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Reading with Cultural Materialism: An illustrative Exercise with Textual Corridors

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Abstract

The most prominent commonality between cultural materialism and new historicism is the understanding that a literary work should be read, understood and evaluated politically also, without neglecting the other alternative appraisals. The common fallacies of most of the 20th century critical endeavors, like their inherent obscurity, notional heterogeneity, and flexibility, have affected cultural materialism also. The deconstructive strategy of exclusion of the outside, thus making the textual world a sovereign of its own too, is sharply criticized by the practitioners of cultural poetics, because the techniques of cultural materialism are employed very effectively to reveal how aesthetic value, far from being timeless and universal, is contingent on historical change. In a cultural materialist reading, contextualization of a text is carried out from a politically charged perspective. To the cultural materialists, an inbuilt confession of the critic's or reader's political commitment can be traced from the method of their literary intervention. Pure independent existence of any discipline is rejected, as they argue that any text is a discourse, which is to be read, appreciated, and interpreted along with other existing or extinct discourse in a society.

Key Words: cultural materialism, contextualization, deconstructive strategy, heterogeneity, historicism

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This article attempts a critique of "Cultural Materialism", the modes and methods of which are elaborated by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in their pioneering work, *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1995). The formulation of one of the late 20th century critical tools, cultural materialism is generally attributed to the British Marxist theoretician Raymond Williams. He is dissatisfied with the seemingly unalterable rigidities of traditional Marxist thinking and perspectives. His realization that the relationship between the economic infrastructure and the cultural superstructure is much more complex than the proclamations of conservative Marxism led him to the institutionalization of this contemporary critical instrument called Cultural Materialism. To use a very simplified explanation, cultural

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materialist theoretical enquiry problematical the umbilical connectivity between literature and histories of all sorts: social, political, economic, cultural etc.

In the upcoming theoretical texts on the topic, the two nomenclatures – 'cultural materialism' and 'new historicism' – are often used almost alternatively and indistinctively. The credit for popularizing the phrase, 'new historicism', is given to the American cultural critic Stephen Greenblatt. Generally, cultural materialism is understood to be the British counterpart of American new historicism. The most prominent commonality between these two groups is the understanding that a literary work should be read, understood, and evaluated politically also, without neglecting the other alternative appraisals. By common consent, cultural materialists and new historicists strip the author, the reader, and the critic off their claims of absolute objectivity in their literary and cultural endeavors. The basic concern of cultural materialism, according to Stephen Regan, is " to study the works in the material conditions of their production and reception". (151)

The common fallacies of most of the 20th century critical endeavors, like their inherent obscurity, notional heterogeneity, and flexibility, affects cultural materialism also. That is why, critics liberally use alternative phrases like 'Cultural Materialism', ' Materialist Historicism', 'Cultural Studies', 'Cultural Poetics', 'New Historicism', etc. to denote the same school of criticism. The diversity of cultural materialist practice defies its reduction to a school or creed. And, it might more profitably be regarded as a flexible range of strategies and techniques. It is this elusive changeable quality and the capacity to incorporate ideas from other disciplines which prevents it from becoming a dogma. This is the greatest secret of its rampant appeal among the contemporary interpretive methodologies.

Cultural Materialism adopts the analytical anthropological / comprehensive sense of culture, not the evaluative sense which identifies 'cultured' with 'refined sensibility' or 'possessing superior values'. Cultural materialists' culture accepts every cultural form, including the "subordinate" and the "marginalized" ones. The cultural effects of each and every human interaction in his social set up are covered under this umbrella term. The media (visual, auditory, and the print), along with popular music and pulp fiction, enjoy the same treatment here with classical music and canonical literature, etc. All cultural manifestations are treated democratically without according to any privileges and hierarchical distinctions between the 'high art' and the 'low art'.

Regarding the second constituent of the phrase, 'materialism', Dolimore and Sinfield say that, "Materialism is opposed to idealism". It insists the term that culture does not transcend the material forces and relations of production. Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, but can be independent of it. Cultural materialism therefore studies the implications of literary text in history. Cultural materialists theoretically interrogate the political positions of individuals and institutions with the belief that consciously or unconsciously the individual's or the society's psyche shelters some internalized political propositions. Therefore,

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his/her claim for political neutrality is nothing but a bourgeois political ideology in disguise. Thus, being nonpolitical, for cultural materialists, is simply a deception.

