



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 8.4  
IJAR 2021; 7(1): 428-431  
[www.allresearchjournal.com](http://www.allresearchjournal.com)  
Received: 18-11-2020  
Accepted: 22-12-2021

**Dr. Lekha Nath Dhakal**  
Associate Professor, Nepal  
Commerce Campus, Tribhuvan  
University, Kathmandu, Nepal

## Exploration of literary text and cultural system of a particular society: An approach of New Historicism

**Dr. Lekha Nath Dhakal**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/allresearch.2021.v7.i1f.8233>

### Abstract

This article tries to show that the major issue of New Historicism is to explore the relationship between texts and the cultural system in which they are produced. New Historicism is a historical method which studies and evaluates the literary text in terms of social, historical, and political contexts. It considers the works of literature as a historical text. It reveals the formalist conception of literature as an independent aesthetic order that goes beyond the requirements and interests of a society. This article also attempts to represent that one cannot imagine the literary text apart from the society. It is another form of social significance which the society produces and in return it reshapes the culture of that society. New Historicism clarifies how texts signify both culturally constructed patterns, and produce cultural formations. New Historicists have a faith that it makes no sense to isolate literary writings from the social context because such writings are the product of intricate social relations. This literary theory is first introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in 1980s as a usual practice of cultural poetics. Its concepts, themes and procedures were often recognized by the scholars of the English Renaissance in the late of 1970s and early of 1980s. They focused their attention on the literary form of drama and carefully observed the voices of the oppressed, the marginalized, and the deprived.

**Keywords:** New historicism, marginalized, oppressed, cultural – construct, social context

### Introduction

New historicists are mainly influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault and American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. New Historicism suggests a subjective approach to literature and was practiced mostly in Renaissance studies. Literature is a cultural creation constructed by more than one consciousness. Social, political, religious, and economic factors of a given society determine the literature it produces. These elements mingle in the society through social energy which is shown in the works of art and becomes the means to characterize the ideology of culture through texts. New Historicism ventures this through its suggestion of historicity of texts and textuality of history.

New Historicism, as the subject of research, differs from the old concept of history. Traditional historicism takes history as “universal,” but New Historicism regards it to be “cultural.” According to Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, New Historicism can be separated from the Old Historicism “by its lack of faith in objectivity and permanence and its stress not upon the direct recreation of the past, but rather the process by which the past is constructed or invented” (4). This view on history brings about a new understanding on literature and literary criticism. Traditional literary historicism tries to rebuild the past objectively, whereas New Historicism suggests that history is knowable in the same sense as literature is through subjective interpretation. The understanding of the past is conducted by the present consciousness. Louis Montrose, in his “Professing the Renaissance,” lays out that as critics we historically bound and we may only reconstruct the histories through the filter of our consciousness: “Our analyses and our understandings necessarily proceed from our own historically, socially and institutionally shaped vantage points; that the histories we reconstruct are the textual constructs of critics who are, ourselves, historical subjects (23). To Montrose, New Historicism must recognize that “not only the poet but also the critic exists in history” and “our comprehension, representation, interpretation of the texts of the past always proceeds by a mixture of estrangement appropriation.” (24). Montrose suggests that

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Lekha Nath Dhakal**  
Associate Professor, Nepal  
Commerce Campus, Tribhuvan  
University, Kathmandu, Nepal

this kind of critical practice constitutes a continuous dialogue between “a poetics and a politics of culture” (24). In Montrose’s opinion, the complete recovery of meanings in a diverse historical outlook is considered necessary since older historical criticism is illusory. He remarks:

The practice of a new historical criticism invites rhetorical strategies by which to foreground the constitutive acts of textuality that traditional modes of literary history efface or misrecognize. It also necessitates efforts to historicize the present as well as the past, and to historicize the dialectic between them – those reciprocal historical pressures by which the past has shaped the present and the present reshapes the past. (24-25)

