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Original Article

# Prisms of Past: A Study of History-Culture Interface in Colonial and Postcolonial India

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***Abstract***

*This paper examines the interface between history and culture in colonial and postcolonial India by treating literary expression, memory, the body, and popular-cultural forms as alternative sites of historical knowledge. It begins from the premise that mainstream historiography has often privileged official, elite, and written records while marginal or embodied experiences have survived through literature, oral memory, bodily trauma, cartoons, film, music, and song. Drawing on memory studies, postcolonial and feminist historiography, phenomenology, and cultural studies, the paper analyses how individual and collective memory are socially constituted and how cultural forms contest dominant narratives. Particular attention is given to bodily memory and Partition narratives, followed by a discussion of cartoons, film, and music as historically meaningful cultural records. The paper argues that cultural expression does not replace documentary history; rather, it expands the archive by revealing affect, public attitudes, lived experience, and suppressed perspectives that official records frequently fail to preserve.*

***Keywords:*** *history, culture, popular culture, representation, individuation.*

## Introduction

History is never encountered only as a neutral inventory of completed events. It is mediated through institutions, archives, collective memory, language, representation, and cultural practice. This becomes especially significant in colonial and postcolonial societies, where official histories often coexist with memories and narratives produced by communities whose experiences were underrepresented in formal records. The present study therefore approaches the history-culture interface as a field in which competing versions of the past are produced, remembered, embodied, circulated, and contested. Halbwachs's theory of collective memory and Poole's account of the social and normative dimensions of remembrance provide a conceptual basis for examining this relationship (Halbwachs, 1992; Poole, 2008).

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, Welling
and swelling I bear in the tide.

---Maya Angelou (Angelou, 1978)

Out of the ashes of a lived past, comes the potent construct of creative synergies that is at once of time and beyond time. Giving the lie to the Eliotesque dissociation of the 'man' who suffers, and the 'mind' which creates, a cultural expression always becomes the agentic force that helps the creator/writer to cross the bar between being and expressing. History and memory, location and nation, among a few other factors, make and unmake the kaleidoscopic self of the creator and the created. Needless to say, the development and operation of individual and national identities become contextual discourses that must be analysed in terms of structural and behavioral dimensions. One of the most effective ways to do so is through the analysis of an individual's or a community's self-expressions.

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Culture, by extension popular culture, more often than not, represents individual and collective aspirations and, more importantly, the process of self-actualisation of a people. Therefore, a study of history-culture interface is necessary to understand meaningfully the interrelation between an individual or a nation and its sense of history. In the present paper, attempts have been made to study the gap between mainstream historical representations and cultural expressions of the people of this country during colonial and postcolonial times.

**Research Questions**

1. How do cultural expressions challenge or supplement mainstream historical representations in colonial and postcolonial contexts?
2. In what ways do individual, collective, and bodily memory function as sources of historical understanding?
3. How can popular-cultural forms such as cartoons, film, music, and song lyrics contribute to the reconstruction of social and cultural history?

**Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to: (a) examine the reciprocal relationship between history and cultural representation; (b) analyse memory and the body as sites of historical knowledge; (c) identify the role of marginal and gendered narratives in contesting dominant historiography; and (d) assess the value and limitations of selected popular-cultural forms as historical sources.

**Research Methodology**

The paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary methodology. It combines close reading of literary and cultural texts with concepts drawn from historiography, memory studies, feminist thought, phenomenology, and cultural studies. Rather than treating cultural artefacts as transparent records, it reads them contextually, asking who produces them, whose experience they preserve, what conventions shape them, and how they relate to documentary evidence. This method follows the caution advanced in scholarship on memory, cartoons, film, and music: cultural sources are historically valuable precisely when their mediation, audience, form, and limits are critically examined (Gilbert, 2005; Gunning, n.d.; Kemnitz, 1973).

