Introduction: An Approach to New Historicism and Its Possibilities in Anne Tyler's Fiction

Chapter 1

Introduction: An Approach to New Historicism
and Its Possibilities in Anne Tyler’s Fiction

1.1 What is New Historicism?

New Historicism is a fascinating new critical practice which shows a resurgence of interest in history. It is a reconstruction of the past from a present perspective, and highlights the role of the present in remaking the past and making it more usable to the present. It “refers to a general reaction against unhistorical approaches, and a fresh interest in the specific social and political contexts of literary works” (Baldick 187). Louis A. Montrose in the essay, “Professing the Renaissance” calls it a return to history from the post-structuralist obsession with language and argues that New Historicism is concerned with “the historicity of texts and textuality of history” (Veeser, Historicism 20). The text has historicity as it is embedded in the social and cultural context, and history has a claim to textuality as we have no access to the full lived authentic past and only traces of it are preserved. It treats a work of literature not as a story worthy of analysis but as a representation of historical forces. This modern school of literary criticism considers the social, cultural, historical, economic and political implications of the text. Stephen Greenblatt defines New Historicism as “a shift away from a criticism centred
on 'verbal icons' toward a criticism centred on cultural artifacts" (Greenblatt, *Learning* 3), and comments on the mutually beneficial roles of the historical and the literary.

1.2 *Origin and Spread of New Historicism*

Carolyn Porter observes that New historicism springs forth from a diverse set of practices that are not in themselves new and attributes the origin of this practice to various figures as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, Raymond Williams, Mikhail Bakhtin, Terry Eagleton and Hayden White (Porter 743 – 49).

The emergence of New Historicism was predominant in the 1980s, and its origin can be traced back to Raymond Williams’s *Marxism and Literature* (1977) which inspired the rehistoricization of literary studies in England and America, and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) which gave a new impetus to the eurocentric cultural discourse and questioned the preeminence of Western culture. Though the term seems to have been coined by Michael McCanles, New Historicism rose to prominence with Stephen J. Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (1980). His other works which delved into power relations in Renaissance culture, and propelled the New Historicist movements include *The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance* (1982), *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*
(1988), Learning to Curse (1990) and Marvellous Possession: The Wonder of the New World (1991). In 1982, the founding of the journal Representations also gave further momentum to the New Historicism scholarship. Other frontline practitioners of this theory include Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson and Marilyn Butler.

1.3 Paradigms of New Historicism

1.3.1 Historical Co-texting

New Historicism involves a parallel reading or juxtaposition of the literary and the non-literary texts of the same historical period. Both are given equal importance and allowed to work as sources of information or interrogation with each other. This way, the non-literary text becomes not a con-text, but a co-text, along with the literary work. The literary text is placed within the framework of the non-literary text which is closely read. Previous writings about the text are ignored and the text is subjected to fresh scrutiny mainly from the historical point of view. For eg., Peter Barry speaks of Greenblatt’s placing of the Elizabethan plays side by side with the historical factors which pointed to a colonialist policy in the Renaissance (Barry 173).

This sort of an analysis makes New Historicism establish a point of contact with Clifford Geertz’s use of the term ‘thick descriptions’. Colebrook explains that Geertz employs the term in the New Historicist way of analyzing a particular social event which has meaning for the people involved and
discovering the patterns of conventions, codes and modes of thinking that attribute those meanings to the cultural event:

Rather than seeking the meaning of a text in the intention or mental content of either the author or the work, we could focus on the effect of the text in a network of practices. We could see the text as an effective symbol: a social fact which makes action meaningful and is a part of a culture’s way of performing its actions in an ordered and understandable way. Description of texts would be ‘thick’ if they referred to the social and cultural forms in which the text operated (Colebrook 75).

1.3.2 Employs a Documentary Method

The typical New Historian essay begins with a historical anecdote, doing away with the customary beginning with the literary interpretations. The critic Barry refers to Louis Montrose’s essay ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream and the Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture: Gender, Power, Form’ as an example of New Historicism in practice. The opening sentence of Montrose’s essay is: “I would like to recount an Elizabethan dream – Not Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream but one dreamt by Simon Forman on 23 January 1597 ” (Barry 173). Barry goes on to say that these anecdotes have the force of the documentation with dramatic openings and
citation of dates and places, and give the reader the feel of a lived experience. A point to be noted in this connection is that the entire documents are not offered, but only extracts from them are provided for bilateral study.

1.3.3 Deconstruction and Remaking of the Text

The canon of Deconstruction contends that a single or fixed meaning cannot be attributed to the word in the text. It allows the text to present a number of independent and often conflicting voices. In the same way New Historicism contends that a work is not an autonomous body of fixed meanings, but represents a diversity of dissonant voices and unresolved conflicts in a specific culture. It affirms the importance of the text, though it does so in relation to the context which becomes the co-text. While Post-Structuralism tries to effect the meanings from a 'close reading' of the text alone, New Historicism attempts it more from the cultural context in which the text is embedded.

It agrees with Derrida's view that there is nothing outside the text in the sense that what is available to us of history is, as Montrose observes, in the textual form. The text is deconstructed and remade by being subjected to the practices of its own time, those of our time, and the means of language. This has shades of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the 'dialogic' nature of the text overlapping with it, which constitutes a fundamental idea upon which New Historicism, too, seems to have been built.
1.3.4 Sharp Political Edge

