

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

ISSN: 2278-9529

# GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue-III May 2014



Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor: Madhuri Bite

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>

## A Critical Note on New Historicism

**Altaf Ahmad Bhat**

Ph.D. Scholar,  
School of Studies in English,  
Vikram University Ujjain (M. P.)  
India

### I

#### **Introduction:**

The records of literary criticism and theory are almost as old as literature itself. As known, literary criticism is a sort of mental exercise of evaluating, classifying, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and valuing the literary art. This indicates that criticism also includes creative skill to comprehend the literary artist's work first, and then put forward one's valid view. In this sense, it is really 'meta-literature'. The world's successful critics and theorists are only the renowned literary figures. As Ben Jonson says that "To judge of poet is only the faculty of poets". This means that only a writer can understand the mysteries and mental regions of his/her fellow writers and can respond them aptly and effectively.

#### **Ancient Classical Criticism:**

The earliest proofs of criticism are found in Greek literature. In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., Athens was the lap of literary enterprises. So the critical activity was first undertaken by Plato and his eternal disciple Aristotle. This preliminary era of criticism is termed as Hellenic, means Greek, period of criticism. Plato's *Republic* is looked upon as the first critical book in which he expresses the ideas regarding the literary and poetic process. It is then Aristotle who in real sense commenced the critical journey still potent and pervasive. His *Poetics* has proved an immortal foundation stone of criticism for the proceeding centuries, and it has caloured thoughts and talents of almost all the critics and theorists irrespective of language differences. The study of the book is inevitable in every literature and for every literary student and scholar. Aristotle develops for the first time the ideas of *mimesis* and *catharsis* which are even today the issues of discussion and debate. He not only gives the theory, but also defends poetry from the onslaughts of his master Plato who terms poetic art as lying, imitative and secondary.

#### **Graeco-Roman Criticism:**

After the Geek masters, there comes glistening stage of criticism known as Graeco-Roman criticism. Although the majority of concepts are derivative and assimilative, yet there are critical thinkers and theorists of real genius whose contribution has a paramount significance. Horace, Quintillian and Longinus are the authentic and penetrating critics of this period. Horace's *Ars Poetica* and Longinus's *On Sublime* like Aristotle's *Poetics* have proved as torch bearers, and their merits and utility have been acknowledged by all the major literary figures.

**Renaissance Criticism:**

With the advent of *Renaissance*, the critical curiosity accelerates and the enquiry of the antique Greek and Roman founders of creative and critical business also enlarge the horizons of learning. The term *Renaissance* is described as the birth of the modern world out of the ashes of the Dark Ages; as the discovery of the world and the discovery of man; and the era of the emergence of untrammelled individualism in life, thought, religion and art. In *Renaissance* England, critical thought evolves swiftly through four successive stages. The preliminary phase is the critique of style and language of classical rhetoricians; the second is the effort to introduce the ancient practitioners' meters in the English poetry; the third step is an attempt to defend the imaginative literature in the face of moralist puritans; and in the final stage, the critics try to expound their own rules and norms. Among these critics, the prominent ones are Sir Philip Sidney whose *Apology for Poetry* is indispensable in the history of criticism. Ben Jonson is another poet-critic. His *Discoveries* almost touches all issues of poetic art. The nature, function, and blessings of poetry; and the qualifications and nobility of poet are discussed in a very practical manner.

**Neo-Classical Period:**

Jonson's criticism is 'liberal criticism' targeted against the excesses and absurdities of his era. With the passage of time, the same criticism became more and more popular. The result is that over a century from John Dryden to Samuel Johnson. The epitomes of this movement are Dryden, Alexander Pope, Dr. Johnson, and Joseph Addison and so on. All the writer-critics revived and practised Greek and Roman literary and critical conventions to the exclusion of every thing.

**Romantic Era:**

As the preceding pseudo-classicism emerged as a reaction against the excesses and violations of Elizabethan literature, so has English Romanticism against the hollowness and rigidity of its predecessor. The French Revolution (1789) triggered the romantic ideal of individual liberty and free expression without preordained restrictions. The great critical landmarks of this period are William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Moreover, *Defence of Poetry* by P. B. Shelley is also a spectacular achievement in the field of literary criticism.

**Victorian Criticism:**

Romantic critical thought has also some drawbacks due to which it could not sustain very long. It shows utter disregard to the prescribed norms and principles, and the same has resulted in certain trivialities. By the time, Victorian age starts, there emerges a new mode of criticism based on some procedures. The critical art is bestowed upon an elevated status and has been closely affiliated with life. Mathew Arnold, the towering figure in this period defines criticism: "A disinterest endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and noble ideas". As the era proceeds toward its closure, there is seen a rise of the aesthetic movement stimulated by French symbolists like Mallarme and his fellows. Instead of "art for life's sake", it is now "art for art's sake" which is dominant. The English

representative of this new development is Walter Pater whose great contribution is *Studies in the History of Renaissance* (1873).

