



Speaking with dead to recover the past: Reflections on New Historicism and Stephen Greenblatt

- 1) Dr. Dhananjay Prabhakar Deolalkar, Associate professor, Department of English, Government Vidarbha Institute of science and Humanities, Amravati
- 2) Dr. Durgesh Vitthalrao Borse, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. Vidarbha Institute of Science and Humanities, Amravati

Abstract:-

New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. Based on the literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt and influenced by the philosophy of Michel Foucault, New Historicism acknowledges not only 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. A New Historicist looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer's times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer's times, in turn recognizing that current cultural contexts color critic's conclusions.

New Historicism, then, underscores the impermanence of literary criticism. 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 our understanding of great literature.

Key words:- Historicism, New Historicism, Renaissance, Anecdote, Foucault, history, literature, criticism

Stephen Jay Greenblatt (born November 7, 1943) is a literary critic, theorist and scholar. He was born in Boston and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. After graduating from Newton High School, he was educated at Yale University. Greenblatt taught at University of California, Berkeley and Harvard University. Greenblatt was class of 1932 Professor at Berkeley and taught there for 28 years before taking a position at Harvard University where in 1997 he became the Harry Levin Professor of Literature; he was named John Cogan University Professor of the Humanities in 2000.

Greenblatt is regarded as one of the founders of New Historicism, a set of critical practices that he often refers to as 'cultural poetics'. His works have been influential since the early 1980s when he introduced the term. Indeed, his influence meant that 'New Historicism' first gained popularity among Renaissance scholars many of whom were directly inspired by Greenblatt's ideas and anecdotal approach.

'Historicism' is a theory as per which events are determined by conditions and inherent processes beyond the control of humans. It is a theory that stresses the significant influence of history as a criterion of value. In *Art and Architecture* historicism is the deliberate use or revival of historical styles in contemporary works.

Historicism refers to philosophical theories that include one or both of two claims:

1. that there is an organic succession of developments, a notion also known as historicism.
2. that local conditions and peculiarities influence the results in a decisive way.

The theological use of the word denotes the interpretation of biblical prophecy as being related to church history. The term has developed different and divergent, though loosely related, meanings. Elements of 'historicism' appear in the writings of the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, influential in the 19th-century Europe as well as in those of Karl Marx whom he influenced. The Post-Structuralists use of the term New Historicism, shows connections with both 'anthropology' as well as 'Hegelianism.'

In 'archaeology', Historicism is defined as a general and increasingly ambiguous term meaning a number of different things to different people. At its heart, however, is the idea that *a society and its culture exist mainly in their dynamic and developmental character*. In this way it gives emphasis on non-rational behavior, all-round creativity, and doubts many of the beliefs inherent to a progressive view of change. In Christianity **Christianity** is a monotheistic religion centered on Jesus of Nazareth, and on his life and teachings as presented in the New..., the term *Historicism* refers to the confessional Protestant **Protestantism** is one of three main groups currently within Christianity... form of prophetic interpretation which holds that the fulfillment of biblical **The Bible**, is the name used by Jews and Christians for their differing canons of sacred texts.... prophecy **Prophecy**, in a broad sense, is the prediction of future events.... has taken place throughout history and continues to take place today, as opposed to other methods which limit the time-frame of prophecy-fulfillment to the past or to the future.

Karl Popper Sir Karl Raimund Popper, CH, MA, Ph.D., D.LITT, FBA, FRS, was an Austrian and British philosopher and a professor at the Lo... uses the term, 'Historicism' in his influential book *The Poverty of Historicism* *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is an influential two-volume work by Karl Popper written during World War II.... to mean:

an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their primary aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the 'rhythms' or the 'patterns', the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history. ⁽¹⁾

The Poverty of Historicism is a devastating criticism of the belief in the laws of history, social development, and progress. Karl Popper wrote with reference to Hegel's theory of history *HISTORY: Past, Present and Future Book I* is a double-disc album by Michael Jackson released in 1995 by the Epic Records... which he criticized extensively. However, there is a wide dispute whether Popper's description of "historicism" is an accurate description of Hegel or more a reflection of his own philosophical antagonists including Marxist-Leninist *Marxism-Leninism*, strictly speaking, refers to the version of Marxism developed by Vladimir Lenin; see *Leninism*.... thought, then widely held as posing a challenge to the philosophical basis of the West *The term Western World or "the West" can have multiple meanings depending on its context*.... as well as theories which drew predictions about the future course of events from the past. The historicist position is that there is no objective way to determine which of the various competing theories on a subject is correct. In science,

philosophy, or any other discipline, there are only the facts about who has believed what, and when they believed it.