This method of cultural analysis becomes obviously a coherent meeting of history and some of developments in all liberation ideologies. The counter-tendencies in the cultural arena, like the resistance to the dominant ideologies of patriarchy, feminism, etc, are given the focus in this critical approach. Here literary works are treated as a location for the representation and legitimization of the prevailing establishmentarian ideological power. In other words, it is a perspective which is concerned generally with the interaction between the state power and the cultural forces. Literary representations, too, are not viewed as innocent manifestations of ideas. On the contrary, they have hidden aims of legitimization of the status quo power equations. Cultural materialists do not attribute ant transcendental or sacred status to ant text, whether literary or historical (Barry, 182). So, the demolition of the accepted meanings of text becomes the norm, thereby, turning every reading into an iconoclast one.

Cultural materialism studies how dominance and dissidence are constructed both materially and culturally while focusing on how the text becomes the site of struggles which do not necessarily end up in the incorporation of the subversive elements within the dominant ideology. As the text could be made to support the interests of the dominant class, culture, and gender, etc. either by institutionalization or by the production of dominant readings, the job of the dissident critic is to challenge the incorporation of literature by the dominant ideology. Dollimore and Sinfield (1995) suggest a number of strategies that the dissident critic might adapt for his purpose. They are:

a) Rejection: adapting the strategic simple tactics of rejection of the respected text for its reactionary implication can be stimulating. It can shake the normally unquestioned assumptions.
b) Interpretation: this has been a dominant means of handling awkward text. They are analyzed so as to yield acceptable meaning. Such situated readings can shake the authenticity of the text.
c) Deflect into form: one may side step the issue of the version of human relation propounded in the text, by shifting the attention from the text's supposed truth to the mechanisms of its construction.
d) Deflect into history: by not privileging the literary text, and by taking it only as a production of a version of reality at a certain historical conjecture, subsequently reuse and reproduce it in terms of the other practices and historical conditions. Once this is done, the dissident critic, against the grain of dominant reading, can interpret the text.

As a social critique, cultural materialism asserts that literature is a product of culture. So, literary commentaries are also essentially a critique of that culture. This compulsive attachment of literature with history, i.e. treating the text as something inextricable from

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its context, is strikingly opposed to the traditional modes of criticisms. In a cultural materialist reading, contextualization of a text is carried out from a politically charged perspective. This is an affirmation of the belief that literary text should not be worshipped above other texts. With the advent of cultural materialism, the landscape and the boundaries of literary studies have been dramatically changed, proclaiming the need for a map of extended ground.

While the critics, who are concerned with historical background of literature, grapple only with the context of production, cultural materialists give equal importance to the contexts of textual receptions also. That is, 'reading' of a text varies as cultural contexts of readings change. To put it in other words, the reading outcome will be different from context to context, time, to time and individual to individual. So, it is advised that books are to be read "as sites of power struggles, as sites of emerging classes and ruling orders and as sites of national, political, and cultural demonstration".

The cultural materialist project puts forward the "historicized view of literature", according to Caroline Porter. This rooting in the past is well represented by the theorists. Here, conventional dispassionate reading is replaced by an alert reading, which becomes a form of political intervention. Reading is a process in cultural materialist practice wherein the authorial versions of the cultural content are countered by the reader's values. On the interrelationship between the cultural context and the reception of authorial accounts, Cynthia Chase comments on another occasion which rightly resembles with the cultural materialist method as "…to place literary works in a historical context made up of social and political events and discourses in the interests of recovering their historical particularity through the details of their perspective. Therefore, the recovery of history, from textual comments also, becomes an inescapable theoretical procedure. This is how the textual representations authority and demystification of the specific forms of power become an illuminating interrogation.

A text is something like a prison house or one of the many types of symbolic cultural constructions where the rebel voices are often subdued by the techniques of consolidation and containment. It does not mean that these warring forces could be subdued totally forever. But these rebellious voices always play a hide and seek game in the peripheries of the textual realm. At the same time, the dominant ideological intentions that the text pronounces also attempt to repressive and adaptive techniques skillfully, thus allowing a little bit of eruptions of the contenting voices.

To cultural materialists, an inbuilt confession of the critic's or readers political commitment can be traced from the method of their literary intervention. The authorial practice of saying and non-saying is unveiled by the practitioners of cultural poetics

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through the analysis of the authorial suppression of historical consciousness. In other words, the politics of omissions and commissions is operated out of the text. The reader judgments', too, are often evaluated as biased – exposing their political entanglement. On the ground that literature is a product of culture, cultural materialists take literary commentaries as critique of that culture. These critiques will either be affiliating with the dominant cultural ideologies or distancing from it. Conventional criticisms transcend the sectional interests, articulating a genuinely shared culture and cosmology characterized by harmony, stability, and unity. In contrast, cultural materialism is likely to consider the ideological dimensions of consolidation; by the way, the dominant ideology reinforces its class-gender interest by presenting the social order as natural and immutable. It foregrounds the production and propagation of meanings or "truth" given by the power structures of the time.

