



## NEW HISTORICISM – DE CANONIZING LITERATURE TO UNDERSTAND IT IN A MORE MEANINGFUL MANNER

G Bhargavi

(Teacher Of English, TSWRS/JC (B), J.P Nagar, Nagarkurnool Dist. Telangana State.)

Email: [bhargavi.goud@yahoo.com](mailto:bhargavi.goud@yahoo.com)



### ABSTRACT

From Plato to present day literary theory and criticism constructed varied platforms to analyze and interpret literature. Aristotle's poetics deals with poetry and tragedy. It is the first written document which precisely defines tragedy and speaks about anagnorisis, peripeteia, hamartia, hubris, catharsis. Later after nearly two centuries Horace and Longinus created the standards of good and noble poetic craft. Philip Sydney in 1579 in his 'An Apology for Poetry' placed poetry well above all other studies. Later during the Neo-classical age John Dryden in his 'Essay of Dramatic Poesy' discussed merits and demerits of various streams of poetic talents. In 1798 with the publication of 'Lyrical Ballads' by William Wordsworth and S T Coleridge, the diction, metre in poetic craftsmanship searched for commonplace themes. Wordsworth declared 'Poet is the man speaking to men'. S T Coleridge in his 'Biographia Literaria (1817)' goes on length to separate the mechanical admixture of creative ideas that is fancy with that of organic creation that is imagination. In Victorian age Mathew Arnold stations criticism and creativity at equal altitude. Mathew Arnold's Touchstone method garnered importance to the style of ancient poetic masters. Later in the modern age the Classicist and Modernist T S Eliot explains the poetic process with that of creation of Sulphuric acid in the presence of platinum flint. T S Eliot says that poet's mind works like a catalyst in the creation of a poem untainted by the process or elements of poetic creation....which led to the creation of 'Impersonality Theory'

My paper deals with the critical theories during the modernism and post modernism and post modernism laying emphasis on New Historicism as the amicable tools of literary analysis.

**Keywords:** *New Historicism, New Criticism, Russian formalism, Text In a Context, Thick Description, Social energy.*

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Modernism is the age of experimentation spanning the gulf of time between two world wars. In literature it is the time which has witnessed the spurt of stream of consciousness technique, Dadaism, Vorticism, Cubism, Imagism through which poetry, fiction, drama underwent dramatic changes in respect of themes, narrative styles and employment of literary diction.

When it comes to criticism Russian Formalism, it held the sway in the beginning of the twentieth century heralding the new century into a distinctive style of literary analysis. Viktor Sklovsky, Vladimir Propp, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky held that form is more vital than the content. "Morphology of Folk Tale" by Vladimir Propp categorises the action in a tale into thirty one functions and seven broad characters beginning from Absentment to Wedding. He scrutinized more than hundred Russian Folktales and percolated the stylistic content to thirty one functions and propagated that each and every story comes into the fold of these thirty one functions with slight variations in the sequence of occurrence of incidents.

Russian Formalism has initiated the trend of looking at the form only. Its successor New Criticism further strengthened the concept of intrinsic value of the poem depending upon its diction, irony, tension and paradox. W K Wimsatt and Monroe C Bradsley developed the term 'Affective Fallacy' and 'Intentional Fallacy' which states that it is a fallacy to look at or examine the influence of the poem on a reader and intentions of the author behind writing a poem. Language, structure, plot, poetic devices...all intrinsic factors assumed privilege over extrinsic factors such as social context author's biography etc. that negotiate the creation of the poem. Structuralism which has become a famous milestone in the study of language started to take its freedom for analyzing poem.

The theory of psycho analysis and the discovery the unconscious, study of the dream mechanism by Sigmund Freud led to the expansion of applications of Psychoanalysis to literature. Psychoanalysis says literary expressions are the reflections of the hidden thought material in the unconscious.

Ferdinand de Saussure's 'Course in General Linguistics' fathomed the depth of the meaning between the world and its ascribed concept. Signifier, signified devoid of any concrete innate relationship constitute the web of negotiated, consolidated meaning. The concept of meaning is not concrete it is referential, constitutive, ambiguous, arbitrary, contingent. The concept is furthered by Post Structuralism with the 'Death of the Author' by Roland Barthes and 'Of Grammatology' by Jacques Derrida. Post Structuralism is also called Deconstruction. Deconstruction is dismantling the textual meaning as when author is dead it leads to the birth of the reader and text dismantles itself.

New Historicism which is also called 'Cultural Poetics' is propagated in 1980s in America by Professor Stephen Greenblatt. The term 'New Historicism' is coined by Greenblatt himself. Another New Historicist critic Harold Aram Veesser stresses on the need of looking at non-literary text on par with literary text when he says literary texts and non literary texts circulate inseparably. Initially the study of New Historicism concentrated on the studies and works of William Shakespeare, it later expanded to other genres and writers.

Unlike New Criticism, New Historicism does not limit its critical armament to probe intrinsic factor alone, rather, it sees text in its context of creation. Privileging the literary text over non literary text is overwhelmingly denied and 'Equal Weightage' is applied to study literary and non literary text. New Historicism believe that a text can be sufficiently illuminated for close scrutiny when it is placed in context, here the context can be anything like documents linked to history, politics, culture, art, legal papers or at least it may be a list of grocery items. Hence the text is not a jewel in the crown but it is one entity among many. Hence privilege is denied.

'Thick Description' is a concept embraced by New Historicism which directs the critic to go for the detailed, multi faceted study of the text. Limited study misleads interpretation; the critic shall go deep into its core to interpret a text in its context. Thick description, according to Clifford Geertz a cultural anthropologist, is providing the reader with sufficient context to interpret and understand it. Vast cultural



context augments the process of understating the text in more meaningful manner.

New Historicism equi-weighs a text more or less in its own creation whereas cultural materialism envisages a text with the present context and sometimes critics place the world 'Cultural Materialism' as equivalent British term for American New Historicism.

In the beginning of his famous essay 'The Circulation of Social Energy' Stephen Greenblatt states 'I began with a desire to speak with the dead', underlining the importance of the past in the context of history both intellectual, political, historical, literary are sidelined with contingencies; he remarks 'This project endlessly repeated, repeatedly fails for one reason; there is no escape for contingency.

Shaping powers of materialism, capitalistic ideology, business politics nexus, unheard voices of the suppressed, subversive tendencies: which even though present they can't mingle with the dominant, are the vital factors in analysis the circulating social energy in the context of textual representation.

## CONCLUSION

Text in context, literary text on par with non literary text highlight Karl Marx's observation that is 'Men and women make their own history but not in their own choosing'. The history, according to New Historicism is not the history of the dominant ideology or of those who are at power wielding stations. History what we study is His story only. History which is the pastness of the past it never can be retrieved in its entirety. Yet the efforts are to be made to understand the pastness of the past and its relevance to the present.

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