In literary criticism, history plays a vital role. Literary historians wrote history of literature from various perspectives. Literature is not only criticized but also understood in relation to the past. Thus, the concepts such as tradition, modernity, age, genre and trends are frequently used by critics in literary criticism. An artist and a critic are always found themselves at crossroads between tradition and modernity. They deny the tradition or become part of it. Orhan Pamuk, the winner of the Nobel Prize of 2006 in literature, says in an interview at British Council, Mumbai on 5th March, 2009 that his novels are an attempt to reconstruct the past with reference to the present. He adds an artist is pulled by the forces of tradition and modernity.

Traditional Historicism uses historical context to explain and understand a literary text. It assumes that to know a text one need understand its insertion in a particular moment of time as a n expression of a writer influenced by his/her times. History consists in part of consistent world views that are reflected in art. This type of historical criticism takes into consideration an author's biographical data as well as historical works from the time in order to show how the text reflects its time: ideology, social, political, economic beliefs and trends, etc. It has a very simplistic view of history but history is more complicated involving a swirl of conflicting attitudes. History is always understood from a set of beliefs, values, etc., rooted in one's time. One looks at the past from the present. So the present decides the meaning of past. Past is not one and the same all the times, it gets revalued, reshaped and reconstructed every time.

Since the 1950's, when Lacan and Foucault argued that each epoch has its own knowledge system, which individuals are inexorably entangled with, many post-structuralists have used *historicism* to describe the view that all questions must be settled within the cultural and social context that they are raised in the answers cannot be found by appeal to an external truth, but only within the confines of the norms and forms that phrase the question. This version of historicism holds that there are only the raw texts, markings and artifacts that exist in the present, and the conventions used to decode them.

'New Historicism' tries to establish a strong strategy to criticise literature with the help of post-modernist critique of history, particularly that of Foucault. Greenblatt defines it as a method of literary criticism that emphasizes the historicity of a text by relating it to the configurations of power, society, or ideology in a given time.

Major articles on this topic by renaissance scholars were published in *New Historicism* edited by Aram Veesser in which he gives the basic tenets of this 'school':

1. That every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices
2. That every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling a prey to the practice it exposes.
3. That literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably.
4. That no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives an access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature.

5. Finally, that a critical method and language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participating in the economy they describe.

There are a number of similarities between 'New Historicism' and 'Cultural Materialism'. Both New Historicists and Cultural Materialists are interested in recovering lost histories and in exploring mechanisms of repression and subjugation. The major difference is that the 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 people). New Historicists tend to draw on the disciplines of Political Science and Anthropology given their interest in governments, institutions, and culture, while Cultural Materialists tend to rely on Economics and Sociology given their interest in class, economics, and commodification.

Robert Young in *White Mythologies*, gives a difference between the New Historicism and Cultural Studies:

The former is identified closely with Foucault, while the latter owes its allegiance to Raymond Williams and really only amounts to a way of describing British ex-Marxists. (2)

New Historicists are interested in the questions of circulation, negotiation, profit and exchange, i.e. how activities that purport to be above the market (including literature) are in fact informed by the values of that market. New Historicists take this position further by claiming that all cultural activities may be considered as equally important texts for historical analysis: contemporary trials of hermaphrodites or the intricacies of map-making may inform a Shakespearean play as much as, say, Shakespeare's literary precursors.

