

HISTORY AS METHOD, HISTORY AS PROBLEM: THEORIES OF THE HISTORICAL IN LITERARY STUDIES

Pankaj Sharma

*Professor, Department of English
Chaudhary Devi Lal University, Sirsa
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1179-3889*

ABSTRACT

The last four decades have witnessed a remarkable migration of historical theories into literary studies, from New Historicism and Cultural Materialism in the early 1980s to the more recent absorption of microhistory and Subaltern Studies. This paper argues that the migration has produced not merely a set of new reading methods but a deeper epistemological discomfort: these theories challenge the distinction between historical and literary knowledge itself, treating history not as a stable background against which literary texts are read but as a contested, constructed, and textual phenomenon in its own right. Drawing on the work of Greenblatt, Williams, Dollimore and Sinfield, Ginzburg, Davis, Guha, and Spivak, the paper traces how each framework re-theorises the relationship between text and context and identifies the tensions that arise when literary scholars borrow methods designed for different disciplinary purposes. It contends that the most productive response to these tensions is not resolution but a sustained engagement with the friction between historical and literary ways of knowing.

Keywords: *New Historicism; Cultural Materialism; microhistory; Subaltern Studies; historiography; literary theory; epistemology.*

Literary studies have always borrowed from neighboring disciplines, but few borrowings have been as consequential, or as unsettling, as theories imported from historiography over the past forty years. When Stephen Greenblatt introduced the term “New Historicism” in a 1982 essay for the special issue of *Genre* titled *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, the gesture seemed modest enough: a call to read literary texts alongside the non-literary documents of their period, treating both with equal seriousness (Greenblatt, “Introduction” 5–6). But the implications ran far deeper than method. If literary and non-literary texts occupied the same field of cultural production, if a royal proclamation and a Shakespeare play were equally caught up in what Greenblatt called the “circulation of social energy,” then the traditional hierarchy that had placed literature above history as an object of aesthetic contemplation was no longer tenable (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 1–20). The consequences of that small shift are still unfolding.

This paper examines four theoretical frameworks that have migrated from historical scholarship into literary studies: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, microhistory, and Subaltern Studies. It argues that they share a common premise—that history is not given but made, not background but text—but resolve the implications of that premise in strikingly different ways. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism diverge over the political consequences of textual analysis. Microhistory raises the problem of scale, asking whether the intimate reconstruction of a single life can carry the interpretive weight that literary scholars demand of it. And Subaltern Studies confronts the hardest question of all: whether historical or literary methods can recover the voices of those whom both disciplines have systematically silenced. In each case, the literary scholar who borrows from historiography inherits not only a method but an epistemological problem, and the most honest scholarly response may be to hold those problems open rather than to pretend they have been settled.

NEW HISTORICISM: THE PARALLEL TEXT AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The conceptual core of New Historicism is deceptively simple.

Read a literary text beside a non-literary text from the same period—a trial record, a travel narrative, a medical treatise, a map—and attend to the ways they inform and complicate each other. Neither text is privileged; both are products of the same cultural moment, shaped by the same circulations of power. Greenblatt developed this method across a series of works on Renaissance literature, most fully in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and *Shakespearean Negotiations*, arguing that the self was not an autonomous entity but a construct fashioned through encounters with institutional authority (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 1–9). The theoretical underpinning came largely from Michel Foucault, whose conception of power as diffuse, productive, and operating through discourse rather than simple repression gave New Historicists a vocabulary for describing how literary texts participated in the maintenance and contestation of social order (Foucault 170–194).

What made this approach genuinely new, as opposed to a return to the older source-study historicism of the early twentieth century, was its insistence that the relationship between text and context was not one of reflection but of mutual constitution. A Shakespeare play did not merely “reflect” Elizabethan anxieties about authority; it actively shaped them, circulated them, and in certain cases contained or redirected them. Greenblatt’s reading of the *Henriad*, for instance, argued that the plays’ apparent subversion of royal authority was itself a mechanism of containment, a controlled release of dissident energy that ultimately reinforced the structures it seemed to challenge (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 21–65). This “subversion-containment” model became both the signature move and the central vulnerability of New Historicism. Critics objected, with some justice, that it left no room for genuine dissent—that in Greenblatt’s account, power always won, and literary texts were always, in the end, complicit (Levinson 29–30). If every