New Historicism is liberal and accepts all forms of differences and deviances. However, it is different from the Marxist sense of emancipation which is centred on the working class. Mark Poster traces the point of contact between New Historicism and Michel Foucault, and observes that Foucault shifted the focus from the working class to the other social groups which suffered exploitation or alienation—the insane, the prisoners, the homosexuals, the women—oppressed by the modern society (Krieger 107–30). In this sense there is a plurality of critiques effected by New Historicism which detects the oppressed and the marginalized voices in the text, and makes a political reading of it. The critic Paul A. Bove links Foucault’s ‘discourse’ with power and knowledge: not the Marxist power which implies “control by repression or exclusion. It means, rather, control by the power of positive production: that is, a kind of power that generates certain kinds of questions, placed within systems that legitimate, support and answer those questions; a kind of power that, in the process, includes within its system all those it produces as agents capable of acting within them” (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 54). In other words “it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions...” (Dreyfus and Robinow 220). This idea is echoed in the term ‘Cultural Materialism’ – with which New Historicism is closely linked.
New Historicism renders a political reading of the text by giving a venue to the culturally and psychologically oppressed and marginalized women in the society. Judith Lowder Newton contends that New Women’s history is about the gap between the prescription of roles and women’s actual behaviour. She argues that women’s activities and struggles are seen as having a causative relation to the areas hitherto associated with men. New Historicism, in her opinion, juxtaposes the voices of men and women on the same social topics and movements and here the emphasis is not on organized women’s voices, but on the lonely and individual struggles (Veeser, Historicism 152 – 67).

New Historicism is also sympathetic towards the post-colonial way of thinking advocated by critics like Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorthy Spivak. It decries the inter contamination of language and cultures in colonial and post-colonial societies, and talks in terms of post-colonialism as a discourse and power. As Said puts it, “Orientalism is a ‘discourse’ in Michel Foucault’s sense; that is, an institutionalization of a special language which gives its users powers to define others” (Baldick 186).

1.4 Old Historical Approach versus New Historicism

The Old historical method considered literature and history as text and context, while the New Historicism considers them as text and co-text, and refuses to distinguish between literature and history, the aesthetic and
the real. The Older historical method stated that literature was a reflection of a particular age’s shared ‘world-view’. New Historicism deviates from it in upholding that no age or culture has a single homogeneous world-view, but is internally diverse and hence heterogeneous.

Yet another difference between the Old method and New Historicism concerns the significance of the roles played by history and text/author. Says Greenblatt, “... the traditional historical approach to literature ... finds history to lie outside the texts, to function in effect as the object to which signs in the text point” (Greenblatt, *Representing* viii). Abrams endorses Greenblatt’s view when he says, “the view that history, not the author, shapes a literary work and forges its meaning is indeed the crucial feature in the shift from traditional historical criticism both to the New Historicism and to the New Politicalism” (Abrams 365). The old historicism presented history as blocks of periods, one following the other and indicating progress and evolution; the New Historicism “projects a vision of history as an endless skein of cloth smocked in a complex overall pattern by the needle and thread of power. You need only pull the thread at one place to find it connected to another” (Porter 765).

A further distinction between the New Historicism and the older method is manifest in the shift of the focus from the old objectivity to the new ‘object’ and from history to ‘histories’. New Historicism can be
distinguished from the historical method “by its lack of faith in “objectivity” and “permanence” and its stress not upon the direct recreation of the past, but rather the processes by which the past is constructed or invented” (Cox and Reynolds 4). Add Cox and Reynolds:

New Historicism tends to regard texts in materialist terms, as objects and events in the world as a part of human life, society, the historical realities of power, authority and resistance; yet at the same time, it rejects the idea of “History” as a directly accessible, unitary past, and substitutes for it the conception of “histories”, an ongoing series of human constructions, each representing the past at particular present moments for particular present purposes (4).

The older historical method was of lesser worth in comparison with New Historicism as it was a study of the text in the ‘background’ or ‘context’ of history. As earlier mentioned, in New Historicism, history becomes the co-text and is a record of written documents. It is these recorded facts in history which will be subject to a close reading earlier reserved for literary texts. As a result it becomes a witness in proving the textual facts. This makes New Historicism of greater worth than the old method.

1.5 Significance of New Historicism

New Historicism has gained popularity as a critical practice because
of various reasons. One significant achievement of this method is in the ample scope it provides for innumerable interpretation of the literary work. As Greenblatt and Gunn observe, New Historicism has reminded us that "literature is not something given once and for all but something constructed and reconstructed, the product of shifting conceptual entitlements and limits" (Greenblatt and Gunn 5). This opportunity for reading meanings at different levels into the text is rendered possible also because of the points of contact it establishes with various literary theories as well as cultural and social concepts. We are confronted with "not a unified field at all but diverse historical projects and critical idioms that ... originate from a variety of sources, some of which lie outside the realm of literary study altogether and intersect one another often at strange angles" (3).

Another point of significance which has made New Historicism important lies in the fact that it has encouraged and effected a return to history and culture from the earlier preoccupation with the dry realm of pure theory. As Said observes,

"... texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (Said, World 4).
New Historicism is also appealing because of the sense of novelty it injects into the reader as it analyses the text in the light of a historically documented extract. It avoids Post-structuralism’s dense style and uses a more accessible style as it presents fascinating data and draws its conclusions. He feels that he has stepped into a new territory and has gained access to a whole world of histories which were hitherto relatively unlinked to the literary text. This sort of a study will be helpful in delving deep into the marginalized cultures, as well as into the marginalized aspects of the prominent cultures.

Carolyn Porter argues that New Historicism frees us from ‘World Views’ in criticism and allows us to “approach literary texts as agents as well as effects of cultural change, as participating in a cultural conversation rather than merely representing the conclusion reached in that conversation, as if it could have reached no other ...” (Porter 782).

1.6 Disadvantages of New Historicism

New Historicism may have gained momentum as a new critical practice, but it has some drawbacks. New Historicism posits power as a constant entity functioning in all human relations and hence has done nothing new as it has only replaced the trans-historical term ‘man’ with ‘power’. This is an argument raised by critics like Carolyn Porter. She argues that New Historicism seeks to propagate traditional humanist values instead of moving towards a postmodern, non-human-centred way of viewing the world.
Jane Marcus has found fault with New Historicism as lacking in 'truth value', and taken it to task for moving from the text to the context. Asserting the importance of the text, she criticizes New Historicism for paying too much attention to the context which she considers as only “an enhancement of the text”, “the setting for the jewel”, “the scenery for the play” (Veeser, Historicism 132).

