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Munshi's *Jaya Somnath*: The "New Historicism" Approach

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Abstract:

The "New Historicism" is the concept of 20th century that not only acknowledged, like the Formalists, the importance of literary text, but also stressed on viewing the literary text with an eye to history. The new historicists focussed chiefly on a work's historical content and evaluated it by analyzing the interplay between the text and historical contexts that included the influence of author's life and his intentions in writing a particular piece of work. The work therefore is the "cultural construct" and is influenced by the prevailing ideas and assumptions of the historical era.

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Jaya Somnath (1940), the most mature novel written by Kanaiyalal Munshi (1887-1971), an eminent Gujarati litterateur and Father of Historical Novel witnesses an abiding influence of cultural atmosphere including prejudices and taboos existing during the historical time of the novel (11th century) and the period during which the novel was written (20th century). The aim of the paper is to analyze the historicity of a text by relating it to the configurations of power, society and ideology in a given time. The chief motto is to evaluate the novel through new historicism approach and identify it as a “cultural construct” of the era.

KEYWORDS: *New historicism, cultural construct, monological, lingam, Gujarat-ni-asmita, acharya, pashupat cult, darshan, bhakti, Padamdi, mlechha and sabhamandap.*

Concept of “New Historicism”

The founder of “New Historicism” approach is largely considered to be Stephen Greenblatt, an American literary critic, theorist and scholar who explained in detail the concept of *cultural poetics* in his introduction to *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (1982). He explains that prior historicism was monological; its goal was to detect a singular political vision held by the literate population. New Historicism is a break from this method of historical interpretation as well as from earlier formalist criticism. Literature, Greenblatt claims, *mirrors* the era's beliefs, but from a *safe distance*. He also opines that although the distinction between artistic production and the politics of the time exists, it is no longer intrinsic to the texts because it *is constantly redrawn by artists, audiences, and readers*. According to New Historicism, while

Munshi's *Jaya Somnath*: The "New Historicism" Approach

assessing past, the attempt of the reader to gain the historical knowledge is not objective but subjective i.e. it depends upon perceiver or historian's role, state of mind etc. Moreover, one can't recover the knowledge of past without self-modifying what used to be thought as *stable* and *objective* (Greenblatt 1980).

New Historicism is a theory of literary criticism that suggests literature must be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. Unlike previous historical criticism, which limited itself to simply demonstrating how a work reflected its time, New Historicism evaluates how the work is influenced by the time in which the author wrote it. It also examines the social sphere in which the author moved in the past, the psychological background of the writer, and the books and theories that may have influenced him or her. Beyond that, many critics also look at the impact the piece of work had on others and consider how it influenced others. New Historicism acknowledges that any criticism of a work is colored by the critic's beliefs, social status, and other factors. Both the work and the reader are affected by everything that has influenced the new historicists. New Historicists aim simultaneously to understand the work through its historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature, which documents the new discipline of the history of ideas. New Historicism thus represents a significant change from previous critical theories like New Criticism, because its main focus is to look at many elements outside the work, instead of reading the text in isolation.

Kanaiyalal Munshi, a connoisseur of historical novels in Gujarati and advocator of *Gujarat niasmita* (Gujarat consciousness), authored *Jaya Somnath* (1940) in which he focused on the struggle of Rajput princes of Gujarat to shield the holy temple of Somnath from the pillaging throng of Mahmud of Gazni. Munshi himself confessed in the preface of the novel that