### **Modern criticism:**

With the arrival of pioneers like T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis in the critical arena, the history of English criticism has taken a new direction in dual sense: it has evolved certain new critical conventions and canons and refuted the old ones; secondly, it has procured the excellence in the revaluation and review of the traditional literary figures. The contribution of these modern critics later on leads to the new development in America in 1930s-40s known as New Criticism. These critical thinkers have contributed to the theoretical as well as practical criticism. In both the fields fresh methods have been devised for the evaluation of literature.

### **Contemporary Scenario:**

Since the inception of the Twentieth century, a number of literary theories and approaches have taken birth in a quick succession. Mostly these approaches raise the question of meaning in a work of literature. Some focuses on lingual and rhetorical elements and others on socio-cultural context. Some imparts more importance to 'reader', and other consider as usual 'author' as a real originator and meaning producer. The 'death of author and birth of reader' is the subject of grand significance in the contemporary critical enquiry. The literary productions have been bifurcated as 'works' and 'texts'. To elaborate these approaches here one-by-one would be an irrelevant undertaking, but their names are tabulated with their respective time span as:

- Russian Formalism ( 1920s-30)
- Myth and Archetypal Criticism (1940s-50s)
- New Criticism and Phenomenological Criticism (1940s 50s)
- Stylistics and Structural Criticism (1960s)
- Poststructuralist Criticism; Discourse Analysis; Reader-Response Criticism; Reception Theory; and Speech Act Theory (1970s)
- Dialogism; Cultural Studies; New Historicism; and Queer Theory (1980s)
- Postcolonial theory; Eco-Criticism; and Diasporic Studies

## **II**

### **New Historicism:**

The term New Historicism is fathered by Stephen Greenblatt in his well-known book *The Power of Forms and the Forms of Power in the Renaissance* (1982). It has originated mainly as a reaction to its predecessor critical scholarships like Formalism, Structuralism, Deconstructionist approach and the Reader-Response Theory to historicize the text once again. In addition to Greenblatt, its principal protagonists are Jonathan Goldberg, Edward Pechter, Louis Advian Montrose, and Jean Howard. Greenblatt later on in his career says that the term New Historicism has been used unintentionally and the preferable term for it is 'Cultural Poetics'. Whatever it may be named, its main objective is to see a literary work in the historical background, and to focus on socio-cultural circumstance. It also considers the available critical literature written on the text. It is not merely the earlier kinds of critical enterprises such as historical and biographical scholarships. But it places a text within the totality of socio-cultural institutions and

practices that make the history and culture milieu of a particular moment of time and place. In this way, literature interacts as a product as well as producer of social and cultural conventions and codes. Moreover, new historicists analyze the texts by incorporating in their evaluation both literary and non-literary documents which author might have consulted at the time of writing. A reader is supposed to grasp the nexus between the text and the attended social, political, and economic conditions in which it is wrought. Greenblatt sheds an adequate light on the method in his essay “Resonance and Wonder” in the given manner:

The new historicism obviously has distinct affinities with resonance; that its concern with literary text 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 stable, prefabricated background against which the literary texts can be placed, but as dense network of evolving and often contradictory social forces. The idea is not to find outside the work of art some rock onto to which literary interpretation can be securely chained but rather to situate the work in relation to other representational practices operative in the culture at a given moment in both history and our own. (*Learning to Curse* 170)

This mode of New Historicism derives and assimilates the concepts and procedures of interpretation from various schools of thought. The nucleus of Post Structuralism is that texts consists codes of signification which are always at loggerheads. Mikhail Bakhtin’s Dialogism also clarifies that mostly the works fabricate a number of opposing forces that symbolize the multiple social sections and their motivations. The propagators of cultural anthropology are of the opinion that a culture is made up of various but distinctive sets of signifying systems. So the explication and detailed analysis of socio-cultural location of a work may reveal the diverse significations. Moreover, such deliberations of a work also help to explore the holistic notion of a cultural system with its galaxy of codes and modes of the practical life. All these passing references indicate that the history of a particular culture is not fixed and close ended reality, and literature as a part of it requires to be critically analyzed. Therefore, new historicism treats every text as a discourse which reflects factual situation. Besides, the literary work is conceived as a verbal entity of the cultural products associated with particular time. It is thought that these socio-cultural reflections in texts endorse and inflate the power structures of bourgeois and the slavery of proletariats of a society. This approach of criticism of considering a literary texts as a historical process is appropriated and vindicated by Louis Montrose as, “a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history”.

Greenblatt being the sole originator of New Historicism exemplifies its main interpretative procedures by analyzing the literary texts with historical and cultural consciousness. In the essay “Invisible Bullets”, he focuses his attention on Thomas Harriot’s *The Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1988) as a typical commentary of European colonizers of America which justifies “the

Machiavellian hypothesis of the origin of princely power in force and fraud”. Harriot attests the English power structure and the reactions of that power by the Native Americans who are hegemonized and oppressed. Greenblatt identifies the same relation between Prospero, the colonial oppressor and Caliban, the native colonized in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. This discourse and counter-discourse between masters and slaves is concocted in such an artistic manner that audience or readers voluntarily yield before it, and even eulogize it as subalterns. Greenblatt terms this phenomenon as the “subversion-containment-dialect”. The concept implies that in order to maintain its power, or contain the challenge to the prevailing order, any strong political and cultural force openly encourages ‘subversive policy’. Here a similarity is found between New Historicism and Marxism of Antonio Gramsci’s idea of ‘hegemony’. Gramsci says that a social class gets control and influence not by force, but making its ideology so pervasive that the subordinate sections non-seriously accept it and help in their own oppression.

