

**Literary Theory and Literary Criticism**  
**Prof. Dr. Vimal Mohan John**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Lecture - 18**

**Part B**

**New Historicism and Cultural Materialism**

Hello and welcome back to the module on New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. Before, we further our discussions; let us quickly recap what we discussed in the previous module. We looked at the process of new historicism itself and looked at the practice of the practice and the mode of analysis deployed by the new historicism. We understood, how they just a pose literary and non literary text, reading the former and the light of the latter.

And they tried to, thereby defamiliarize the canonical literary text and attempt to detach it from the accumulated weight of the previous literary scholarship. And they tried to look at the text as if it where brand new. They also focused attention between both the text and the cotext on issues of state power and how it can be maintained on patriarchal structures and on their perpetuation and on the process of colonization and with it is accompanying mind sets, etcetera, etcetera.

We understood, how the new historicis method also employees the post structuralize outlook, especially the readers notion that every facet of reality is textualized and available to us in a textual form. And focus on idea of social structures as something that is being determined by dominant discursive practices. Now, let us look at a practical example of new historicism. For this example, we will refer to shapes and we will refer to Leo's Montrose famous work *Midsummer Night's Dream and Shaping Fantasies of Elizabeth and Culture*, gender, power and form.

Montrose, as we discussed in the previous module is one of the pioneer's of this method of new historicist criticism. Now, this analysis, this bit of analysis appeared originally in the American journal called *Representations* and this journal name *Representations* is basically the house magazine of, can be consider the house magazine of this moment of new historicism.

Now, in the previous class we looked at how Montrose... Montrose give us the famous definition of new historicism as the, as something that centers upon the historicity of the text and the textuality of history and this essay on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, validates this pronouncement. His overall thesis within this essay is, that the play creates the culture by which it is created and shapes the fantasies by which it is, itself shape.

The core crux of the argument in the essay is that, the Queen Elizabeth, the British queen Elizabeth could project herself as the queen, who had, whose originally had mystical and magical potency, preciously because these images were itself given currency in the core dramas and comedies and the pastoral epic poetry of her own time. Conversely, the figure of Queen Elizabeth herself stimulates the production and promotion of such works and imaginary.

Hence in this sense, history is texturized and texts are itself, text are themselves historicized. A simple modern day parallel to this phenomenon would perhaps be the way that images of masculinity and femininity etcetera in films, that we seen films pervade our lives and offer us ways of representing ourselves. Films with their representatives or images of masculinity and femininity give us the role models which we can, which we can be trapped inside with. So, the real life is seen as, is seen to imitate the filmic representation of life.

In this essay, Montrose also points out, how the queen was the head of an extremely patriarchal society, in which all the, almost all powers were vested in men and then, the irony; however, is that this is a society that was never the less ruled by a woman, who had you know, because of her position all most absolute power of life, overall her subjects, including man. In Shakespeare's play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there are several instances of a queen who is seen as a master and thereby feminized.

For example, we have the character of Hippo Lighter, who is the Amazonian queen and she has been defeated by Thesis, whom she must now submit to and marry. Similarly, Titania who is the queen of the fairies is seen as someone who has defied her husband Oberon and is thus as a consequence humiliated by him. He administers a magic potion to her which makes her fall in love with the first thing, she sees upon making up and has lots of fear.

He is familiar with the play, you know that this is basically lowly character who has the head of a donkey, she is also does, humiliated and ruled over. Throughout the play, there is much about the rights of a father's over daughters and her, the rights of fathers over daughters and husband's over wife. And we understand from the play also, that the precondition of male desire becomes a sort of female subjection.

The happy ending, now the quote on quote happy ending that we see in the play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* depends upon the very reinforcement of patriarchy. Thus the very festive conclusion to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, in its celebration of romantic heterosexual union, which depends upon the success of a process whereby possessive mothers and unruly wife's and willful daughters, etcetera are brought under the control of husbands and lords and in effects, just the patriarchal mechanism.

Hence, it is suggested that the play might be seen as implicitly treasons and this is because, Shakespeare's comedy can be seen as symbolically neutralizing the royal power to which it seemingly paced so much. In, practice also patriarchy is maintained in spite of the presence of women figures at the pinnacle of power. This is done by in this example by constantly insisting on Queen Elizabeth's difference from other women. Now, this can be seen as a very familiar strategy even in modern times.