apparent challenge was always already contained, then what was the point of analysing it? The political payoff seemed to vanish at the moment of its discovery. This objection was sharpened by the emergence of Cultural Materialism on the other side of the Atlantic. Writing from within a British tradition of Marxist cultural analysis, Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, and others drew on many of the same theoretical resources—Foucault, discourse analysis, the parallel reading of literary and non-literary documents—but arrived at markedly different conclusions. Where New Historicists tended to find containment, Cultural Materialists looked for what Sinfield called “faultlines”: the moments where a text’s ideological coherence broke down, where the dominant order failed to contain its contradictions, and where dissident readings became not only possible but historically consequential (Sinfield 9–47). The difference was not merely temperamental but methodological. Dollimore and Sinfield identified four commitments that defined Cultural Materialism: attention to historical context, incorporation of structuralist and post-structuralist theory, close textual analysis of canonical works treated as cultural artefacts rather than timeless masterpieces, and an explicit political commitment to progressive social change (Dollimore and Sinfield 2–11).

That last commitment is the crux.

New Historicism, as its critics noted, described the operations of power with analytical precision but was reluctant to say where it stood in relation to them. Cultural Materialism insisted that the point was not merely to understand cultural production but to intervene in it. For Sinfield, reading Shakespeare through the lens of Cold War politics or Thatcherite social policy was not an anachronism but a necessity: the meanings of canonical texts were being actively produced in the present, and the question of who controlled those meanings was a political one (Sinfield 290–302). Whether this insistence on present-day political engagement constituted a genuine advance over New Historicism or merely a different set of assumptions dressed in the same theoretical clothes remains, I think, an open question. Raymond Williams, whose Marxism and Literature laid much of the groundwork for Cultural Materialism, was himself sceptical of any cultural analysis that claimed direct political efficacy without specifying the mechanisms of that efficacy (Williams 108–114). The literary text, on Williams’s account, was part of a broader material process—but only a part, and its capacity to produce political change was mediated by institutions, audiences, and historical circumstances that the text itself could not control.

Between these two schools lies a question that neither has answered satisfactorily: what exactly does historical contextualisation do to a literary reading? One answer is epistemological—it changes what we know about how texts participate in cultural production. Another is political—it changes what we can do with that knowledge in the present. But both answers assume that the literary text is interesting primarily for what it reveals about the culture that produced it, not for what it does as a work of art. This is the complaint that formalist critics, from both traditional and deconstructive camps, have levelled against historicist approaches since the 1980s: that in the rush

to situate texts within networks of power and discourse, something about the specificity of the literary—its formal properties, its capacity to surprise, its resistance to paraphrase—gets lost (Gallagher and Greenblatt 1–18). Greenblatt and Gallagher acknowledged this concern in *Practicing New Historicism*, conceding that the relationship between formal analysis and historical contextualisation remained “a problem rather than a solution” (9). That concession, rare and valuable, suggests that the most thoughtful practitioners of these methods are aware that they have not resolved the disciplinary tensions their work has created. They have, at best, made those tensions productive.

MICROHISTORY AND THE PROBLEM OF SCALE

If New Historicism and Cultural Materialism contested the politics of textual analysis, microhistory raised a different but equally disquieting question: what happens to historical knowledge when the scale of inquiry shrinks to a single life, a single village, a single trial? The term was first used programmatically by a group of Italian historians associated with the journal *Quaderni Storici* in the late 1970s, among them Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, Edoardo Grendi, and Carlo Poni. Their project drew heavily on the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz, particularly his method of “thick description,” which argued that social meaning could be reconstructed only by attending closely to the particular actions and understandings of individuals within specific contexts, and then working outward toward broader interpretive claims (Geertz 3–30). Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms*, a reconstruction of the cosmology of a sixteenth-century Italian miller named Menocchio from Inquisition records, became the defining example of the genre: a single obscure life, recovered from archival silence, made to speak about popular culture, religious authority, and the limits of intellectual freedom under the Counter-Reformation (Ginzburg 1–12).

