



PALPABLE REALITIES: EXPLORING A NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE IN THE NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH THROUGH 'THE TOUCH OF THE REAL'

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the integration of New Historicism within the narrative fabric of Amitav Ghosh's novels, focusing on the concept of 'The Touch of the Real.' Amitav Ghosh, a significant contemporary writer, often intertwines historical events and cultural contexts within his narratives, creating layers of authenticity and palpable realities in his works. This abstract presents an investigation into Ghosh's novels through the lens of New Historicism, emphasizing the infusion of historical, cultural, and socio-political dimensions that render his narratives profoundly immersive and realistic. Through this analysis, the research seeks to unveil the inherent connections between Ghosh's literary creations and the socio-historical realms they depict, emphasizing how his works encapsulate a vivid 'touch of the real' that transcends mere storytelling, offering a deeper understanding of the past and its implications on contemporary existence. Employing a New Historicist approach enables a comprehensive examination of the interplay between history, culture, and fiction, thereby shedding light on the nuances of Ghosh's narratives and their reflection of historical truths. This abstract outlines the methodology, objectives, and significance of employing a New Historicist perspective to decode the palpable realities embedded within Amitav Ghosh's literary tapestry.

Key Words: *Palpable, Touch of the Real, purveyor of a history, New Historicism, resisted systematization, paradigm, emblematic, Practicing New Historicism.*

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INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's novels often intertwine history, culture, and socio-political contexts, making them fertile ground for exploring through the lens of New Historicism. New Historicism, as a literary theory, focuses on the interdependence between literature and historical context, emphasizing the cultural and social elements reflected in the text. When comparing Ghosh's novels with the tenets of New Historicism, several points of convergence and exploration emerge:

Historical Context and Intertextuality:

Ghosh's works, such as "The Shadow Lines," "Sea of Poppies," and "The Glass Palace," intricately weave historical events, often across different countries and time periods, into the narrative. New Historicism, emphasizing intertextuality, focuses on the connections between a text and the historical events or discourses of the period. Ghosh's novels reflect this intertextuality by drawing on real historical events, such as the Opium Wars in "River of Smoke," colonialism in "The Glass Palace," and more.

Power Dynamics and Marginalized Voices:

New Historicism often delves into power structures and marginalized voices within literature. Ghosh's novels frequently portray the struggles of marginalized characters in the face of larger historical and political upheavals. For instance, the depiction of laborers, sailors, or marginalized communities in "Sea of Poppies" reflects the broader historical context of imperialism and colonial exploitation.

Cultural Hegemony and Identity:

New Historicism also examines cultural hegemony and the formation of identities. Ghosh's exploration of identities within various cultural and historical contexts provides a rich landscape for understanding how cultural factors influence and shape characters and societies in his novels.

Subverting Historical Narratives:

New Historicism often questions and challenges established historical narratives. Ghosh's novels, such as "In an Antique Land," explore unconventional historical accounts, blending fiction and non-fiction, challenging the readers' perceptions of historical truth and cultural authenticity.

Historical Events and Their Impact:



Ghosh's narratives illustrate the enduring impact of historical events on contemporary society and personal lives, a key aspect of New Historicism. The resonance of past events and their continuing influence on the present is a theme evident throughout Ghosh's works. The comparison between Amitav Ghosh's novels and New Historicism lies in the way Ghosh's narratives reflect and interact with historical and socio-political contexts, aligning with the core principles of New Historicism in literature – understanding the text as a product and producer of historical and cultural contexts. The novels serve as rich ground for exploring the complexities and nuances of historical, cultural, and social interplay, which are central to the New Historicist approach. New historicism was a 1980s thing, a literary critical movement that took shape on the West Coast, becoming established there and elsewhere as what one could talk about after having talked for long enough about feminism, deconstruction and literary theory. The term may have been coined by Stephen Greenblatt in an essay of 1982; if so it was already a restrike, minted from a prototype used by Wesley Morris in 1972 or perhaps by Roy Harvey Pearce in 1958. Greenblatt himself came to prefer the term 'cultural poetics', but by the time he said so the nominal territory had already been claimed: 'new historicism' it was going to be, and has been ever since in the anthologies and commentaries published to represent and explain the recent evolution of Anglo-American literary criticism.

