Chapter I

Introduction:

Historicizing the Postmodern

Postmodernism has radically transformed the composition of academies with its interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach and orientation towards knowledge and disciplines. The emergence of the cultural literary theory, New Historicism, in this context has copiously contributed to the development of interdisciplinary studies. History, like Linguistics, is related to almost all disciplines. The nature of History itself is subjected to subtle and meticulous interrogation to unravel the relation between History and histories. This is necessary to account for the conspicuous absence of the representation of the marginalized and the devoiced communities in historical narratives. This also explains the relation between the narration of empirical histories and the prevalent power hierarchies in the society: the dominant power structures of the society influence the constitution of empirical histories. This tendency compels the subalterns to review the nature and scope of History and to assert the significance of histories. The revision of empirical history and the origin of genealogies are the immediate consequences of the review of History as a knowledge discipline. Similarly, the literary history of the empire, which erases the cultural differences between the colonizer and the colonized, is also being seriously interrogated. This cultural and historical revision is required to maintain the cultural identity of the colonized as different from that of the
colonizer. In this context, the effort to historicize the postmodern self is significant. This is because postmodern historiography brings about fresh and significant insights into the nature of both historical and literary narratives.

Postmodern theories raise many questions about the relationship between history and literature. Though they constitute different disciplines, they are primarily narratives which represent reality indirectly. The analysis of narrative attempts to locate the Postmodern self, though not precisely, within the spatio-temporal limitations of the text. The narrative aspect in both history and literature erases the distinctions between them. They merge into a single narrative space when the postmodern self is historicized in the text. But the postmodern self eludes definition and appears too enigmatic for representation: it can only be approximated as a field of possibilities. The self is in a perpetual state of flux; it refuses to manifest itself in the elasticity of the text. In spite of the limitations of representations, the self can and need to be historicized to probe the relation between narrative and reality. Subjectivity in narration questions the role of imagination in the construction of reality.

Postmodernism encourages the intertextuality of narratives. Discourses of widely different nature are often integrated into the framework of a postmodern text. In texts treating the relation between history and literature, the characteristics of major discourses like history, literature and language are discussed; such texts provide critical insights into the integration and coherence of multiple discourses within the textual framework. These discourses mutually complement and illuminate one another. Though they synthesize into a single
textual site, each discourse maintains its difference from others. History and literature are basically narratives in the medium of language; so there is hardly any distinction between them as narratives. But the writer’s subjectivity as well as his politics interferes in the selection and the sequencing of the events narrated. So the discourses integrated into the text are coloured by the politics of the writer, wherein the politics comprises the personal as well.

Postmodernism deconstructs the traditional notions of language, identity and the process of writing itself. As a cultural construct is related to language, the construction of identity is problematic in postmodern representation. Language or metalanguage is the medium through which identity is represented. Narratives function with the help of linguistic signs and reflect on their own identity. So language is self-reflexive in nature. Identity is a process of becoming; constructed from the matrix of similarity and difference. Identity is continually renewed, redefined and rediscovered through the linguistic process of writing.

Writing is a process of constructing identity through language. Linguistic construction of identity is related to the construction of meaning within the textual space. Postmodernism rules out the possibility of any monolithic or fixed meaning. Meaning is derived through an unending process of signification in which the meaning(s) of a sign are continually deferred. The meanings of a sign are derived in relation to the vectors of similarity and difference. This leads to the possibility of open-ended texts with multiple meanings. The text is in a flux of evolution; identity shifts, changes and
evolves. Identity depends on the way in which it is articulated. So in Postmodernism, there is always an uncertainty about the nature and constitution of identity. The construction of identity becomes an ever-changing, continuous process. Identity is a cultural construct because the discursive resources that form the material for identity formation are cultural in character. But without language, the very concept of identity is unintelligible. Thus comprehension of identity is a linguistic process. A writer constructs identity through his/her writing. A reader (re)discovers his/her identity in the writing.

In the textual construction of national identity, tradition/past is historicized in narratives. A society can acquire a unique identity through historicizing its past. In this context, loss of identity or crisis of identity is vicariously related to the society’s treatment of its past. This is because past is not history. History is well organized, well-structured and well substantiated arguments about the past. Historicization of the past is essential for a social/political identity. James Mill’s The History of British India helps to identify an Indian society emerging under the political structures of British administration. The type of social formation in any nation is closely related to the cultural identity of its people. The emergence of a postwar British society, for instance, is the outcome of the process of historicization.

A narrative, in its movement or course, engages itself with space and time. Narrative space enacts its role in relation to time. Paul Ricoeur, who makes one of the most influential discussions about the nature of time, broadly outlines the relation between time and narrative in his three-volume work
Time and Narrative. He understands time and narrative on intimate terms, precisely because narrative is the human relation to time. Ricoeur’s perspective on time and narrative is a hermeneutic one. It is based on an understanding of the imperatives involved in the interpretation of phenomena.