Brook Thomas refers to Greenblatt’s practice of refusing to adopt the old strategy of beginning with a historical background and then moving to the analysis of a text which is revealed by or which reveals the background. Instead, according to Thomas, Greenblatt places all on the same plane and cuts from one to the other, creating “a field of energy between the two so that we see the event as a social text and the literary text as a social event” (Thomas 32). This, he claims, is a defect in that it results in “arbitrary connectedness”. As New Historicism places all social practices on the same plane, the selection of one practice over the others and its juxtaposition with the particular literary text is rendered difficult.

New Historicism is not greatly valued by historians because it relies upon a single historical anecdote to testify as a witness for an apparently unrelated and seemingly marginal issue in the literary text.

One final argument raised against New Historicism is that in its obsession with power structure, it makes us adjust our sense of culture so
that what once appeared strange does not seem so now; as when New Historicism concentrates on the marginalized and the bizarre, thereby restoring their importance and paving the way for their resistance of absorption to the master culture.

1.7 Application of New Historicism: A Few Illustrations

In his essay, "Towards a Poetic of Culture", Stephen Greenblatt refers to a paper by the political scientist and historian Michael Rogin, who "observed the number of times [the former U.S.] President [Ronald] Reagan has, at critical moments in his career, quoted lines from his own or other popular films" (Veeser, Historicism 6). Greenblatt concludes that Reagan "continues to live within the movies; he has been shaped by them, draws much of his cold war rhetoric from them, and cannot or will not distinguish between them and an external reality. Indeed his political career has depended upon an ability to project himself and his mass audience into a realm in which there is no distinction between simulation and reality" (6). Greenblatt also mentions the reaction of Anthony Dolan, a White House speech-writer, who was asked to comment on Rogin's paper. Dolan links Reagan's speeches to Nazism and Communism, the Cold War counter subversion in the 1940s and its revival in the 1980s as a result of the political replacement of Nazism by Communism. He concludes that Movies "heighten reality rather than lessen it" (6).
In “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction”, the critic Joel Fineman (Veeser, Historicism 72 – 73) alludes to a very suggestive essay called “Fiction and Friction” by Stephen Greenblatt. Greenblatt mentions an anecdote about a certain Marie Le Marcis, a household servant in Roven in 1601, who surprises her fellow servant Jeane Le Febvre, by revealing that she was a man masquerading as a woman. This parallels with the situation of disguised identity and sexuality in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. In the anecdote Marie and Jeane have a sexual relationship and decide to marry, much to the shock and indignation of the then conservative community. The scandal raises medical and jurisdicial questions. A number of doctors are called in to resolve the questions and one specialist, Jacques Duvall establishes the fact that Marie is a man – the decisive evidence provided by Marie’s ejaculation caused by the friction of the doctor’s touch.

Greenblatt is led by this incident to questions of how the two sexes, in spite of the differences, stand to each other, with regard to the anatomy of the sexual apparatus, in a relation of the introverted homology. He cites galenic medical theory—“Turn outward the woman’s, turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man’s, and you will find them the same in both every respect” (72). Greenblatt is interested in the ‘introverted collation’ of anatomical sexuality. This also leads him to the social and cultural differences between the two sexes (friction). This is fictionalized in Shakespeare’s Twelfth
Night in the playful, punning dialogue between Viola and the Clown in the III Act (lines 11 – 20).

Another example of a New Historicist reading of a well-known text is provided by the authors of A handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (Guerin et al. 327 –30). They refer to the reading made by Susan Bruce of Book 3 of Gulliver’s Travels. In her article, “The Flying Island and Female Anatomy : Gynaecology and Power in Gulliver’s Travels”, Bruce offers an explanation of why Swift named the flying island ‘Laputa’, which in Spanish means ‘the whore’. Bruce begins her article by describing a commentary on Gulliver’s Travels, published in 1727 by one Corolini di Marco who makes a dry reference to Gulliver catching rabbits for food in Book 4, “A voyage to the Houyhnhnms”. Di Marco ties this episode with the notorious scandal, involving the then royal physician St.Andre and the so-called ‘rabbet – woman of Surrey’, Mary Toft, who managed to convince various members of the medical profession in 1727 that she had delivered a number of rabbits, which, she had actually inserted into her vagina and then labored to deliver with the help of a midwife. This also allows Bruce to describe the hostility between not only midwives and men in the medical profession, but also women and men in general. Bruce connects the male outrage at the female power with Gulliver’s observations on women in Gulliver’s Travels. In this nauseating description of a tumour on a Brobdingnagian woman’s breast,
rendered repulsive with a number of holes into which a person could have crept and hidden himself, Swift implies not the appreciation of the female body but the horror and disgust generated by it.

Bruce then turns to Book 3 and describes the island of Laputa as “a gigantic trope of the female body”. The circular island has a round chasm in its center through which the astronomers of the island descend. Bruce compares the floating structure of the island Laputa to a woman, with its central chasm comparable to the uterus and the vagina. Gulliver and the Laputians are able to enter the cavity at will and control the island. Bruce argues that this is synonymous with the male control over the female body, rendering the body the status of a whore – ‘la puta’.

As an illustration of New Historicism in practice, Peter Barry refers to an essay by Louis Montrose entitled “A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture: Gender, Power, Form” which had appeared originally in the American journal Representations. The author sums up Montrose’s thesis as one which creates the culture by which it is created, and shapes the fantasies by which it is shaped (Barry 130). The cult of the Virgin Queen as one with mystical and magical powers is fostered by literature like Spenser’s The Faerie Queene and a wide range of masques, comedies and epic poetry. This image in turn generates literature; thus life and literature play upon each other.
Montrose’s essay, according to Barry, opens with an account of a dream by Simon Forman on 23 January 1597. Forman dreams of an erotic encounter with the Queen, whom he has just saved from the advances of ‘a weaver, a tall man with a reddish beard’. Montrose relays Forman’s account of the Queen’s revealing style of dress. This enables the reader to project the Queen as the mother of the nation, and at the same time as a virgin, openly flirtatious and provocative.