his purpose in writing the novel is not to highlight the attack of Sultan Mohammed on Patan, but to depict the heroism and fortitude of the soldiers of Gujarat. It is significant that though Munshi presents the Rajput princes as men of valour yet he also depicts them as lacking in farsightedness and astuteness. Their pride of race and naïve arrogance makes them boast about the military power of the Rajputs and take the massive, organized and disciplined army of Mahmud irresponsibly. On the other hand, Mahmud of Gazni has been depicted by Munshi as a powerful leader who inculcates courage in the destabilized minds and hearts of his brave soldiers in the testing situations. The novel is based on an actual incident of 1024 A.D. when Mahmud of Gazni sacked the city of Somnath and its renowned Somnath temple, killing more than 50,000 people who strove to protect it. Mahmud personally shattered the gilded *lingam* to pieces and then took them back to his homeland and put them in the steps leading to the newly constructed Jamiah Masjid so that they would be stepped upon by all those going to the mosque to pray. As against the facts of invasion of Mohammed Gazni and demolition of Somnath Temple, Munshi has emphasized the Kshatriya temper of the Rajputs who strove very hard to save the temple of Somnath, for Munshi's intention was to exhibit *Gujarat-ni-asmita* (glory of Gujarat) through his novel.

Plot Structure of *Jaya Somnath* (1940)

Jaya Somnath is a poignant account of the crusade that Gujarat fought to defend its honour when Mahmud of Gazni attacked and destroyed thrice the holy temple of Somnath. The story dates back 1082 of Vikram Era (1024 A.D.). The pilgrims are going to Prabhas Patan to attend the festival of the full moon at Somnath. The gilded domes of the temple look gorgeous and the sacred hymns are being chanted by a multitude of Brahmins. The temple dancers are dancing in

Munshi's *Jaya Somnath*: The "New Historicism" Approach

front of the God to pay their reverence to Lord Shiva. The shrine of Somnath is presided over by Gangsarvagna, the greatest Acharya of the Pashupat cult who had won profound admiration from all the people. More than four hundred dancers dedicated to Lord Somnath live near the shrine of Somnath. Ganga, the head and guardian of all the dancers prepares her eighteen year old daughter Chaula for her maiden dance before Lord Somnath. Bhimdeva, the young Chaulakyan king of Gujarat, with his retinue is also present there who is on his annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Somnath. When Chaula begins her dance, she appears extremely beautiful and graceful and in her ecstatic mood, she surrenders herself completely to Lord Somnath. In the rapturous climax, she collapses and becomes unconscious. Gangsarvagna takes the unconscious Chaula in his arms and declares that she would dance before God on every Monday in the temple.

After a while, Damodar Mehta, the minister of Bhimdeva brings the news that the army of Mahmud of Gazni is marching towards the shrine of Somnath with the intention of destroying it. Bhimdeva takes an oath to protect the temple under all circumstances. As soon as the festivities are over, Bhimdeva goes for the final *darshan* of the Deity of Lord Somnath before leaving for his capital. At this time, he finds Chaula praying alone with her head rested on the ground. Bhimdev, enthralled with the beauty of Chaula follows her as she goes to have a dip in the sea in the shimmering moonlight. But when she emerges out of the water after taking bath, the Head of the terrible Kapali sect catches hold of her. As per the rituals of the Kapali sect, a human being is required to be offered as a sacrifice to Bhairava, the frightful form of the Lord Shankar at midnight of the festivities. Bhimdeva kills the kapali and saves Chaula, who had fallen unconscious. When she regains consciousness, he discloses his identity to her as King Bhimdev.

Others such as GhoghaRana, the ruler of GhoghaGadh, his son Sajjansinh and grandson Samantare also on the annual pilgrimage at Prabhas to have *darshan* of Lord Somnath. After

Bhimadeva leaves, Gangasarvagna instructs Sajjansinh and his son Samant to return to Ghogha Ranaand intercept Mahmud's passage through the desert. On leaving Prabhas, Sajjan sends his son Samant to Jhalor to warn its ruler to get ready to face the invader. In order to save time, he goes across the desert by unfamiliar route on his beloved camel *Padamdi*. For four days, Sajjan bravely rides through the desert heading towards North. On the fifth day, he is caught in a sandstorm and is almost suffocated by the blinding, arresting clouds of sands. But with the name of Somnath on his lips, he is able to ride through the storm unharmed.

