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Context in cultural materialism and new historicism: A Review

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Abstract

This paper reviews presence and role of historical context in Cultural Materialism and New Historicism, two important literary theories emerged in 1980s. Cultural Materialism, propounded by Raymond Williams, and New Historicism, coined by Stephen Jay Greenblatt, are two important approaches to analysis of literature on the common ground of “context”, having socio-cultural forces behind an event, because no historical event has a single cause; rather, it is intricately connected with a web of economic, social, and political factors (Foucault). New historical critics are less fact-and event-oriented than historical critics used to be- the

truth about what really happened can be purely and objectively known only from its cultural context. They are working right at the border of Marxist, poststructuralist, cultural, postcolonial, feminist, and reader-response/reader-oriented criticism. They have multiple interests and motivations. In the final part of the paper, two literary texts- William Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice* and Emily Bronte’s novel *Wuthering Heights*- are analysed from the perspectives of these two theories with cultural context of the event given in these literary texts.

Keywords: Cultural Materialism, New Historicism, Cultural and Historical Context, Marxism

Introduction

Cultural materialism and new historicism, two important literary theories, emerged in 1980s, with many similar grounds of analysis of literature. Cultural materialism was coined by Raymond Williams, a Welsh Marxist theorist, and new historicism was coined by Stephen Jay Greenblatt, an American scholar. Williams coined the term “Cultural materialism” with his focus on history and culture which blend leftist culturalism and Marxist analysis. Both theories emerged as counterparts and endpoints of the line. Williams introduced this theory with his focus on historical context, but with impacts of economy, culture, society, politics, etc. with broader perspective in literature. New historicism was an American development in the study of early modern literature, following the publication of Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) [10]. This theory is a form of anti-humanism, because, for the theorists, individuals are entirely products of their time and place, products of the historical context. It is also a form of anti-positivism because the certainty of ever establishing “true” or “objective” knowledge, the same as in history, is always frustrated and that is subject to further investigation. Cultural materialism was a British development after publication of Jonathan Dollimore’s *Radical Tragedy* (1984) [3] and the collection of essays, which Dollimore and Alan Sinfield edited, called *Political Shakespeare* (1985) [4]. In both these theories, existing conditions or socio-political context of a literary text (or event) become important for analysis. Culture becomes a “system of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relations with the world” (Dollimore *et al.* vii). Culture produces ideology and this ideology is reflected in a literary text. Therefore, such text can be analysed from the perspective of both cultural materialism and new historicism.

If new historicism concerns itself with better understanding the past for the sake of academic interest, cultural materialism concerns itself with better understanding the political present as mediated through the past for the sake of *changing* that present (Parvini 243). Where new historicists tended to see containment and the triumph of power, cultural materialists saw ideological contradictions and therein the scope for dissidence and subversion (Parvini 243).

Neema Parvini says that, broadly speaking, new historicism and cultural materialism mark a shift in the discipline of English literature from a period in which the primary focus of criticism was the literary text to one in which the primary focus has been historical context (Parvini 238). New historicists and cultural materialists distinguished themselves by bringing a diverse range of influences of Marx, Foucault, Walter Benjamin, or Mikhail Bakhtin, and the exact locations of all the complex boundaries between the new historicism and other “isms”, i.e. Marxism and poststructuralism. They are also influenced from anthropology, historicism, and new criticism, etc. for contextual questions from new perspectives of cultural materialism and new historicism.

In the case of the new historicism, it is blend of culture and history, and the best explanation in its concern is historical. 1920-1950 literature was observed from a psychoanalytic perspective and the process gave less importance to individuals and more to the historical context, for all driving forces behind the literary event, and from this emerged new historicism. It is partially historical approach but it is not "old" historicism, bound to the event in a certain historical time and place, but it extends to cultural factors as well, which are driving forces behind the event.

When new criticism emerged, historicists left the ground for the new critiques. New critics, who were formalists, had tendency to treat literary works as self-contained, self-referential objects. They were concentrated within the text for form and meaning. Later, new criticism was attacked by reader-response theory, saying that meaning of a work is not inherent in its internal form but rather cooperatively produced by reader and text. For poststructuralists, followers of philosophy of Jacques Derrida, texts are inevitably self-contradictory and we can find form by ignoring or suppressing conflicting details or elements. They ignore the world beyond the text and its reader and they ignore the historical contexts.