Montrose then relates this to the tensions generated in a patriarchal society which is ruled by a woman. He refers to several such examples in Shakespearean plays, where the Queen who has absolute powers, is mastered and feminised. He refers to Hippolyta, the Amazonian Queen, defeated by Theseus; Titania, the Fairy Queen, who, after defying her husband, Oberon, is humiliated by him in having Puck administer the magic potion which causes her to fall in love with the first being she sees after waking up.

Thus Montrose argues that Shakespeare’s comedy neutralizes the royal power and maintains patriarchy. Barry relates Montrose’s thesis to the more recent political situation in England. Even under the rule of ‘the iron lady’, he argues, the Tory party could not revise its ideas about the role of women in society, but only served to reinforce the male ideas.

Commenting on recent changes in Shakespearian criticism, Claire Colebrook points out that Shakespeare is no longer the bearer of timeless
values, nor a picture of the Elizabethan age. (Colebrook 86 – 87). From the traditional point of view Othello has been the study of jealousy and evil, but more recently this approach has been replaced by a focus on how a culture produces evil to deal with certain historical particulars. Colebrook cites Dollimore and establishes that “Othello is an instance of cultural distancing in which Elizabethan England constructed other cultures as internally threatening in order to create a sense of its own national identity” (87).

Elsewhere in her book Colebrook refers to Stephen Greenblatt, who manages to present Iago not as a “morally reprehensible and ruthless manipulator”, but as “the consummate performer of self and the epitome of renaissance self-fashioning” Desdemona is won from her father by Othello’s rhetorical powers. But the narrative powers of Iago proves to be more persuasive than that of Othello in the end. “The ‘art’ of Iago is simply more explicit and calculating than the art of a supposedly more legitimate power. The distinction between the real and authentic power of the monarch, and the theatrical power of imposters and dramatists is itself a performance, a performance of sincerity” (210).

Colebrook also provides a political reading of The Tempest by shifting the emphasis from “the Renaissance awareness of the power of performance to the transition from feudal power as spectacle to modern power as internalised legitimation” (200). The crisis in the play is resolved when
Prospero gives up his coercive powers of magic and adopts another mode of performance: a royal masque and the staged performance of a royal patron for Caliban and the conspirators.

1.8 New Historicism and/or Cultural Materialism

Cultural Materialism was initially claimed to be the British counterpart of the American New Historicism. Both are by no means unified theories which owe allegiance to any single theorist, but are practices which incorporate several theories and positions. Both cannot be clearly separated from each other. Many examples of contemporary critical practices draw upon both Cultural Materialism and New Historicism. Anthologies of one include references to works of the other. However, it is presently accepted that Cultural Materialism is not just the British name for New Historicism; there are subtle differences between the two which account for an ongoing family squabble between the two.

The word ‘culture’ in the phrase Cultural Materialism can be explained as inclusive of all forms of culture. Raymond Williams defined culture as “the entire complex of practices, significations, institutions, material forces and personal responses” (Williams, Marxism 94). Hence the movement involves a critical analysis of the production and reception of all forms of cultural products, and also looks into the power structures that determine the meanings, the value and the status of diverse cultural products.
It undermines the hierarchical discrepancy that exists between ‘high art’ which appeals to the elite and ‘low art’ which gains mass appeal. It devotes an equal attention to popular fiction, romances, magazine-writing, advertising, journalistic reports, comics, films, TV, Video and popular music. This also shifts to the center stage hitherto marginalized subjects such as the productions of women, the ethnic groups, the working class, the post-colonial and the Third World Cultures. It serves to replace the earlier traditional monoculturalism with a more diverse, multicultural perspective. The other word ‘materialism’ in the phrase is the opposite of ‘idealism’. Unlike materialism, idealism believes that only high culture can be the product of a talented individual mind. Materialism argues that culture is not just a reflection of the economic and political system, but is also determined by the material forces and relations of production.

Cultural Materialism is anchored in the British left-wing critic Raymond Williams’ term ‘structures of feeling’ which are concerned with ‘meanings and values as they are lived and felt’. This is contradictory to the acceptance of the existing dominant values and beliefs in the society. This results in “a sense of disconnection between individual experience and cultural meaning, as well as a striving for reunification” (Williams, English 64). Cultural Materialism believes that the novel is not just a mirror reflecting the society. It is more than a mere reflection. It is engaged in achieving a sense of
cultural coherence by relating social and moral elements into the community. Cultural Materialism is a movement of optimism as it concentrates on the interventions whereby men and women create their own history. But New Historicism is comparatively more pessimistic as it focuses on the power of social and ideological structures which restrain men and women. This political pessimism of New Historicism is also attributed to its scepticism about the possibility of attaining ‘truth’ since it is aware of the risks and dangers involved in claiming to establish truths. The crucial difference between the two is that New Historicism produces a subversion in order to contain it, while in Cultural Materialism, traces of subversion remain even if it is contained. This is why Sinfield states that “even a text that aspires to contain a subordinate perspective must first bring it into visibility; even to misrepresent one must present” (Sinfield 48).

Yet another distinction between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism concerns the selection of the historical or non-literary documents for parallel study. New Historicism selects the co-text from the literary text’s own period of time, whereas in Cultural Materialism, the non-literary text is selected from a different period of time into which the literary text is situated. Barry refers to an essay called ‘Telmah’ (Barry 187 – 89) which originally appeared in Terence Hawkes’ book That Shakespearian Rag. This particular essay is centred on the Shakespearian critic John Dover Wilson, famous for
his text What Happens in Hamlet? The essay opens with an emphasis of the cyclic and symmetrical elements of the play, how the same situation is repeated several times. According to Barry, Hawkes’s title is the reversed ‘Hamlet’ which is symbolic of the repeated motif of looking backwards in the play.

