Chapter I

The Story of History

Till 1980’s literary studies in England and America were hitched to the band wagon of New Criticism. ‘Dissociation’ was the key word and the literary text was considered as an independent entity, detached from its social, historical and political context. New Historicism as a critical practice redrew the disciplinary boundary between history and the literary text and gradually began erasing the differentiation between the text and the context. The text came to be interpreted at the site of individual subjectivities, hegemonic discourses, and as a construct of power and knowledge.

New Historicism challenged the Victorian and Modern literary canons and its representational textual readings and proposed that the production and consumption of texts were informed by historical and social factors, which in turn were influenced by the texts themselves. New Historicists like Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher and Louis A. Montrose, through their analysis of Renaissance texts, established that a text could be dissected and their long buried, hidden, hegemonic discourses be revealed. New historicism has prioritized the relationship between text and society and has tried to de-mystify the historical, social, and economic forces which fashion a literary text.
and insists that any text can be regarded as a legitimate document in the production of the discourse of history.

It was Stephen Greenblatt who coined the term ‘new historicism’, and his work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* initiated the practice of new historicist methodology in literary analysis. In their work *Practicing New Historicism* Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt indicate that to them the term “at first signified an impatience with American New Criticism, an unsettling of established norms and procedures, a mingling of dissent and restless curiosity” (2). While New Criticism considers a literary text as an organic unity and tries to present the ways in which each element of the text contributes to generate an organic whole, New Historicism focuses on those aspects of the text which are not harmonious and thus disrupt the organic unity of the text. Discordant or subversive elements are considered on par with the positive, constitutive elements in New Historicist readings.

Gallagher and Greenblatt, acknowledging the indebtedness of New Historicism to Herder’s concept of “the mutual embeddedness of art and history”, propose that the methodology will help in “treating all the written and visual traces of a particular culture as a mutually intelligible network of signs” (7). New Criticism denies any exchange between literary and historical texts while new historicism studies the relationship between artistic production and other productions within a culture. Greenblatt and Gallagher trace the
positive consequences of considering culture as text, in their work *Practicing New Historicism*. The new approach has encouraged critics to consider works which have hitherto been considered insignificant or totally ignored. Redrawing the difference between the major and minor works of literature, new historicists have revealed the complex relationships between these texts, changing the way the canonical works and authors are approached. Canonical works of literature are brought into an interface with non-literary texts, which brings out unexpected aesthetic dimensions in both, changing the status of the classic and the non-literary works and unsettling long established aesthetic hierarchies. The purpose of new historicism is not to devalue artistic pleasure, but to excavate the factors which fashion literary works from outside the domain in which it is located. The inevitable consequence is “a wholesale aestheticizing of culture . . .” (Gallagher & Greenblatt 12).

History is no longer considered as a scientific and objective record of facts and is increasingly regarded as a discourse influenced by creative imagination and shaped by the power relations within the society. It is deemed as subjective and ideologically conditioned and consequently, amenable to multiple interpretations. New Historicism asserts the ineluctable link between history and text making it possible to have an active dialogue between history and literature. Louis Montrose’s puts it succinctly: “the historicity of texts” and “the textuality of history” (20). In his article
Chapter I

“Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” Montrose elaborates:

By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing—not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a 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; and 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 texts, called “histories.” (20)

Consequently a novel as the ‘textualised’ view of history has been established on the notion that history has always been interceded by linguistic codes. All texts are viewed as the product of the discourses and ideology of the age and are considered as legitimate historical documents. The text, in the words of Greenblatt, “ceases to be a sacred, self- enclosed, and self- justifying miracle.”
its boundaries begin to seem less secure and it loses exclusive rights to the experience of wonder” (Gallagher & Greenblatt 12). Literary or artistic production, instead of becoming an isolated entity is outside history, is embedded in that particular culture and is, consequently, influenced by the discursive elements of the culture even as the impact of a text on the re-shaping of that culture is undeniable. As Greenblatt and Gallagher assert in Practicing New Historicism, “If an entire culture is regarded as a text, then everything is at least potentially in play both at the level of representation and at the level of event. Indeed it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a clear, unambiguous boundary between what is representation and what is event” (15).