Origin of the Journal: Representation:

The critics associated with new historicism have been exceptionally unwilling to stand together for a team photograph – the mark of the movement is the disavowal of movements. These two authors opt for the lower case: not New Historicism, but new historicism. The house journal Representations, founded in 1983 and still going strong, included in its first issue no editorial statement or declared common project; only the blurb on the subscription form, written by the historian Natalie Zemon Davis, gave any inkling of a consensus, and that was woefully vague. What we were getting, she wrote, was a 'strikingly original set of voices' ranging across various boundaries in pursuit of the intricacies of 'words and images'. Nonetheless, four of the six essays in the first issue were by Berkeley professors, and Berkeley professors made up the entire editorial board. No one, I suppose, wants to be in a movement with the people across the hall, and yet many movements – the Cambridge School, the Yale School, and the Chicago School – have been so constituted. So new historicism, as we are told here by two of its founding figures, 'resisted systematization' and 'became rather good at slipping out of theoretical nooses'. Pretty much like literary criticism, in its enduring modern form as a hands-on intellectual occupation that subsists by not being theory, philosophy, history or any of the other disciplines bedazzled by the false promises of systems, structures and upper-case designations. Others produce their intellectual abstractions while literary critics, represented by writers as apparently different as F.R. Leavis and Raymond Williams (although they, too, were across the hall in another town at another time), remind us of the urgencies of real life. There is much of this sort of language in the present book, which describes and commends a 'total immersion in practice' and a 'close, detailed engagement



with specific instances' often enough to hold onto the good will of the most dogged apostle of traditional lit. crit. Can there be a dogmatism of insouciance?

Views of Foucault and Marx.

New historicism's opponents have not been slow to find fault with this commitment to particularities, seeing in it a symptom of leftist disillusionment, an evasion of the challenges posed by feminism and the women's movement, and a head-in-the-sand attitude to the movement's own historical identity as, for example, the purveyor of a history of the early British Empire (Shakespeare and all) which has remained incurious about the doings of the American empire of the present day. New historicism's preference for Foucault over Marx, discourse over class and ideology (the latter again criticized here by Catherine Gallagher as a sort of fetish), metaphors of circulation and exchange – 'social energies' – over those of cause and effect, and almost anything over Derrida and the challenge of radical deconstruction, seemed to many to be a rather too comfortable rehabilitation of old pleasures in the face of what came to be known as Theory. At the same time, there was and is a foxiness to new historicism, which threatens its critics with the hint (sometimes more than a hint) that all this has been thought about and dismissed for good reason, or already taken care of. Is this true, or just finessing? Who might tell, and how? Can we have 'devices of doubt' along with the pleasures of 'real presence' without creating hermeneutic turmoil? Can we enjoy our acts of reading, and the 'pastness' we meet with in them, without suffering too much anxiety? True to their convictions about the poverty of collectivism, Gallagher and Greenblatt write separate chapters, managing only a gestural 'we' as the narrative persona of the book. Their preoccupations are different, and differently argued. Greenblatt is the most famous of the new historicists, thanks to his sequence of dazzling essays on the Renaissance, in which considerable learning and imagination are applied to unpredictable conjunctions between high cultural texts like Shakespeare's plays and non-literary or lowlife genres such as maps, medical treatises and events in the history of slavery and empire. And it is Greenblatt who is especially fond of the rhetoric of particularity and of 'lived experience' in the pursuit of a 'confident conviction of reality'. Gallagher wants her particularities to be less comforting and more 'vehement and cryptic', more against the grain, and as 'outlandish and irregular' as possible. It is she who quite brilliantly brings back the 'long-neglected British potato debate', in which the humble tuber was projected as being 'against the grain' in another sense, inasmuch as it resisted the economy of accumulation and exchange associated with the primacy of wheat as the staple food of the working (Irish) poor. Only in the growing of wheat and in the work done to turn it into bread – the work of culture – could an impoverished peasantry hope to participate in the benefits of an emerging civil society. Potato monoculture encouraged none of the virtues and rewards of labour: potatoes grow in the dark by themselves and are immediately consumed, so that they can offer only excess or scarcity (both of which are morally as well as physiologically destructive). Both authors have much to say about the status of the anecdote, one of the signature motifs of new historicism, but they

