Fourteen Myths, One Legend: A New Historicist Reading Of The Myth Of John Henry In Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*

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ABSTRACT

Myths and folklores are living records of tradition, culture, and beliefs transmitted from one generation to the other. The prologue in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001) presents fourteen variations of the myth of John Henry. Whitehead in his novel, demonstrates how oral tradition transforms historical fragments into a culturally meaningful legend. Instead of John Henry as a fixed heroic figure, Whitehead foregrounds multiple voices, regional claims, racial dynamics, and industrial myth-making that contribute to the development of the narrative. These varied myths destabilise the idea of a single, recoverable historical truth. This paper tends to approach the varied myths of John Henry using the theoretical lens of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism. The varied narrative construction of the myth

exposes the contested and constructed discourse of history. The prologue in *John Henry Days* functions as a metafictional archive of cultural memory. It reveals how power, memory, and culture contribute to the production of historical meaning. Whitehead exhibits fourteen varied competing histories, through which he questions the politics of representation and the formation of identity. The author interrogates the authority of singular narratives, and he suggests that myth not only operates as a preserved fact but also an evolving site of ideological negotiation.

Keywords: Myths and Folklores, Tradition, Regional Claims, Constructed Discourse, Cultural Memory, and Ideological Negotiation.

Human civilisation, culture, and development have been preserved and transmitted across generations through multiple channels like rituals, inscriptions, literatures, and most significantly through oral traditions. Human societies maintain their collective memory through narration, music, and storytelling prior to the development of written history. Myth and folklore developed as fundamental components of cultural consciousness within this oral tradition. Traditions, fears, historical experiences, beliefs, and social and moral ideals are all preserved and passed down by them. In addition to being archives of grace and joyous recollections, they also retain trauma, exploitation, displacement, sadness, and wounds, passing on these experiences, along with victories to the future generations. Thus, myth and folklore represent an important stage in cultural evolution, particularly for colonized, repressed, and diasporic people. They are the only source through which it is possible to turn the given experiences into symbolic narratives stored in the form of culture that is passed from generation to generation despite the tendency for humanity to forget its identity and to be overwhelmed by race or the more powerful history. Cultural memory is not only manifested in the identity of the people; it is also emotional, and the feelings associated with the memory

determine its impact on the generations that carry it. Unlike history, myths are not concerned with truth; instead, they are about how different cultures interpret facts and events and the narrative structure that makes sense for them. R. Barthes in Mythologies (1957) points out that this is the reason why myth is different from history because it turns history into nature; therefore, it accepts contradictions.

Myth and folklore within the African American culture, serve as instruments of survival, transforming collective trauma into narrative continuity. The mythical figure of John Henry stands as an enduring narrative pattern that encapsulates collective anxieties about race, labour, masculinity, and industrial modernity in African American literature. This collective memory of the legend of John Henry has been reinterpreted in Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001). "In regards to the reality of John Henry, I would say he was a real, live, and powerful man, some fifty years ago, and actually died after beating a steam drill" (Whitehead 10). The author tries to blur the boundary between myth and history, thus making John Henry a historical legend. In the prologue of *John Henry Days*, the author has mentioned fourteen variations of the legend. Despite having fourteen variations, they do not weaken the legend, but reinforce its mythic elasticity. Each version of John Henry naturalises a different ideological claim like, regional pride, industrial heroism, racial endurance, etc. This paper argues that the prologue functions as a New Historicist intervention into the politics of historiography.

The Myth of John Henry

The oppression of the African community dates back to the early seventeenth century, during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. After colonising the country, the next initiative of the white masters was to enslave the African race. Millions of Africans were forcibly transported to various parts of the colonising countries. They were forced to undergo heavy physical labour and torture, survive in inhumane conditions,