As he was heading towards his ancestral fort, he is encountered by a search party of Mahmud. He is captured and taken to him. Sajjan feels that Lord Somnath has made him the instrument of destroying Mahmud. Accordingly he advises the Sultan not to take the beaten path since a vast army of Hindu kings is ready to oppose him on the way but to take a shorter route over which he (Sajjan) would guide the invading army. Mahmud accepts the advice, and with Sajjan as the guide, the army advances through the expanse of trackless sands. Sajjan prays to God for the sandstorms. On the fourth day, his prayer is answered. Sandstorms rise in blinding fury. One-third of Mahmud's forces meet a bad fate. Sajjan, happy at the thought that he has done his duty, clings to his beloved camel *Padamdi* with "Jaya Somnath" on his lips as the sands engulf him. The clever Mahmud however reorganizes his forces and retreats from the danger zone and lead his army to the beaten path which he had left a few days before.

Samant, in compliance with his father Sajjansinh's wish, proceeds towards Jhalor. When he reaches GhoghaGadh, he meets crowds of refugees running for their lives who tell him the heartrending stories of the mayhem wrought by the "*mlechha*" (Mahmud). When Samant reaches Bhammariya on the outskirts of GhoghaGadh, he breaks down to see a ghastly spectacle where not a single living soul is alive. The family shrine of the Chauhans is burnt down and all

Munshi's *Jaya Somnath*: The "New Historicism" Approach

the houses are demolished. On his way back, Samant is made captive by a search party of Mahmud. When he is taken to Mahmud, he tries to slay him but in vain. Yet the invader generously grants the brave Samant his life and lets him go free. Samant returns to Prabhas and informs Gangasarvagna of the fate that had overtaken Ghogha Bapa and his family. He also requests Gangasarvagna to evacuate the fort and take away the divine *lingam* from the temple.

On the other hand, Bhimdev makes all possible efforts to defend Prabhas Patan and save the temple from the invasion of Mahmud. As a safety measure, he sends old men, women and children to Khambhat through sea route. But Ganga and Chaula decide to stay behind to look after Gangasarvagna. Chaula comes in contact with king Bhimdev and gets impressed by his courage and stern resolve of saving the temple of Somnath. She starts considering Bhimdev as a Divine Lord in the shape of a human being.

To think of him, to serve him, to wait on him, this had become the very breath of her life. Lord Shankar was getting ready to fight the demon Tripura; and she, Uma, the Consort of Lord Shankar, was there to serve him, to look for his comforts (*Jaya Somnath* 206).

Bhimdeva too is inclined towards Chaula; he confesses his love for her and expresses his wish to marry her. He utters in a voice pulsating with emotions, "*whenever I see you, my fatigue disappears*" (208). Shivrashi, the principal disciple of the Gangasarvagna and follower of Tripurasundari cult also breeds a strong desire to win Chaula. He is shattered to hear of Chaula's marriage with King Bhimdev and decides to take revenge upon him. In a frenzy of disgust at his Guru Gangasarvagna who had given consent for the marriage, Shivrashi establishes contact with the invader Mahmud and shows him the passage through which the army could enter the fort. Bhimdev fights to the last and makes his final attempt to stem the tide of Mahmud's men, but

without success. He gets fatally wounded and becomes unconscious. Mahmud enters the temple with his brave warriors. He gets astounded by the dazzling grandeur of the temple. But the next moment, he severs the head of Gangasarvagna who was guarding the *lingam*. Mahmud takes the *lingam* in his hands and breaks it into three pieces. After establishing his victory over Somnath, Mahmud escapes through Kutch but he loses most of his men, horses and material on the way. Bhimdev reorganizes life in Gujarat once the invader leaves the land. He plans to construct a magnificent temple of Lord Somnath at the same place.