Taking cue from Foucault’s formulations of representations and discursive formations, New Historicists try to reposition the text in the historical moment and consider the text as the product of culture and the agent of ideology. Literature mediates rather than imitates human action and hence shapes rather than reflects an age, forging a dialectical relationship between history and the text.

New Historicism treats historical documents as texts, as no more objective or factual than a literary text and no less fictional and imaginative in character. Instead of deifying the illustrious deeds of distinguished people, the New Historicist practice is more concerned with the mundane activities of
ordinary people. Through analysing literary work in the light of everyday practices, the text is unsanctified.

Elucidating history as a form of narrative, New Historicists throw light on the historian’s interpretative subjectivity. The historian’s location within the culture will influence his writings and historical records should never be treated as closed or final but as always open to new readings and interpretations. New Historicists, while focusing equally on both literary and other texts circulating within culture, trace power structures operating in society and identify the social energies which are encoded in these texts. Influenced by Michel Foucault’s analysis of the different ways in which power operates in society, it examines different texts to throw light on the extent to which power relations coordinate and advance dominant or accepted concepts and manners through discourse and explains how any challenge to accepted patterns of behaviour is treated as deviant or demonic.

In his article “The Circulation of Social Energy” Greenblatt explains the poetics of culture as the examination of cumulative production of different cultural practices and the relations among these practices. He attempts to trace the factors responsible for the force generated by cultural products and refers to its effect on the mind as ‘energy’. A literary work survives its author and the culture to which it owes its origin as a consequence of this social energy embedded in the work. Greenblatt is interested in “the negotiations through
which works of art obtain and amplify such powerful energy” (“Towards a Poetics” 7). As Greenblatt tries to reconstruct these negotiations he fails to trace back the original energy to a single, original, creative moment. In its place he encounters “extended borrowings, collective exchanges and mutual enchantments” (7). Instead of a simple, impassive reflection as suggested by mirror image there is “a whole spectrum of representational exchanges” (8), the nature of which is historically decided. Greenblatt distinguishes the different types of exchanges as appropriation, purchase and symbolic acquisition. Whatever forms the exchange adopts, a liaison is forged between the aesthetic practices of the theatre and other social practices. In this active relationship, the objects and practices that are borrowed by the theatre undergo reconstruction. Thus a critical distance is established between the cultural objects and practices presented by the theatre and the response of the audience.

Greenblatt insists on certain notions with which one has to approach the question of the relation between art and society. He elaborates:

1. There can be no appeals to genius as the sole origin of the energies of great art.
2. There can be no motiveless creation.
3. There can be no transcendent or timeless or unchanging representation.
4. There can be no autonomous artifacts.
5. There can be no expression without an origin and an object, a *from* and a *for*.

6. There can be no art without social energy.

7. There can be no spontaneous generation of social energy.  
   *(Shakespearean Negotiations 12)*

Mimesis is constantly bound with negotiation and exchange and these exchanges are not always monetary. The individuals, who are the agents of exchanges, are themselves the products of collective exchange.

While dealing with the concept of negotiation and exchange, that is, the points at which different cultural practices intersect one another, Greenblatt denies that there is any “homogenization of interest” *(Learning to Curse 228)*. Greenblatt’s interest always remains focused on the work of art or literature, and not on the other cultural and ideological structures, which are employed to illuminate the particular work. A work of art or literature is certainly relevant as other cultural structures resonate within it. But an artistic or literary work is even more significant as one can approach it only in a spirit of wonder. Greenblatt’s desire is “to extend this wonder beyond the formal boundaries of works of art, just as I wish to intensify resonance within these boundaries” *(Learning to Curse 228)*. In “Resonance and Wonder” Greenblatt explains the two concepts:
By resonance I mean the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which as metaphor or more simply as metonymy it may be taken by a viewer to stand. By wonder I mean the power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention (Learning to Curse 228).