In the mid-1980s, Brook Thomas, a new historicist, wrote, while working in an essay on Keats's Ode on a Grecian Urn, that some questions should be raised for historical and political realities behind writing the poem such as: Where would Keats have seen such an urn? How did a Grecian urn end up in a museum in England? Such questions presume that Keats might have written that ode in a certain historical context. Such questions may present responses and information about Keats's definitions of art, truth, beauty, the past and the timelessness, which are good for new historical analysis of the poem (Thomas 509-22).

New historical critics are less fact-and event-oriented than historical critics used to be- the truth about what really happened can be purely and objectively known only from its cultural context. They are less likely to see history as linear and progressive, as something developing toward the present or the future (teleological); they are less likely to think of it in terms of specific eras, each with a definite, persistent, and consistent *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the times) (Walker 259). New historicists are unlikely to suggest that a literary text has a single or easily identifiable historical context (Walker 259). New historicist critics tend to define the discipline of history more broadly than it was defined before the advent of formalism. They view history as a social science and the social sciences as being properly historical. For Greenblatt, literature is not a sphere apart or distinct from the history that is relevant to it. He says that historical criticism must be "conscious of its status as interpretation (Walker 260)." McGann writes that historical criticism can no longer make any part of its sweeping picture unselfconsciously, or treat any of its details in an untheorized way (qtd in Walker 260). New historicists use thick description to blur distinctions, not only between history and the other social sciences but also between background and foreground, historical and literary materials, political and poetical and literary materials (Walker 260).

New historicists remind us that it is treacherously difficult to reconstruct the past as it was, rather than we have been conditioned by our own place and time to believe that it was. Michel Foucault, an archaeologist of human knowledge, encouraged the new historicist critic of literature to redefine

the boundaries of historical inquiry (Walker 261). Foucault's view of history was influenced by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's concept *wirkliche* (real or true) history that is neither melioristic (that is, getting better all the time) nor metaphysical (Walker 261). Like him, Foucault did not see history in terms of a continuous development toward the present. It is difficult to see present practices critically from within them, and because of the same cultural practices, it is extremely difficult to enter bygone ages. No historical event has a single cause; rather, it is intricately connected with a web of economic, social, and political factors (Foucault, qtd. in Walker 261).

Greenblatt comments that the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators....and the institutions and practices of a society. It is the product of collective negotiation and exchange (Walker 264). Like a work of art, a work of history is the negotiated product of a private creator and the public practices of a given society. Any one change is connected with a host of others, and no one of them may simply be identified as cause or effect, progressive or regressive, repressive or enabling.

While introducing an anthology of essays in *The New Historicism* (1989), Veeseer mentioned some key assumptions that often appear in new historicism:

1. That every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses The tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. That literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;
4. That no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. Finally,... that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.

(Veeseer xi)

New historicist literary critics have participated in a broader, interdisciplinary movement toward unification virtually unprecedented within and across academic disciplines. New historicism is an interdisciplinary approach to literature. It covers up cultural materialism, which views both productive (economic) and reproductive (demographic) forces as the primary factors that shape society.

These both approaches, cultural materialism and new historicism, appeared in the same area of the discipline, at roughly the same time- and in constant dialogue, often taking the opposite sides of debates- new historicism and cultural materialism have frequently been compared and contrasted, considered side by side, or viewed as two sides of the same coin (Parvini 238). New Historicism insists that literature must be understood in its historical context because it views literary texts as cultural products that are rooted in their time and place, not works of individual genius that transcend them (Parvini 239). New historicism was primarily a method of power analysis strongly influenced by the anthropological studies of Clifford Geertz (1973) ^[8], modes of torture and punishment described by Michel Foucault (1977), and methods of ideological control outlined by Louis Althusser (1971).

Neema Parvini, in his article *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, gives a three-point definition of cultural

materialist assumptions as follows:

1. That social dissidence is not only possible but inevitable as a result of the competing discourses that foster contradictions in any dominant ideology.
2. That the present is in need of radical change and the process of change can be advanced in the sphere of education by searching for moments of contradiction and dissidence in the culture of the past.
3. That genuine dissidence comes from “dissident subcultures” and hence the search for dissidence itself must first come from a “dissident subculture”, an attack on hegemony from the margins of discourse where the hegemonic ideology has the weakest hold over its subjects. (Parvini 245)

Parvini, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Critical Theory* (pp. 238-249), has summarized Raymond Williams’s theory of “Cultural materialism” in the following words:

