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New Historicism in Fictional World: Mapping the Paradigm

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Abstract

New Historicism offers a critical way out for the understanding of a literary art work. The trend New Historicism came into existence as an upshot against New Criticism in the similar way as the New Criticism surfaced as a reaction against historical and biographical methods of literary appreciation. The new critics reflect upon a literary text as a self-sufficient body or unit. They are apprehensive of history and take into account the discipline as an opponent of literature. The new historicists--like its British equivalent, may be called cultural materialists--reject the new critical instructions. They see literature and history as a part of vigorous and lively exchange. New Historicism is established on the supposition that a piece of literary work is the consequence of the time, place, and circumstances of its composition. The new historicists, therefore, thrust aside the self-sufficiency of both an artist and work of art and contend that a literary text cannot be read and understood in isolation. They stress that literary texts must be read and deciphered in its biographical, social and historical perspective.

Keywords- *Poetics, Historicism, Methodology, Cultural*

The term new historicism was coined by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt, whose book '*Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*' (1980) is usually regarded as its beginning'.¹ Though he had pang of conscience about this phrase as he said that he used this term unintentionally and would prefer Cultural Poetics to New Historicism. However, the term New Historicism remains in practice and holds a unique place as a critical instrument for elucidation of literary text. Most of the New Historicists decline to be recognized with any specific theory or ideology. As C.T. Indira rightly observes: "New Historicism is eclectic in its theoretical basis but has opened up a fascinating mode of analysis of cultural practices which goes beyond the scope of the structuralist methodology in studying cultural institutions. It combines the spirit of deconstruction with the ideological orientation of Marxism and Post-Marxism, and finds a rich source in the concepts of power and history as set forth by Foucault."² On the other hand comparable inclination can be

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recognized in works by a range of critics published during the 1970s, a first-rate example being J.W. Lever's *The Tragedy of State: A Study of Jacobean Drama*. This concise and epoch-making book confronted the traditionalist critical views about Jacobean theatre, and related the plays much more closely and meticulously with the political events of their period than preceding reviewers had done. In an oft quoted phrase, Louis Montrose described the new historicism as "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history."³ An uncomplicated explanation of the new historicism is that it is a technique built on the comparable reading of literary and non-literary texts, by and large of the same historical phase. The new historicism declines to privilege the literary text: instead of a literary forefront and historical backdrop it foresees and puts into practice a manner of investigation in which literary and non-literary texts are given identical importance and continually update and cross-examine each other. When the words of Louis Montrose are taken into consideration that is 'the textuality of history and the historicity of text,' a kind of paradox seems to work in place. More often than not, a new historical essay will arrange the literary text within the casing of a non-literary text. Thus Greenblatt's key innovation, from the perspective of literary study was to put side by side the plays of the Renaissance era with the gruesome colonialist guiding principles exercised by all the major European powers of the time. He draws interest to the marginalization and dehumanizing of concealed and suppressed usually by opening an essay with an investigation of a contemporaneous historical record which have similarities in some way with the subject matter of the play. Greenblatt himself submits to the appropriated historical document as the story and the standard new historicist essay skips the traditional bookish opening about formerly published elucidation of the play in question, and commences with a dominating and dramatic anecdote as the opening sentence of the essay reads 'I would like to recount an Elizabethan dream—not Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*' but one dreamt by Simon Forman on 23 January 1597.'⁴ These strong and melodramatic openings frequently refer to date and place and have all the strength of documentary, bystander account, muscularly evoking the attributes of lived experience rather than history. In view of the fact that these chronological documents are not subordinated as contexts, but are investigated in their own right, they should possibly be called co-texts rather than contexts. The text and co-text used will be seen as illustrations of the same historical moment and deciphered correspondingly. Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton in the introduction to their anthology of essays *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* describe the process of involving the text and co-text thus:

Where earlier criticism had mystified Shakespeare as an incarnation of spoken English, it (new historicism) found the plays embedded in other written texts, such as penal, medical and colonial documents. Read within this archival continuum, what they represented was not harmony, but the violence of the

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Puritan attack on carnival, the imposition of slavery, the rise of patriarchy, the hounding of deviance, and the crashing of prison gates during what Foucault called the Age of Confinement, at the dawn of carceral society (carceral comes from the Latin word *carcer*, meaning a prison).⁵

The description quoted above well put into words the atmosphere and aspirations of new historicism, and the expression about comprehension of literature within the archival range is a brilliant encapsulation of the approach.

When it is said that new historicism interests the parallel analysis of literary and non-literary texts, the word parallel puts in a nutshell the basic dissimilarity between this and earlier approaches to literature which had utilized the historical information and facts. These former approaches used to make a hierarchical division between the literary text, which was the object of significance of worth, the jewel, as it were, and the historical backdrop which was simply the surroundings and by distinctness of less significant worth.