Greenblatt defines wonder and resonance by suggesting a dialectical relationship between the two. A literary or artistic work owes its resonance to the successful assimilation of its milieu, the work metaphorically or metonymically invoking the circumstances of its production. A reading of the resonances counters the singularity or uniqueness of the work, but at the same time augments our understanding and appreciation of the work’s unique attraction. Resonance does not take away the sense of wonder; instead an analysis of the historicity of the work of art enhances the strangeness of the past leading to the alienation of the present. The work of art is made strange through the involvement of the past in the aesthetic strategies of defamiliarization.

Greenblatt affirms that new historicism, with its declared intention to trace the milieu of a literary work and to compare the circumstances of its
original production and consumption with that of our own, has always been concerned with resonance. New historicists do not interpret these circumstances as fixed and invariable, or as pre-established contexts in which a text can be located and analysed. Instead the intersecting circumstances are seen as “a dense network of evolving and often contradictory social forces” (Learning to Curse 229). The text is analysed in relation to other “representational practices” (229). The attempt is to forge a connection between the individual work and its milieu, to minimise its insularity, to reveal the circumstances of its production, to analyse the conditions of its appropriation and to display the concreteness or flexibility of the boundaries that initially made the object’s existence possible.

Sometimes contextual objects become more expressive and relevant than the fore-grounded material as representational practices in themselves, assuming a life of their own and becoming eloquently resonant. But, according to Greenblatt, the effect of resonance depends more on “awakening in the viewer a sense of the cultural and historically contingent construction of art objects, the negotiations, exchanges, swerves, exclusions by which certain representational practices come to be set apart from other representational practices that they partially resemble” (Learning to Curse 232).

Explaining the concept of self-fashioning Greenblatt opines that even ‘self’ is constructed on the basis of power relations that are embedded in social
discourse. Subjectivities or identities are moulded or fashioned in accordance with dominant cultural demands. New historicism is interested in the contingent self, conditioned by the expectations of its class, gender, race, religion and national identity, which in turn inject changes in the historical course. The individual agency is insisted upon, and meaning and intention are attributed to impassivity and marginality as every element of action, every form of behaviour, every gesture, becomes significant, intentional and consequential. As Greenblatt asserts, “Agency is virtually inescapable” (*Learning to Curse* 221). Individual agency is facilitated as well as restricted by social and historical structures. Greenblatt says:

> Actions that appear to be simple are disclosed as multiple; the apparently isolated power of the individual genius turns out to be bound up with collective, social energy; a gesture of dissent may be an element in a larger legitimation process, while an attempt to stabilize the order of things may turn out to subvert it. And political valences may change, sometimes abruptly: there are no guarantees, no absolute, formal assurances that what seems progressive in one set of contingent circumstances will not come to seem reactionary in another (221).
Montrose insists that the term ‘subject,’ which has come to substitute the term ‘individual’, emphasizes the historical constitution in language and society of the individual. Montrose confirms:

Thus, my invocation of the term “subject” is meant to suggest an equivocal process of *subjecification*: on the one hand, shaping individuals as loci of consciousness and initiators of action—endowing them with subjectivity and with the capacity for agency; and, on the other hand, positioning, motivating, and constraining them within—*subjecting them to*—social networks and cultural codes that ultimately exceed their comprehension or control. (21)

New Historicism traces the ways in which language absorbs and reflects power relations in society. But one cannot deny the subversive insights generated by the texts which are ultimately contained by the text itself. The new historical study of Renaissance drama reflects on this subject-structure problematic. While there is the potential for resistance or the subversion of the dominant ideology, reflecting the subject’s agency, these resistances or subversive indications are ultimately repressed by the hegemonic order, which, at the outset, had actually produced these resistances so that these could be contained and thereby consolidate its authority. Greenblatt’s much acclaimed chapter in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, “Invisible Bullets,”
analyses Shakespeare’s plays *Henry IV Part I & II* and *Henry V* in the light of these arguments. The essay refers to the work of Thomas Harriot, *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, which gives a report of British colonialism in America. Harriot examines how colonizers secure the acquiescence of the natives to Christianity and the people who represent it through employing products of human ingenuity. Here subversion is deliberately induced to strengthen the colonising power and its religion. As Greenblatt asserts, “the subversiveness which is genuine and radical . . . is at the same time contained by the power it would appear to threaten. Indeed the subversiveness is the very product of that power and furthers its ends” (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 30). Power and subversion are proved not to be in simple opposition, but are engaged in a complicated correlation. Subversion assumes various forms which are used to thwart attempts at subverting dominant power relations. Greenblatt says that this is true of all Shakespeare’s plays: “Shakespeare’s plays are centrally, repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder . . . above all in the plays that mediate on the consolidation of state power” (40). In the character of Falstaff subversive and carnivalesque elements are given free play, only to be subdued in the end, leading to the celebration of power embodied in Prince Hal. The essay highlights containment of subversion, challenging the potential for positive and legitimate transformations in society. The concluding
comment of the opening section of the essay “Invisible Bullets,” echoing the words of Kafka to Max Brod on hope, reiterates this position; “There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us” (39).

