



## IS FACT AN INFINITE INTERPRETATION? : GOING NEW HISTORICIST WAY IN TEACHING LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT



New Historicism identifies the need to look into the texts which are non literary in nature in order to decipher the literary texts as a dire necessity because text takes its origins not in isolation but in constant and continuous negotiations with contextual society. New Criticism is incomplete in its approach of close scrutiny and in following affective fallacy and intentional fallacy as sins of interpretation. The formalistic criticism concentrated only on the text as it existed one and the only one in the world ceasing any dialogue with its context. The hiatus created by the formalistic approaches is filled by the New Historicism with its inclusive approach to analyze the literary text by dismantling its canonicity with the help of projecting the text and its context on parallel lines.

My paper would deal with the vistas that will be open if we adopt the path of New Historicism which unveils multidimensional possibilities in teaching literature.

**Keywords:** *Close Scrutiny, Equal Weight, Text Co-Text and Context, Panopticon, State Ideological Apparatus.*



In Literary Theory from Plato to present day many theories concentrated on different modes of approaches, where they rely on the dictum saying fact as an interpretation. In the study of literature, formalism and its staunch follower New Criticism venerated text as a closed entity.

#### **NEW CRITICISM – A CLOSE SCRUTINY**

New Critics looked for consistency of imagery in lyric whether it is a single dominant image through the poem or a pattern of multiple but related images, it became for some an index to the quality of a given poem, such consistency of imagery helped to create what John Crowe Ransom among others called Texture, when an image takes on meaning, beyond its objective self it moves into the realm of symbol. They draw their interpretation avoiding the fallacies enumerated in Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'The Verbal Icon (1954)'. Both intentional and affective fallacy came under attack by reader response critics. In tension, Irony and paradox, according to Allan Tate in New Criticism it is the integral unity that results from the successful resolution of the conflicts of abstract and concrete, of general and particular, of denotation and connotation. All these resolutions, devices, manifestations culminate into the notion that nothing exists outside of the text.

Defamiliarisation (Viktor Sklovsky, 1917), Literariness are other major concepts where language use restricted to the given context in the literary piece. In his essay "Art as Device" Viktor Shklovsky defined defamiliarisation as to 'distinguish poetic form from practical language on the basis of the former's perceptibility.

On the opposite extreme to Formalism and New Criticism, the Reader Response Criticism sets the reader as the creator of the meaning. It believes that a text does not even exist, in a sense until it is read by some reader. The roots of this theory go back to I A Richards' Practical Criticism published in 1929 in which he asked his students for an independent interpretation without allowing them to know the biographical details of the poet and the poetic genre. Yet another kind of reader-response criticism is 'reception theory' which documents reader responses to authors and/or their works in any given

period. Hans Robert Jauss, a German Scholar, in his 'Towards an Aesthetics of Reception, seeks to bring out a compromise between that interpretation which ignores history and that which ignores the text in favor of social theories. Stanley Fish argued in his 'Surprised by Sin' that meaning in a literary work is not something to be extracted, as a dentist might pull a tooth, meaning must be negotiated by readers in a line of time. In the gamut of all these venerated approaches interpretation rests either on text or on external circumstances.

With the advent of post structuralism and Deconstruction an endless play of interpretation came not being. Philosophical musings over the linguistic fluidity and inconsistency in the meaning of words paved the way for vast varied ways of interpretation.

#### **NEW HISTORICISM - A BALANCED APPROACH**

Stephen Greenblatt is credited with the term which proclaimed equivalence in interpreting literary text. Traditional approach advocated literary foreground and cultural background, but new historicism stressed on the 'equal weight' for literary and non literary text. The context of prevailed social circumstances believed new historicism as the direct vital effect on the literary production. Canonicity or omnipotence of the grand texts is questioned.

Even now, in class rooms, curriculum is still adhering to the final principle of drawing conclusions on the historical, moral and aesthetic value of the text. New Historicism on the other hand treads its way in the findings of Michael Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci. Antonio Gramsci's State Repressive Structures, State Ideological Apparatus and Panopticism gave sufficient depth for the new historicism to thrive. It believes that state repressive structures like Police, Military force subverts the overt rebellion against the dominant authority, and State Ideological Apparatus thrives to inculcate the 'feel good factor' in the subject through religious and educational institutions. New Historicism which making the concept of the 'to be interpretative text' as co-text strives to resurface the conspicuous State Repressive Structures and State Ideological Apparatus.

In the opening sentences of his 'History of English Literature (1863) Hippolyte Taine said



Literature is 'not a mere play of imagination' nor is it 'a solitary caprice of a heated brain'. In the same way New Historicist critical method enumerates not only the extent of the play of imagination, but also the effects of race, ethnicity, relations of gender, religious institutions, economic and physical environments, dispositions of power.

The canonicity of great writers of different periods of English literature has been adorned and admired in the light of traditional methods of interpretation. New Historicism sheds light on the hitherto marginalized, suppressed, subversive voices of the same period in which the canonical text had been formed.

Karl Marx said 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make under circumstances chooses by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. New historicism seeks to reinvent the picture of social, political and institutional scenario under which the text is formed, it erases the privilege of literary text and picks up a lesser read documentation and compares the above enumerated elements on par with literary text. We can see the grafting of power relations in literary text.

In an interview to Harold Veaser in 1988 Gayathri Chakraborty Spivak said that margin is not simply opposed to the centre but as an accomplice of the centre. New historicism establishes the long gone relation between margins, unheard voices and esteemed text. The accomplishment of rapport between these two provides us with suitable interpretation to study sociopolitical context.

Panopticism is an application in architecture use to control the inmates of a prison; the concept is invented by Jeremy Bentham. Panopticon is circular building with a central watching tower. An Officer sitting in central watching tower can watch the activities of inmates without being watched by prisoners. Prisoners cannot see him but the surveillance officer can observe them at any given point of time and at any place. Prisoners cannot observe where the officer is looking at and at whom he is looking in any given point of time, but they believe that they are under constant surveillance. There is no private sphere left for them, they will be

under the influence that they are under constant watch. Michel Foucault in his 'Discipline and Punish' adopts the system of Panopticon to the functions of State Power and Ideology. New Historicism draws its interpretative energies by searching the pervasiveness of Panopticism in literary works by studying 'documents of judiciary' penal proceedings, legislative promulgations, travelogues, diaries and even from least known authors and sources.

On the technical level New Historicism uses the words which are more related to economic and commerce like exchange, negotiation and above all the typical new historicist essay starts opening with an anecdote or with a passage from marginal text where scholars and students in criticism can breathe a fresh air of novelty. Examples may be cited from Louise Montrose essay on *Midsummer Night's Dream* Where he cited paragraphs from Simon Foreman, instead of starting elegantly from traditional authoritative texts, it draws its elegance by interpreting text in a unique way.

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