**History, Literature and the Politics of Representation**

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now History
has many cunning passages, contrived corridors And issues,
deceives with whispering ambitions, Guides us by vanities.

T.S. Eliot (“Gerontion”)

T.S. Eliot’s poetic conceptualisation of history, though used in a completely different context, speaks loudly about the indeterminate as well as subjective nature of history as a field of study. In the original usage of the term, there was hardly any difference between history and story, as both were subjective narratives and were products of imagination. The problem in defining history as a discipline stems from its etymological meaning itself, which keeps the field open for subjective interventions and interpretations. Moreover, as Jane Austen pointed out in Northanger Abbey— "But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome." (2007)—history and historical writings have been primarily dominated by the ruling class, leaving hardly any substantial space for the marginal voices within the course of history. However, dominant historical representations came to be questioned by marginal writers more frequently than ever before, especially after the feminist movements had spread all over the world. It happened in history and literature alike, as both have been accused of suppressing marginal voices for centuries. (Austen, 2007)

It was roughly from the fifteenth century onwards that the two disciplines—history and literature—came to be dissociated from one another, at least apparently. History, since then, came to be defined as a discipline, the primary objective of which is to record past events objectively, without relying much on one’s imagination; whereas, literature came to be considered as a genre that primarily deals with human imagination. However, even after the dissociation of these streams, in terms of their presentation of past events, the two disciplines have continued to overlap and intrude into each other’s territories whenever they have taken up past events as the subject matter of their treatment. Historical novel is a classic example of how the two disciplines have intermingled to produce new forms of narration. Thus, the connection between history and fictional writing has always been a reciprocal one, one influencing the other in documenting the past and reproducing the present as a continuation of that past. Even though history originally referred to the written documents of past events, later on, especially post the development of multiple theories in the field of culture studies, the general meaning of history started to change rapidly. Under the changed circumstances, history came to include oral narratives too as its primary source. Naturally, past events and peoples came to be seen and explained from every possible standpoint which changed the nature of history and historical writings in a decisive manner. Historiography or studying history scientifically became as important as history itself. New theories and perspectives, such as subaltern studies, little histories, ethnic historiography, trauma and memory studies etc. were developed within the field of history and historiography studies, which forced the scholars of both history and other

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branches of humanities and social sciences, including literature, to interpret events, incidents and cultures of both past and present from multiple perspectives and standpoints. As such, the line between history and other such branches of knowledge started to blur like never before, which resulted in the rapid rise of interdisciplinary studies across disciplines.

**Memory, Culture and Counter-History**

Memory is given so much importance in modern historiography because of its capacity to store and reproduce both individual and social narratives. Individual memory is largely rooted in personal experiences and also the neural structure of an individual, whereas collective or social memory is mainly captured in common cultural and ethnic practices, oral literature, popular architecture etc. As such, the two types of memory function differently, especially when it comes to identifying historical truths. However, people like Maurice Halbwachs are of the opinion that individual memory has social component in it. They believe that it is almost impossible to dissociate the two as they are conceptually as well as practically linked to each other. Ross Poole reiterates Halbwachs's stand on this: "That I have a vivid recollection of a childhood misadventure is due to the many family retellings of the incident, and even photos of the people involved at the time. Those memories that are not supported and confirmed by my friends, family members, colleagues and the like tend to lapse. What is more fundamental is the fact that the terms in which we experience and recall an episode in our lives are provided by the language, conventions and values characteristic of the social groups to which we belong. Memory, like every other experience, is conceptually structured. On Halbwachs's view, the most individual of memories is as much a social – he would say collective – phenomenon as the rituals and mores characteristic of different social groups." (152) The views of Poole with regard to the relation between individual memory and social phenomena emphasise the social and/or cultural nature of memory. Thus, it is quite expected that both individual and collective memory can be dictated by dominant ideologies and the same can be subject to the workings of the hegemonic network active within a given social set up. Therefore, it is mandatory on the part of a postcolonial writer like Soueif or Faqir to use memory—both individual and collective—with utmost caution and criticality; else they would end up reproducing the same old colonial narratives about their people. In order to avoid such possibilities, both these writers have mixed their personal experiences with the available documents about important political events social happenings in the country which have strong bearing on the process of identity formation—both on individual and on social levels. (Halbwachs, 1992; Poole, 2008, p. 152)