New Historicists believe that “it makes no sense to separate literary texts from the social context around them because such texts are the product of complex social exchanges or negotiations” (Booker 138). New Historicism has a historical method to borrow certain features from post structuralism like the principle of plurality—that a literary work may have different meanings to different people. The theories that are near to New Historicism are Marxism, Feminism, and Cultural Materialism in their being skeptical of the formalist view of literature as an independent realm of discourse. David Forgacs, in his essay “Marxist Literary Theories,” puts forward that regardless of the diversity of Marxist theories, there is one assumption that is final, which is “that literature can only be properly understood within a larger framework of social reality” (167). The definite source of social reality is “found in history, which Marxists see as a series of struggles between antagonistic social classes and the types of economic they engage in” (167). Gallagher in her work “Marxism and New Historicism,” points out one major distinction between new historicism and Marxist criticism is that “the new historicist, unlike the Marxist, is under no nominal compulsion to achieve consistency.” She even insists that “historical curiosity can develop independently of political concerns” (46). New historicists try to reconstruct the ideology through diverse agents. She further puts her opinion that:

The traditionally important economic and political agents and events have been displaced or supplemented by people and phenomena that once seemed wholly insignificant, indeed outside of history: women, criminals, the insane, sexual practices and discourses, fairs, festivals, plays of all kinds. Just as the sixties, the effort in the eighties has been to question and destabilize the distinction between sign systems and things, the representation and the represented, history and text. (43)

New Historicism acknowledges literature as a social and cultural creation constructed by more than one consciousness. It is not a product of a single mind. It is achieved through the lens of culture that produced it. Literature is a specific vision of history and not a distinct category of human activity. As man himself is a social construct, there is no such thing as a universal human nature that surpasses history. No one can rise above their own cultural formations, their own ideological upbringing in order to understand the past in its own terms. It is impossible for a modern reader to appreciate a literary work

as its contemporaries experienced it. The best approach to literary criticism is to try to recreate the ideology of its culture by taking the text as its basis and by exploring diverse areas of cultural factors.

New Historicism is based on Foucault’s theories which offers a critique of history. It reestablishes basic concepts concerning literary production and asserts that history cannot be separated from textuality. New Historicism is a part of the postmodern fashion in literary history and culture studies. It welcomes the breakdown of genres and invites the analysis of discontinuities, linking anecdotes to the disruption of our understanding of history. Postmodern era regards history as a discourse constructed by literary imagination and power relations. In this sense, it is ideological and subjective. In “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” Montrose defends New Historicism as a practice that recognizes “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (230). Montrose explains:

By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question – traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement. Secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the documents upon which historians ground their own text, called “histories.” (20)

New Historicists point to the culturally specific nature of texts as products of particular periods and discursive formations, while viewing reality—history—as itself mediated by linguistic codes which is impossible for the critic or historian to bypass in the reconstruction of past cultures.

Greenblatt emphasizes the relation of language to reality. He explores this connection in his essay “Marlowe and the Will to Absolute Play” in referring to ways in which Christopher Marlowe’s characters fashion themselves through language. Language, he implies is detached from reality, but the characters try to fill the existential void with words. He remarks that “Magnificent words are spoken and disappear into a void,” but their detachment is the condition of their existence as “it is precisely this sense of the void that compels the characters to speak so powerfully, as if to struggle the more intensity against the enveloping silence” (*Self-Fashioning* 200). Language, in this sense, is primary and precedes referent. Greenblatt begins “with the desire to speak with the dead,” he admits, “all I could hear was my own voice” (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 1). He believes that the solution to this impasse lies within himself as an historically situated subject saying “my own voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living” (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 2).

Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, states that self-fashioning directs attention to the problematic structure of power in representation. He argues that self-fashioning involves not self –creation but submission to an absolute power. It is achieved in relation to something perceived as

alien, strange, or hostile: the “threatening other—heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist” (9), who must be unveiled or invented in order to be marked, attacked, and destroyed. In Greenblatt’s reading of Othello, Iago’s successful manipulation of Othello serves as an example of the unseen power structure of self-fashioning. Greenblatt writes, “in Othello it is Iago who echoes that last line ‘I am not what I am,’ the motto of the improviser, the manipulator of signs that bear no resemblance to what they profess to signify” (238). A sole textual analysis of the improvising power relation in Othello is certainly not the task of New Historicism. The reason why Greenblatt highlights the role of Iago is, in effect, to explore how Shakespeare’s literary symbolism of self-fashioning operates within its social and cultural symbolic structures. By comparing Iago’s improvisation of Othello, to Shakespeare’s manipulation of his audiences and social culture, Greenblatt regains “a sense of the complex interactions of meaning in a given culture” (30).