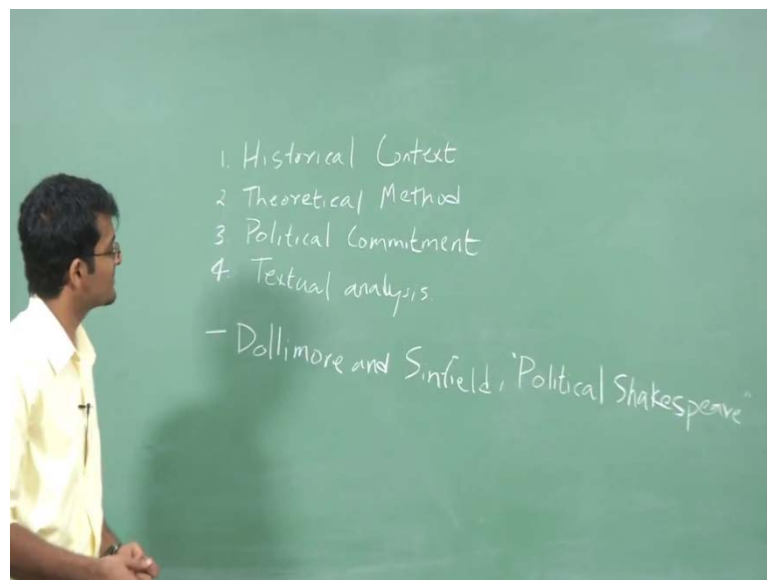
For example, despite having a female leader at the helm of (Refer time: 07:34) party, we are talking about Margaret Thatcher of course. Despite, this powerful female leader, the party did not revise its ideas about the role of women in society. On the contrary, under the rule of the iron lady Margaret Thatcher reactionary ideas where in fact, reinforced and strengthened. Thus Queen Elizabeth's rule was not intended to undermine the male hegemony of the culture, of the culture of her time, of her culture.

If anything the emphases upon her difference from other women might have actually helped to reinforce it, just as we saw in the case of Margaret Thatcher. Thus all the pageants and the place of her time, of Elizabeth and time, transformed herself into, transformed her the image of Elizabeth into a religious mystery and not a real woman. All these demonstrates, what is meant in practice by insisting upon the historicity of the text and the textuality of history and with that we will stop our focus on, we will stop the focus on the practice of new historicism.

We will now start looking at something known as cultural materialism. Cultural materialism is defined by the British critic Graham Holderness as a politicized form of historiography. What this means is that, the study of historical material which includes literary text of course, within that it implies a study of historical material including literary text within a very politicized frame work. This includes the present with those literary texts that this literary text having some way helped us to shape.

This term cultural materialism was popularized in 1985 and it was first used by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, who are perhaps the best known of the cultural materialist, as the subtitle for the edited collection of essays known as Political Shakespeare. They define the term as a critical method which has four characteristics.

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So, Dollimore and Sinfield tell us in Political Shakespeare that, the process of cultural materialism combines attention to the historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis. So, you combine all these four features and that is how you get an idea of the thrust areas of this phenomenon known as cultural materialism. Let us look at each of these four components in slighter a detail. First, we saw how it emphasized in the historical context.

The aim of this aspect of cultural materialism is to allow the literary text to recover the histories, to recover it is history or to recover the history that we are repressed or lost or which other kinds of previous study had largely left ignored. Secondly, the emphasis on

theoretical method signifies its break with liberal humanism and the absorbing of lessons of structuralism, post structuralism and other such approaches which had become very prominent, since the 1970's.

We understood how this emerged, apparently almost decade or so, after its counterpart, the moment known as new historicisms. Thirdly, the emphases on political commitment signifies the influence of Marxist and Feminist approaches and perspectives and the break from the conservative crystal framework which had till then greatly dominated Shakespeare criticism.

And lastly, the stress on textual analysis means that there is a commitment to not just making theory of a very abstract kind, but to practicing on mainly iconic and canonical text, which continue to be the focus of massive amounts of academic and professional attention. So it would consider as relevant history, not just what happened about 400 years or so ago, but that was the times including our own in which Shakespearian work is produced and reproduced and consumed and circulated.