The affinity of postmodern literary theories to science, especially to Einstein’s theory of relativity and to Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, is remarkable. They redefine the nature of the self within the new parameters: the self of the artist is reaffirmed in an imaginative space-time dimension. The combined entities of space and time are never separate in contemporary philosophy as in earlier versions where time is understood as fixed and immobile, linear and chronological and is traversed by the movement of history. But, today they are inextricably interrelated and interwoven. Space is not an absolute entity, but is relatively defined with time, and vice versa. In postmodern discussions, space and time reconstitute each other to conform to the concept of space-time. It is necessary to understand human activity as redistributed in space-time, though human interaction is situated in a particular space at a particular time. This has changed the construction of meanings within the text, since the spatial and temporal elements constitute one of the intratextual conflicts in the texts.

Michel Foucault illustrates the idea of a spatialized history in his prominent works. He postulates a history of discourses and power in their spatial relations. He argues that a whole history of spaces remains to be written and his particular method of epistemological analysis emphasizes the
connection between space and power/knowledge. The functions of power/knowledge are spatialized in all societies. Foucault’s attempt is to synchronize the power structures with epistemological structures in society.

Frederic Jameson, however, argues that the transition from modernism to postmodernism should be located as a shift from the concerns of time and temporality to a dimension of the categories of space and time. He argues that human beings exist in a decentred postmodern hyper space which has no effective bearing on the subject. So the subject feels adrift, itself becoming an image of the self in a global world of flow and monstrous multinational information systems. He connects the concept of space and time to the question of subject position which, he thinks, can be defined only in relation to space and time.

In modernism, the fragmentation of the society is transmuted into art and literature. The writers attempted to create an integrated whole from the fragmented self. The fragmentation of the society or the artist is transmuted into literary/artistic works and the artist overcame fragmentation by exploring techniques that constructed an integrated self in a coherent text. But postmodernism creates a new sensibility by celebrating a decentred subjectivity. In postmodernist analysis, the centre of reference for the text is abdicated; the centre is not fixed entity. In postmodernism, the chaos of the external world is transmuted into the text; the chaotic structure of the world is manifested in the chaotic structure of the text without a centre. The postmodern writers never try to create order in the text through their narrative techniques.
Instead, they highlight the chaos, fragmentation and randomness of the world through their texts.

The perspective of postmodern criticism on language, identity and truth is strongly influenced by Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy. His concepts like the open-ended text, multiple perspective of narration, the questions of truth and identity, parallels, absences, silences and voids in narratives, the problematic nature of language, the artificiality of representation, the deconstruction of binary opposites and the intertextual nature of texts form some of the prominent discussions in postmodern criticism. The fallacy of the fixity of meaning and the illusion of reality are two dominant characteristics of postmodern analysis.

The postmodern notion of history as a subjective narrative of elusive truth has questioned the truth-validity of many of recent theories. The process of getting to the truth of what really happened in the past by means of narratives has become problematic. This is due to the subjective factors like selection, ordering and sequencing of events involved in historical narratives. In this respect, discourses like history, literature and philosophy are found to be closely related in their attempt to find the truth. In these discourses, narration is a way to find and approximate the truth. Literary writings contribute to historical writings as model narratives; but how far such writings are truthful is subject to relative factors. Postmodernists think that history must abandon the search for objective truth; they think that there is nothing called absolute truth. Postmodern theories themselves have altered significantly the way history has
been told, read, and altered. These alterations have not changed the known truths of history. They have changed the way these truths have been selected, ordered and interpreted along with the reasoning behind them. In this respect, postmodern critics see history as a linguistic construction. So the truth of history is a language specific reality which is not politically neutral.

The foundations of literary history entail an analysis of the characteristics of literary historiography. Postmodern historians claim that the notion of writing history is a narrative enterprise in itself. The historians who undertake this enterprise assume their position as decentred subjects and reveal their own identity. Thus narration is related to the subject position of the narrator. Subjectivity is a factor which no writer can evade, especially in his attempt at writing, including objective writing. An exposition of the self of the narrator reveals the identity crises of the writer in the process of writing. Thus, narrating the self is punctuated with identity crises.

Literature contributes to the ways in which our view of history is shaped and determined. In this context, writings on history become both a narrative and a product of particular social and political contexts. The postmodern notion of history is complex and problematic. Each historian engages in writing history representing the past at particular moments of the present as conveniently as possible with several personal intentions. Historical narratives or histories are written in the interest of the dominant groups in any society. The way in which some histories are privileged over others has a direct bearing on the power structure of the society.
Historical narratives can never find out any objective truth. They can only search for relative and subjective truth which is different from the idealized absolute truth. The possibility of an essentially and absolutely objective history has been challenged by postmodern critics. Historical narratives are only quixotic races to reach the objective truth. The limitations of language to describe reality are emphasized by postmodern thinkers. They challenge the possibility of a purely objective history. In this respect, every historical writing is a distortion of reality away from historical facts. The significance of the representation of reality can only be fictional in its function. So narratives, literary or historical, are fictional in representing objective reality.