The second section of the essay is called ‘To the Sunderland Station’ which is a take off on the title of the well-known history of the Russian Revolution called To the Finland Station. Hawkes gives an account here of Dover Wilson on the train to Sunderland in 1917, sent by the government to resolve the labour problems in a munitions factory. Wilson is said to be reading W.W. Greg’s article on Hamlet in which the focus is shifted from Hamlet to the king. Greg makes the reader claim some sympathy for the king. This is challenged by Wilson who seems to have a fanatical desire for order as evidenced in his writings about Russia as an organic feudal state. The essay, claims Barry, “creates a pattern of appearing and containing difference. Hence, a way of interpreting the play is placed among several co-texts from twentieth century life, and thus the play itself is culturally transformed” (Barry 189).

1.9 Anne Tyler and Her Achievements

Although Anne Tyler has won several accolades with her literary and critical output, she is mostly regarded as an advocate of uncontroversial issues, and her fiction is considered more popular than appealing to the elite.
As a woman writer whose novels, which deal generally with the familial issues of the middleclass, are well-received by the public, she deserves greater scholarly attention.

Until recently, Anne Tyler, whose novels form the corpus of this study, was considered only as an upcoming writer from the South of the United States; but an unbelievably long list of laudable works she has produced, and the impressive number of awards she has won, have since then catapulted her to the rank of the front-runners of American literary figures. Tyler was born on 25 October 1941, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to a journalist-cum-social worker-father and a chemist-mother. Her family settled in Raleigh, North Carolina – one of the Southern states – when Tyler was still a small girl. She lived in various communes like Celo in the South, studied at Duke and Columbia Universities, and was employed for a time as a Russian Bibliographer at Duke and as a librarian at McGill University, Montreal, before taking up full-time writing as a career. In 1963, Tyler married Mohammed Teghi Modaressi, an Iranian Psychiatrist, whom she lost recently to cancer, and now lives with her two grown-up daughters Tezh (born 1965) and Mitra (born 1967) in Baltimore, the locale of most of her novels. So far Tyler has authored 16 novels, apart from a large number of short stories, – which have never been collected, republished or anthologized – articles and reviews published in well-known periodicals that include the New Yorker.
the Southern Review and the New York Times Book Review. Tyler’s first novel, If Morning Ever Comes, was published in 1964 when she was only 23 years old. A series of novels followed – The Tin Can Tree (1965), A Slipping Down Life (1970), The Clock-Winder (1972), Celestial Navigation (1974), Searching for Caleb (1976), Earthly Possessions (1977), Morgan’s Passing (1980), Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant (1982), The Accidental Tourist (1985), Breathing Lessons (1988), Saint Maybe (1991), Tumble Tower (1993), Ladder of Years (1995), A Patchwork Planet (1998) and Back When We Were Grownups (2001) – all of which have captured the attention of the critics, as well as served to enhance Tyler’s impressive fan-following. She has already won a string of awards which include ‘Mademoiselle Award’ for writing (1966), the ‘American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award’ (won in 1977 for “her past achievements and promise of excellent work in future”), the ‘Janet Heidinger Kafka Award’ (1980), the ‘PEN/ Faulkner Award’ (1982) and the ‘National Book Critics Circle Award’ (for The Accidental Tourist in 1985), apart from the coveted ‘Pulitzer Prize’ (for Breathing Lessons in 1988). The Accidental Tourist has been made into a motion picture by Warner Brothers, in which William Hurt, Kathleen Turner and Geena Davis Starred. Davis even won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in the role of Muriel in the film.
1.9.1 Tyler's Controversial Place Among the Contemporaries

Anne Tyler's growing critical recognition has made her readers and reviewers alike ponder over the possibility of placing her in any literary tradition. Alice Hall Petry calls her "something of an anomaly in contemporary American literature" (Petry, Understanding 1). She has been labelled variously—a feminist, a non-feminist; a realist, a romantic; a victorian and a post-modernist. Although her novels are strewn with a number of dominating women characters who deliberately set out to alter the destinies of others, Tyler is not a hard-core feminist who is against men and marriages. Her novels like Morgan's Passing may deal with the improbabilities one usually associates with romances, but for the most part, she does not shy away from the facts of life. She may be Victorian in some of her view points like that of sex which is negligible in her novels; but at the same time, there is a marked existentialist tendency in her fiction which is in keeping with her chronological position among the Post-modernists. Nevertheless, it exhibits none of the obvious stylistic traits and daring experimentalism one usually associates with Post-modern writing. As Gordon Taylor says, Tyler's fiction is "contemporary in literary—technical performance, but in ways deflecting rather than inviting distinctions between the 'modern', and various species of the 'post-modern'" (Stephens 68). They are comedies of manners marked by compassionate wit and precise details of domestic life and stress, personal
isolation and difficulties of communication between people.

Apart from the pluralisms which are to be discussed in the various chapters of this work, there are quite a few instances of ambivalence pointed out in Tyler’s fiction by her critics, reviewers and scholars, which underline the difficulty of placing her in any one literary tradition. Readers find that the family structures and relations in her novels are, at the same time, a source of isolation as well as bonding; members of her fictional families are simultaneously drawn to, and repelled from, one another. They “can be helpful in times of crisis” and also “prove disconcertingly ineffectual in a crisis” and also “prove disconcertingly ineffectual in a crisis” (Petry, Understanding 32–33). Her characters prefer to stay at home, yet are packed and ready to go; they are poised on the thresholds of their front doors, ready for escape; they are almost like Anne Tyler herself who admits in her essay, “Still Just Writing”:

I like routine and rituals and I hate leaving home; I have a sense of digging my heels in. I refuse to drive on freeways. I dread our annual vacation. Yet I’m continually prepared for travel: it is physically impossible for me to buy any necessity without buying a travel-sized version as well. I have a little toilet kit, with soap and a nightgown, forever packed and ready to go (Sternburg 15).
Her novels, sprinkled with equal amounts of humour and pathos, deal with neither the upper class nor the lower; they are slices of middle America. She writes not about heroes or villains, but about average people who are a combination of both.

