www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 7.825

Poetry Is Not a Luxury: A Critical Re-examination of Verse as Human Necessity

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Abstract

The perception of poetry as a luxury — a pleasant aesthetic indulgence available only to those insulated from material necessity — has persisted in popular discourse and educational policy alike. This paper challenges that perception through a systematic, multi-disciplinary investigation of the function of poetry across historical periods, cultural geographies, and social conditions. Drawing upon literary history, cognitive psychology, political philosophy, and cultural criticism, the paper argues that poetry is not a luxury but a fundamental human necessity, performing vital functions that no other form of language or expression can adequately replicate. The historical record demonstrates that human communities under conditions of extreme deprivation — including war, famine, caste violence, and political oppression — have continued to produce and consume poetry, suggesting that the impulse toward poetic expression is constitutive of human identity rather than incidental to it. The paper further argues, following Audre Lorde, that the classification of poetry as luxury operates as an ideological function, systematically restricting access to linguistic and expressive resources among socially marginalized groups. With reference to world literary history and selected Indian literary traditions, this paper posits that the devaluation of poetry in contemporary educational and public policy is not a neutral aesthetic judgment but a political one with measurable social consequences.

Keywords: Poetry, Human necessity, Audre Lorde, Literary value, Ideology, Cultural studies, Indian English literature, Language and power

1. Introduction

In an era dominated by empirical metrics, market-driven curricula, and the pervasive ideology of instrumental utility, the arts in general and poetry in particular occupy an increasingly precarious position in public imagination and institutional

support. The question — whether poetry is a luxury or a necessity — is deceptively simple. At its surface, it appears to invite an aesthetic judgment. Upon examination, however, the question discloses a deeply embedded set of assumptions about the nature of human beings, the purpose of language, and the relationship between cultural production and social power.

A luxury, in its common signification, is that which one may enjoy in abundance but can dispense with in necessity. By this logic, poetry — which does not produce food, manufacture shelter, or generate economic surplus — would appear to be, unambiguously, a luxury. Yet this conclusion, comfortable as it seems, collapses upon empirical scrutiny. The historical and anthropological record reveals no human culture that has been without poetry, including cultures defined by conditions of acute deprivation. If poetry were truly dispensable, human beings — across continents, centuries, and civilizations — would have dispensed with it. They have not.

This paper argues that the persistence of poetry across all human conditions is not a romantic coincidence but a structural fact about the nature of language and human consciousness. It proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical framework governing conceptions of cultural necessity. Section 3 surveys the historical evidence of poetry's function under conditions of social extremity. Section 4 examines the cognitive and psychological dimensions of poetic engagement. Section 5 interrogates the ideological dimensions of the luxury argument, with particular reference to Audre Lorde's foundational essay. Section 6 considers the implications for educational policy. Section 7 offers concluding observations.

2. Theoretical Framework: Rethinking Cultural Necessity

The dominant framework for evaluating cultural production in post-industrial societies derives from a utilitarian economic tradition that measures value in terms of productivity, marketability, and GDP contribution. Within this framework, the arts are routinely classified as belonging to what Abraham Maslow (1943) would identify as the upper tiers of human need — aesthetic and self-actualisation needs that arise only after physiological and safety needs are satisfied. Poetry, within this schema, becomes the province of the comfortable and the secure.

However, this framework has been subjected to significant critique from multiple disciplinary directions. Ellen Dissanayake (1992), in her ethological study of art, argues that art-making — which she terms 'making special' — is a species-characteristic behaviour of Homo sapiens, as fundamental to our evolutionary profile as language or tool use. Similarly, Denis Dutton (2009) draws upon evolutionary aesthetics to argue that aesthetic responsiveness is a universal human disposition arising from adaptive pressures, not a cultural luxury superimposed on an otherwise complete life.

More recently, the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994, 2010) has argued that emotional intelligence and the capacity for symbolic representation are not secondary to rational cognition but constitutive of it. On this account, the faculties that poetry cultivates — attention, emotional precision, metaphorical reasoning, the capacity to inhabit another's perspective — are not ornamental but functional.

The framework adopted in this paper combines these perspectives to argue that cultural necessity must be understood not merely in terms of biological survival but in terms of what is necessary for fully human life — a life characterised by meaning, community, moral agency, and the capacity for self-representation.

3. Poetry Under Conditions of Extremity: The Historical Evidence

3.1 War and Incarceration

The twentieth century provides abundant evidence that poetry is not abandoned under conditions of extreme privation but intensifies within them. Primo Levi, a chemist and survivor of Auschwitz, famously described an urgent compulsion to recall lines from Dante's Inferno while on a forced labour march. In his memoir If This Is a Man (1947), Levi recounts straining to remember a passage from the Canto of Ulysses and experiencing the recovery of those lines as a form of human restoration. The significance of this episode is not anecdotal: it suggests that in conditions where the material and corporeal were maximally imperilled, access to the precise language of poetry was felt as a form of survival.