Inspired by Foucault’s suggestion that history is more registered in its discontinuities, New Historicists are inclined to study the breaches and interruptions in history. Instead of bringing a single, unifying perspective to the analysis of a historical period, its ideas and practices, it is treated as a site of conflict, as a location of discursive elements and practices. Subsequently a literary critic is expected to study these diverse, multiple elements in the light of the ways in which power is produced, deployed and harnessed for particular interests. Foucault in *History of Sexuality* refers to the “omnipresence of power,” (93) because power is inherent in every relation. Foucault contends: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but it comes from everywhere” (93). Foucault does not consider power as an institution or structure nor is it the innate strength, rather “it is the name that one attributed to a complex strategic situation in a particular society” (93). Power is not acquired, shared or seized; it is discharged from various points and is active in all interactions, communications and experiences in the society. Foucault asserts in his interview “Critical Theory/Intellectual Theory”:

when I speak of power relations, of the forms of rationality which can rule and regulate them, I am not referring to Power--
with a capital P – dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration – or between a dominating and a dominated class. (38)

According to Foucault power relations suffuse all relations within society and he studies the ways in which power operates and is resisted, and he conceives individuals not as passive recipients, but as active subjects. Power is not a possession, but a strategic performance. Foucault asserts in *Power/Knowledge*:

> Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In
other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (98)

Thus power is not just a set of relations between the oppressor and the oppressed, and not even located within institutions such as the state or the government. It is a system of relations diffused throughout society. There are multiple power equations, assuming different forms and activating performances within family, institutions and government. Foucault is interested in the way power is negotiated by individuals, at the local level, not at the centralised, impersonal level. To Foucault, power is not simply a form of oppression, something that just restrains individuals and curtails freedom, but also something productive, generating new forms of behaviour and events. He asks in *Power/Knowledge*:

> If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (119)
But despite its pervasive nature, power is unstable since the exercise of power inevitably generates resistances. In the power network these resistances are present everywhere and so there is no single source of resistance, but “a plurality of resistances” (*Power/ Knowledge* 96). Foucault examines the ways in which power is produced and organised in a society and how it constructs particular identities and institutions and how it generates challenges and resistances to established patterns of behaviour. Influenced by Foucault’s interpretations of power mechanism, New Historicists maintain that literary productions do not merely reflect the concepts, ideologies and aspirations of a society in a disinterested manner; they are influenced and shaped by them and are vigorously involved in maintaining or resisting them as the case may be. Similar to other discourses literature and culture are also locations of power and resistance.

Foucault is concerned with representation which, for him, is directly related to the production of knowledge within a particular culture and not just to the production of meaning. This production of knowledge is engendered through discourses, which he defines as “the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (*The Archeology of Knowledge* 80). Foucault is particularly interested in the regulated practices, that is, the unformulated rules and structures which generate and circulate
particular utterances and statements. Discourse is related to power relations, but not in the sense of the Marxist concept of ideological determinism. Foucault asserts:

discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, anymore than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.