The exercise of giving identical weight-age to literary and non-literary literature is the primary and most fundamental difference between the new and the old historicism. As illustrative of old historicism the best examples may be Tillyard's '*The Elizabethan World Picture*' published in the year 1943 and '*Shakespeare's History Plays*' came into print in the year 1944; alongside which new historicism commonly demarcate it. These books explained the arrangement of conventional mind-set to the society and the social order, to the divine being, to the fashioned and fabricated cosmos etc. which Tillyard perceived as epitomizing the Elizabethan viewpoint as imitated in Shakespeare's plays. The fixed method to Shakespeare all through the 1970s was illustrated by the arrangement of this historical framework, with the exercise of adjacent comprehension and the examination of prototypes of descriptions.

The subsequent significant differentiation involving old and new historicism is summarized in the expression archival in the phrase 'the archival continuum' for the reason that this word specifies that new historicism is without a doubt a historicist rather than a historical movement. That it is involved in history as represented and scripted in written documents, in history-as-text. Historical consequence as such, it would contend, is irrecoverably lost. This prominence stands the influence of the long-familiar opinion in literary knowledge that the genuine notion, or sentiments, or purpose of an author can on no account be restored or restructured, so that the actual existing personage is at the moment totally superseded by the literary text which has been passed down to the present generation. So to speak, the word of the bygone days substitutes the world of the past. Since, for the new historicist, the incidents and approach of the past now continue living exclusively as writing, it would be significant to subject that writing to the class of close examination previously reserved exclusively for literary text.

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Included into this inclination for the textual record of the past is the effect of deconstruction. New historicism agrees to Derrida's outlook that there is nonentity outside the text, in the particular meaning that the whole thing concerning the past is only presented to us in textualised form: It is three time processed; first through the ideology of its own time, then through those of present, and finally through the entwined web of language itself. Whatever is represented in a text is thereby reconstructed or remade. New historicist essays at all times comprised of another remaking, another incarnation of the past, as the literary text drama or poetry under discussion is juxtaposed with a chosen document, so that the documents selected may not really be relevant to the text since the aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by re-situating it.

Enthused by Foucault, New Historicism commonly tackles with the thought that the inferior general denominator of the entire human deeds is authority, control, influence, supremacy and power. Therefore, the new historicists look for hitting upon illustrations of power and the way it is scattered and dissolved within the text. Power is an agency all the way through which the marginalized are restricted and controlled; and the fascination that the marginalized desire to gain. As a critic of literature the New Historicists inquire about the sites and situations of resistance and struggle to make out that which is the group, entity, body or unit with the utmost power and potency. Being anti-establishment, New Historicism for all time totally endorses personality, liberty or lack of restrictions and keeps record of all forms of differences and deviance. Conversely, it agrees to defeat, setback, loss and thrashing as an inescapable and fated end at the hands of power and as such New Historicism seems to articulate negative and gloomy anxiety of Michael Foucault. Peter Barry observes, "this notion of the state from the post-structuralist cultural historian Michael Foucault whose pervasive image of the state is that of 'panoptic' (meaning all-seeing) surveillance."⁶ Foucault incorporated the 'panopticon' in his argument of power to demonstrate the idea of imaginative surveillance, or self-policing that crops up in the text when those are not in power are made to consider that they are being inspected by those who are in power. The Panopticon was a plan for a spherical detention center formulated by the eighteenth-century utilitarian Jeremy Bentham: the design was made out of tired ranks of cells which could all be inspected by a single warden placed at the centre of the sphere. All-encompassing federation or state does not uphold its watch by brutal force and threats. Discursive practices are like invisible bullets as Greenblatt has explained the term in his well-known composition "Shakespearean Negotiations" (1990). It is multi-structured, multi-faced present in multiple forms and at multiple levels. New Historicism--all the same celebrates individual liberty and deviant thinking--recommends that it is unimaginable because power is enabled and maintained by institutions, such as the colonial administration, the ordinary and royal court, the religious institution like church, , the patriarchal family—and also diffused in ideological

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structures of meaning, characteristic modes of expression, recurrent narrative patterns to name a few.

New Historicism, despite some fundamental dissimilarity, is closely linked up to Cultural Materialism. New Historicism is American in foundation whereas Cultural Materialism is mainly British in origin. New Historicism is indebted to Marxism and Post structuralism in general and Foucault in particular. Cultural Materialism is principally obliged to Marxism of Raymond Williams who has minted the term Cultural Materialism in 1977 in his celebrated book *Marxism and Literature*. Both New Historicists and Cultural Materialists are attracted to recovering lost histories and in investigating the device and procedure of authoritarianism, repression and subjugation. The major difference is that New Historicism tends to concentrate on those who are at the top of the social hierarchy, *i.e.* the church, the monarchy and upper classes while Cultural Materialists tend to concentrate on those who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy *i.e.* the people from the lower strata of society, the classless majority, the untouchables the women, the marginalized people, the down trodden *etc.* Also, though each of the schools of literary criticism and other practices different kinds of resource material as New Historicists attend to the disciplines of Political Science and Anthropology given their interest in governments, regime, leadership, institutions, establishment, body and culture, while Cultural Materialists tend to rely on Economics and Sociology given their interest in class and higher social order, economics and commodification. Cultural Materialist criticism was made famous in literary circle by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. "Some other leading exponents of this school of literary criticism are Catherine Belsey, Paul Brown, John Drakakis, Francis Bark, Peter Hulme, Simon Sepherd, Thomas Healey, Kate Mcluskie and other."⁷

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