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Historical interpretation of literary text

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Abstract:

This paper aims to investigate the New Historicism theory as an effective means to interpret and analyze the literary text. In doing so, the historicizing theory has been posed against “New Criticism” which traditionally stresses upon the need to understand a literary work as an autonomous whole in an isolated state from the socio-political ambience. In contrast to this, New Historicism is all about situating a work in to the socio political, economic, cultural and ideological ambience of the time and space which the text belongs to. The historical interpretation of a text helps a reader or a critic to understand the underlying idea which the author wants to convey in a subtle manner coated in the form of a personal story. All art carries a bigger political message which is disguised in the pretext of plight of fictional characters. According to historicizing approach, understanding art is to comprehend what is not explicitly conveyed by the author, thus interpretation is all about the ability to decode the blind spots in a text. An attempt has been made to evaluate the tenets of Marxist theory from the perspective of new historicism. Apart from this, some illustrations are presented

in order to authenticate the need to understand literature from the historical, social, political and cultural view point. The relevance of a text should be judged by the degree of its connectivity with the historical milieu which surrounds the text and the author.

Keywords: New historicism, interpretation, new criticism, Marxism

Introduction:

The American philosopher and literary critic Fredric Jameson in his book “The Political Unconscious” begins with an appeal “Always historicize” (Jameson). This is the slogan Jameson gives at the very onset of this book as a key to understand or interpret a literary text. So I just found this idea worth exploring. So basically the aim of this research paper is to investigate the value of understanding literature by interpreting its historical context. By historical context I mean the prevailing

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social, political, economical and cultural ambience during the times when the text was written. An attempt has been made to find out the relevance of the social equivalent of a text in comparison to study the text in an isolated manner as an autonomous whole. This paper challenges the notion “Art for the art’s sake” and instead considers the art as an artist’s tool to shape the society. As Oscar Wilde states in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “All Art is quite useless” (Wilde). It means art should not have a utility or purpose; rather it should be an end in itself.

Russian philosopher Georgi Plekhanov strongly advocated against the doctrine of “Art for the art’s sake”. He suggested that the idea of art for art’s sake is as strange as considering “wealth for wealth’s sake or medicines for medicines sake”. Thus, all human activities must serve mankind otherwise they will be reduced to some useless or idle occupations. And Art is no exception to this rule. Plekhanov insisted that an artist best serves the society when its work is concurrent with the prevailing social concerns.

New Historicism as a tool for literary Analysis:

New historicism as a tool for critical analysis is concerned with situating a literary work in its historical milieu, focusing on the time and space in which the

work was written as well as paying attention to the author’s life. This approach is apparently a reaction to the New Criticism which lays emphasis on close reading a work as a self-contained and isolated object.

Marxism and historical interpretation of literary text:

The historical approach of understanding literary text is aligned with the tenets of Marxist theory which also focuses on viewing literature as a reflection of society. According to the Marxist theory, the study of literature and the study of society are intricately bound. Marxism believed that a critique of a text cannot exist in isolation from the cultural situation in which the text evolved. Marxist theory looks beyond conventional literary elements (literary themes, style, plot or characterization, poetic tools like figures of speech and other literary devices) and rather focuses on uncovering the writer’s ideology through examination of the fictional world’s characters as well as the social and economic setting of the times when the work was written.

Apart from historical and cultural background, Marxist theory adds one more dimension to it, that is, economic means of production. It helps in understanding of the social and political forces at work during the time when the text is written or is being interpreted. These forces influence the

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interaction between literary work and readers in the sense that which work is to be published or how much a text will be distributed.

Consider the example of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman visits his employer Howard Wagner's office to request for an office job instead of the travelling job. Willy is not only denied the option, rather he is fired from his current job, which infuriates Willy.

I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not piece of fruit! (Miller, *Death of a Salesman*)

Miller, through the character of Willy Loman, has depicted the condition of the ordinary American citizen during the times of Great Depression, when the US economy crashed and there were job losses, businesses shut down over night. Miller himself witnessed the economic upheaval of depression days when his father suffered huge losses in business due to economic depression in America. Miller struggled thereafter by doing petty jobs like truck driver, shipping clerk etc. Miller's works are thus inseparable from the political and social conditions which prevailed during his times in America.

Bringing a change in society:

Historicizing a text helps in exposing the class conflicts thus creating an

impetus to bring change in society. Bertolt Brecht deployed the alienation effect in his plays by making familiar appear de-familiar in order to distance the audience from the world of illusion and set them to bring change. In *Mother Courage and her Children*, in a very important scene in which Mother Courage's daughter Katrin is killed. The enemies attack the village at night and Katrin, who is dumb, climbs on a ladder to reach at an elevation and then starts beating the drum in order to alert the villagers about the upcoming danger. She does so by risking her own life as the enemies had already captured the home in which Katrin is staying. The enemy soldiers get infuriated by this act and warns Katrin to stop otherwise they would kill her. Katrin pauses for a moment, looks towards the soldier who is aiming a shot at her, then towards the village, and then starts beating the drum even harder. The beating stops only with the shot of the gun; Katrin is shot dead by the enemy soldier.

It is an impactful scene in which Brecht has highlighted that the individual who apparently do not have any voice can actually raise his or her voice in an impactful manner. Thus, every individual has capability of bringing change in the society leading to peace and harmony. It is noteworthy that Brecht's work was published around 1939 when the whole world was at the edge of 2nd World War. The above scene was a subtle way of author

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to invoke responses from people to contribute to bring harmony positive change in society.