(*History of Sexuality*, 1: 100-101)

Discourse is thus the agency of both oppression and resistance. Discourse is not simply a process of reflecting reality; it suggests the structures and patterns by which the reality has to be apprehended. Foucault argues in “The Order of Discourse,” “we must not imagine that the world turns towards us a legible face which we would only have to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favour” (67). Discourse influences, invigorates, and at times restrains our perceptions. It is through discourse and the structures it institutes that we perceive and interpret the world; the system of perception and interpretation
producing a sense of stability and regularity, which cannot be easily challenged.

Foucault is deeply concerned with knowledge production and in his works *Power/Knowledge, The Order of Things*, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he analyses the subtle, tacit, structures which establish knowledge. Rejecting the traditional concept of individual geniuses, Foucault favours the concept of abstract, institutionalised, structured model of knowledge production. He focuses on the material conditions that have influenced ideas or knowledge. In *Power/Knowledge* Foucault presents knowledge as related to power relations: “Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power. . . . It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (52).

Foucault’s perspective hinges on the link between power relations and knowledge, which leads to the production of facts. The individual scholar is conceived as the site where this knowledge is engendered. Foucault uses the terms ‘episteme’ for the structural patterns and rules which generate and circulate knowledge and this is part of the historical paradigm. The knowledge produced consequently confirms the existing power relations, establishing the fact that what can be produced and circulated are subject to approval by the
authority. The so called ‘fact’ or truth is evidently constructed and is the consequence of power relations. Foucault states in *Power/Knowledge*:

> truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power. . . . Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned . . . (131).

Foucault affirms that the moment of your self-perception is the moment of your objectification; you become an object in the power relations. He states in “Critical Theory/Intellectual Theory,” “if I tell the truth about myself, as I am now doing, it is in part that I am constituted as a subject across a number of power relations which are exerted over me and which I exert over others” (39).

Our knowledge about the past is also historically constructed and hence needs critical examination which will certainly change our notion about the present too. Foucault challenges the enlightenment discourse of history which proposes the onward progress of human civilization and which gives a sense of uniqueness and completion to the present. To Foucault the present is also as strange as the past, and definitely not more unique than the past. The
The influence of Foucault can be seen in the subject and method of analysis chosen by new historicists like Greenblatt, Gallagher and Montrose.

The perspectival shift regarding history and culture has led to a rejection of conventional conceptions regarding canonical works and authorial genius. In “Towards a Poetics of Culture” Greenblatt affirms: “the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (12). Any text is a cultural construct rather than the isolated and unique creation of a genius; a text cannot exist in cultural vacuum. New historicism explodes the myth of authorial genius, by rejecting the assumption that imagination and inspiration are strange, unexplained phenomena belonging to a genius, and instead regards them as products of social energies circulated in any given time. The relevance of canonical works of art, that is, great works of all time which reflect universal human values, too is challenged by new historicists.

A significant element in new historicist methodology is the use of anecdote, that is, the crucial contiguity of a historical anecdote with a literary text, which is indicative of the blurring of the boundaries between literature and history. Gallagher and Greenblatt state: “That both the literary work and the anthropological (or historical) anecdotes are texts, that both are fictions in the sense of things made, that both are shaped by the imagination and by the
available resources of narration and description helped make it possible to conjoin them”(31).

New Historicism is indebted to Clifford Geertz’s concept of ‘thick description’ which he differentiates from ‘thin description, “which only describes the ‘mute act,” while the former gives “the act its place in a network of framing intentions and cultural meanings. . . .” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 21). Thick description for Geertz is a little story, an anthropological anecdote, a typical excerpt from his field journal, “deliberately unpreceded by any prior explanatory comment . . .” (7). Thus the excerpt is meant to surprise and arouse curiosity that demands interpretation of cultures. As Gallagher and Greenblatt explain, “It functions then to subvert a programmatic analytical response, a fully systematized methodology, and it helps to call into question, in the midst of a loose allegiance to structuralism, whether either a culture or a method could ever be rendered satisfyingly systematic” (22).