At this time, Chaula, Bhimdev's wife, residing at the royal palace of Khambhat delivers a son. Khambhat jubilantly celebrates the grand occasion of the birth of a prince. Chaula however, is heart-broken who feels that she has deceived the Lord by marrying Bhimdev. Chaula's heart is now drawn towards Lord Somnath. To Chaula, Bhimdev's face, the smell of his body, the soft touch of his scented beard, the passion in his eyes, seemed to belong to a stranger shockingly distasteful. With her eyes shut, shaking in every limb, she silently prays, "My Lord Somnath, why have You forsaken me? Why have You forgotten me?"(301)

She ardently wishes to die but survives with only hope in her heart that once the temple is rebuilt, she will perform her last dance before her Lord and seek apology from Him. She is so much in love with her Lord that she considers her own son "*a living reminder of her fatal lapse*". (305)

When the new temple of Somnath is built, the confederate kings would assemble to install the new *lingam*. Chaula immediately leaves for Prabhas, caring neither for herself nor her child. She arranges for a festive dress to dance on the occasion of reinstallation of the *lingam* of Lord Somnath. Chaula requests Bhimdeva to give her permission to dance before the Lord but

Munshi's *Jaya Somnath*: The "New Historicism" Approach

hesternly turns down her request, for Chaula is now the queen of Gujarat! She is no longer a temple dancer and therefore cannot dance before a public assembly. Chaula feels defeated for a moment. But she fosters a different idea in her mind.

On a specific day, in the new *sabhamandap*, the ceremony of installation of *lingam* takes place by a new Sarvagna Gaganrashi in the presence of a big crowd that includes kings and princes of various states. After the installation ceremony, the new Sarvagna calls for a dance. Out of a group of dancers, a dancer with veiled face, comes forward and begins her dance in a spirit of ecstasy that holds the assembly in breathless attention. The audience is moved as they observe the dance developing into a heartrending expression of desolation, gloominess and repentance as the dancer pours out the torment of her soul in sobbing rhythms. Her movements indicate that she is offering herself to Lord Shankar. Suddenly the movement of her dance slows down. The music also comes to a halt. The dancer bends low and suddenly gets up. It seems from her joyous movements that she has been able to appease Lord Shiva.

"She jumped in ecstasy; the way she gesticulated, combined with the rapid beat of her ankleted feet expressed her triumph". (320)

The music is resumed. The crowd now watches every movement in dead silence. She jumps towards the sanctum and places her head on its threshold. The drums stop. Her head slides lifelessly from the threshold and she dies at the feet of Lord Somnath. As her veil drops down, Bhimdev recognizes that the dancer is none other but his wife Chaula. He gets furious and draws his sword to kill her. The truth is that Chaula always lived for the Lord and wanted to be one with Him. Today she has accomplished her purpose. The assembly looks at Chaula in absolute silence. Bhimdev leaves the place in extreme distress and Samant also disappears in the darkness with a heavy heart.

Application of “New Historicism” to *Jaya Somnath*

Though *Jaya Somnath* is focused on an actual historical incident of invasion of Mahmud of Gazni on Gujarat, Munshi has tried to view the same incident in the light of affirming the zest of Rajputs of Gujarat in protecting the glory of Gujarat. The Indian writers such as Dayanand Saraswati, Shri Aurobindo Ghosh, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya and Mahatma Gandhi along with Western writers such as Alexandre Dumas, the French novelist, and Walter Scott, the English novelist, deeply influenced him and helped him add the flavor of imagination in the historical novel and elevate it to new heights of success. There was also a great influence of Vedic and Classical Sanskrit literature on Munshi that made his novels an awesome combination of English, French, German and Indian literature. Moreover the religious training of offering worship to the deity Lord Shiva imparted by mother Tapiben led Munshi to incorporate religious bent to his novels.