Greenblatt examines the subtle text-context power circulation in respect of self-fashioning in Elizabethan culture. Shifting from textual matrix to the contextual matrix, from the characters to the author, enables Greenblatt to provide an insightful study of the interplay between fiction and history and between selfhood and cultural.

Catherine Gallagher in her work, “Marxism and New Historicism,” explains New Historicism as “reading literary and nonliterary texts as constituents of historical discourses that are both inside and outside the texts” (37). Catherine elaborates that the practitioners of New Historicism “generally posit no hierarchy of cause and effect as they trace the connections among texts, discourses, power and the constitution of subjectivity” (37).

Aram Veesser manages to bring together certain assumptions that constantly appear in new historicist theory. He points out that:

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

He asserts that “there is no such thing as a human nature free of culture” (51). He does not see culture as “complexes of concrete behavior patterns—accustoms, usages, traditions, habit clusters” (44), but as “a set of control mechanisms— plans, recipes, rules, instructions...for the governing of behavior” (49). As Greenblatt remarks “self-fashioning is in effect the Renaissance version of these control mechanisms, the cultural system of meaning that creates historical embodiment” (*Renaissance* 3). Greenblatt says literature “functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of these concrete behaviors of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behaviors is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes” (*Renaissance* 4). The author, social factors, and the text all help us understand the larger picture. New historicist criticism is concerned with these three

functions and all three must be the concern of the literary criticism.

Foucault suggests that discourse should be an object of historical analysis; “the history of sexuality ... must first be written from the viewpoint of a history of discourses” (69). He argues that power must not be seen as merely negative, refusing and repressive. It is a productive feature. In such discourses, sexuality becomes one of the decisive factors of human personality. This production of sexuality as an area of knowledge coincides with the production of truth about sexuality. Foucault regards this process as an important part of the emergence of what he calls “bio-power.” New Historicism proclaims a return to history, and with it there comes the end of the long imagined antithesis between history and theory. Their opposition has been a necessary critical fiction of our time.

Greenblatt suggests that during the Renaissance, the fashioning of identity, both in formation and expression is primarily a product of social institutions. The fashioning of identity was less autonomous because in Renaissance “family, state, and religious institutions impose a rigid discipline upon their middle class subjects” (*Renaissance* 1). Identity fashioning is artificial and imposed during early modern period. Greenblatt notes that there is also a “direction enacted by the works of literature in relation to the society: a shift from absorption by community, religious faith, or diplomacy towards the establishment of literacy creation as a profession in own right” (8). Greenblatt evaluates Edmund Spenser, Thomas Wyatt, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare. These authors know about fashioning since they had to adapt themselves to different identities, as they did not follow the expected pattern. Being sons of middle class families, “they did not inherit their personalities; they had to reinvent them” (8). In *Representing the English Renaissance*, Greenblatt explains his attempt in evaluating the Renaissance texts in a historical emergency. He argues that any form of art is performed in a cultural environment and the production of literature is not a private matter but a social act with its “contests” and “negotiations.” He further says that imagination is created in a social environment and is a product of public condition:

These contests and negotiations are all social; they do not occur in a private chamber of the artist’s imagination, for that imagination, in its materials and resources and aspirations is already a social construct. This does not mean that art can be reduced to social structures such as class, status, or kinship, any more than it can simply be collapsed into the material basis for its production and consumption. A culture’s diverse social constructions are at once interconnected and differentiated, so that if, for example, a culturally dominant conception of social inequality shapes artistic representations, those representations have at the same time the power to constrain, shape, alter, and even resist the conception of social inequality. (viii)

Social structures create public imagination and at the same time art which is a social construct itself, helps alter and save the social pattern. History and literature are thus interrelated and they are agents of meaning.

Greenblatt, in “Murdering Peasants,” highlights that history and art are not constituent but their production requires

numerous elements, and the outcome of social and political values are introduced to us through the text: "The production and consumption of such works are not unitary . . . they always involve a multiplicity of interests, however well organized, for the crucial reason that is social and hence presume more than one consciousness." He remarks that "in response to the art of the past, we inevitably register, whether we wish or not, the shifts of value and interests that are produced in the struggles of social and political life" (14). Greenblatt also asserts that instead of depicting the ordinary operation of law, functioning to defend property, English artists most often narrate events at once more menacing and more socially prestigious events colored by "feudal fantasies in which the sixteenth century gentry dressed their craving for honor. Thus instead of the assizes and a hempen rope, we have tales of mass rebellion and knightly victories" (15). Artists prefer to narrate events that belong to the feudal society, instead of the capitalist relationship.