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approach it differently. Gallagher is the more skeptical, seeing in her own affection for the anecdote an attempt to have things both ways, to preserve a frisson of the enigmatic along with a sense of the recoverable presence of lost worlds. Greenblatt, for all his fondness for the rhetoric of particularity over that of grand narrative, approvingly cites Erich Auerbach's idea of the part as leading to a felt sense of the existential whole. For Greenblatt, this is what an anecdote does; it is a device offering 'representational plenitude'. At the same time, his suspicion of any claim to other sorts of wholeness leads him to end two of his own substantial chapters, one on Joos van Gent's Communion of the Apostles and the other on Hamlet, with a defence of incompleteness as the necessary mark of all interpretation. Now you see it, now you don't. (This is also the unintended result, alas, of the blotchy reproductions of Joos's paintings.) It is the successful, quasi-magical effect of Auerbach's conjuring tricks, 'captivating readers' with their improbable production of profound and complex wholes out of seemingly negligible parts – a few paragraphs or fragments – that leads Greenblatt to think of him as his exemplary precursor. The more arbitrary the passages selected seem to be, the more impressive the deep meanings that are derived from them. Auerbach's 'conjuring trick' offers Greenblatt the sort of legitimacy metaphorically associated these days with an expertise in recombinant DNA: 'a powerful ability to conjure up complex life-worlds from tiny fragments'. The rabbits that come out of the hat, though, both are and are not real rabbits, which is how new historicism likes to have it. Greenblatt calls this 'a touch of the real'. On the one hand, there is the image of reality, a comfort to all who were exhausted by the relentless assault on Western metaphysical attributions of presence mounted by Derrida and others since the mid-1960s. A well-pitched anecdote still sounds like a slice of life, the very thing itself. Greenblatt's implied and admired wholeness is existential, the whiff of real people in real places, and accessible as such by way of literature. His use of detail is the opposite of Derrida's, which took us away from illusions of substantiality and presence into an abyss of 'supplementary'. On the other hand, new historicism, in its journey round the back of Theory, identifies itself with that revolt against the sorts of wholeness called 'totality' and 'totalization' and associated in the 1980s with (a misreading of) Fredric Jameson, Marxism and Sartre – against the belief, that is, in the accessibility of a social-historical whole determining individual lives or events. Resistance to this notion came from the conviction either that no such wholeness exists (the liberal autonomy position) or that even if it did, we could not know it as such (the hermeneutic instability lobby), and sometimes by both at once. Greenblatt himself became well-known for wanting 'to speak with the dead': new historicism, in its early essays, emphasized the cinematic bringing to life of the past – avowedly 'representational' but giving the effect of the real – while standing against the historicist idea that coherent and complete patterns in the past could be determined and articulated. Like a slice of movie footage, the new historicist past was wholly there and yet not there, and not implicated in any pattern beyond that of its own telling, except by loose association with something in the teller's own place and time that was itself resistant to full knowledge. History, in this way, became synchronic: events were conjured up in densely



contextual detail, but cut loose from what came before or after. Some said that this was as much of history as we could have in an age that had forgotten how to think historically; others found only another incarnation of ‘slice-of-life’ criticism, now in a mode more fully cinematic than ever. It is notable, then, that this new book has a diachronic structure, as it attempts to put the luminous details together into a suggestive protohistoric of modernity. Most of this work is done by Gallagher, who typically begins her chapters by proposing a motif that carries through from Greenblatt’s arguments into hers, as if to hint at the lineaments of a continuous history. She writes about the 19th century while Greenblatt deals with the 15th and 16th, so it is indeed modernity that is conjured up. Two of Greenblatt’s three chapters are about the anxieties generated around the Eucharist: does the bread and wine of the Communion become real flesh and blood? What happens when it enters or exits the material body of the believer (or the unbeliever)? And what is the status of the leftovers? Catholics, Protestants and Jews divide in answering these questions, with often murderous results. Only the matzoth is bread – and nothing more than bread – and relies on acts of memory and imagination for its affiliations with sacred history: it involves no miracles and no theological prestidigitation, just situated acts of commemoration and remembering. Conversely, the drama of the Real Host is the matter of Joos van Gent’s painting, which Greenblatt revivifies in a brilliant act of imaginative scholarship, and of Shakespeare’s play, whose ‘mad verbal lightning’ asks questions of a Hamlet obsessed with Eucharistic paradoxes about leftovers, paternal inheritance, matter and spirit, the excremental and the divine. Old Hamlet dies ‘full of bread’, funeral meats are recycled for marriage tables, the widowed Gertrude passes on to Claudius and kings make progress through the guts of beggars. In these and other ways, Shakespeare’s play rehearses the rhetoric of Protestant polemics against the Mass.

