CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

It is a rewarding and enlightening question to ask if an imaginative work could be used as a source of history. Historians generally hold the view that imaginative literature can be used as a source of history, but its use should be confined only to its status as a primary source. They mean that, since a creative or imaginative writing is the product of influences from the particular time in which the writer is attempting the work, it is possible to have traces from the contemporary times of the particular writer being carried on to his creation. This does not mean that any literary work is essentially a primary source, for no one can clearly establish the amount of imagination that has gone to embellish the historical traces, if any, from the writer's own times. However, since the imaginative writer has no recourse to the past and since his methodology does not require that he makes a research into the documents and evidences the way a trained historian does, his work cannot be treated as a secondary source.

What is implied in the stance stated above is a refusal of the historians in general to accept something for history at the absence of evidences. Here is the relevance of the anxiety of imaginative writers with regard to the history of individuals, peoples and events that cannot be written for want of evidences. The issue is particularly relevant in the case of the need for constructing history of people who are vanquished or are no more in power. It
would be inhuman to insist on evidences for events and people who are suppressed or even wiped of from the face of the earth by people in power. The anxiety could also emerge from a dissatisfaction with regard to the existing interpretations of the already known facts. It is from such or a similar anxiety the phenomenon of the indispensable communion or fellowship of a historian and an imaginative writer emerges. This is not, necessarily a meeting of two different persons: rather, it implies a particular process of creativity whereby the factual necessity of a historian and imaginative freedom of a 'poet' coalesce and help produce a work that may elude both the traditional historians and ivory towers' artists. For, a particular work that combines imagination and an irrepressible historical necessity tend to transcend the traditional approaches of both history and literature.

The Portuguese national poet Luis Vaz de Camões's sixteenth century epic, Os Lusiadas, is believed to be such a unique work that combines the elements of both history and imaginative literature. The general perspective taken in the present study is that literature can be used as a source of history - primary as well as secondary - provided that the work in question is subjected to rigorous generic analysis and the reader is prepared to exploit the freedom which the imaginative garb of the work allows, enabling the reader to take sides with competing views polyphonically. What is basically needed for such an exercise to be fruitful is to first reexamine one’s own views on the existing definitions and assumptions of history as well as literature. The exercise, therefore, began with a study of the nature of history today in order to realize
how the contemporary thoughts of history and those of literature tend to appropriate each other so creatively that the confluence still furthers the on-going humanizing process of both the disciplines of history and literature. The important findings of such an analysis can be summed up as follows.

Chapter I: Introduction: Is History Literature, or Vice Versa? attempted to delineate nature of history, role of imagination in history and the ‘historical’ dimension of literature itself.

While defining the nature of history, it is difficult to overlook the fact that a historical account is impossible without the mediation of language and the structuring or ordering of otherwise disparate facts into a comprehensible whole. This means that the activity of writing history renders imagination an essential ingredient of historical narrative. In other words, historian has to be conscious of form and method as much of facts he is trying to organize. He has also to attend to the politics of source that has come into existence through explicit as well as implicit interests. Imagination comes to the fore also because of the distance between the source and the historian, as well as the perspective from which he is trying to interpret the source. The so-called impartiality of history becomes still more complex by the idea of grand narrative and an insistence of sources which in turn seem to suppress histories of the vanquished who are, naturally, bereft of traces of history.

In the light of these considerations, a tendency is noticed among some literary critics and intellectual historians to look at imaginative literature itself as source for alternative histories. Since imagination itself is a legitimate
ingredient of literature, a literary source grants the reader the liberating experience of looking at history from multiple perspectives. As centres constantly shift in the reading of a literary source, history seems to emancipate the reader from the strictures of monolithic voice of traditional historical narratives.

Luís Vaz de Camões’s Os Lusiadas (1572), by its nature of being an epic, is a work enriched by the use of imagination in transforming a past not merely into history but even into a memory of a nation. The work is a Renaissance epic and Camões attempts to invest in it a history that spans from the beginning of Portugal till the peak of the overseas expansion of Portuguese Oriental empire. The facts that Camões follows chronicles faithfully, and that he himself followed da Gama’s sea-route to India, render the work unique among world epics. Perhaps being the only epic in the world that uses an unprecedented amount of history as its subject matter, Os Lusiadas requires to be seriously examined as a case study to seek fresh answers to the question of treating literature as a source of history.

Chapter II: Reading or Experience?: Formation of Os Lusiadas attempted to examine the background and influences that have gone into the making of Camões’s epic.