For literary scholars, the attractions of microhistory are obvious. Narrative matters here. Voice, character, and the texture of lived experience receive the attention that structural history denies them. And the method resists the abstractions of structural analysis in favour of the concrete and the particular. But these attractions carry a methodological cost that is worth examining honestly. Microhistory depends on the survival of documentary evidence—trial records, wills, inventories, court depositions—and the historian’s interpretive choices are constrained by what the archive happens to preserve. When the evidence runs out, the microhistorian faces a dilemma that is fundamentally literary: whether to fill the gap with conjecture, to acknowledge the silence, or to shape the available material into a narrative form that implies a coherence the evidence may not support. Natalie Zemon Davis confronted this problem directly in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, where she acknowledged that her reconstruction of the motives and experiences of a sixteenth-century French peasant woman was “in part my invention, held tightly in check by the voices of the past” (Davis 5). That phrase—“in part my invention”—marks the precise point where microhistory becomes a problem for literary studies rather than merely a resource. Two later works

in the microhistorical tradition press the point further. Keith Wrightson's *Ralph Taylor's Summer* reconstructs the world of a seventeenth-century scrivener in plague-stricken Newcastle from the legal and testamentary documents he produced, but the narrative's power depends on Wrightson's willingness to shape those documents into a story with the arc and texture of fiction (Wrightson 1–15). Jonathan Spence's *The Death of Woman Wang*, set in provincial China during the same century, goes further still: the titular figure appears only in the final chapter, functioning less as a historical subject than as a literary device—a hook, as Spence himself acknowledged, upon which to hang the broader story of rural Chinese life in a period of upheaval (Spence 1–9, 121–140). These are superb works of historical writing. But the literary scholar who turns to them for method must reckon with the fact that their power comes, in significant measure, from the very techniques—narrative shaping, selective emphasis, imaginative reconstruction—that historians have traditionally distinguished from their own disciplinary practice. Microhistory does not resolve the tension between historical and literary knowledge; it enacts it, and asks the reader to hold both modes of knowing in suspension.

SUBALTERN STUDIES: VOICE, SILENCE, AND THE LIMITS OF RECOVERY

Subaltern Studies, which began in the late 1970s as a conversation among a small group of South Asian historians in England and grew into one of the most influential scholarly movements of the late twentieth century, confronts the question of voice and silence in its starkest form. The founding premise, articulated by Ranajit Guha in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* in 1982, was that the history of colonial and post-colonial South Asia had been written overwhelmingly from the perspective of ruling elites, and that the politics of subordinate groups—peasants, workers, tribal communities—constituted “an autonomous domain” that existing historiography had failed to address on its own terms (Guha, *Subaltern Studies I* 1–8). The project owed something to E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, which had demonstrated that the history of ordinary people could be recovered from below, but Guha's formulation went beyond Thompson's in insisting that subaltern politics was not merely a precursor to or a failed version of elite nationalism but a distinct form of political consciousness with its own logic, its own methods, and its own historical significance.

The relationship between Subaltern Studies and literary scholarship deepened considerably after 1988, when Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak contributed her celebrated essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and co-edited *Selected Subaltern Studies* with Guha, introducing the project to a wider Anglophone readership with a foreword by Edward Said (Guha and Spivak vii–xiv). Spivak's intervention complicated the project's founding assumptions in ways that remain, I think, insufficiently appreciated by literary scholars who invoke her name. Her argument was not that the subaltern had interesting things to say if only historians would listen. It was that the very structures of colonial knowledge—the archives, the legal records, the administrative documents

on which historians depended—were produced by the colonial state and therefore could not be read as transparent records of subaltern experience. The subaltern's voice, in Spivak's account, was not lost or buried or waiting to be recovered; it was structurally unavailable within the terms of colonial discourse. To claim otherwise was to mistake the historian's own construction for the voice of the silenced (Spivak 271–313). This is a genuinely unsettling position, and its implications extend well beyond South Asian historiography. If the subaltern cannot speak within the discursive frameworks available to the historian, then can she speak within the frameworks available to the literary scholar? If a novel gives voice to a peasant woman or a colonial subject, is that voice an act of recovery or an act of appropriation? The question is not rhetorical. It has consequences for how we read postcolonial fiction, how we teach it, and how we evaluate its claims to represent experiences that the dominant archive has suppressed.

Antonio Gramsci, whose Prison Notebooks supplied the term “subaltern” in its modern theoretical sense, had used it to describe groups excluded from the hegemonic structures of civil society, and his thinking circulated widely in the English-speaking world only after Raymond Williams gave it prominence in 1977 (Williams 108; Gramsci 52–60). But Gramsci's concept, rooted in Italian Marxism and the analysis of class struggle, underwent a significant transformation in its passage through South Asian historiography and into literary theory. For Guha, the subaltern was defined primarily by political subordination within a colonial and postcolonial order, not by class position alone. For Spivak, the subaltern became a figure for the limits of representation itself, a theoretical category as much as a historical one. The literary scholar who borrows from Subaltern Studies must decide, often without acknowledging it, which version of the subaltern she is working with—Gramsci's, Guha's, or Spivak's—and the choice carries substantial interpretive consequences. A reading that claims to recover subaltern voices from a novel operates within Guha's framework, which assumes those voices exist and can be heard if the right methods are applied. A reading that attends to the structural silences of a text, to what it cannot say, operates within Spivak's more sceptical framework. The two are not easily reconciled, and to pretend that “Subaltern Studies” names a single coherent method available for literary-critical borrowing is to flatten a debate that the movement's own participants have refused to settle.