used as objects; bought and sold as sex slaves, denied of basic needs and rights and much more. After the American Civil War, Africans were approved of basic rights, and freedom. Even after the abolition of slavery, the racial control existed through sharecropping, convict leasing, and industrial labour exploitation. All these methods contributed to the state's capital and also served as tools for re-enslavement. The newly emancipated slaves found themselves either in labour camps or were abandoned. John Henry was one such slave, who was taken away from his motherland to work in a railway construction site. Later, after industrial revolution and the invention of steam drill, he was abandoned. During the transition between slavery and industrial labour, John Henry did not want his race to experience sufferings of abandonment and so he challenged the steam drilling engine. The contest was set between John Henry and the machine that who drives more steel into the rocks would win. John Henry used his entire strength and valour to win the contest believing it will make his generation free from starvation and poverty. He won the race, but his body failed in exhaustion. The legend martyred with the hammer in hand as a dignity of human endurance. The prologue in *John Henry Days* has fourteen distinct variations of John Henry, each offering conflicting details about his birthplace, death, race, labour, and historical significance. The prologue that has fourteen variations are competing discourses that expose history not as a stable record of fact but as a site of ideological construction. Whitehead, through multiple narratives, transforms the myth of John Henry into an archive of cultural negotiation, through which he reveals how folklore explains the ideologies of race, labour, capitalism, and power.

"The steel driving man had many homes" (Whitehead 5). The author had included various versions that he had previously heard from his own people and read about. The author marks in one of the versions that the birth place of John Henry was West Virginia, and that the legend was included in the Appalachian labour history. Another version marks his birth at Alabama, associating John Henry with

Southern railroad expansion. A different version places him in Virginia, intensifying regional competition over cultural ownership. Another variation identifies him as a formerly enslaved man who entered railroad labour after emancipation. Another version portrays him as a free Black labourer already working in the industrial system. In one folklore, he defeats the steam drill in a dramatic contest of human strength versus machine. In another, the outcome is ambiguous, and his victory is debated. Some accounts insist he wins but collapses and dies immediately from exhaustion. Other versions suggest he survives the contest but later dies from heavy labour. One narrative emphasises that the tunnel at Big Bend as the historical site of the competition. Another version claims that the contest never occurred and that the legend evolved from labour songs. Some versions stress his extraordinary physical strength, elevating him into a superhuman folk hero. Others frame him more realistically, portraying him as an ordinary worker mythologized over time. In certain tellings, John Henry becomes less an individual and more a symbolic figure representing Black labour resistance against industrial capitalism. These narrative inconsistencies are not accidental, rather they highlight the processes through which folklore constructs collective memory. Whitehead's strategic juxtaposition of these variations does not question the liability of the myth, rather expose myth as a cultural mechanism through which societies narrate themselves. Thus, the steel-driving man becomes an enduring symbol, into which competing historical reflections are collected, demonstrating that myth is less about origin and more about ongoing reinterpretations.

New Historicism, associated primarily with Stephen Greenblatt, challenges the notion of objective historical truth. Instead of treating history as a transparent background for literature, New Historicism views both literary and historical texts as embedded within networks of power and discourse. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980), According to Greenblatt, identity and historical significance are not found as permanent realities but rather are "self-fashioned" through cultural conflicts. A

text is more than just a reflection of the past. Instead, they often contribute to its productivity. According to New Historicist theory, myth and folklore serve as a platform for marginalized histories to challenge the prevailing official narratives. The cultural impact is not diminished by the lack of clear documentation. Rather, it becomes more intense and leads to additional understanding and interpretations. The conflicts between institutionalized history and oral memory are revealed by the various mythological interpretations of the legend. Whitehead turns folklore into a visible repository of collective memory by arranging the variants repeatedly. The prologue turns into a storehouse of recollections, allowing readers to see how myth gains significance over time.

The core idea of New Historicism is that there is no singular, uncontested narrative. Historical truths emerge from competing voices, institutional authority, ideological struggle, power, and domination. Literature becomes a site where these tensions are argued and dramatised, which is exemplified in Whitehead's prologue. By presenting fourteen incompatible recollections, he undermines the authority of definitive history and demonstrates how myth and folklore are shaped by regional pride, racial politics, and industrial capitalism. The prologue is not just as an introduction but acts as historiographical criticism. It invites readers to confront the instability of historical documentation and power structures, and to determine which version gains legitimacy. These narratives compete for authority, demonstrating how history is negotiated rather than being discovered. Whitehead uses the myth and its variation not just to recollect the hero but stages the processes by which legends are made. By refusing to give privilege to any single version, he resists the hierarchical impulse to declare 'one true account.' Instead, truth appears as a product of power relations and ideological conflict.