In the exploration of the cunning passages and contrived corridors of the textual labyrinth, the cross-disciplinary enterprises of cultural materialism and new historicism share many platforms together. Nevertheless, cultural materialists register and complaint that new historicists limit their activity with the description of social domination and exploitation in literary texts, especially of the past. The new historicists are also accused of refusing to adopt a commitment to reconstitute the present social hierarchy into which they have been co-opted.

Regarding the question of perspective in cultural endeavor, the cultural materialists insist that the perspective of a person is not an automatically selected one, but often a product of the unconscious internalization of the hegemonic discourse of time and place. Explaining the choice of perspective, which ultimately leads to commitment, Max Adreth states: "There is a reciprocal and fruitful exchange between his creative activity and his life as a man of action? The latter provides him with rich materials for his art; and as he mixes with people; he shares his difficulties and learns about their feelings" (449).

On the cultural materialist perspective of the language, Marvin Harris opines: "cultural materialism makes no claims concerning the functional relationship between infrastructure and the major phonemic and grammatical features of particular families of language. Cultural materialism does not hold that particular modes of production reproduction cause people to speak Indo-European rather than Uto-Aztecan languages (55). As materialist criticisms scorn the ideological abstractions of language, especially the transcendent claims of language components and its implications, they always club the word and the world in which the author and the reader live. Language is never a transcendental gift, but a material formulation for cultural materialists.

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It is this conservative nature of language that facilitates the retention of their current shape, or their perspective norms, not because of the lack of linguistic innovations or dissents, but because many people believe that things or rules in the languages have to be the same as their present forms. So, uttering purely grammatical sentences, which are governed by the lexicon and syntactical rules that constitute the language, is only an act of conforming the existing system. Any alteration in this terrain is considered to be a revolution or a serious deviation.

The reciprocally overlapping characteristics of the two academic disciplines – history and literature – cannot be neglected in cultural materialist readings. Traditional historicists' water-tight compartmentalization of intellectual disciplines is nullified in the cultural materialist reading of history and literature. Pure independent existence of any discipline is rejected as they argue that any text is a discourse, which is to be read, appreciated and interpreted along with the other existing or extinct discourses in a society. In order to achieve this, texts should be contextualized, incorporated, compared, and contrasted with other disciplines, whatever they be. On the importance of this cultural materialist contextualization of texts, Jeremy Hawthorn records that " Historicists are committed to the belief that literary works are most fruitfully read in the illuminating contexts of historical forces which contributed to their birth and the historically conditioned and changing circumstances of their subsequent life".

At the same time, Hawthorn cautions the readers and interpreters against their tendency to over-historicize literacy texts with the over anxiety to fine a one to one correspondence with textual implications and historical date. This sort of appreciation will only lead to the assumption that literary texts perfectly reflect the social engagements of the time. This is purely a non-cultural materialist approach, according to Simon Eliot and W. R Owens, who elaborate this slippage as:
New Historicists reject both the notions that literary text can 'reflect' historical condition and also that there is any single essential historical narrative about which literature can itself directly speak. All texts, major or minor, whether great or trivial, are 'historical', which is to say, they are event in history of their time as well as comments upon certain aspect of that history. Reading the text therefore demands equal attention to both these dimensions.

The operational agenda of cultural materialist literary strategies could be summed up in the following fashion. Literary texts should be historically, culturally, and politically contextualized as a historical and a political decontextualization of a text is the strategy of the hegemonic ideology prevailing in the society. The autonomy of literary texts should be rejected and should be substituted with interdisciplinary interrogations. Authorial, reader, and critical objectivity is a misconception, as they are inextricably and essentially

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subjectivities of their own socio-political environment and because every individual is socially constructed. Along with assertions of dominant ideology, the text unknowingly shelters marginalized, rebellious, and anti-establishmentarian subversive perspectives, which are to be dug out with the help of some politically interrogative reading strategy. "Appropriative" reader intervention is creative, rather than the confirmative "naturalization" of the text. Literary texts should not be attributed any trans-historical sacrosanctity. They are only one of the many subtexts that need to be subjected to political interpretation. There can be no essential, universal, all-inclusive human nature and aesthetic criteria. History is not an objective, linear, and homogeneous stream of events, but a 'constructed' or 'fabricated' textual manifestation of the subjective interpretations of the historians. In the place of universal and homogenous literary pursuits, fragmentation and multi-culturalism is aimed at. The reciprocity of material condition of textual production and the superstructure is to be accepted without privileging one over the other. Textual interpretations may vary from place to place, from time to time, and from individual to individual. Reading is essentially a political intervention that is aimed at demolishing the accepted meanings. It is not a passive activity to absorb the author's intentions. The watertight generic compartmentalization of literary texts should be replaced by an interdisciplinary approach. It should be remembered that all readings are negotiations between the author and the reader, and between the past and the present.

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