In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Greenblatt holds that literary pleasure and interest is "a collective production" since language as the "heart of literary power" is the "supreme instance of collective creation" (4). Greenblatt compares the function of the Renaissance artists with the Renaissance monarchs. He says that "at some level we know perfectly well that the power of the prince is largely a collective invention" since "the symbolic embodiment of desire, pleasure, and violence of thousands of subjects" and also "the instrumental expression of complex networks of dependency and fear, the agent rather than the maker of social will" (4). Greenblatt opines that Shakespearean theater is a product of collective intentions, and the moment of writing is a social moment. The theater compels the audience to a collectivity since Shakespearean theater "depends upon a felt community: there is no dimming of lights, no attempts to isolate and awaken the sensibilities of each individual member of the audience, no sense of disappearance of the crowd" (5). The textual traces that Greenblatt is interested in New Historicism are "signs of contingent social practices" (5). We could be curious to know how these collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic form, offered for consumption so that we can examine the boundaries that divide cultural practices appreciated as art forms and other closest forms of expression.

In "Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England," Greenblatt explains that there is a "social energy" that we experience within ourselves, whose "contemporary existence depends upon an irregular chain of historical transactions that leads back to the late sixteen and seventeenth centuries" (6).

The history of knowledge has been dominated by a certain tension between two claims: claims of attribution and claims of truth. The claims of attribution are those which hold that knowledge claims require attribution to someone. The discovery by the subject serves to grant the status of knowledge to a claim or discovery by the subject is a precondition to a claim being the sort of thing that can be entered into discourse. Claims of truth are those sorts of claims that hold that truth is not constituted in history but revealed by history. Proper historical analysis can clarify truth from falsehood. The subject can well represent something that prevents truth from unfolding and being

revealed through presentation of myth or prejudice as fact. The subject as a seeker of truth is important. It is the subject that must stand independent of prejudices and myth. One must try to demonstrate how and under what conditions, the understanding of the individual can be "modified without some individual inventor discovering truth and at the same time how the work of these modifications can produce new knowledge" (*The Chomsky-Foucault Debate* 17).

In conclusion, literary text represents body of knowledge. It also becomes a technique for understanding the composition of it. It is a way of resolving the dilemma by showing historically specific relations between bodies of knowledge, or disciplines, and disciplinary practices. Thus, one can understand New Historicism as an approach to re-read the historical, cultural and social condition of a particular society because literary text is something that refers to knowledge of history as it traces through a series of relations. This study finds that literary text cannot be imagined out of the history and culture of the society as it is the social product. It offers analysis of history and reestablishes the basic concept about the literary production and It declares that history cannot be separated from textuality. New historicism is a postmodern fashion in literary and culture studies.

#### Works Cited

1. Booker, Keith M. *A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Longman 1996.
2. Chomsky, Noam and Michael Foucault. *The Chomsky – Foucault Debate*. The New York Press 2006, 15- 16.
3. Cox Jeffrey N, Larry Reynolds J. *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*. Princeton UP 1993.
4. Foucault Michael. *History of Sexuality: An introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley Penguin. 1978, 1.
5. Gallagher Catherine. *Marxism and New Historicism*. *The New Historicism*. Ed. Veenser, H. Aram. Routledge 1998, 37-46.
6. Greenblatt, Stephen J. *Renaissance Self – Fashioning, from More to Shakespeare*. The U of Chicago P 1980.
7. *Murdering Peasants. Representing the English Renaissance*. Stephen Greenblatt, Ed. U of California P 1988.
8. *Representing the English Renaissance*. Ed. Berkeley: U of California P 1988.
9. *Shakespearean Negotiation: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Oxford UP 1990.
10. Montrose Louis A. *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture*. *The New Historicism*. Ed. Veenser, H. Aram. Routledge 1989, 15-36.
11. Veenser Aram H. *The New Historicism*. Routledge, 1989.