**The Body as a Historical Archive**

In postcolonial narratives, written across continents, mutilated and ravaged human body, especially women's body, has been taken as an invariable source of history, a history that is either suppressed or misrepresented by the mainstream history, mostly dominated by men. Human body is given this much importance because human body can sometimes 'remember' and restore past incidents, especially incidents of violence and trauma, more distinctly than the human mind. Memory has generally been considered as a component of the human brain and recollection of past incidents has been theoretically linked with the brain. However, if people like Elaine Scarry are to be trusted, human body has stronger memory and can remember things more effectively than the human brain. Scarry observes: "What is remembered in the body is well remembered". (109) She justifies her claim by explaining how injured human body distinctly remembers the incidents of war. She says, "For example, the history of the United States participation in numerous twentieth-century wars may be quietly displayed across the surviving generations of any American family—a grandfather whose distorted feet permanently memorialize the location and landing site of a piece of shrapnel in France…a cousin whose damaged hip & permanent limp announce in each step the inflection of the word "Vietnam," and along with the injuries of thousands of his peers assures that whether or not it is verbally memorialized, the record of war survives in the bodies, both alive and buried, of the people who were hurt there." (112) (Scarry, 1985, pp. 109, 112)

Urvashi Butalia in her well-known volume on the history of the Partition of India, entitled *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998), emphasises the importance of studying injuries, both psychological and physical, in recovering the suppressed history of violence on the marginalised sections of people within a society. Body, mutilated body to be more precise, speaks loudly in such narratives of violence and trauma. (Butalia, 1998)

Body is generally seen as a physical entity alone that has different functionalities other than what mind is supposed to perform. The French philosopher M. Merleau-Ponty had gone far beyond the body-mind dichotomy while defining body as something that is capable of responding to external realities in the same way as mind does. His concept of 'bodily subjectivity' rewrites the relation between human body and the world. He notes: "Our body comprises as it were two distinct layers, that of the habit-body [body memory] and that of the body at this moment [body representations]… Correspondingly, my body must be apprehended not only in an experience which is instantaneous, peculiar to itself and complete in itself but also in some general aspect and in the light of an impersonal being." (p. 95) Thomas Fuchs (2012) adds, "This implicit memory is based on the habitual structure of the lived body, which connects us to the world through its operative intentionality." (p. 9) Thus, the general understanding of human body as a mere lifeless vehicle for carrying emotions, which are stored in the mind alone, came to be sharply contested by these philosophers who are of the view that human body also contains emotions and it reacts emotionally to objects and

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incidents whenever necessary. Naturally, body is capable of perceiving as well as communicating emotions independently. Therefore, human body plays as important a role in the process of individuation as the mind or the brain. Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* emphasises this emotional role of the human body. In her novel, she puts forward human body as a political entity, capable of silently, even loudly at times, telling the story of gendered violence and physical displacement. Individuation remains incomplete without taking into consideration the role played by human body in such narratives. Deepti Misri in her conceptualisation of the human body as a living archive of memory, with reference to the novel in question, comments: "What the Body Remembers foregrounds the many ways in which gendered bodies serve not merely as sites or "grounds" of inscription for violence, as feminist scholars of violence and war have so often observed, but also as living archives that house the memory of violence. Equally important, the novel suggests how a feminist literary narration may expose and counter the representational violations of patriarchal memory." (2011) (Baldwin, 1999; Fuchs, 2012, p. 9; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 95; Misri, 2011) Thomas Fuchs, the German Professor of Philosophy and Psychiatry, also highlights the role of body memory in successfully carrying on human history in his article "The phenomenology of body memory". He points out: "Body memory is the underlying carrier of our life history, and eventually of our whole being-in-the-world. It comprises not only the evolved dispositions of our perceiving and behaving, but also the memory cores that connect us most intimately with our biographical past. And even when dementia deprives a person of all of her explicit recol-lections, she still retains her bodily memory: The history of her life remains present in the familiar sights, smells, feel, and handling of things, even when she is no more capable of accounting for the origin of this familiarity and of telling her life history." (20) (Fuchs, 2012, p. 20)

