

NEW HISTORICISM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Abstract: New historicism is a movement in literary criticism that began in the 1980s. Its main claim is that the themes and meaning of literature are not universal and cannot be derived from the text alone. Rather, they are the product of the author's time and cultural situation. These critics don't, however, believe people can look at history objectively. They believe that people's interpretation of history is influenced by many factors including socio-political ones. As such, the interpretations of literature are also influenced by the social and political factors of the reader.

Key Words: Historicism, literary, non literary, historicize

New Historicism, a very influential critical approach to literature applied especially to study the works of William Shakespeare and Early Modern period's literature generally took a shape in 1980s and replaced very quickly with New Criticism to study works of literature. "Despite many attacks from feminists, cultural materialists, and traditional scholars, it dominated the study of early modern literature in the 1980s and 1990s. Arguably, since then, it has given way to a different, more materialist, form of historicism that some call "new new historicism" (Parvini 1).

The term New Historicism was devised by famous American literary critic Stephen Greenblatt. His book *Renaissance Self – Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) is generally considered as its origin, though similar inclinations can be viewed in the works of many critics that were issued during the 1970s. To take an example of J. W. Lever's *The Tragedy of State: A Study of Jacobean Drama*. Commenting on this book Peter Barry said that this small but revolutionary book questioned old critical thoughts concerned with Jacobean theatre. It linked the literary works of that epoch with the political happenings of the times which no one had ever done. This term New Historicism is regarded by him as a method in which the parallel reading of literary and non- literary works is done. Both literary and non-literary texts of the same period are given equal weight in this school of thought (172).

In New Historicism according to N. Krishnaswamy the non- literary work is considered as a co-text of the literary text, and it does not have any privilege against the historical or non- historical texts. "The textuality of history and the historicity of texts are

given equal weight" in this theory, though in the traditional approaches, only literary or social history served the purpose of understanding literary texts. However in New Historicism historical documents are regarded as co-texts or expressions of the same historical event which is inherent in literary texts (84).

New Historicism arises out of a diverse set of practices that are not new. As Carolyn Porter has observed, "the turn towards history has been in evidence for some time"(qtd. in Guerin et al 248). Guerin et al have observed that "Porter credits the emergence of American Studies, women's studies, and Afro- American studies programme on college and University campuses as an important sign of changing nature of literary criticism" (248). To quote H. Aram Vesser:

As a return to historical scholarship, the volatile practice of new historicism concerns itself with extra literary matters, including letters, diaries, films, paintings, medical treatises etc. New Historicists seek "surprising coincidences" that may cross generic, historical, and cultural lines previously maintained highlighting unexpected lending and borrowing of metaphor, ceremony, dance, or popular culture...It brackets together literature, ethnography, anthropology, art history, and other disciplines and sciences in such a way that its politics, its novelty, its historicity, and its relationship to other prevailing ideologies all remain open questions (xi- xii)

New Historicism is influenced by the literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt and Michael Foucault. It advocates that a literary work is influenced not only by the times and conditions of the author but the feedback of the reader to that particular

work is also affected by its surroundings, notions and preconceptions. Thus it tries to draw interpretations of the text by observing the work of art within the structure of the predominating ideas and assumptions of its historical moment. History is taken not merely a complicated explanation of anthropology and prepossessed concepts, but rather a record of facts and events.

A new historicist critic considers the literature in broader historical frameworks. He analyses how the author's times affect the work and how the work resonates its author's times. Thus he identifies those cultural contexts that affect analyst's opinions and judgments. New historicists consider history in the category of social sciences like anthropology and sociology. Thus they explicate the sphere of history more broadly than the older historians, who tended to view history as literature's background and the social sciences as completely historical.

New historicists emphasize that the history should not be rebuilt as the same. Rather that it should be reconstructed and reestablished according to our own times, and should be believed that it was so. These critics also keep in mind the historical changes while describing past. They assert that ideology evinces itself in the production of literature and its discourse. As the time changes, so will our understandings of great literature.

The critics of New Historicism collocate literary and non-literary texts. They study literary works in the context of non-literary ones, thereby defamiliarise the authorized literary text from the previous literary scholarship and see it as a new one. "They focus attention (within both text and co-text) on issues of state power and how it is maintained, on patriarchal structures and their perpetuations, and on the process of colonization, with its accompanying 'mind-set'" (Barry 179).

Alan Sinfield is of the view that a literary text can be understood as an intercession: an attempt to present certain past stories convincing. The writer's as well as people's intentions all the time can be inferred in diverse activities like previous experience, knowledge of registers, codes, forms, genres, internal coherence and the opinions of other people. Therefore the literary and non-literary works can be assumed as powerful narrations operating in as well as out of their original historical moment in our lives

and of others. The literary works of all the periods express certain complex and challenging themes through some stories repeatedly. This is because the works that require most attention are the cumbersome and uncertain ones, though majority of people like to write and read about them (40-41). "When a part of our world view threatens disruption by manifestly failing to cohere with the rest, then we must reorganize and retell its story again and again, trying to get it into a new shape- back into the old shape that we can develop and apply" (41-42). The literary works are involved in these processes and techniques.

New Historicism according to Greenblatt is not only a doctrine or a premise of literary criticism, but a process of textual analysis arising out of the theoretical ferment of 1970s. Its concern to examine the textual drafts of the history is asserted on the assumption that the text is available to the readers only in the shape of a textuality which is also embedded in that of the present. He outlines an important aspect of New Historical method in his well known essay, "Resonance and Wonder" in the following words:

The New Historicism obviously has distinct affinities with resonance; that is, its concern with literary texts has been to recover as far as possible the historical circumstances of their original production and consumption, and to analyze the relationship between these circumstances and our own.

New Historicist critics have tried to understand the intersecting circumstances not as a stable, prefabricated background against which the literary texts can be placed, but as a dense network of evolving and often contradictory social forces (170).

New Historicism emerged as an unavoidable reaction against the new critical and deconstructive approaches to struggle with the difficult composition of the literary text. Prafulla C. Kar has informed that New Criticism suspect history by considering it harmful to literature as it puts a powerful emphasis on the close reading of the text, and detach it from the outside influences. The theorists of deconstruction on the other hand disapprove literature as a conventional phenomenon. However the critics of New Historicism try to make adjustments between these two situations by making a common ground for their reciprocal agreement (76). "In such a context the interaction between them

becomes a two- way process in which the discursive function of literature can be understood in terms of its social relevance and vice- versa” (Kar76).

Many new historicists have admitted that they been influenced by the critical writings of Michael Foucault, while the renowned British cultural critic Raymond Williams has inspired Stephen Greenblatt to a great extent. Other critics like Brook Thomas have been impressed by German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin, and others like Jerome McGann have adopted the traits of the writings of famous Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin.

Thus new historicism has acquired a significant place in the arena of literary theory and criticism. The critical theory underscores the uncertainty of any literary criticism. It propounds that any literary work gets affected by its circumstances and subsequently reflects the beliefs, social strata or other factors of the times in which it is written. However it also acknowledges that with the change of times, the understanding of any great literary work also changes.

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