1. Accounts of history, culture and literature should aim to be specific and concrete rather than general and abstract lest it risks surrendering ‘reality to a formula’.
2. We should do away with the Marxist distinction between base and superstructure, or ‘true’ materiality and ‘false’ ideology, because culture is always inextricably material and bound up in material and social processes.
3. Culture is also irreducibly complex, despite the fact that there may be ruling powers; it has, finally, no fundamental coherence. It is a site of constant struggle and change.
4. Within this struggle, some cultural groups are dominant, while others are residual or emergent. However, they all form part of the complex set of social processes known as culture.
5. When analysing cultural objects it is important to be aware always of the material and social processes that made them.
6. Within this cultural milieu, individuals still maintain a degree of consciousness and individual agency. We should avoid the structural Marxist trap of making people mere ‘superstructural effects’.
7. Literature offers us access to some of the sites of ideological incoherence and struggle in the culture in which it was produced.

Application of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism in Literary Texts

Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* has dispersion of power and marginalization of social classes. The lawyer, judges and British Christians have domination, dispersion of power, over Semitic Shylock, who is in marginalization of social classes. It is Cultural Materialistic analysis of the circumstances in which Shylock is entrapped and harassed to lose money as well as flesh according to the bond. The bond itself carries cultural materialist values. Money and flesh both have cultural and materialistic values for Shylock, but he fails to acquire any of them. Usury was a practice at that time. During Shakespeare’s period, Jews were found very small in number. Either they were expelled from Britain (a large number of them expelled in 1290) or they were converted to Christianity. We can analyse this historical issue from the perspective of New Historicism.

Though Jews had been converted, they were still subject to anti-Semitic prejudice. In 1594, Roderigo Lopez was accused of plotting to poison Queen Elizabeth. He was the royal

physician to her. He was a Spanish Christian of Jewish ancestry. People did not believe because he was from Jewish ancestry. During his execution, he spoke to the public and said he “loved the Queen as well as he loved Jesus Christ, (3-9)”, but his words had adverse effect upon them. They laughed at him with disbelief because he was from Jewish ancestry. Practicing Jews were not allowed to enter Britain before, during and even after Shakespeare’s death in 1660. (##)

Jews were involved in usury even in Shakespeare’s time, and that was a legal practice, though Christians were culturally and religiously forbidden from that practice. Lending money on interest was a greedy and devious act in contemporary society. Shakespeare presents Shylock as a money lender on interest and, for the same reason, in all generations since the play was performed, audience have been taking the issue as anti-Semitic. This event suggests that Jews were at pains at time. These Jews showed cruelty and greed because of the discrimination and abuse by Christians in contemporary society of Britain. The fourth act of the play shows pain and suffering and disgrace caused by the Christian community towards Shylock. Though Shylock does not get sympathy from the Christians within the play, audience, generation after generation, shows natural sympathy for him, and sense of poetic justice fails here, with the tag of tragic-comedy to the play.

Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* was published in 1847. Queen Victoria was ruling over the Great Britain. Whig party leader Lord John Russell was prime minister. Crop failures and Irish potato famine of 1846 created problems in food supply and they had high prices of food. People had very poor working conditions and living conditions (The Bread Riots). Besides, they were crushed down by high unemployment. Many countries were in revolution for liberal causes, democracy, and rise in economic causes. It was mainly economic misery that brought up a lot of changes in Europe. Revolutions in different countries in Europe were consequence of the misery and its fear (Campbell 58-75).

In the year that the novel *Wuthering Height* published, social structure and relationship were disturbed by the industrial revolution. The bourgeoisie, a new urban class appeared between the aristocracy and the working class. New clashes were seen in the society. People had a new way of living and new ideologies emerged in the society. Human life and values were measured in materials. A worker’s work was measured in money value. Bourgeoisie expanded its power through investment and political hegemony. They isolated themselves from aristocracy and working class people. Land, property, voting rights, political power, etc. all were centralized within themselves. Bourgeois system of economy changed the social life and it had effects on literature as well. William’s writes, “Periods of major transition between social systems are commonly marked by the emergence of radically new forms” of literature” (189). Bourgeois writers like Emily Bronte wrote with new social issues of the time.