**Popular Culture as Historical Evidence: Cartoons, Film, Music and Song**

**1. Cartoons and Political Memory**

Political cartoons provide a particularly useful example of the history-culture interface. Kemnitz (1973) argues that cartoons can reveal public attitudes, emotional intensities, assumptions, and attempts to shape opinion, while Khanduri's study of Indian cartooning shows how the form became a site for negotiating colonial authority, nationalism, liberalism, and modernity (Khanduri, 2014). In colonial India, vernacular adaptations of *Punch* did not merely imitate British satire; they appropriated its visual language for local critique. Cartoons should therefore be read neither as simple illustrations nor as direct statements of collective opinion, but as culturally coded historical evidence.

**2. Film as Social and Cultural History**

Film similarly complicates the distinction between objective record and cultural representation. Gunning (n.d.) emphasizes that film can preserve details of everyday life, social attitudes, performance, dress, work, leisure, and public space, but its apparent immediacy can conceal staging, editing, selection, and ideological framing. Its historical value lies not only in what it depicts but also in how it was produced, circulated, received, and remembered. For colonial and postcolonial studies, film can thus be approached both as evidence of social life and as an active producer of historical consciousness.

**3. Music and Song as Historical Sources**

Music and song preserve forms of experience that conventional archives often register imperfectly. Gilbert (2005) demonstrates that musical texts can retain the shifting perceptions of communities living through extreme historical conditions, even when such sources remain partial and require corroboration. Basundoro and Afdholy (2023) similarly show that song lyrics may preserve references to actual events and the emotional or psychological dimensions of lived history. Used critically alongside other evidence, songs can therefore contribute to histories of everyday life, marginal communities, political feeling, and collective memory.

**Findings and Analysis**

The analysis yields four principal findings. First, historical representation is plural: literature and popular culture do not merely reflect an already completed past but participate in constructing its meaning. Second, memory is both individual and social. Personal recollection is shaped by language, community, repetition, ideology, and shared cultural frameworks (Halbwachs, 1992; Poole, 2008). Third, the body can function as a historical archive, particularly in narratives of war, displacement, and gendered violence. Scarry's account of pain, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body, Fuchs's concept of body memory, and Misri's reading of Partition fiction collectively demonstrate that history may persist through embodied habits, wounds, sensations, and traumatic memory (Fuchs, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Misri, 2011; Scarry, 1985). Fourth, cartoons, films, music, and songs expand the evidentiary field of history by preserving public feeling, everyday life, and contested perspectives, although they must be interpreted with the same source criticism applied to written documents.

**Conclusion**

The history-culture interface reveals that the past survives in more forms than official historiography alone can accommodate. Written records remain indispensable, but they do not exhaust historical experience. Literature, memory, the body, cartoons, film, music, and song preserve dimensions of identity, suffering, aspiration, public opinion, and everyday life that may otherwise remain marginal to dominant narratives. In colonial and postcolonial India, this

expanded archive is especially important because questions of power, gender, nation, displacement, and representation are inseparable from the production of historical knowledge. A critically interdisciplinary historiography should therefore neither romanticise cultural memory nor dismiss it as subjective. Its task is to place cultural expressions in dialogue with documentary evidence, thereby producing a more layered, self-reflexive, and inclusive understanding of the past.

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