Among the influences and sources that have contributed to the creation of Os Lusiadas, are Aenied, Metamorphoses, the Bible and mythology. In addition to these, the faithfulness of Camões in following the chroniclers is amazing. Some of the works critics often quote in this connection are
Décadas of João de Barros, História do Descobrimento e Conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses by Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, Roteiro da Primeira Viagem de Vasco da Gama by Álvaro Velho and Crônica d'el Rei D. Manuel by Damião de Goes. The historical context of the Renaissance, the national urgency which Camões understood, should boost the vision of the Portuguese, his own experience at sea attesting that of Vasco da Gama and his mariners, the poet’s conception of history in the light of his Christian faith, have all helped the formation of the epic.

From a historian’s point of view, Os Lusiadas appears to take after the nature of chronicled history primarily because the work has been fed by the historical sources of the time as well as by the writer’s personal experience of sailing to and living in the Orient. As a work fed by literary sources and myths, Os Lusiadas has further contributed to the transformation of history into the pleasure of reading an imaginative literature. Imagination has helped the admixture of his reading and experience to do away with the missing pages in history for the sake of a comprehensive whole.

The chapter has further attempted to give particular focus on the life at sea as revealed in the epic in order to highlight the possible input of the personal experience of the poet in his work. Though the historian in him furnishes the reader with facts, as an imaginative writer his tolerance for the lack of evidences in history is particularly revealed in his reverence for the unknown, the mysterious and the miraculous.
endeavoured to analyze the self-consciousness as revealed in the epic regarding the identity the poet / historian assumes with regard to the work he has created.

The chapter seeks to expose the attitude Camões maintains while writing the poem. At one level, the reader can see that Camões positions himself as a poet as he prunes his history with moral judgments, experiments with temporality and an investment of a conception of history illumined by Faith. In his hand, history becomes a memorable whole enriched by poetic figures, generic features and a verse pattern rendered in ottava rima. He has no difficulty to proclaim in many a place in the work that he is a poet even when he complaints that the hardships in Portugal have turned the people rather indifferent to poetry.

The moral stand he takes also helps him to abstain from romanticizing the Portuguese heroes beyond believable proportions. Many a time, the poet reminds the reader that his interest is not in yarning fantasies but in narrating historic deeds. He believes that action is superior to poetry, and art itself, as in the hands of Paulo da Gama, turns out to be a source of history, narration of which renders the listeners spellbound. Similarly, histories told by various other characters in the epic, like Vasco da Gama, the nymph and Tethys, etc., are purposed to inspire and teach rather than to merely inform.

In this unique work, Camões has sought to blend historical reality with poetic truth. The poetic method has obviously required of him to resort to
selections and conflations. The historical blunders he commits can be said to be inevitable, but the sincerity in recording the (then-hushed) contemporary criticism against the Portuguese project of overseas expansion, is amazing. As *Os Lusiadas* remains to be an imaginative reinterpretation of historical sources, the identity of Camões constantly blurs between that of a poet and a historian.

**Chapter IV: The Victorious or the Vanquished?: Nationalities in Os Lusiadas** strove to probe the question of centrality of nationhood in the epic in order to observe which nation occupies the subject position in the epic.

It is commonly held that because *Os Lusiadas* is the national epic of Portugal, the nationality of the history the epic sings is the poet’s own. As an epic that was historically necessitated at a time when the signs of the decline of the Portuguese empire were already visible, the poetic endeavour to centralize Portugal in the epic is understandable. In the process, Portugal, though a ‘tiny’ nation, takes for granted even the centre of the universe, assumes a right to subdue the rest of the world, and feign to dream a world evasive enough to hold many kingdoms in awe. However, the whole imperial thrust of the Portuguese adventure seems to get punctured by signs of self-criticism, the diminutiveness of the nation and a note of elegy contributed by an awareness of a nation that was already in decline. Parallel to this is the voice of the epic in favour of other nations, including that of Calicut. The attempt of this chapter was to prove that the question of the centrality of
nationhood chosen in *Os Lusiadas* can be determined only if one becomes conscious of the angle from which the work is being read.

All the while, the entire progression of the epic is carried along the single goal of realizing the obsessive desire of reaching the priceless India - the target of the epic voyage that assumes the position of a commercial and imaginative compulsiveness in the poem. At the end of an arduous journey, when the Portuguese make the landfall at the Malabar coast, the mariners are enticed by the affluence, customs, polity and governance prevailed in Calicut. In front of a country that existed from time immemorial, overflowing with merchandise and ruled by a powerful and prosperous lord, there seems not much for Portugal to boast of itself.

It is true that there are attempts in the poem to depict Portugal even as one excelling the entire Europe or the ancient kingdoms of Greece and Rome. There are (hi)stories of Portuguese knights fighting for the honour of Spain, England and Germany. However, as an epic that sings histories of the countries the mariners visit, the subject position of the historical reality in the poem cannot easily be established in favour of any single nation. Indeed, as a literary source, *Os Lusiadas* liberates the reader from the linearity of traditional historical writings, offering him a wide spectrum of alternative histories.