Within a similar paradigm, Gallagher sees the potato as emblematic of the autochthonous body, an alternative to the bread of true believers – which is derived from grain – and thus to the work and exchange ethic of commercial culture: Irish Catholics, with their worship of the spurious substance of the Communion wafer (according to Protestants), are thereby primed for association with the potato, whose pre cultural fecundity and promised substance (born from the earth, always available) is also the sign of spiritual impropriety. A comparable complex recurs in *Great Expectations*, which casts Pip (in Gallagher’s account) as the wicked son, the Hamlet figure who engages with the leftovers of Shakespeare’s play, who administers bread to a convict, who is told twice over to be glad that he is not himself killed as food for the table and often that he’s ungrateful (true, in ways that he only gradually comes to realize). Dickens’s novel projects ‘the death of the plot of genealogical identity and rightful inheritance’; it is obsessed with the unstable boundaries between the living, the dead and the undead or half-dead – and with a condition somewhere between life and death wherein we are unsure about what can be re-experienced and what cannot. Motifs of this kind are both arresting and convincing, but are they history? Indeed, are they meant to be? Not in



the sense of being what simply happened, or even of what was said in the way it is said here – Gallagher cheerfully admits that the connections she adduces ‘do not truly make a single empirically available discourse’. They are, however, loosely historicist: they suggest that significant things happen in the light of other things that have happened. The model of modernity implied here is relatively familiar as the one formed around the Protestant suspicion of Catholic worship of graven images and real presence. But the working out of the details is not familiar, indeed, it is unfamiliar enough to be breathtaking, and to invite that willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith. Modernity’s evolution has been a bloody one, with Christians murdering Jews and Protestants starving Catholics, though no full history of the Irish famine or of European anti-Semitism is offered or intended here. But a constellation of images is identified that will be of concern to anyone attempting such histories, as well as to newly educated readers of Renaissance plays and Victorian novels. That constellation is not only in and of its moment, but also now sufficiently diachronic to suggest that these authors have been practicing new historicism long enough to feel almost ready to link up their archives – centuries apart – into something more coherent than their claim to ‘discrete and self-contained’ projects might suggest. Practicing New Historicism declares itself to be a ‘belated recognition’ that something should or could have been said about this movement that did not think it was a movement. If it is twenty years too late to be a manifesto, then it is rather too soon to look like a history, given that new historicism’s exponents are still in productive mid-career. The matter of origins is rehearsed, and debts acknowledged to some of the familiar fellow spirits, like Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault. There is also Raymond Williams, to be heard most obviously in Greenblatt’s predilection for ‘lived experience’, and E.P. Thompson, whose determination to remember the overlooked figures of the past is affirmed (though with qualifications) by Gallagher as a formative model for her own work. Feminism and women’s studies are acknowledged by saying that their influence has been only minimally acknowledged. There are also, appropriately, some surprises. You might not have thought of Herder as an exemplary precursor, but here he is; and the appearance of Auerbach took me even more by surprise, though as with the best of Greenblatt’s conjuring tricks, the outcome is perfectly obvious once he’s performed it. Auerbach seems right, especially after he has been cloned with Geertz and acquired a ‘hold on the world’ that his more purely literary conjuring’s might not otherwise attain. It is Auerbach’s presence that anchors the pervasive question of Jewishness, which is seen as common to Auerbach’s dismissal from his university post in Marburg in 1935 ‘on racist grounds’, his act of homage to the texts of a literary tradition from which he had been exorcised (his ‘cultural catholicity’), and to the problematics of the Eucharist that govern Greenblatt’s chapters, where only the Seder both invokes and abrogates the pastness of the past, as does the best of new historicism. The connections are unmissable, but lightly made: Greenblatt remarks but does not dwell on the place of a Jewish anti-substantiality that is closer to Protestantism than to Catholicism but too far from either to protect its practitioners from persecution. So, too, his guiding preoccupation with consumption and

body culture, those well-known components of Californian life. This research article is not a meditated response to the many identities that have been imposed on new historicism by others: too friendly to capitalism, too gentle in facing the challenge of Theory, too entranced by the charisma of Renaissance England, and so forth. To be sure, no author can be expected to encompass his or her own historically, or to account once and for all for the kinds of culpability that nowadays come with being a historian, whether they are longstanding (where were you or your parents during the Holocaust?) or presentist (are we being racist or nativist?). But accountability is in the air, and it is symptomatic of new historicism and surely part of its appeal that we are allowed to be relatively free from anxiety about what we're doing when we speak or write. Gallagher worries now and again about where she is coming from; Greenblatt, who once described literary critics as middle-class shamans, knows that a good magician does not show the public how his tricks work. There is also, it must be said, very little self-congratulation or mere autobiography of the sort to be found in so much contemporary identity politics and a good deal of marketable academic writing. It is always the case here that what is written about has a greater claim on one's attention than the manner of saying it. Responding to Benjamin's fragmentary account of Baudelaire's Paris, Adorno found himself resenting feeling he'd been stranded 'at the cross roads of magic and positivism'. These authors can convince us that this is no bad place to be, as they nudge us toward the sorts of connection that can never be fully exposed or confidently proven.

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