Doris Betts in her provocative essay, “Tyler’s Marriage of Opposites” investigates the titles of Anne Tyler’s novels and detects the sense of doubling and contrasts implied in them. In *Earthly Possessions*, Betts hears the obvious meaning and the reversed one, “What on earth possessed you!” In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, the title is pluralistic with the meaning changing from sick *for* home and sick *of* home. The logo on Macon Leary’s guidebooks, “traveling armchairs” reminds Betts of the cliché “armchair traveler” and she even pounces on the oxymoron which is the title, *The Accidental Tourist*, and asks, “how can a tourist be accidental?” The title of Tyler’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, *Breathing Lessons*, “blends an action that is reflexive, autonomic, natural – “breathing” – with a process deliberate, cerebral, learned – “lessons” ” (Stephens 6 –7). Alice Hall Petry catches on the ambiguity in the title *Celestial Navigation* which combines elements of sky and earth. Petry refers to the protagonist of the novel, Jeremy, who is “terrified of the murky ocean of reality surrounding him”. He is guided by the heavenly stars which might mislead him. Petry says that he might be lost or waylaid and never get home again (Petry, *Understanding* 121).
This sense of ambivalence is also detected by the critic Katherine Whittemore who lists a number of writers and reviewers that support or criticise Tyler. The list is balanced in number and content on both the sides. Whittemore mentions the Tyler supporters thus:

Larry McMurtry is a fan. To a lesser degree, so is Edward Hoagland. Francine du Plessix Gray and Michiko Kakutani have given Tyler glowing reviews. Her friend Eudora Welty once said, "If I could have written the last sentence in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant I'd have been happy for the rest of my life". The Washington Post book critic Jonathan Yardley – a fellow Baltimorean – was beside himself with adoration for The Accidental Tourist: It "cuts so close to the bone that it leaves one aching with pleasure and pain", he wrote. "Words fail me; one cannot reasonably expect fiction to be much better than this". Nick Hornby has called Tyler "my favorite writer, and the best line-and-length novelist in the world" (Whittemore 113).

The list of Tyler's detractors is as long:

James Wolcott seems plain bored by Tyler's work. Diane Johnson doesn't like the fact that her brand of bitter-sweet tastes more sweet than bitter. Johnson berated The Accidental
Tourist for being a "Reaganesque dream novel", because it "urge[s] a whole agenda of comforting, consoling ideas" that are "powerfully attractive". She continued, "It's just that they are not true". Vivian Gornick, in her Village Voice review of Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, conceded Tyler's great talent but indicted her for what Gornick considers nothing less than "a paralysing immaturity" (Whittimore 117).

1.10 Aim, Procedure and Methodology of the Project

According to New Historicism, literary texts should not be detached from the wider network of texts and other cultural activities. In his essay called "Invisible Bullets", Stephen Greenblatt employed a ploy of beginning an essay by telling an anecdote that is far removed from literature, and then subjecting it to close reading. He then tallied it with similar structures extracted from literary texts of the same period. Judith Burdan claims that for the New Historicists, literature "acts as a participant within a larger system of cultural production" (Kowaleski – Wallace 288). She adds:

In order to achieve a fuller exploration of literary texts, New Historicists breakdown the barrier between literature and other fields of research, drawing upon the discourses of medicine, law, sociology, anthropology, religion, education and so forth (288).
Anne Tyler’s novels have already been subjected to some interdisciplinary scholarship. C. Ralph Stephens, in his editorial introduction to the collection of some wide-ranging and insightful essays on Tyler, observes that scholars and critics in the U.S. have applied theories of anthropology, psychology, structuralism etc to her fiction, but there are many other promising cross disciplinary approaches that are to be used, to interpret her novels. He mentions ‘new historicism’ as one such approach yet to be used on Tyler (Stephens xi). The aim of this project is to apply the theory of New Historicism to the fiction of Anne Tyler. Tyler has written both long and short fiction, but this work attempts to study only the former in the light of this challenging and unorthodox practice of New Historicism. The essence of the thesis is the ambiguities and ambivalence glimpsed in Anne Tyler’s novels, which seems to keep pace with the doubleness witnessed as regards issues in various spheres of life. An effort is made to resort to various historical, cultural, ideological and material reasons to account for the obviously pluralistic view points in the novels of this gifted writer.

This project hence attempts to produce a New Historical re-reading of Anne Tyler’s fiction, drawing attention to the local devices, incidents and instances which form the basis of history. Breaking down the barrier between literary and non-literary texts, it aims to use anecdotes, artefacts, materials and events from historical and literary texts. Thus works outside the realm
of literary scholarship will be re-valued along with works of literary merit. The project thus tries to produce a critical analysis of contemporary culture by integrating the textual details, the literary interpretive methods and the frame works of collaborative disciplines like sociology, anthropology and religion.

As is the practice of New Historicism; the focus here is thus on certain incidents from various realms of history and culture which form the prime documents of interaction in the chapters of this dissertation. Each document is then traced to a similar or related incident or theme, in Tyler’s world of fiction. Cross references are then made, and inversions and marginalities are discovered.

New Historicism is an area of critical theory not much experimented with by scholars; and Anne Tyler is an author whose works have not received due scholarly attention, despite her voluminous output, large fan-following and impressive critical recognition. This project makes a humble effort to rectify these shortcomings and invite more scholarly and academic attention to this recent critical theory as well as to this living recipient of the Pulitzer Prize. As is obvious from the title, this introductory chapter endeavours to make an approach to understanding the intricacies involved in the practice of New Historicism. It focuses on the traceable paradigms of New Historicism and explains the origin of this critical approach. It analyses how this theory
differs from the historical theory prevalent in the past and shows parallels with and differences from the related theory of Cultural Materialism. Illustrations of the application of this critical practice, are also provided from various sources in order to show both the possibilities and the difficulties involved in the New Historicism reading of any piece of literary work. A detailed account of the life and works of Anne Tyler is also given in this chapter, along with a profile of the awards and achievements of this novelist. Her dual life as an earlier commune-girl and a later city dweller, her cross-cultural marriage, her precarious position as both a popular as well as a serious writer, and her reputation as an author non-aligned to any fixed literary canon are pointed out along with the variations on the themes in her novels to add strength and substance to the analysis of the pluralisms discussed in the subsequent chapters.

