

*The New Historicism Theory used by Urvashi Butalia in The Other Side of the Silence*

New Historicism is an interesting new way to look at literature. It is a reconstruction of the past from the present perspective and emphasizes the role of the present in reshaping the past to enhance its utility for contemporary contexts. In the article "Professing the Renaissance" (1989), Louis A. Montrose says that New Historicism is a return to history from the post-structuralist focus on language. He also says that it is about "the historicity of texts and textuality of history" (qtd. in Abrams 245). The text possesses historicity as it is situated within a social and cultural context, whereas history asserts a claim to textuality, given that access to the complete lived true past is unattainable, leaving only remnants of it preserved. New Historicism regards a literary work not as a narrative for interpretation but as a manifestation of historical forces. "There is no such thing as objective history because narratives are, like language, produced in a context and are governed by the social, economic, and political interests of the dominant groups or institutions" (Nayar 203). New Historicism, a contemporary literary criticism movement, examines the social, cultural, historical, economic, and political ramifications of the text. Its focus on culture as text, based on the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, means that there are more things that can be "read" (Abrams 245). Due to this cultural significance, Stephen Greenblatt and other notable new historicist scholars examine marginalized literary and non-literary texts or works.

Greenblatt characterizes it as "a shift away from a criticism centred on 'verbal icons' toward a criticism centred on cultural artifacts" (Learning 3). Carolyn Porter notes that New Historicism and its methodology are prominently reflected in the works of several intellectuals, including Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, Raymond Williams, Mikhail Bakhtin, Terry Eagleton, and Hayden White (qtd. in Vesser 743-49). New Historicism became popular in the 1980s. Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977) and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) are two works that helped start it. The American critic Greenblatt came up with the term "New Historicism." Most people think that his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) is where it all started. Similar trends are observable in J.W. Lever's *The Tragedy of State: A Study of Jacobean Drama* (1987). This short but important work questioned a lot of orthodox ideas about Jacobean theater and connected the plays much more intimately to the political events of the day. Greenblatt has also written *The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance* (1982), *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1988), and *Learning to Curse* (1990). The establishment of the magazine *Representations* in 1982 further propelled the new historicist studies. Jerome McGann, Majorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, Catherine Gallagher, Jeffrey Knapp, Louis Montrose, Stephen Orgel, Walter Benn Michaels, and others are also well-known practitioners of this theory. New Historicism asserts that texts are integral to quotidian actions and are deeply

entrenched within the institutions and power dynamics of mainstream culture. New Historicism is a technique that involves reading literary and non-literary materials from the same historical time side by side. In other words, it won't "privilege" the literary text. New Historicism envisions and implements a style of study where literary and non-literary texts are accorded equal significance, perpetually informing and interrogating one another. A new historicist essay usually starts with a story from history instead of the usual literary interpretations. Louis Montrose's 1983 essay "A Midsummer Night's Dream and Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture: Gender, Power, Forms" is an example of this method. Montrose's article begins with the words, "I would like to recount an Elizabethan dream—not Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but one dreamt by Simon Forman on 23 January 1597" (167). Peter Barry further asserts that these narratives possess the weight of documentation, characterized by dramatic openers and specific citations of dates and locations, so imparting to the reader the sensation of a lived event. In this sense, the non-literary text becomes a "co-text" of the literary work instead of a "con-text." Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton do a good job of explaining this process in the introduction to their book *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* (1992). Jacques Derrida's *Deconstruction* asserts that a singular or definitive interpretation cannot be ascribed to the word within the text. It lets the text show a variety of different voices that don't always agree with each other. New Historicism asserts that a work is not an independent entity of immutable

meanings, but rather embodies a plurality of discordant voices and unsolved tensions within a particular culture. Post-structuralists strive to derive meaning solely from a 'close reading' of the text, whereas new historicists focus on the cultural context in which the text is situated. New Historicism concurs with Derrida's assertion that "there is nothing outside the text" (158), in the specific sense that all aspects of the past are accessible to the reader solely in textualized form: they are 'thrice-processed,' initially through the ideologies, perspectives, or discursive practices of their era, subsequently through those of individuals, and ultimately through the distorting framework of language itself.