Anna Akhmatova's Requiem, composed in Stalinist Russia between 1935 and 1940, was so dangerous to possess in written form that its stanzas were memorised by trusted friends and committed to no paper. The choice to compose and preserve poetry under conditions of potentially fatal state surveillance represents a profound argument

about the necessity of poetic expression. Akhmatova herself wrote: 'I have woven for them a great shroud / out of the poor words I overheard them speak' — situating the poem explicitly as an act of witness and moral obligation, not aesthetic pleasure (Akhmatova, 1940/1976).

Similarly, the verse produced in Nazi concentration camps — much of it recovered only through oral transmission and post-war collection — demonstrates that even those facing imminent death continued to compose poetry. The scholar David Roskies (1984) documents an extensive tradition of Yiddish poetry composed in the ghettos of Eastern Europe, arguing that this verse served both commemorative and communal functions irreplaceable by other forms of expression.

3.2 Colonial Resistance and Postcolonial Assertion

The relationship between poetry and political resistance is well-documented in the context of colonialism and its aftermath. In Ireland, the keening traditions — bardic poetry and lament — constituted cultural memory and political identity at moments when formal political expression was suppressed. W.B. Yeats's understanding of the Irish Literary Revival was precisely that poetry could restore a colonised people to their own selfhood in ways that political rhetoric alone could not.

In the African context, Aimé Césaire's Notebook of a Return to the Native Land (1939) is paradigmatic of poetry functioning as a vehicle not of aesthetic pleasure but of psychic and cultural decolonisation. Frantz Fanon (1963) acknowledged the role of cultural production — including poetry — in the reconstruction of colonised subjectivity, arguing that the coloniser's most profound violence is inflicted upon the interior life of the colonised, and that counter-cultural production is therefore a form of political praxis.

3.3 The Indian Tradition: Bhakti and Beyond

Indian literary history offers perhaps the richest evidence for the claim that poetry is a necessity of the marginalised rather than a luxury of the privileged. The Bhakti movement (eighth to seventeenth centuries CE), which generated an extraordinary corpus of vernacular poetry across the subcontinent, was primarily a tradition of the socially dispossessed. The weaver Kabir, the Dalit cobbler Ravidas, the woman saint Mirabai, and the Kannada Veerashaiva poet Akka Mahadevi all deployed the compressed, musical

language of the bhajan and the vachana to challenge caste hierarchy, patriarchal confinement, and religious exclusivism.

> *'I cast off shame, my teacher showed me the way / I'll go nude, the love of Chennamallikarjuna is enough' — Akka Mahadevi (trans. A.K. Ramanujan)*

These were not poets writing from comfort. They were persons using the resources of verse to assert forms of selfhood that the social order denied them. The fact that their poems survived — in oral tradition and later in written form — while the social conditions that produced them changed only gradually, suggests that the poems performed a function — of testimony, of memory, of communal identity — that no other form of expression could replicate.

In contemporary Indian writing, the poetry of Dalit writers such as Namdeo Dhasal, Meena Kandasamy, and Mamata Sagar continues this tradition of verse as an instrument of assertion against social invisibility. Kandasamy's Ms. Militancy (2010) is explicitly conceived as a political document that uses the resources of poetry — rhythm, metaphor, the first-person lyric voice — to narrate caste violence and gendered oppression in ways that journalistic or academic prose cannot achieve.

4. Cognitive and Psychological Dimensions of Poetic Engagement

The claim that poetry is a human necessity receives independent support from cognitive psychology and neuroscience. Research on the psychological effects of expressive writing — of which poetry is a concentrated form — has yielded consistent findings since James Pennebaker's foundational studies in the 1980s. Pennebaker and Beall (1986) demonstrated that the act of translating emotional experience into language produced measurable improvements in immune function and psychological well-being in subjects who had experienced trauma.

Subsequent research has extended and refined these findings. The literary scholar and cognitive scientist Mark Turner (1996) argues that narrative imagining — the capacity to understand one's experience through story and metaphor — is the fundamental instrument of human thought, not a supplement to it. Poetry, as the most concentrated and formally disciplined form of metaphorical language, would on this account be a primary mode of cognitive activity, not a secondary one.

The discipline of poetry therapy, now practised in hospitals, psychiatric facilities, rehabilitation centres, and prisons, provides institutional acknowledgement of poetry's therapeutic function. The National Association for Poetry Therapy (United States) defines the practice as 'the intentional use of poetry and other forms of literature for healing and personal growth' — a formulation that explicitly positions poetry as a form of care rather than entertainment. Research reviewed by Mazza (2003) documents the application of poetry therapy to populations including survivors of trauma, patients with terminal illness, and individuals with severe mental illness, with measurable outcomes in emotional processing and social integration.