In the earlier historical-biographical criticism, literature was seen as a reflection of the historical world in which it was produced. Further, history was viewed as stable, linear, and recoverable--a narrative of the fact. In contrast, New Historicism views history skeptically (historical narrative is inherently subjective), also, more broadly; history includes all of the cultural, social, political, anthropological discourses at work in any given age, and these various "texts" are unranked - any text may yield information valuable in understanding a particular milieu. Rather than forming a backdrop, the many discourses at work at any given time affect both an author and his/her text; both are inescapably part of a social construct.

New Historicists want to understand the complex set of connections that intersect a text at the time of its production. They reject the idea that there is a single, monolithic ideology, attitude, set of beliefs, or way of using language. Instead, they want to examine and understand the relationship among political, economic, social, and aesthetic concerns which constantly overlap each other. They want to describe the way a specific form of power works within a specific historical moment.

Greenblatt notes, 'the new historicism erodes the firm ground of both criticism and literature. It tends to ask questions about its own methodological assumptions and those of others.' New Historicists read literary texts but they read them along side historical 'texts' (documents, events, actions, etc.). There is a levelling of texts in that the literary text does not explain the historical context and the historical text does not explain the literary text: they are intertwined, like two sides of a sheet of paper. So, there is a great deal of New Historicists who focus on Shakespeare-

Con-texts with a hyphen, to signify a break from the inequality of the usual text/context relationship. Con-texts are themselves texts and must be read with: they do not simply make up a background. ⁽³⁾

Michael Ryan summarizes the task of 'New Historicism' by saying, 'there is no single historical discourse of a period; instead, the critic must trace out the multiple and complexly interconnected histories that make up an age.' In other words, there are multiple 'discourses' operating at the same time. For example, there are such things as 'legal discourse,' 'military discourse,' 'patriarchal discourse,' 'religious discourse,' 'sports discourse,' 'academic discourse,' 'patriotic discourse,' 'Marxist discourse,' 'medical discourse,' and so on, for one could argue that there is a discourse that belongs to any identifiable group of people. By 'discourse,' one means not only the way one uses a language but also the assumptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and hierarchies that are attached to the way the language is used. The task is to show how a text functions within a discourse or show how a text attempts to negotiate with competing discourses.

'Discourse' is defined by Michel Foucault as 'language practice'; that is, language as it is used by various constituencies (the law, medicine, the church, for example) for purposes to do with power relationships between people.

New historicists typically examine the functions and representations of power and focus on the ways in which power contains any potential subversion. New Historicists usually agree with the Foucauldian notion that the author and the living person who write a book each should not be equated. New Historicists are mainly concerned with the extent to which literary texts lay bare the existing power relations of which they are themselves a product. Where a cultural materialist prefers to make clear the way in which these same texts may serve as sites of subversion and dissidence, as places, to use Alan Sinfield's description, a culture exposes its own faultiness.

The New Historicists try to establish the interconnections between literature and the general culture of a period. The post-structuralist intellectual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s challenges the older historicism on several grounds and establishes a new set of assumptions.

There are two meanings of the word 'history': a) 'the events of the past.' and b) 'Telling a story about the events of the past.' The Post-Structuralist thought makes it clear that history is always 'narrated' therefore, the first sense is problematic. The past can never be available to one in its pure form but always in the form of 'representations'. History itself is a text. Historical periods are not unified entities. There is no single 'history' but only discontinuous and contradictory 'histories'. The idea of a uniform and harmonious culture is a myth imposed on history and propagated by the ruling classes in their own interests.

Historians can no longer claim that their study of the past is detached and objective. One cannot transcend one's own historical situation. The past is not something which confronts one as if it were a physical object but is something one constructs from already written texts of all kinds which one construes in the line of one's particular historical concerns. The relations between literature and history must be rethought. There is no stable and fixed 'history' which can be treated as the 'background' against which literature can be foregrounded. All history is 'foreground'. 'History' is always a matter of telling a story about the past, using other texts as one's intertext. 'Non-literary' texts produced by lawyers, popular writers, theologians, scientists and historians should not be treated as belonging to a different order of textuality. Literary works should not be regarded as sublime and transcendent expressions of the 'human spirit' but as texts among other texts. In this way, New Historicism demystifies the so called canon of great writers.