The second chapter of this dissertation points out the ambiguous and ambivalent stand adopted by Anne Tyler on certain public and gender issues. This is juxtaposed with similar striking viewpoints from the public sphere which provide corroborative evidence to Tyler's stand. The chapter will open with incidents of anti and pro abortion protests reported by the media. Attention is drawn to surveys done which show that the majority of the public are fence-sitters who are not drawn into any camp. This, along with the ambiguous and ambivalent dimensions of the ideology, practice,
psychological and moral implications and the very terminology of ‘abortion’, will also be stressed in order to invalidate the standpoint of Tyler’s women characters, which combines a belief in the practice of abortion as well as a hesitation on their part to practice it. Abortion is discussed in the chapter not merely as a national or political issue, but also as the focal point of the gender questions raised in Tyler’s fiction. The chapter will allude to the material condition of women’s lives manifest in this woman novelist’s fictional world – their isolation, oppression, and the emergence of their assertiveness. This will be done in the light of the fact that in the 1980s, New Historicism spread over fresher territories and took a firm grip of the feminist way of thinking. The feminists adopted this mode to stress the dominance of the masculine power structure to alienate and weaken the feminine, as is effectively shown by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic by employing motifs of confinement and madness as part of the struggle against patriarchal definitions.

However, in this part of the dissertation, the ambivalent stand struck by the novelist and the public towards abortion also tallies with the changing trends in feminism towards masculinity and patriarchy, which has witnessed a shift from earlier confrontation to recent conciliation. Instances of fluctuating cultural attitudes of the society towards the motherhood and fatherhood mystique and the nurturing role of the sexes in child care will also be cited in
the chapter to account for the variations in the cultural consciousness of the
novelist. Anne Tyler’s heterogeneity is also obvious in her depiction of both
the men and women characters. There are run-aways and stay-at-homes
among both the sexes in her novels; her stereotypical females who perform
the traditional roles of wives and mothers almost equal her willful, plucky
and heterodox women. Her men characters are presented, on the whole, in
a sympathetic light, as initiators of changes in gender hierarchy and
‘subverters’ of the sexual division of labour. The chapter will show many of
them as inverted with feminine qualities and performing the roles of surrogate
mothers beneath their masculine fronts.

The polarized public opinion concerning abortion is replicated in several
other controversial issues including urbanization, violence, multiple murders
etc. Documentation is also provided for the mixed response towards the
effects of urbanization and towards the political hide and seek regarding gun
control and arms race which has accounted for the escalation in incidents of
violence and mass murders in the American society. Tyler’s position as a
novelist of the suburban milieu oscillating between pastoral dreams and
popular urban culture will be brought home in the second chapter, with
illustrations of both the milieu provided for authorization. Similarly the degree
of restraint and sense of detachment shown by the novelist in the accounting
of death and devastation in her fiction will also be highlighted, while alluding
to the sense of alienation and detachment experienced by her characters due to deprivation and violence in her fictional families. The absence of a homogeneous world view in Tyler’s fiction will be underscored and the conclusion reached that there is more social concern in her recent novels, though it is not consciously and deliberately expressed. Tyler acknowledges this in her letter to this scholar, which is appended at the end of this dissertation: “Although of course these and other issues concern me, I have never felt comfortable using my fiction as a platform to discuss my political beliefs”.

Detection of deviant traits constitutes an important feature of New Historicism interpretations of literary works. The third chapter of this dissertation will highlight the celebration of deviance in the behavioural patterns of Tyler’s fictional characters. Many of them are ambivalently placed; they are not fully sane, nor are they completely insane. These borderline characters that are balanced delicately and dangerously between the extremes of sanity and insanity are in a line of progression with the ambiguities explained in the second chapter. The chapter on Tyler’s eccentrics will open with the thawing in the previously horrified attitude of the readers and the viewers towards the demonic image of the fictional and filmy character of Dracula who is subverted from a diabolic villain to a more humane and caring person. This is projected as a reflection of the changes undergone by the public in their
attitude towards what is considered as the grotesque. Grotesque has come to be treated not as something crude and fantastic, but as something realistic and appropriate to the existential problems. Tyler’s novels incorporate this change and present eccentricity not as a condition that invites revulsion, but one that invokes fascination and understanding. The chapter will show the novelist not as a champion of the causes of these idiosyncratic people; on the other hand, she will not be seen as denouncing them either; instead, they will be projected as deserving our sympathy and caring.

In the course of the chapter it will be established with the aid of illustrations from the primary sources that the oddities of Tyler’s characters who are neither thoroughly villainous nor laudably heroic are more behavioural than physical. Instances of visibly obvious eccentricity in appearance are negligible in Tyler; what is more prominent is the waywardness conveyed through the gestures, actions and mannerisms of the characters. What is striking in the novels is that the deviation from the orderly ways only serves to heighten the individuality of these people, and enables them to deserve the readers’ liking and sympathy. The chapter will also establish a biogenetic link between Tyler’s characters and their eccentric tantrums. It will be depicted not merely as a familial trait affecting generations, but also as a means of empowerment for many of her fictional men and women. A part of the chapter will also be devoted to deal with the carnivalesque tradition
and the dress code referred to in Tyler’s novels.