In fact Geertz in his essay “Thick Description,” narrates a story, an interesting anecdote, involving sheep stealing, murder and justice, which occurred in Morocco and which was reported to him by one of the participants. He refers to the anecdote as “quoted raw, a note in a bottle,” (9), the expression bringing about a coalescence of both the ‘specific’ and ‘general’ The narrative, which is something found, and reported to him, is actually written as a story in the field diary of an anthropologist. According to
Gallagher and Greenblatt this emphasis on both narrative and textuality implies a link between the text and what the text refers to: “which the text gestures as that which lies beyond the written word, outside its textual mode of being” (23). Thick description gives meaning to action through suggesting the purpose and circumstances of the action. It illuminates the inconsistent and discordant structures which produce meaning. Geertz’s interest in meaning and the conflicting structures that fashion it explains the interest New Historicists show in him. When Geertz wants us to read his anecdote it is as a ‘raw’ sample of his field notes, invoking the ‘real’ rather than the ‘imaginary’ world, consequently broadening the scope of texts to be interpreted. Gallagher and Greenblatt confirm:

His thick descriptions of cultural texts strengthened the insistence that the things that draw us to literature are often found in the non-literary, that the concept of literariness is deeply unstable, that the boundaries between different types of narratives are subject to interrogation and revision. (30)

Gallagher and Greenblatt discuss the indebtedness of the movement to Erich Aurebach’s form of literary historicism, which is illustrated in his epoch making work *Mimesis*, which he begins with a reference to a scene in *Odyssey* with no proper introduction or acknowledgement. From an analysis of Homeric style he moves to the study of Biblical style, taking a scene from the
Bible (Aurebach 3). This is Aurebach’s style, drawing fragments from different texts, “and the styles disclosed in those fragments represent historically determined and determining methods by which the world is apprehended, imitated, and reproduced” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 32). Each chapter of Mimesis begins similarly, with short excerpts from a text. Through close reading and sometimes through the juxtaposition of other passages, the excerpt is analysed. Each chapter reveals an intense historical sense and a consciousness of intricate inter-textual relations. Gallagher and Greenblatt confess that new historicism has definitely been influenced by Aurebach’s style. This is how they elaborate the particular influence:

The influence is most striking in the adaptation of Auerbach’s characteristic opening gambit: the isolation of a resonant textual fragment that is revealed, under the pressure of analysis, to represent the work from which it is drawn and the particular culture in which that work was produced and consumed. That culture in turn renders the fragment explicable, both as something that could have only been written in a moment characterised by a particular set of circumstances, structures, and assumptions and as something that conveys the life-world of that moment. The new historicist anecdote as many of us deployed it is an Auerbachian device. (35)
Auerbachian method is advantageous in elucidating long and complicated texts, without conveying a sense of futility and boredom. This anecdotal, fragmentary style has a wonderful effect, conveying an impression of magic, “the conjuring of a complex, dynamic, historically specific spirit of representation out of a few paragraphs” (37). It is as if the fragmentary passages he has selected for analysis reflect the whole system. The anecdotal method implemented by Auerbach derives from the belief that fragments represent the larger reality. The literary work, its textuality, reflects or imitates the lived experience. According to Gallagher and Greenblatt, Auerbach is concerned with “moments of representational plenitude: moments in which a culture’s apprehension of reality, its experience of reality, and its representation of reality converge” (41). Like Auerbach new historicists too want to access the real. Gallagher and Greenblatt confirm, “we wanted to find in the past real bodies and living voices, and if we knew that we could not find these-- the bodies having long moldered away and the voices fallen silent—we could at least seize upon those traces that seemed to be close to actual experience” (30).

The first chapter of Practicing New Historicism explores the way New Historicism is influenced by Geertz’s method of ‘thick description’ and Auerbach’s historicism, the movement forcing a union out of these different methods. The result of this influence is the tendency to consider culture as text
Chapter I

and text as the embodiment of culture. Intense analysis of fragmentary moments in culture can illuminate the thoughts of an age and open its emotional register.