Munshi's contribution as a historical writer is greatly indebted to Sir Walter Scott, the Father of Historical novels in English who inculcated in him a strong desire to become a romantic historian and fictionalize history. Munshi was often criticized for taking liberties with history, but he was only using the writer's privilege, as did Shakespeare and Scott. Of Munshi's incredible contribution, Shridharani says, “*Mahatma Gandhi made Gujarat proud in its present tense by creating heroes out of clay. Munshi made Gujarat proud in its past tense by revealing heroes from under the archaeological dust*”. (Sheth: 35). It is also said of Munshi that “*The catalyst of Munshi's vision was his historic passion that persisted till the end of his life*” (Sheth: 44) Munshi chiefly focused on narrating the past events, blending facts with fiction, history with

Munshi's *Jaya Somnath*: The “New Historicism” Approach

romance in his novels. He conceived of a novel in which history is allied to romance so that the past is recreated with all its vigour and liveliness with the semblance of reality.

In the novel *Jaya Somnath*, Munshi has depicted the heroic efforts of the soldiers of Gujarat in fighting a battle with Mahmud of Gazni when he attacks the shrine of Somnath. History is a witness to the fact that Mahmud turned the temple into ashes and looted everything leaving people in extreme agony and trepidation. It is interesting that along with this harrowing incident, Munshi has depicted the episode of Chaula's love with the purpose of effacing the defeat and pain of the victory of Mahmud of Gazni over Gujarat. Munshi has tried to glorify the valiant soldiers who sacrificed their lives to protect the Somnath temple. He has also endeavoured to lessen the agony of the defeat through love episode of Chaula in the novel.

A minor character of Chaula has been elevated and transformed into a romantic heroine in the novel. It is an indication of spiritual and intellectual maturity of Munshi that he is able to present a charming and sympathetic portrait of a girl lost in mystic devotion. Munshi believed that the glories of *Bhakti* are nurtured on the basis of thwarted love. To Munshi, the sect of *Bhakti* is an emblem of social malady. The illuminating visions of *Bhakti* were regarded by Munshi as a retreat from the gloominess of the world that denied to mankind the joy of living. As against the orthodox tradition, he practiced his own cult of love which has a discipline of its own. He glorified physical love wherever there is union of hearts. It is apparent in various instances narrated by Munshi in which Chaula surrenders herself completely to Bhimdev even before getting married to him. Chaula is unique in being the only heroine of Munshi who turns from the

love of man - Bhimdev to the love of God - Lord Somnath without earning even the slightest condemnation of the readers which is indeed a sign of maturity in the writing of Munshi.

History affirms that Bhimdev was a valiant man and his strategy in defending Patan is commendable. It is also true that in spite of all possible attempts, he could not save Somnath Temple, yet it is certain that his efforts expedited Mahmud's fleeing away from Somnath. Munshi has glorified the character of Bhimdev with the sole intention of turning a traumatic incident of Mahmud Gazni's invasion less agonizing. In the novel, there are several other men of heroic stature who rise in the defence of Somnath and prove their commitment for motherland. It is the spirit of national resistance of the heroes of Gujarat against the villainous forces that Munshi has accentuated in the novel *Jaya Somnath*.

Conclusion

It is quite evident that Munshi has defined the discipline of history more broadly than his predecessors. Munshi's own views regarding cultural ethics, morality and religious flair are noticeably observed in the midst of his narrating of historical event of invasion of Mahmud of Gazni on Gujarat in the eleventh century. Moreover Munshi's portrayal of somatic beauty of Chaula in dazzling colours; her surrender to Lord Bhimdev and her final submission to Lord Somnath are the outcome of Munshi's belief in the strength of dynamic individual personality which is much needed in the affairs of life. The dominating attitude of male folk in the society is also a chief trait that is observed in almost all the novels of Munshi. Munshi believed that man incessantly strives for purity; integrity, nobility and heroism in his life, but at the same time, weakness, sin and evil in life are also its inseparable elements. Munshi as narrated the events in

Munshi's *Jaya Somnath*: The "New Historicism" Approach

such a sequence that the novel ends at a triumphant note. The demonstration of the victory of virtue over vice; of good over evil and of humanitarianism over fanaticism are the key features that governs the novel.

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