The presence of the large number of eccentrics in Tyler’s fiction and the affinity that the novelist shows towards them and invites from the readers will be explained in the light of several literary and philosophical theories. These include the ideas of power-relations, containment and subversion, purity and dirt, disturbance of borders and margins, encounter and collision of one discourse with another, relation between madness and production, labour and idleness etc which are alluded to in order to substantiate the statements and arguments made in the chapter.

The fourth chapter entitled “Black, White and Shades of Colour ...” will deal with race and ethnicity in Anne Tyler’s novels. The pattern of discussion followed will be the same as in the previous chapters. It will begin with the historical documentation of the irony manifest in cultural pluralism. This is obvious in the ambivalent attitudes of the people, especially the whites, towards racism. It reveals in their positive self presentation of understanding which conceals a negative impression of tolerance of the blacks and the coloured. This conscious or unconscious tactic enables them to avoid the risk of being labeled ‘racists’. The chapter will make an account of the experiences of a white author in his attempt to cross over the colour line. It will also document his sense of helplessness and inadequacy in the face of the prevailing system which makes him look like a man of double
consciousness. This ‘doubleness’ will be evident even in the ambivalence of the blacks towards themselves and towards the issue of racism. All these dualities tally with the shades of ambiguity in Anne Tyler’s stand on the matter of race and ethnicity. The peripheral and insignificant existence of the black people in her novels, and the fading memories of the Civil War will be stressed, which will make her novels seem to strike an attitude of offence. Yet the roles attributed to the limited number of blacks present as confidants, choral characters and as people sensitive to the sensibilities will show Tyler certainly as a humanist, if not a social crusader.

The chapter will also refer to the readings of the Colonialist and Post-Colonialist experts such as Fanon and Said to establish Anne Tyler’s position of ambivalence towards the Asians and other ethnic groups present in her fiction. Their occurrence on the margins of Tyler’s fictional universe will be illustrated along with their depiction as the eccentric ‘other’. The novelist’s tolerance and acceptance of these people will be pointed out towards the end of the chapter. Possibilities of the undertones of Post-colonialist tendencies in the novelist’s vision will be checked and the conclusion reached that Tyler, perched in between ‘the melting pot’ and ‘the mosaic’, is, nevertheless, an ambassador of goodwill.

The heterogeneity in Anne Tyler’s religious sense will be looked into in the penultimate chapter. Her novels are peopled with neither saints nor
sinners; on the other hand, even her saints are part sinners, and her sinners part saints. The various phases of religious surge in the American life will be summarized in the beginning of this chapter, and the evolution of the group called the “Jesus People” that practices ethical more than spiritual values will be traced. The oscillating nature of the religious revival in the country and the inconclusiveness of the religious situation will be studied. The religious pluralism based on an enthusiasm for humanity, and its origin in the mutually accommodative relationship between the various religions, will be dealt with. The various permutations ascribed to Jesus Christ, the divine – human figure, will also be shown to account for the pluralistic religious traits of Anne Tyler in her novels.

Anne Tyler’s religious background and upbringing will be alluded to in the course of the chapter to substantiate the nature of the religious awareness in her fiction. This takes the form of the presence of pastors, priests, and preachers among the leity, who are, however, situated only on the periphery of her novelistic art. The chapter will discuss her positive as well as negative treatment of religion and religious people. Also emphasized will be the ambiguity seen in the novelist’s use of religion as a means of humour, irony and satire. The chapter will conclude with an illustrative analysis of the ambivalent position adopted by Tyler’s texts as regards religious matters which echo the similar pluralities visible even in the cultural contexts.
The concluding chapter will wind up the debates and deliberations made throughout the thesis. It will commence with Michel Foucault’s argument that the novel is marginally placed in the whole sphere of literary activity, that it is excluded from serious literature and compromisingly occupies an intermediate status between fact and fiction, that it caters to the middleclass and struggles to meet the formal standard of high art, and that it is characterized by some element of looseness and ambiguity. This argument is taken up as the starting point of the last chapter in order to pinpoint the ambiguities in Anne Tyler’s novels which are difficult to be treated as either literary or popular, and which are ambivalently situated in the treatment of issues and people. The chapter will reinstate Tyler’s position as a reader’s as well as a critic’s novelist who has been writing steadily for over four decades now. The escalation in her popularity rating and critical recognition, in spite of her habit of keeping a low profile and shunning publicity ploys in order to advertise and promote her novels, will be taken note of. Side by side, the need for more scholarly interest in her fiction, which has been surprisingly low, will also be pointed out. This part of the thesis will summarise the arguments made in the previous chapters and will conclude by taking a look beyond the limits of the thesis. The difficulties encountered during the scholarly research on the challenging and new critical practice of New Historicism will be mentioned, and possibilities of further research in
Anne Tyler suggested.

As New Historicism is an assimilation of concepts derived from various recent theories, this will also try to interpret Tyler's fiction by an application of theories and findings put forward by philosophers and critics like Michel Faucault, Stephen Greenblatt, Mikhail Bakhtin and Edward Said. The main strategy employed will be the historicization of texts by documenting historical facts that echo the textual incidents and can be read from one to the other. However, as the various chapters deal with issues of cultural, political, racial and religious significance, research and reference materials pertaining to the same will be made use of throughout the length and breadth of the thesis, along with the incorporation of certain biographical, textual and sociological data, particularly with reference to the author and her personal as well as literary background.

"As we look back at the cultural archive", says Edward Said, "we begin to reread it not univocally but contrapuntally" (Said, Culture 59). It is this sort of a reading that will be made of Tyler's novels in the thesis. It will provide an outlet for implications that remain hidden, and stress the texts' origin in social and cultural reality. Said also talks about an affiliated reading which enables the text to maintain itself as a text, the "status of the author, historical moment, conditions of publication, diffusion and reception, values drawn upon, values and ideas assumed, a framework of consensually held
tacit assumptions, presumed background and so on" (Said, *World* 174 – 75). Such an attempt will also be made here to show Tyler’s texts as a phenomenon in the world, produced by a network of non-literary and non-traditional affiliations.