Joel Fineman’s essay “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction” reflects on a significant aspect of anecdote, which narrates a singular event, and its unique reference to the real. He argues that “the anecdote determines the destiny of a specifically historiographic integration of event and context” (56). Fineman, in the light of the narrative qualities of the anecdote, admits its literary quality. At the same time the anecdote moves beyond the literary and it is this that gives it the “referential access to the real” (56). This combination of the ‘literary’ and the ‘real’, and its formal brevity, makes Fineman to think of anecdote “as a historeme, i.e., as the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact” (57). This is how Fineman explains the anecdote:

the anecdote is the literary form that uniquely *lets history happen* by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity, i.e., it does so only in so far as its narration both comprises and refracts the narration it reports. (61)
Thus the anecdote, complete in itself, provokes a disruption in the continuous flow of a larger historical structure, which suggests something real outside the historical narrative. The anecdotal form thus discloses and also destabilizes history. Like Fineman new historicists too relate anecdotes to the disruptions of history. They are primarily interested in anecdotes which are “outlandish and irregular” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 51), which would maintain the strangeness of the past; anecdotes which would disrupt the historical framework applied to a particular period. These anecdotes reveal at a miniature level the power forces at play in a historical period. Destabilising the ‘epochal truths’ such anecdotes reveal the concealed truth of a particular age. As Gallagher and Greenblatt explain: “the anecdote could be conceived as a tool with which to rub literary texts against the grain of received notions about their determinants, revealing the fingerprints of the accidental, suppressed, defeated, uncanny, abjected, or exotic—in short, the nonsurviving—even if only fleetingly” (52).

New historicists want to woo “counter-histories” through anecdotes, and counter-histories which would puncture the grands recits, grand narratives, of the past. Gallagher and Greenblatt claim that these counter-histories, when they become successful, cease to be ‘counter’: “Counter-history and history, in this view, are moments in a continuous conflictual process rather than substantial opposing activities with independently distinguishing
characteristics . . .” (52). They go on to elaborate the methodological implications of the notion of counter-history:

first, that the present is not necessarily a superior objective vantage point, but is often, instead, a reductive one: second, that social realities are often not singular or even reciprocal, but multiple and incommensurable; and third, that the historian must be able to push beyond understanding a past social reality into imagining the social imaginary. (57)

Anecdote distinguishes counter-histories from old fashioned, teleological ‘Big Stories,’ which have traditionally served the purpose of the historians. As Donald R. Kelley in his review of Practicing New Historicism, elaborates, “the Big Stories are, in effect, the fictions of the winners; the counterhistorical anecdotes try to catch the voices and images of the lost, the forgotten, the oppressed, the feminine, the gay, and other sorts of alterity, obliterated in the narrative of mainstream history” (100).

Greenblatt, in his essay “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” admits that new historicism is “a practice rather than a doctrine” (1). According to him what makes the movement distinct is its open, receptive attitude to the intellectual furor of the recent years. Acknowledging the relationship between the text and the context, new historicists consider the text as “the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex,
The dissertation attempts to trace the construction of the Mahatma analysing select fictional texts employing the method of new historicism. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese asserts that the “texts do not exist in vacuum” (221). Acknowledging the new historicist dictum of embedment of the text in culture and the dialectical or reciprocal relationship between the text and history, these fictional texts are studied in relation to respective ages and discursive practices or hegemonic structures within these historical ages. Even though
new historicist practice tries not to differentiate between the text and the context, Greenblatt himself has confirmed that in literary studies the text has definitely to be fore-grounded. Falling in line with this argument the literary texts under analysis are prioritized in this project. The concept of the Mahatma has undergone changes in accordance with the dominant discursive practices of the corresponding ages and literary texts have reflected these changes just as they have also been responsible for these changes. New historicism is the most appropriate methodology to study these attitudinal shifts regarding Gandhi. With the literary and non-literary texts analysed at tandem, the influence of the cultural and historical elements in the apprehension and construction of the Mahatma in different periods can be ascertained.

The representation of the Mahatma undergoes a shift in these literary texts, from a godhead and a myth and a receptacle of people’s hopes and aspirations to a shrewd and practical politician and ultimately to a sad, old and misunderstood man. In mass media too the Mahatma has been presented and re-presented, and in the post-independent context, with Gandhism losing its hegemony in political domain, the Mahatma has become a commercial symbol. The narrative constructions are examined in the context of the dominant discourses and power structures of the respective periods and the Mahatma is established as “the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society” (Greenblatt, Renaissance 256).