Historical significance of love story in Train to Pakistan:

Khushwant Singh in Train to Pakistan created a rogue character Juggut Singh who falls in love with a muslim girl, Nooran. In the last scene of the novel, Juggut Singh sacrifices his life to save the occupants of train travelling to his village Mano Majra to Pakistan in which his beloved Nooran was also travelling. The train eventually safely goes over the body of Juggut Singh. This is the very train which carried dead bodies of thousands of hindu people who were killed by Muslims in the riots. In the context of the times of Indo-Pak partition, Singh has shown through this love stories that love knows no barrier and love is ultimate solution of the problems across Indian border.

Kristallnacht and Miller's Broken Glass:

Arthur Miller's 1994 play Broken Glass is a story of a Jewish couple Gellburgs living in New York City. One fine day Sylvia mysteriously gets paralyzed from legs. While doctors are trying to find the physical cause behind the problem, one needs to understand the historical setting of the play. The title refers to the infamous event in the history of Germany with the name Kristallnacht (a German term which means Crystal night or night of broken

glass). This was when Hitler's Nazi party men attacked German Jews on the pretext of the death of a German diplomat by a Jewish student. As an action of retaliation, around 100 Jews were killed and thousands were imprisoned. This also proved to be turning point leading to massive killing of 6 million Jews as Holocaust. The physical handicap of Sylvia is actually symbolic to inaction or apathy of the rest of the world towards the Nazis atrocities on the German local Jews. Thus this play, including its title, is clearly a reflection of political turmoil of its times.

The well known American feminist writer Carol Hanisch, in her essay Personal is Political reveals the findings of the therapy group formed to discussed the problems of the women which were apparently personal; but concludes that the problems which were otherwise on surface level appeared to be personal, are actually political and raises question on bigger social structure characterized by misogyny and bigotry. Carol Hanisch considers the term "therapy" a misnomer in first place. This is so because therapy means as if someone is sick and needs to be cured, which means he or she needs a personal solution. However, Carol Hanisch wants to highlight the problems as something which belong to an entire group rather than individual problem. By doing so, the solutions may be arrived at by attacking the bigger rigid social structure rather than

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focussing on an individual. Consider the example of a working woman complaining that she is unable to strike balance between her professional life, her husband and her kids. Some obvious tailor made resolutions to this apparently personal problem could be to leave the job and take care of kids, or to switch the job to some other organization where work load is relatively less due to less compensation, or to relocate yourself with your in-laws so that kids are taken care by them. However, if we try to look at this problem from a bigger perspective, the first and the foremost question arises why a woman has to struggle to strike balance between her job and her family? Why there cannot be mandatory government norms which binds the organizations to have the provision of day care facilities, or why a husband cannot work with his wife in tandem to carry the bourdon of household chores and or kids? All these questions points towards the rigid patriarchal societal structure, and the solution to these problems are not personal, rather the solution can be arrived at by bringing change in these social structure. Similarly, the question regarding mandatory laws on provision of day care facility is a direct attack on the legal structure rather than at an individual. Thus, the problems which seem to be personal on the superficial level are essentially political and the solution to these could be met only by bringing social change.

Art as a mirror to the society:

The reflection theory is a way of countering formalist theory of literature which otherwise lock the literary work within its own isolated space, cut off from history. The reflection theory finds its origin into Marxist theory which considered art as a tool to lay bare the prevailing class conflicts in the society.

According to Leon Trotsky, Art is not a reflection but a transformation of reality.

According to Pierre Macherey, the objective of Art is to “deform” rather than “reflect”. This is so because had Art been simply a plane reflection, then it would have become exactly identical to it, thus eventually it would have ceased to be an art and become reality itself. Macherey was of the opinion that literature is essentially parodic, thereby making a familiar experience appearing strange. (Macherey)

The technique of making familiar appear strange to create a distancing effect was efficiently adopted and executed by German playwright Bertolt Brecht in his theatre called Epic theatre. Brecht used to create shocking effects during the play thereby not letting is audience to fall prey to emotional trance. The audience of epic theatre is always made aware that what they are witnessing is not a slice of life, rather it is merely a representation of reality. This awareness sets the audience into action

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themselves outside theatre by raising the consciousness.

Russian revolutionary Lenin while talking about Leo Tolstoy states that Tolstoy's art is a mirror of the Russian Revolution. Pierre Macherey, in his book *A Theory of Literary Production* argued that if Art is a mirror, then it is one placed at an angle to reality, a broken mirror which presents its images in fragmented form, and is as expressive in what it does not reflect as in what it does. (Eagleton)

The above remarks of Macherey is a manifestation of the historical interpretation of arts in order to "decode" the implied meaning, that is, to fill the gap what the author mean to say and what he actually writes and says. According to Plekhanov, literature reflects reality in the sense that the writer is able to translate social facts in to literary ones, and a reader, one must be able to de-code these facts back into society.

Conclusion:

French painter Henri Matisse remarked that all art bears the imprint of its historical epoch, but the great art is that in which this imprint is most deeply marked. Interpreting a text is not only about understanding what the text says, rather also what it does not say. As Terry Eagleton, while referring to Marxism,

remarked that criticism is to show the text as it cannot know itself, to manifest those conditions of its making about which it is, in general, silent. Hence, all form of Art has a historical connotation attached to it. As a reader, one must be able to decode the art back to its social and historical equivalent.

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