Wuthering Heights can be analysed from both Cultural Materialism and New Historicism. Social class and economic difficulties are depicted in the novel, with Heathcliff, who is emulative of the bourgeoisie. Earnshaw found him “in the streets of Liverpool; where he picked it up and inquired for its owner”. Mr Earnshaw treats Heathcliff as his own child with similar provisions and education. However, this treatment causes difficulties in family structure, developing some disparity and inequalities in the family. Heathcliff’s

intrusion and favouritism from Earnshaw disturbs the social equilibrium of the Wuthering Heights. Mr. Earnshaw treats his son Hindley unequally and that is set in his mind and heart. When Mr Earnshaw dies, Heathcliff is treated badly by Hindley. Heathcliff has to work as a servant. He is not recognized as a family member. He is at the bottom level of social structure. Catherine also discards him for his barbaric behavior. She marries Edgar Linton, who belongs to the higher class in the community. Heathcliff suffers from his childhood, because he is discarded by his bourgeois parents probably, but he is relieved with parental love of Mr. Earnshaw, and after his death, Hindley and Catherine treat him as a savage, uneducated, unintelligent, and poor lower class person. These are traditionally cultural materialistic views depicted by Emily Bronte.

Immediately after Catherine's marriage with Edgar Linton, Heathcliff leaves the Height in search of his better fortune. In three years' time, he earns enough money and appears educated but his barbaristic behaviours have not been improved yet. His bourgeois fortune, cultural materials, cannot restore his formerly desired social and cultural status, but prepares himself for revenge against the Wuthering Height and Thrushcross Grange, Hindley and Linton's cultural materialistic positions. New historical context is important here- industrial boom, rise of urban class of people as capitalists and bourgeoisie, and sudden rise of personality by education. Heathcliff's personality change represents the bourgeoisie and capitalist brutality against the feudal of earlier times.

Heathcliff uses his newly earned money and literacy to his advantage. He knows the traditional ideological materialist system in which he was brought up, and he knows how he has to deal with present situation in both places. Though he has a strong hatred against Linton and Hindley, he applies intelligent strategy against both families. He lends money to Hindley who has already fallen to alcohol after his wife's death. Meanwhile, he marries Isabella Linton so that he will have easy access to Catherine and Edgar Linton and their property. He wishes to have hold upon both families' property. He encapsulates a crucial truth about bourgeois society.

Hareton follows Heathcliffs ideology and works accordingly in the capitalist household.

Young Catherine believes herself literate and civilized. She believes that literacy makes one a person of higher class. Literacy has power and values, and for the same, young Catherine manages books with the help of servant Michael and she feels she will have easy way to visit Linton. She understands cultural and materialistic values of intellectual life, which bases of the social class system of that time. Literacy had materialistic value, an access to entire process of economy and its activities, and it was a good way to escape all kinds of social and economic limitations. She teases and makes fun of Hareton for his illiteracy, and teaches him to read and Hareton takes interest in reading and gives value to it. He enjoys reading because he also thinks that it will help him for social, cultural and economic status. Catherine's effort of teaching Hareton is with the sense of equality, not for any kind of oppression. Literacy is a reliable tool for analysing social, cultural, political and economic contexts of any events and thereby persons' roles. Linton is Heathcliff's son, who lived in London with her mother Isabella, and returned home, sick and foresaken, but Heathcliff does not

care and doesn't let others care about him. Linton and Catherine could have matched better and Heathcliff encouraged their meetings, but his intention was to seize the property of both places, the bourgeois culture of conspiracy for property.

Catherine is dead. Edgar Linton is dead. Isabella and her son Linton are dead. Frances and Hindley are dead. Heathcliff loves only one among all these people- Catherine; he loves even her spirit. He wants her spirit stay with him. All his education and property go in vain after death of his beloved Catherine. He does not have anything in his possession. He runs for bourgeois ideology of the time- amassing property and education, for worth of living, for cultural materialism, its values, social and cultural relationship, for love and life, but he gains nothing in the end. Death awaits him, but he cries for Catherine, and finally dies.

Conclusion

Two stories, one from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* and another from Emily Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights*, support the views of the theories- Cultural Materialism and New Historicism. Circumstantial context of the age determines the form of adopted history in Cultural Materialism and New historicism. Essence of both discourse manipulates the amount of past in each of them. Not only their essence is the sole cause of manipulating the past, but also the direction of research refines the material to be conceived. Overall knowledge of the existing issue makes us aware for the collection of intended past. For the correct information, applied tools of study should be error-free. Then only one can find out the inherent quality of the object to describe in the contemporary situation exactly. Hence, the existing forces of the era fix the direction of history in its productions.

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