The implications of this research for the luxury argument are significant. If poetic engagement produces measurable cognitive and psychological effects — if it is, in the technical sense, efficacious — then to describe it as a luxury is to make a category error analogous to describing literacy itself as a luxury. The luxury designation rests on the assumption that poetry produces only pleasure. The evidence suggests it produces something closer to understanding — of oneself, of others, and of the conditions of one's existence.

5. The Ideological Function of the Luxury Argument

The most politically significant challenge to the luxury classification of poetry was mounted by the African American poet and theorist Audre Lorde in her essay 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury,' first published in Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture in 1977 and subsequently collected in Sister Outsider (1984). Lorde's essay, though brief, constitutes a decisive intervention in the debate because it identifies the class and race politics embedded in the seemingly neutral aesthetic judgment.

Lorde argues that poetry is the means by which the felt, the feared, and the desired are given form — and that form is the precondition for action. Her central claim is epistemological: 'For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action' (Lorde, 1984, p. 37). On this account, the movement from felt experience to poetic language to political action is not a sequence of three independent events but a single continuous process. Poetry is the first articulation of resistance.

The ideological dimension of the luxury argument becomes visible when we ask: who benefits from the classification of poetry as luxury? The answer is consistent. Elite educational institutions — from the English public school to the Ivy League university — have never abandoned poetry from their curricula. They understand, even if they do not say so plainly, that the ability to command precise, resonant language is a form of social and cultural power. When poetry is removed from state school curricula, from public library budgets, from community arts programmes, the effect is to restrict this form of power to those who already possess it by virtue of class privilege.

Stuart Hall's concept of hegemony is instructive here (Hall, 1980). Hegemony operates not by direct coercion but by making the interests of the dominant class appear as common sense — as natural, neutral, and inevitable. The classification of poetry as luxury, and its consequent removal from public educational provision, functions hegemonically: it presents itself as a rational allocation of scarce resources while actually operating to maintain asymmetries of linguistic and cultural capital.

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital (1984) provides an additional analytical register. Bourdieu demonstrates that aesthetic dispositions — including the capacity to engage with poetry — are forms of capital that carry social and economic value in ways that are systematically misrecognised as natural taste rather than acquired competency. To deny access to poetry — as a luxury that working-class or marginalised communities cannot afford — is therefore to deny access to a form of capital whose social value is real but whose acquisition is presented as elective.

6. Implications for Educational Policy

The argument developed in this paper has direct implications for educational policy, particularly in the Indian context, where the National Education Policy (2020) has reopened questions about the role of arts and humanities in school and university curricula. The NEP 2020 acknowledges the value of arts education in general terms; however, the structural pressures of a competitive examination system, increasing emphasis on STEM subjects, and the persistent cultural valuation of 'practical' disciplines continue to marginalise poetry and literary arts in practice.

If the argument advanced here is correct — that poetry cultivates forms of attention, empathy, and linguistic precision that are genuine cognitive and social

necessities — then its marginalisation is not merely a cultural loss but an educational failure with measurable consequences. Research by the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States has documented correlations between engagement with literary arts and civic participation, empathetic reasoning, and academic performance across disciplines (NEA, 2012). While correlation does not establish causation, the consistency of these findings across multiple studies warrants serious educational policy attention.

In the Indian context, the oral literary traditions of Dalit, Adivasi, and folk communities represent forms of poetic knowledge that are endangered by the current priorities of formal education. The documentation, teaching, and celebration of these traditions — within educational institutions at all levels — is not a cultural luxury but a democratic responsibility. A curriculum that includes only the poetry of Sanskrit classical tradition or the English literary canon while excluding the vachanas of the Bhakti saints, the lavani of Maharashtra, or the contemporary verse of Dalit and women writers is producing a systematically distorted account of human experience.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued, through historical, cognitive, and ideological analysis, that poetry is not a luxury but a human necessity — and further, that the persistent claim that it is a luxury serves identifiable ideological functions that work against the interests of socially marginalized communities. The evidence of human history is unambiguous: no human culture, including cultures defined by acute privation, has been without poetry. This universality is not accidental. It reflects the fact that poetry performs functions — naming the unnamed, constructing empathy, preserving memory, enabling resistance — that no other form of language can replicate.

To call poetry a luxury is, finally, not an aesthetic judgment but an anthropological error: it misidentifies what human beings are and what they need. In the terms established by Audre Lorde, it mistakes a primary form of knowing for a secondary form of pleasure. The cost of this error is borne most heavily by those who are already most impoverished in other dimensions — whose access to the precise, resonant, authoritative language of poetry would be most transformative, and who are most systematically denied it.

The task is not merely to defend poetry in the abstract but to build the institutional conditions — in education, in public funding, in translation and publication — within which poetry can function as the common resource it has always, historically, been. A society that reserves poetry for those who have already arrived has misunderstood not only poetry, but itself.

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