Historians claim that writing history is always a linguistic enterprise. The discipline of History demands historical accuracy for its narratives. This means that historians must be objective in their narration. But, as history progresses towards more self-consciousness, it becomes less objective in character. It points to the possibility of certain degree of subjectivity in historical narratives. As history is accessible only through textual forms, the extent of subjectivity cannot be determined. So, the reliability on such documents for objective truth is not advisable. Here, history becomes a text for the reader to construct the meanings of events. The meanings depend on the reader’s choice of events and their prominence in the narrative. The truth of such narrative history demands factual evidences for its accuracy.
But historical truth depends not only on the accuracy of the events but also on the prominence.

Writing history involves the representation of the past. The past is (re)constructively represented based on the evidences available to a historian. History is, therefore, always renewed and rewritten, when the old facts get transformed through new knowledge systems. In this process, the writing of history always falsifies its claim to truthful statements. In this sense, writing history partially becomes writing lies on the nature of historical facts and evidences. The etymological derivation of history involves a process of storytelling, where the historian emplots various historical events into comprehensible narrative facts. By employing various tropes in the process of emplotment, the historian tries to impart a sense of history to the readers of histories. The subjective element of historical narration depends on the nature of emplotment or rather on the types of tropes used in the emplotment.

Postmodern theatre incorporates various strategies, devices and techniques in staging historical events. Narrative is one of the strategies that fulfils the tasks involved in the communication of ideas. A dramatist’s attempt to narrate a story often finds resistance from many intertextual allusions to both history and art. Narrative strategies help to problematize and to highlight the artistic and historical issues. While staging the history of an event, language and textuality become the only accessible forms of reality. In this context, the characters in a drama try to narrate a story based on history, peripherally referring to historical events, personages and monuments. The audience finds it
very difficult to make a distinction between fact and fiction in such an enactment. The historical narrative, which is a blending of fact and fiction, engages itself with a fictionalized form of history. It encompasses how a history is evolved on the basis of its exploration of language and textuality. In this process, there is no possibility of an objective truth verifiable outside linguistic construction of narrative. It is here that the postmodern literature becomes significant. Postmodern theatre blurs and problematizes the verification of fact and fiction which are incessantly and intricately blended together. Edward Bond is a postmodern dramatist who skillfully blends fact and fiction in his attempt to reconstruct the past/history in the visual (re)presentation of his plays.

Theoreticians like Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Keith Jenkins and Linda Hutcheon present the problems of representing the past through narrative artifacts. Concepts central to writing history, such as the process of emplotment, reconstruction of events and employment of myths get their prominence in the context of postmodern narratives. All the theoreticians unequivocally underline the need to explore the literary artifacts in writing history.

The plays of Edward Bond can be analyzed in the light of postmodern historiography. Exploring the postmodern techniques and devices, Bond invents a dramaturgy that highlights the metatheatricality of his plays. In this process, Bond’s narrative anchors on chorus, theatre-song, music and play-within-the-play. Bond, in his grand theatre, moves in with reconstructed and
fragmented narratives of past events, which are often objectively rendered as myths in the minds of theatre-goers. Bond’s theatre employs historical personages, events and monuments along with fictional representation. In the portrayal of historical events, the dramatist does not differ significantly from a historian in emplotting linguistic constructions. The visual narrative or staging of history/past is identical to the verbal narrative. A play for Bond is rather a visual paradigm of a reconstructed past.

In the postmodernist view, a literary text is a cultural construct. The construction of a text is possible only through narrative. Narrative is related to representation. Narrative is an indirect representation of reality. History is a grand narrative, with a grand origin and grand teleology. The generally accepted history written from the perspective of the dominant group occupying the metropolitan centre is the empirical history. Histories written from the perspectives of the marginalized groups, remaining at the periphery, are the genealogical histories. The former is called history, whereas the latter is called histories, which promote multi-perspective debate on any historical event.

Hayden White observes, in his *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, that narrative history serves to test our culture’s “systems of meaning production” (1987: 45). He claims that historical narratives provide new realms of meaning to human existence. This point has been emphasized by Dominick LaCapra in his *History and Criticism*. He claims that “the history of discourse. . . will give content and meaning to
what must be for us a blankly utopian future” (1985: 104). Even though narrated histories remain as constructed myths, they have their relevance today in shaping our perspective of life.