New Historicists are influenced by Michel Foucault's understanding of discourses, or discursive formations as rooted in social institutions and as playing a key role in relations to power. New Historicism seeks a 'touch of the real' learned from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, to extend literary critical strategies to the discussion of hitherto unregarded cultural texts. Foucault has emphasized how social and political power works through the discursive regions by which social institutions maintain themselves. Discourses are produced in which concepts of madness, criminality, sexual abnormality, and so on are defined in relation to concepts of sanity justice and sexual normality.

New Historicists explore the ways in which Elizabethan literary texts, especially drama, masque (pastoral) act out the concerns of the Tudor monarchy, reproducing and renewing the powerful discourses which sustain the system. They see the monarchy as the central axis governing the power structure.

Greenblatt says in his 'Epilogue' to *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, 'In all my texts and documents, there were, so far as I could tell, no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society.' The New Historicists re-situate texts in the complex discursive frame of their originating period by way of a detailed allusive reading of them in their intertextual relations with other contemporary political, cultural and 'popular' discourses.

Peter Barry defines 'New Historicism' in his famous book *Beginning Theory* as:

A simple definition of the new historicism is that it is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period. A new historical essay will place the literary text within the 'frame' of a non-literary text. Thus, Greenblatt's main innovation, from the viewpoint of literary, study was to juxtapose the plays of the Renaissance period with 'the horrifying colonist policies pursued by all the major European powers of the era'. He draws attention to "the marginalization' and dehumanizing with an analysis of a contemporary historical document which overlaps in some way with the subject matter of the play. (4)

The New Historicists read literature without a consideration of other commentaries on it. We may call it 'a fresh look' at texts. Shakespeare has been considered as a product of his age so that his work is not an outcome of genius aloof from society but very much part of 'social energy':

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 puritan attack on carnival, the imposition of slavery the rise of patriarchy, the bounding of deviance, and the crashing of prison gates during what Foucault called the Age of confinement' at the dawn of carceral society' (5)

For the new historicist, the events and attitudes of the past exist solely as writing of the kind of a close analysis formerly reserved for literary texts. New historicism accepts Derrida's view that there is nothing outside the text in the special sense that everything about the past is only available to one in a textualised form: it is 'thrice-processed', first through the ideology or outlook, or discursive practices of its own time, then through those of ours, and finally through the distorting web of language itself. Whatever is represented in a text is thereby re-made. The New historicist essays always constitute themselves another remaking, another permutation of the past, as the play or poem under discussion is juxtaposed with a chosen document so that the

document selected may not really be ‘relevant’ to the play, is disarmed, for the aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by re-situating it.

The new historicists juxtapose literary and non-literary texts reading the former in the light of the latter. They try thereby to ‘defamiliarise’ the canonical literary text detaching it from the accumulated weight or previous literary scholarship and seeing it as a new one. They focus attention (within both text and co-text) on the issues of State power and how it is maintained on patriarchal structures and their perpetuation, and on the process of colonization with its accompanying ‘mind-set’.

The ‘New Historicism’ is indeed a historicist rather than a historical movement. That is, it is interested in history as represented and recorded in written documents, in history-as-text. Historical events as such, it would argue, are irrecoverably lost. For the new historicist, the events and attitudes of the past now exist solely as writing. New historicism accepts Derrida’s view that there is nothing outside the text, in the special sense that everything about past is only available to us in textualised form; it is ‘thrice-processed’, first through the ideology, or outlook, or discursive practices of its own time, then through those of ours and finally through the distorting web of language itself.