New Historicism is open-minded and embraces all kinds of variances and deviations. But it is not the same as the Marxist idea of freedom, which solely applies to the working class. It provides a political interpretation of the book by offering a platform for culturally and psychologically disadvantaged and disenfranchised individuals, particularly women. It also agrees with the Postcolonial way of thinking that critics like Edward Said, Gayathri Chakravorthy Spivak, and Homi K. Bhaba have pushed for. It talks about how language and cultures mixed in colonial and post-colonial countries, and it talks about post-colonialism as a way of talking. Michel Foucault is arguably the most significant critic of the twentieth century. His interests in power, epistemology, subjectivity, and ideology have affected critics in fields other than literary studies, including as political science, history, and anthropology. New Historicism is firmly anti-establishmentarian, consistently aligning with

liberal principles of human freedom, and it embraces and celebrates all types of difference and 'deviance.' The new historicist movement owes a lot to the work of Foucault, who based his work on the idea that there are limits to what we can know as a group and on his method of looking at a wide range of texts to learn about the episteme of a certain moment. New Historicism is based on the work of Foucault, notably his latter work on power and subjectivity. It seeks to understand a literary piece as an expression of or response to the power structures of the surrounding society. The Old historical method viewed literature and history as text and context, whereas New Historicism regards them as text and co-text, eschewing the distinction between literature and history, the aesthetic and the actual. The Older historical method argued that literature mirrored the collective 'world-view' of a specific era. New Historicism differs by asserting that no era or civilization possesses a singular, homogeneous worldview; rather, it is characterized by internal diversity, rendering it heterogeneous. In the introduction to his 1995 book *Historicism*, critic Paul Hamilton gives a clear and simple description of historicism and says that it has two main points of view: Historicism is a critical movement that emphasizes the paramount significance of historical context in the understanding of various texts. First, it wants to put the remark in its historical context, whether it is philosophical, historical, artistic, or something else. Second, it usually goes back to look at how any historical work is likely to show the interests and biases of the time it was produced. Historicism is skeptical of the narratives that history presents

about itself; conversely, it is as wary of its own partisanship. New Historicism entails the simultaneous examination of literary and non-literary texts; the term 'parallel' signifies the fundamental distinction between 'New' and 'Old' methodologies in literature that have utilized historical material. Historical methods of the past put the literary text and the historical basis in a hierarchy. The main and most important difference between "new" and "old" historicism is that the "new" historicism gives "equal weight" to literary and non-literary material. The term "archival" in the phrase "the archival continuum" captures a second key distinction between old and New Historicism. The term "archival" signifies that New Historicism is a historicist movement rather than a historical one. So, New Historicism looks at how artistic and non-artistic texts are related in a certain society. The former historical method was inferior to New Historicism, as it examined the text within the framework of history. In contrast, New Historicism is a critical analytical approach that examines the text as a locus of power dynamics (Nayar 201). It examines the cultural discourse of the text and its era. Consequently, it serves as evidence in substantiating the textual facts. This means that New Historicism is better than the previous way. There are many reasons why New Historicism has become a popular way to criticize. It has encouraged and affected a return to history and culture from the earlier preoccupation with the dry realm of pure theory. Another important thing that new historicism does is give different meanings to a piece of literature. New Historicism is based on post-structuralist theories, and in certain ways, it is



*shaped by Derrida's deconstruction and Lacan's psychoanalysis. But it doesn't fully follow all of the poststructuralists' rules and instead utilizes a style that is easier to understand. New Historicism intervenes in cultural disputes and seeks to comprehend the culture of repressed or suppressed individuals. This type of literary study will aid a student in understanding marginalized cultures and the overlooked characteristics of dominant civilizations. Greenblatt, as an interpreter and meticulous student of texts, contests the New Critical principle of practical criticism. He harshly criticizes the usual New Critical methods and thinks that the connections between texts and other types of social production are more complicated than formalist criticism would have us believe. Historians do not regard New Historicism as very valuable because it depends on a solitary historical incident to serve as evidence for an ostensibly unrelated and seemingly peripheral topic within a literary text.*