**Chapter V: Faith or Mythology?**: Conception of History in *Os Lusiadas* essayed to observe the interplay of pagan mythology and Christian faith in the
epic in order to outline the conception of history Camões appears to hold in the poem.

The presence of pagan mythology in Comões’s epic is an issue which many readers of the work, beginning from the time of its first publication till quite recently, could not fully compromise with. From the very outset of the voyage, Bacchus is seen intent on obstructing the enterprise, while Venus is ever prepared to be their benevolent guide. The assembly of gods at the beginning of the course, the underwater conference of the sea gods, personification of the Cape of Storms into the giant Adamastor, and the reward for the mariners in the form of an Isle of Love, etc. give the poem a transcendental beauty. These are the poetic ways of explaining away the difficult and inexplicable moments in history. In another sense, mythology appears to be part of Camões’s conception of history which insists on reward for any honourable human action. History, as Camões seems to suggest, is purposed and, therefore, in his hands, it transcends the secular and the mundane.

Though the pagan gods are presented as actively interested in the explorers, da Gama and his companions attribute the credit of the favours only to their Christian God. Almost the entire history of Portugal beginning with the battle of Ourique(1139) is interspersed with deus ex machina to which the nation’s coat of arms attests a permanent seal. In fact, preaching on the Divine Providence is a major objective of the voyage in the epic. Faith came handy to Camões as the composition of the epic was done at a time
when Reformation was splitting Christendom and Camões chose to take sides with the Catholic Church.

History in Os Lusíadas reaches out the realm of the metaphysical and the transcendental as Camões chose to transform history into a significant whole by resorting to the seemingly two opposing principles of myth and faith. While the poet seems to suggest that man should make a choice in action not looking at future but rather looking from future, the diverse systems of mythology and theology appear to coalesce to create an artistic and ideological unity in the work.

Chapter VI: Epic or History?: Structure of Os Lusíadas sought to investigate how the nature/structure of Camões’s work appears to shift constantly between those of epic and history, or, in other words, being a product of literary imagination and one of historical construct.

As an epic, Os Lusíadas maintains almost all the features of the genre. After the fashion of classical epics, Camões’s work makes invocation addressed to the nymphs of Tagus as well as to Calliope, the epic muse in Aeneid. In Os Lusíadas, however, invocation is often occasioned by a sense of writer’s block or by a sense of the subject matter of the epic, namely history. The convention also gives him occasion to recollect the shipwreck he suffered at the mouth of the Mekong River in Cambodia when the script of this masterpiece was almost lost. The dedication which is another feature of epic is done to king Sebastião and is interspersed with references to many historic
victories of Portuguese kings who helped secure Portugal’s modern frontiers and to various viceroys who served in Portuguese India.

The hero of the epic is again a historical protagonist, namely, Vasco da Gama whose loyalty to the king, ability to take decisions in difficult times and humanity that includes frailties such as fear etc. render him as ‘great da Gama’. However, as the title of the epic suggests the real hero of the work is the Portuguese or the Lusitanians who contribute to the extraordinary deeds or the language of war befitting a time when bloody wars were considered famous and splendid.

Even the epic convention of beginning in medias res corresponds with a historical reality since the voyage of da Gama’s fleet is meritorious only from the point of the Great Fish River from where Bartolomeu Dias was forced to turn back in 1488 and where now, da Gama was genuinely in unchartered waters. Thus the features of epic and those of history complement each other disabling any exclusiveness of a possible categorization of the work as epic or history.

The attempt to clarify the question of using imaginative literature as a source of history is not purposed to solve all the issues related to mimesis either in history or in literature. Complexities of mimesis are primarily caused by the ineluctable process of mediation (of language etc.) in literary creation. There was a time when historians refused to face the issue of mediation in historical process. Of late, there is a welcome change in the attitude of many historians which is reflected in their thinking in terms of the possibilities of
constructing alternative histories in the place of grand narratives. Possibilities of alternative histories seem to effect a radical change in the approaches of the historians in the categorization of sources, method of analysis and the nature of conclusions being arrived, which in turn contribute to the freedom of the writer/reader to perceive history from various angles in contradistinction to the hitherto acquainted monolithic perspectives.

In the process, history does not cease to be history; in assuming yet another role of representing history, literature, too, does not stop functioning literary. Instead, both the disciplines expand the boundaries of their respective fields. Consequently, the horizons appear ever widening with regard to the scope and range of the nature, method and objectives of both the disciplines. The categories analyzed in the preceding chapters such as Reading, Experience, Historian, Poet, Centrality, Faith, Mythology, Epic and History are viewed as factors common to both the disciplines and therefore, overlapping of these concerns across the chapters is deemed natural and immanent in the kind of analysis carried out here. Such an overlapping has become indispensable also because the present research has been carried out holding on to the assumption that history is fundamentally a study of the sources.