New historicism is resolutely anti-establishment, always implicitly on the side of liberal ideals of personal freedom and accepting and celebrating all forms of difference and ‘deviance’. At the same time, though it seems simultaneously to despair of the survival of these in the face of the power of the repressive state, which it constantly reveals as able to penetrate and taint the most intimate areas of personal life. This notion of the state as all powerful and all seeing stems from the post-structuralist cultural historian Michel Foucault whose pervasive image of the state is that of ‘panoptic’ (meaning ‘all seeing’) surveillance.The panoptic state, maintains its surveillance not by physical force and intimidation, but by the power of its ‘discursive practices’ which circulates its ideology throughout the body politic. (6)

The rhetoric of ‘New Historicism’ uses the terms such as network, embeddedness and issues such as non-linearity/recursiveness and mutability of language and truth. History/tradition/authority: all three entities are deeply connected to each other as well as to the issues of space and voice. New Historicism concerns itself with interconnectedness, network of materials and the interplay of literary and non-literary texts.

Greenblatt asserts the importance and necessity of the past saying ‘no individual, not even the most brilliant, seemed complete unto himself’. It sounds exactly like Eliot who says ‘no poet no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone.’ Greenblatt has a desire to speak with dead. He is ready by ‘simulation’ to recreate ‘conversation’ with them. He stresses that the dead are ‘alive’ in textual traces.

It was true that I could hear only my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living (7)

Greenblatt tries to find out the causes and reasons behind Shakespeare’s master works. The artist and the milieu are in continuous, ‘dialogue’ or to use Greenblatt’s term ‘confrontation.’ For him, textual analysis is important but like practical critics and he focuses on margins of the text to find out ‘the half-hidden cultural transaction through which great works of art are empowered. The ‘supreme’ authority of the author is questioned

by Greenblatt which is praised in traditional literary criticism where artist is a 'monarch', specially gifted and different from all other ordinary people.

Theatre is a group activity: 'The moment of inscription is a social moment. Even Shakespeare acknowledges the indebtedness of literary raw material he has 'cooked' and has been serving generations with 'delicious dishes'. It is interesting to ponder over theatre and audience in the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages. Theatre is a mass phenomenon. It is a ritual. The demarcation line was thin between theatre stage and audience literarily and figuratively. For example, it has been said that witches in Macbeth come on the stage 'through' audience. The audience is very close to the action, moreover part of action. When Brutus addresses people of Rome in funeral speech, he says 'Romans, countrymen, and lovers' and Antonio says, 'Friends, Romans and Countrymen'. The three nouns are not uttered to stress anything but they address to three divisions of the audience. The audience used to sit to the right, to the centre and to the left of the stage. And the actor enacting Brutus or Antonio says that these attributes are dedicated to the people of left, centre and right.

Greenblatt calls his 'enterprise' of finding the traces of social circulation of cultural practices as 'cultural poetics.'

I want to know how cultural objects, expressions and practices here principally, plays by Shakespeare and the stage on which they first appeared-acquired compelling force. ⁽⁸⁾

Much of the philosophy that literary criticism deals with is the relationship between the past and the present, their analysis and interpretation.

Greenblatt speaks about 'link' between the present and past. He says:

That there is no direct, unmediated link between ourselves and Shakespeare's plays does not mean that there is no link at all. The 'Life' that literary works seems to possess long after both the death of the author and the death of the culture for which the author wrote is the historical consequence, however transformed and be fashioned, of the social energy initially encoded in those works. ⁽⁹⁾

Greenblatt gives the characteristics of literature and the way it comes into existence:

1. There can be no appeals to genius as the sole origin of the energies of great art.
2. There can be no motiveless creation.
3. There can be no transcendent or timeless or unchanging representation.
4. There can be no autonomous artifacts.
5. There can be no expression without an origin and an object 'a from' and 'a for'.
6. There can be no art without social energy.
7. There can be no spontaneous generation of social energy.

The exchange between the stage and society is a reversible process i.e. give and take and again give. The theatre and social are involved in a continuous fruitful dialogue. Literature and History make each other, if literature is 'the child of history'. History is also 'a child of literature'. There is not only one discourse but there are discourses simultaneously active so we can't have unified system of their analysis.

New Historicists see everything as a 'text' and go 'outside the canon' of tradition of literary studies, examining for instance, private letters, obscure public documents and forgotten/minor literary texts and even, and almost especially, public spectacles and displays in their analysis of the working of social power.

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