

New Historicism

Reetinder Joshi,

Professor, SCD Govt. College, Ludhiana (PB), India.

New Historicism is a method of criticism to interpret a literary work of art, which takes its form as a reaction against New Criticism just as New Criticism came into being as a reaction against historical and biographical methods of literary criticism. For new critics, a literary text is an autonomous entity. They doubt history and concentrate on form. New Historicists believe that a literary work is the product of the time, place, and circumstances of its composition. Moreover, they argue that literary texts cannot be read and understood in isolation. They emphasize that literary texts must be read and interpreted in their biographical, social and historical contexts.

The major difference is that New Historicists tend to concentrate on those at the top of the social hierarchy (i.e. the church, the monarchy, the upper-classes) while Cultural Materialists tend to concentrate on those at the bottom of the social hierarchy (the lower-classes, women, and other marginalized peoples). The most influential figures associated with this school are Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt. Foucault's interest in issues of power, epistemology, subjectivity, and ideology has influenced critics not only in literary studies but also political science, history, and anthropology. Foucault picked up common terms and give them new meaning, thus changing the way critics addressed such pervasive issues as "power," "discourse," "discipline," "subjectivity," "sexuality," and "government."

Greenblatt has studied the Renaissance which has established him as the major figure commonly associated with New Historicism. He brought New Historicism into popularity first among Renaissance scholars, many of whom were directly inspired by Greenblatt's ideas and anecdotal approach. These scholars believed that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but that the critic's response to that work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs, and prejudices.

According to Mitchell Stephens "the new historicism" is currently the hottest of the hot literary theories. It sparks debates which rage through reviews and journals. It is taught wide, even in Indian Universities and interests scholars outside universities. Roger Kimball, author of *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, asserts that new historicism substitutes a species of sociology for literary criticism.

Cultural history can be revealed by studying the work — especially, say New Historicists, by studying the use and dispersion of power and the marginalization of social classes within the work. Studying the history reveals more about the text; studying the text reveals more about the history.

New Historicism seeks to free us from "History", world views and controlling ideologies. It does not ally itself with any one discipline but "brackets together literature, ethnography, anthropology, art history, and other disciplines and sciences" (Veaser, H. Aram (xi)). It seeks to dissociate itself from Marxism but frequently uses its terminology. As identified by Stephen Greenblatt, the man responsible for coining the term, the major influences on his own practice are Foucault, Jameson, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, all of whom are concerned with the relationship between art and society. By intruding into the field of politics new historicism moves beyond naïve formalism, it also is as much a reaction against Marxism as a continuation of it.

In actual practice the method of new historicism is similar to 'close reading' followed by New Criticism and Practical Criticism. The difference is in its assumption that literary texts can tell us something about the world outside of the text, which both New Criticism and Practical Criticism proscribe. John Brannigan in *New*

Criticism and Cultural Materialism differentiates between New Criticism and Practical Criticism. They are similar in the sense that both schools emerged in the 1980's, both resist humanist idealism and formalist methodology and reject facile distinctions between history and representation. But New Historicism examines the functions and representation of power and focuses on the ways in which power prevents potential subversion. Cultural Materialists, on the contrary, look for ways in which defiance, subversion, dissidence, resistance, all forms of political opposition, are articulated, represented and performed (Brannigan,108).

Both these theories have had a tremendous impact on how we read texts mainly "as material products of specific historical conditions" and assume that "texts of all kinds are the vehicles of politics insofar as texts mediate the fabric of social, political and cultural formation" (Brannigan,3). Critics of New Historicism like Fredric Jameson argue that texts are symptoms of history whereas for New Historicists cultural texts are agents of history – they are the means by which history is made.

Two key concepts of New Historicism are 'thick description' given by Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault's 'Subjectivity'. Thick description implies that in order to be understood, a statement or gesture must be studied in its background and context. Clifford Geertz in his essay 'thick description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture' in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973) presents the hypothesis that in order to understand a culture one must first be familiar with the rules and codes for making and interpreting meaning in that culture. One must see the culture from the point of view of those who belong to that culture. Only then can one understand what a wink means in a particular situation. Similarly the past cannot be interpreted through the values of the contemporary culture. Therefore this theory endorses a multidisciplinary, historically and culturally sensitive analysis of literature.

Authors, readers and critics are all 'subjectivities that tend to appropriate the text in order to make it conform to their own cultural prepossessions'. Realizing this New Historicists tend to 'distance' the text with the hope to sharpen their own ability to detect its differences from their present ideological assumptions. They try to 'negotiate' between past and present – especially ideas of class, gender, race and ethnicity – to gain an insight into the forces and configuration of power then and now.

The New Historicists initially directed their attention to the texts of the English Renaissance, especially the literary forms of pastoral, masque and above all, drama. The various factors which played a role in shaping a text were social and economic conditions like literary patronage, censorship and the control of access to printing. These texts or 'sites' enacted and reproduced the interests and power of the Tudor monarchy, and at the same time were alert to the voices of dissent, the oppressed, marginalized and dispossessed. Greenblatt who concerned himself particularly with Shakespeare reveals how princely power is based on predation, calculation, deceit and hypocrisy – yet the plays also record the dissonant and subversive voices of Falstaff and various other Elizabethan subcultures. Greenblatt notices subversion containment dialectic – a thesis that in order to sustain its power, a cultural order fosters 'subversive' elements but in such a way that it can effectively to "contain" it. The audiences accept and even glorify the power structure to which they themselves are subordinated. This idea that containment always triumphs over forces of subversion is criticized as pessimistic by the cultural materialists.

Current literary criticism is affected by and reveals the beliefs of our times in the same way that literature reflects and is reflected by its own historical contexts. New Historicism acknowledges and embraces the idea that, as times change, so will our understanding of great literature. Therefore, when new historicist critics describe a historical change, they are highly conscious of the theory of historical change that informs their account.

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