Thus in cultural materialism, there is an emphases on the functioning of institutions through which Shakespeare is now available to us in the present days and that should warrant a look at such entities as the Royal Shakespeare Company, the film industry which makes remix of or which make films based on Shakespeare's plays. The publishers who all, who produce text books for school and colleges and so on. So, all these densities become subjects of study and scrutiny when you look at the process of cultural materialism.

Cultural materialism also borrows rather heavily from the British left wing critic Raymond Williams as well as Foucault's, I mean instead of Foucault's notion of discourse. Now, Raymond Williams invented the term structures of feeling and these are in his opinion concerned with meanings and values, as they are lived and felt. Structures of feeling are often antagonistic both to explicit systems of values and beliefs and to the dominant ideologies within society.

Structure of feeling characteristically found in literature and they oppose, thus they are seen as something that is capable of opposing the status quo. For example, one could argue that the values in the work of such as such writers as Dickens or the Bronte sisters

represent human structures of feeling which were at variance with the Victorian commercial and material values of its time.

Thus the result is that cultural materialism can be seen as something that is much, much more optimistic about the possibility of change and is even willing at times to see literature as a source of oppositional values. How then is cultural materialism different from new historicism? Well, new historicism is often seen as nearly the American counterpart of cultural materialism. Dollimore and Sinfield who we just quoted also quote marks in saying that men and women make their own history, but not necessarily in the conditions of their own choosing.

According to Dollimore and Sinfield, cultural materialist tend to concentrate on the processes through which men and women make their own history, whereas new historicists tend to focus on the rather sub optimal circumstances in which they are forced to do so. That is, it relies on the power of social structures and ideologies that restraints them to a great extent, thus what results is basically a way of a contrast between what can be seen as political optimism as opposed to political pessimism.

Another key difference is that, the new historicist situates the literary text in the political situation of its own day, while on the other hand the cultural materialist situates within the present itself. And like we mentioned earlier, while new historicism was much influenced by Foucault, cultural materialism on the other hand borrows many of its ideas from those offered by Raymond Williams whose structures of feeling contain the seeds from which grows resistance to the dominant ideology.

To give you this, in the form of a very funny example, let us look at what would capture the differences between the two approaches in a hypothetical evaluation of, what would be their mutual response to something like the English civil war. So, in approaching and interpreting something or something like the English civil war, the new historicism may find it is extremely hard to explain, how the English civil war even got started, because they conceptualize a very repressive state power which would make resistance virtually impossible.

So, they would be confused about how something like the English civil war actually happened and on the contrary, this would be balanced by the cultural materialist, who would find it very difficult to explain how the war even ended. Because, in their

evaluation according to their structures of feeling, it constantly throw up new ideas which would make him to suggest that status or stability of any kind and finality of any kind is virtually impossible.

Therefore to sum up cultural materialistic critics often read the literary text, for example most often Rinosen play in such a way as to rediscover it is histories or the context of exploitation from which it might have emerged. At the same time, they also foreground those elements of the works present form and context, which would have a cost some version of histories to be lost or replaced or ignored in the first place.

For example they would take into account the enormous appeal and the weight of Shakespeare's heritage in England's contemporary present day cultural scene. As we saw with example with reference to their reliance on other things that support this kind of entity in its present day circulation. It is entities like film industry or publishers or even a company that routinely enacts Shakespearean criticism which experience plays.

Also they work mainly within the traditional notions of the canon, on the grounds that writing about more obscure text would hardly ever constitute an effective political intervention. So, while the new historicist would be interested in even an anecdotal text, a very obscure text, the cultural materialism work mainly within you know notions of the canon to constitute effective political intervention and with that, we conclude our discussion on new historicism and cultural materialism.

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- Dollimore, Johnathan and Sinfield, Alan, eds, Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism(Manchester University Press, 2nd edn, 1994).
- Gallagher, Catherine and Greenblatt, Stephen, Practicing the New Historicism (University of Chicago Press, 2000)
- Veenser, H. Aram, ed. The New Historicism (Routledge, 1989)

For further reference, for further readings you can look at the list that is attached.

Thank you very much for joining me, see you in next class.