The trajectory of Subaltern Studies itself—from empirical social history in the early volumes to increasingly theoretical and literary-critical concerns in the later ones—maps the difficulty precisely. By the mid-1990s, several founding members had expressed discomfort with the project's direction. Sumit Sarkar, one of the original contributors, argued that the turn toward discourse theory and the influence of post-structuralism had weakened the movement's connection to the material conditions of subaltern life, replacing concrete historical analysis with theoretical abstraction (Guha and Spivak vii–xiv). The critique was sharp and came from within. It suggested that the very interdisciplinarity that had made Subaltern Studies attractive to literary scholars—the willingness to read historical documents as texts, to attend to rhetoric and representation, to question the transparency of the archive—had also attenuated its purchase on the historical realities

it claimed to address. For the literary scholar, this internal debate is not merely interesting gossip about a famous academic project. It is a warning: borrowing from another discipline's methods means inheriting that discipline's internal contradictions, and pretending those contradictions do not exist does not make them disappear.

CONCLUSION

What connects these four frameworks, beyond the obvious fact that all of them bring historical thinking to bear on literary texts, is a shared conviction that history is not a neutral backdrop but a contested field of knowledge production.

New Historicism insists that literary texts are enmeshed in the same circulations of power as the non-literary documents of their period; Cultural Materialism adds that the analysis of those circulations must serve a present-day political purpose; microhistory demonstrates that the reconstruction of the past is an act of narrative art as much as an act of empirical scholarship; and Subaltern Studies warns that the voices we claim to recover from the archive may be constructions of our own interpretive desire. Taken together, these theories do not offer the literary scholar a stable methodology. They offer something more difficult and more valuable: a set of questions about the relationship between text and context, between narrative and evidence, between voice and silence, that cannot be answered once and then set aside.

The temptation, particularly in literary departments where these theories are taught as chapters in a textbook survey, is to treat them as tools—as devices to be applied to a text in order to produce a reading. But tools are inert; they do not talk back. What distinguishes these frameworks from simple reading strategies is that each of them carries within it a critique of the very activity it enables. New Historicism questions whether any reading can escape the circulations of power it analyses. Cultural Materialism questions whether textual analysis can ever be politically effective on its own terms. Microhistory questions whether the stories it tells are history or fiction. Subaltern Studies questions whether the voices it recovers are the voices of the silenced or the projections of the scholar. A literary criticism that takes these frameworks seriously must take their self-doubt seriously too, and that means accepting that the relationship between literature and history is not a problem that has been solved but an ongoing negotiation—productive, necessary, and genuinely uncomfortable—between two ways of knowing that need each other and do not quite trust each other.

WORKS CITED

- Davis, Natalie Zemon. *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Harvard UP, 1983.
- Dollimore, Jonathan, and Alan Sinfield, editors. *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*. Manchester UP, 1985.

- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage, 1977.
- Gallagher, Catherine, and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. U of Chicago P, 2000.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Translated by John and Anne Tedeschi, Johns Hopkins UP, 1980.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Introduction." *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, special issue of *Genre*, vol. 15, no. 1–2, 1982, pp. 3–6.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. U of Chicago P, 1980.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. U of California P, 1988.
- Guha, Ranajit, editor. *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Oxford UP, 1982.
- Guha, Ranajit, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, editors. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Oxford UP, 1988.
- Levinson, Marjorie. "The New Historicism: Back to the Future." *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History*, edited by Marjorie Levinson, Blackwell, 1989, pp. 18–63.
- Sinfield, Alan. *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*. U of California P, 1992.
- Spence, Jonathan D. *The Death of Woman Wang*. Viking, 1978.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- Thompson, E. P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Victor Gollancz, 1963.
- Veenser, H. Aram, editor. *The New Historicism*. Routledge, 1989.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford UP, 1977.
- Wrightson, Keith. *Ralph Taylor's Summer: A Scrivener, His City, and the Plague*. Yale UP, 2011.