evidential treasure trove the historians' end up acquiring 'masses' of information. The question that becomes pertinent here is that: when diving and collecting evidence, does the historian / writer/ researcher question the evidential value which all such evidence claims to put forth? In the process of his research the historian does not realize that the records which he looked at were the *traces*, the hazy reflection of that which really did occur in the past. I call the records *traces* because it is similar to the binary opposition dynamics that is at work here. In simple words if there is day there is night, if there is lost there is something found, and if there are archived records there might as well be the unarchived records- therefore 'traces'.

By unarchived records I mean those fonds which could not reach the archival shelf - records which were not recognized at all. They originated somewhere in written or oral form. May be at somebody's desk (the originator who wrote them), but eventually they failed in finding a path that could provide them with a shelf life in the archives. All this is the resultant and functional outcome of the power structures that dominated and dictated their course and their path to these governmental bodies which are called the State and National Archives today. About the functioning of these power laden structures Jacques Derrida goes on to highlight in his *Archive Fever*, "Political power entails control of the archives and hence also of the memory" (Archive Fever, 1995).

All these archives thus become places and spaces governed by power and its politics. This power decides the course of voices hidden and buried under the sands of time. It is this power and its governing fathers who decide which voice is to be given a platform and which voice should be removed once and for all from history and from historical remains that are often housed in the large archival buildings.

Michael Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* serves to throw light on the role of power and of those who are endowed with it. Foucault discusses the concept of the panopticon. The

structure of panopticon stands for power, for surveillance. Benthamite panopticon is a circular prison grid structure which has individual cells. And these cells have a disadvantage and that is that they can be monitored from a fixed vantage point. Now this consolidates containment and control. The powerless is governed by the powerful. The observer is the powerful and the observed a powerless entity. Archives too are same. They are like panopticons. A place where in different cells different information regarding different subject gets stored, but the key to these cells is with the archivist and later with the historian researcher who ventures into the archival cells in order to desiccate whatever comes under his lens. Once the researcher historian is given access to these files records he then observes them single handedly from a fixed vantage point thus conferring power on him; as to what to write about and how to write about it.

The question to ponder at her is that is it right to believe the stories that comes to us as histories from the archival grains when these grains are already adulterated in the very process of their appraisal techniques. The archivist decide which voice goes in , which not and the historian researcher /writer of history decides which voices are to stay in and which move out. Thus history cannot be written and understood from the fixed vantage point. It needs to be deconstructed. The evidential value of the facts needs to be questioned. They cannot be relied at their face values just because the officials of power houses have put their stamps on them.

Thus the need of the hour is scrutiny -scrutiny from both subjective and objective standpoints. It should be a scrutiny by the historian who should set aside his own biases and cultural baggage and search for the true or near to truth evidences and not solely write history from what the archives presents to him/her. Also we as readers should scrutinize the work of history from a deconstructive bent of mind. Reading histories, especially the ones which bank on archival dossiers we should seek to discover the material behind them. We should read such histories with critical approach and in the process, explore impressions which they really intend to produce. This can avert the act of '*catachresis*' in the writing and re-presentation of history.

Catachresis in History

'*Catachresis*' is driven from a Greek term *katakhresthai* , which means to misuse. Technically it means to misuse words. It can be in the form of a mixed metaphor, used either deliberately in error or for rhetorical effect. In historical paradigm catachresis has a much deeper meaning. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in has given a deeper understanding of this concept in order to understand history and history that comes to us as readers from the archival shelves. She defines 'catachresis' as a process that is used to re-inscribe and displace historical truths in the form of records by reading the archives contrarily to its constitution. According to her the very act of reading or interpreting something differently from its intentional version is but the outcome of prejudice which dominates ones thinkable frameworks and is the outcome of culturally and personally driven prejudices.

The bias inherent in one's cultural presentation and representation can be of two types: The personal bias and the cultural bias. The historian researcher paints forth on his canvass a picture of his liking (personally driven bias) and in this process he might use the colours of his choice (Cultural representations that are resultant of cultural biases). His picture can be bright or gloomy as he wants it to be. For example if we take the case study of Indian history being depicted by an Indian historian/ writer like Shashi Tharoor and on the other we read history that comes to us from the desk of a well renowned history researcher from the west like William Dalrymple. Both write history depending largely on records which are taken from the archives. One paints an India to which the British owes repartitions and the other paints Indian history on a canvass where his forefathers predominate. What Tharoor writes may impress many a readers in his home country and disappoint the ones in the West and what Dalrymple puts forth may be liked by the west as well as the people here, for Dalrymple in a deft manner have used the archives as a manipulative tool of subverting history. In one of his interviews in relation to his well-known book *White Mughals* he confidently claims that the readers in the west like his work because he presents them in bright

light and the ones in the east like his writing for his painting a picture of the east that the west was enamoured by and wanted to ape in terms of cultural living. The moment such a declaration is made by any historian, Catachresis is what takes place. History thus becomes his- story alienated, disjointed, owing much 'reparations' to its readers.

Thus historians are never innocent when entering the doors of the archival organizations. They enter there heavily laden with such biases based on their personal and cultural interests sometimes ideologically driven sometimes culturally motivated. And so when they draw inferences from the documents on the archival shelves it can be a catachrestic observation (reading archives differently from their constitution) on their part , which is largely meant to suit their own discreet designs and not the interest of their readers. This in turn leads to production of popular history and not professional history.

Conclusion

Thus we see that History in the archives is an enormous jig-saw. It's like a puzzle with a lot of missing parts. There are ruptures in those missing parts. Foucault's observation, as to how sometimes peoples conceptions of things change in accordance with their self-interests and culturally driven preferences, particularly owing to their own interest in 'power' is a brilliant observation made in this context. He leaves us all with the impression that a historian's interests will inevitably determine the interpretation he / she provides of the past- an interpretation that is most of the time catachrestic (driven by one's personal and cultural baggage).

As a post-colonial female subject I wish to conclude on the premise that if the records in the archival shelves are decoded or manipulated in a catachrestic order, then many narratives might just get buried in the panoptical cells of the archives. Stories may come to us but with hidden ruptures. As readers and researchers of history the need of the hour for us is to delve deep into the “nuts and bolts” of history research and history writing, and decipher the popular from the professional, the personal from the cultural, the unheard from the heard , the unarchived from the archived and that is when history will become (Hi)story.

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