Although the literariness of works and values of culture are open to change and reconsideration, yet the major thrust of new historicism is to blur the separation between text and context. It discards the concept of a text as self-sufficient and autonomous freestanding of its attended factors like biography, history and society as celebrated by New Critics. This mode of evaluation also nullifies the Poststructuralist view that the literary art is a sort of ‘free play’ of signifiers without a centre and ultimate meaning. Regarding *Renaissance* literature, new historicists harbour a notion that there is the Elizabethan ethos and meaning in them on one side, and the present readers’ understanding and commentary on the other side. Shakespeare’s comprehension and perception as a grand author in the modern sense is not all inclusive without the context of *Renaissance* theatre. Arnold Kettle in this connection says, “The best way to emphasize the value of Shakespeare in our changing world is to see his, recognizing that the two worlds, though very different, are at the same time a unity” (10). This reveals that the new historicists are inclined to historicize the texts in order to make them relevant to the present. Shakespeare’s dramas can be more meaningful and proficient in one’s reading experience, if they are placed in the cultural poetics of the day. Greenblatt does the same by perusing some popular dramas of the great playwright like *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *King Lear*, and *Richard II* and so on. Robert Weimann also pleads for ‘historical oriented and particularized engagement with the texts’ in his essay “Past Significance and Present Meaning in Literary History, Structure and Society”. He says further:

As a matter of course, the institutional function of criticism (as against its civilizing role in society at large) tends to encourage the approach to literature as a normal discipline. As a mere body of formalized knowledge, the object of study and the purpose to which it can be put become more and more unrelated. The correlation between knowledge and education becomes precarious. There is a dissociation between the self-contained needs and standards of the discipline (and the corresponding emphasis on formality, autonomy, on internal relationships and demonstrably written texts), on the other hand, and the role that the discipline (and the use of its results) can play in the lives and the society of those who practice it, on

the other. And since the objects of the discipline are usually taken from the literature of the past, the dissociation tends to disturb, or leave undeveloped, the reciprocal quality of the most basic historical relationship between the significance of the work and the present meaning of its revitalized use and interpretation. (*Modern Language Theory: A Reader* 270)

During 1980s, New Historicism remained at peak as a literary enterprise, and efforts were made to review and reconsider the earlier approaches of criticism. Its practitioners have shown similitude with the critics of African-American and other ethnic literary productions which try to demonstrate the cultural formation and canon formation by white Europeans oppressing, marginalizing and subordinating the procurements of non-whites termed as 'other'. Moreover, the evaluating principles of this critical mode also manifest likeness with the considerations of feminism which focus on the patriarchal power-politics in socio-cultural establishment. Later on in 90s, the one time strong literary method Deconstruction has also been shadowed by New Historicism due to its seeming relevance to place the text in its cultural and historical context.

The main issues in the contemporary literary criticism are the status of 'author' and his 'work'. Different schools of thought judge these subjects differently, sometimes radically rouse the resentment from the reading public. The treatment of author in the New Historicism is somewhat identical to what Michel Foucault says in his well-known essay "What is an Author". He reduces the position of author to author-function. New historicists suggest that institutional and cultural factors determine the function of the author. But the modern concept of a literary work as 'text' is in dissonance with new historicism. The work is treated merely as a linguistic or verbal construct, and is supposed to be read in isolation. This idea of literary production does not coincide with the view of new historicists. Greenblatt in "Towards a Poetics of Culture" expresses that "the product of art as a negotiation between a creator and class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions and the institutions and process of society" (*Learning to Curse* 158). Jerome Mc Gann is also pertinent here: "Poems are, by the Nature of the case (or as Kant might say, transcendently) time and place-specific, and historical analysis is, therefore, a necessary and essential function of any advanced practical criticism" (*Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* 298).

### **Conclusion:**

In this way, it can be said that New Historicism provides a novel perspective of literary criticism, and opens up new dimensions for the readers not to restrict themselves to the verbal construct of work only, but to unravel the historical and cultural consciousness of the writer also. The approach is a compendium of diverse procedures, and its employment in critical enquiry is bound to enlighten the readership, and thereby enrich the process of defining, classifying, and evaluating works of literature. Therefore, there is a scope for spatial and temporal analysis of literary text. The past is revived for the utility of the present.

### **Works Cited:**

- (1) Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage Learning, 2009. Print.
- (20) Greenblatt, Stephen. *Learning to Curse: Essay to Early Modern Literature*. New York: Rutledge, 1990. Print.
- (3) Kettle, Arnold, ed. *Shakespeare in a Changing World*. London: 1964. Print.
- (4) Rice, Philip and Patrice Waught, ed. *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Edward Arnold, 1989. Print.