In his plays, Bond employs many narrative strategies for the reconstructions of the past as a medium of radical politics. The fabricated narratives of his plays are based on the reminiscences of traditional myths/histories. They are given additional metatheatrical commentary by means of prefaces, theatre songs and notes to their dramatic methods. The plays move as a kind of postmodern documentary, alluding to the contemporary issues of society. They construct meanings of the past in connection with contemporary issues. They also help to review the concerns of the present in the perspective of the past events (re)presented on the stage. His representations of historical myths on the stage are intended for social change. They are endowed with effective political implications and are expected to civilize people. For Bond, the ability to (re)construct past/history is a cultural/political device in which fact and fiction find a close relation to reality.

Bond’s orientation is to dramatize the injustices of the present society and to show to the society an alternative way of living through deliberate political changes in the society. He draws his illustrations of the present from the past. Such appropriated, adapted and fictionalized history functions as the subtexts of humanness in his plays. The sense of a historical period is created in his plays by means of references to historical figures, places, costumes,
settings and dialogues peculiar to the period on the stage. Bond employs anachronism as a means to link the events depicted on the stage with the present concerns of the age. Bond’s use of sociolects, music and flashback technique help to historicize the past in his dramas. Dialectical differences in the language used create the impression of characters’ locality and the community.

Literary historiography is challenged for various reasons in the postmodern era. Issues of reality and representation, identity and subjectivity, and intersexuality and politics of history presented in literary works, are problems for postmodern critics. According to them, narratives / discourses have a good role in establishing the exposition of a fragmented self and a decentred subjectivity. In this respect, narrative history is personal, racial, ethnic and communal. Each conventional narrative history is constituted of events imaginatively represented in an apparently objective manner. Postmodern subject positionings have helped to challenge this objectivity in representation. This has paved the way for an ongoing reconstruction of conventional myths/history for contemporary relevance and re-interpretation. As literature is an integral part of the cultural terrain, the contemporary relevance of revisiting historical events brings forward new layers of meaning in our culture. Edward Bond’s plays deliberately work in this direction.

The study applies the theoretical developments of postmodern historiography as a tool for the analysis of the select plays of Edward Bond. It also evaluates the complexities of his stagecraft in the visualization of history and myths in the plays with respect to their performance. The plays selected for
the study are the visualization of the reconstructed past in the form of events or characters. Bond’s plays illustrate how the meanings of the text as well as the messages of the performances alter with reconstructed alterity of the historical narratives. The study explores how Bond creates a visual world of alternative reality by the reconstruction of the past through verbal and visual narratives of genealogical significance and their potential for mediation.

Literary works like dramas, with historical significance, reflect on the present and the future in terms of the past. Bond’s plays reveal the practice of reconstructing the past in new conceptual frameworks to criticize the present or contemporary events. Very often, his plays reveal the public disillusionment with a political establishment, its inherent hegemony and violence. By staging the problems of the contemporary society, Bond reminds the humanity the need to be human in our relationships with individuals. In an interview with Peter Billingham, he remarks: “The only way that you can create humanness is by dramatizing the self. We should be dramatizing the conflicts within the self and what art and drama should be doing is increasing human self-consciousness” (2007: 3). Bond is very conscious to develop a politics of humanness to fit to the contingencies of the present day world. He has creates a new aesthetic of humanism in his plays. Bond’s plays reveal the dangers of the hegemony and violence inherent in the contemporary political institutions and illustrate how they can be undermined by reconstructing a genealogical history as a revision of contemporary politics.
Postmodern literary historiography works as an axis to the interpretation of plays. A play is a text as well as a performance. Bond exploits the similarity between fiction and history to reconstruct the past. Different forms of history are synthesized in the text as an attempt to visualise the past: history as myth, history as memory, history as genealogy and history as fiction. His plays are an amalgam of histories.

In the postmodern era, the expansion of historical imagination has paved the way for innovative techniques and practices. The postmodern notion of history, especially from the points of view of historians like Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra and Arthur Marwick, has witnessed the progressive blurring of concrete facts. Very often, readers/writers experience a problematic of the marginalization of literary as well as historical facts in postmodern writings. The problematic of reconstructing history is subject to the postmodern issue of self-referentiality. It tries to make its stand apart from various theories, especially of representation and reality. It attempts to find a solution to the problem of concretizing what is factual. But reconstructing history always remains a means by which the devoiced can articulate their resentment and dissent. It also helps to analyze the voids and silences in the text.

The ways in which history and myths have been reconstructed on the stage provide a definite identity to Edward Bond. The class struggle and the cultural divide suffuse Bond’s work. He constructs his plays both politically and poetically around images. Bond stagescapes the resistance of the socially marginalized groups in the visual representation of his plays. The characters
previously devoiced by the oppressive power structures articulate their resentment through his plays. Bond develops a politics of humanness and its aesthetic to represent the relation between the self and the other in a problematized contemporary world.