New Historicism highlights the flow of social energy within texts. The myth of John Henry is remembered and circulated through ballads, festivals, commemorations, and tourism. The prologue

therefore exhibits how these forms of circulation contribute to myth-making. The legend becomes commodified, institutionalised, and mythologised but, never stabilised. Industrialisation and capitalism celebrate technological progress, inventions, and development but, the myth preserves a nostalgia for human strength, labour, and dignity. John Henry's death dramatizes the cost of modernisation. Whitehead's inclusion of multiple versions highlights how this symbolic meaning shifts across contexts. Some recollections account John Henry as a hero; others portray him as an exploited slave/labour. These differences reveal changing attitude towards labour and race. During the rise of industrialisation and capitalism, myth served as a romanticisation of labour. In contemporary reinterpretations, myth often functions as a critic. The prologue captures these ideological transformations. The myth of the legend remains unresolved, like the historical realities of racial labour and exploitation. New Historicism situates literary texts within the conditions of power. The prologue thus exhibits how industrial modernity reshapes collective memory.

The structure of the prologue resembles an archival compilation. Each variation exhibits a historical note, citation, or ethnographic fragment. This archive alignment of the variations aligns with New Historicist methodology, which often juxtaposes literary and non-literary texts to reveal discursive tension. Whitehead's prologue performs a similar juxtaposition internally. By assembling contradictory accounts, he exposes the mechanics of archival authority. The archive, often assumed to preserve truth, becomes a site of ambiguity. Documentation does not eliminate uncertainty, but multiplies it, as history is documented and dominated by the powerful. In this way, the prologue delves broader into the concerns of the novel, which examines the historical commodification and dominance. The legend, John Henry is not just remembered but is celebrated through centuries despite the never-ending debates over his life and death. The archival structure demonstrates how people in power attempt to stabilise one fixed meaning, even when folklore is

open to reinterpretations. New Historicism teaches that archives are not just neutral repositories of memory, but instruments of power and dominance. The varied myths about John Henry's birthplace reveal deeper struggles over cultural ownership and single truth. Each region seeks to claim the hero as its own, transforming folklore into territorial identity.

African American folklore has historically functioned as a counter-narrative to the dominant historical discourse. John Henry stands one among many other African or other colonised warriors symbolising endurance and resilience in the face of exploitation. His myth has also been included in the mainstream American mythology. Sometimes it is stripped of its racial specificity. Whitehead's prologue exposes this tension. By presenting multiple claims without resolution, he demonstrates how cultural memory becomes a battleground. It remains contested, reflecting Africa's fractured history in American society. Through a New Historicist lens, these regional and racial claims illustrate how identity is constructed through narrative assertion. The prologue does not verdict over the authenticity rather, it reveals the processes by which authenticity is claimed.

The fourteen different myths of John Henry in the prologue of *John Henry Days* constitute a theoretical statement about history and how it has been carried through ages. Through multiplicity of narratives, Whitehead destabilises the authority of single historical truth and also foregrounds the ideological forces that shape myth and memory. This paper argues that the prologue transforms folklore into an archive of competing discourses in accordance to the theoretical lens of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism. The legend of John Henry emerges as an evolving cultural text shaped by race, labour, region, and capitalism rather than being a recoverable and liable fact. Each variation reveals how history is constructed through power and negotiation, rather that history being preserved intact. As an African American author, Whitehead has strived hard to bring the erased history of the victims to the light modern

era. By including fourteen incompatible histories, Whitehead invites readers to question the very foundations of history through which Whitehead strongly suggests that myth does not conceal truth, but exposes the processes by which truth is made. Whitehead's *John Henry Days* situates itself within contemporary debates about memory, representation, and cultural authority. John Henry survives not because he is historically verified, but because his act of endurance continues to circulate as a site of ideological struggle. The present study opens several opportunities for future research. A comparative analysis between *John Henry Days* and other neo-historical or revisionist narratives that reinterpret folklore through postmodern techniques can be initiated. New researches may be developed by incorporating cultural memory studies, or postcolonial perspectives to further examine how myth exhibits collective suffering. Also the interdisciplinary researches connected with folklore studies, media studies, and cultural anthropology could explore and explain how the myth of John Henry continues to circulate in contemporary festivals, tourism, and digital platforms.

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