

A New Historicist Reading of Golshiri's *My China Doll*

Nasrin Jamnezhad

Master of English Language and Literature, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran.

Abstract

As a writer of wide humanist knowledge and touching worldview, Hushang Golshiri, manipulates the social and political context of his time as the backbone of his stories through which he reveals the mentality of his characters which looks complicated at times. *My China Doll*, as one of his great short stories, poignantly matches this argument. Drowned in the mentality of a little girl we are presented with pretty loud echoes of the particular historical, political, and cultural facts of the time. These special discourses help shaping the consciousness of his characters on the other hand. In order to analyse the story in this regard, a New Historicist approach will be rewarding as applied to the story. As New Historicists emphasize to regard a work of art as a mere cultural artefact as well as a socially constructed product, this is the general view of the story within the article. Therefore, the way it is formed by the interplay of Various social and political discourses are explored within the context reflecting the pure art of Golshiri in portraying his characters mind development during the process.

Keywords: Discourse, New Historicism, Mentality, Context, Textuality, Interplay

Introduction

The great Iranian fiction writer, editor, and critic, Hushang Golshiri, was the first Iranian short story writer who was vehemently eager to experience bold novelties in Persian literature and every single piece of his writing carries the weight of some poignant humanist issues. Heshmat Moayyad remarks in his introduction to *Black Parrot, Green Crow* that “he was one of the few Iranian writers whose writings reached Europe and beyond in his own lifetime (14)”. He had a keen tendency to explore modern devices and styles such as stream of consciousness narrative to reconsider familiar concepts and events. Another significant factor which dominates his works is apparently his particular attitude toward social, political and cultural issues. In fact, as Moayyad goes on in his discussion of Golshiri:

“He had the nature of a political fighter. His participation in the anti-establishment struggles of the 1970s was not limited to the power of his pen. He also took part in the early stages of political activities that were organized by teachers, students, and other dissident groups” (12).

Having a brilliant awareness of the working class and dominant oppression prevalent then, he echoes the social and political facts in almost all of his stories. Regarding such considerations about the nature of Golshiri's writings, it will be rewarding to explore his stories in the light of New Historicist approach in order to come up with the ways in which his narrative embodies conflicting discourses which was present in his society and the extent to which these social, political and cultural discourses interplayed with each other. The selected story here is one of his remarkable short stories, “My China Doll”, which belongs to a collection of short stories called *My Little Prayer Room* (Namazkhane – ye – Kuchak- e – Man) published in 1975. I would like to scrutinize the story in terms of the already mentioned theories and related concepts of the New Historicists. Putting the story in specific social and political discourses of its time will shed light on the perception of the story as a *cultural product* of the clashing seventies in Iran. To begin with, a brief background of New Historicism approach will be presented and then their theories will be applied to the text itself.

New Historicism

New historicism developed in the late 1970s and it rejects both traditional historicism's view of literature that disregarded literary texts and that of New Criticism's which considers literature as something which exists in an everlasting dimension beyond history. New historicists believe that, as Lois Tyson puts it,

“Literary texts are cultural artefacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written. And they can do so because the literary text is itself part of the interplay of discourses, a thread in the dynamic web of social meaning” (291).

Actually, they argue that *texts* are created within *contexts* and this interplay of a historical context and the text it produces is of great importance in analysing literary works. New Historicists try to explore different influences and relations of literary texts and the social and cultural contexts. In other words, New Historicism is characterized by what Louis Montrose mentions as “a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of histories” (qtd. in Castle 131). New historicists consider literary works as the products of a particular culture which might be compelling to the readers of a specific time and place. They reflect the dominating ideology and the set standards of verity, authority, and power.

The New Historicists' view of history is not a mere background which formulates the framework of the narrative. It can be said that their goal in reading a literary work is to get an understanding of the history

and power relations in society. Moreover, they argue that all individualities and identities of the story are actually products of the dominant historical and social conditions of the story and it is formed in interaction with them. "The written word is self- consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, structures of power" (qtd. in Brannigan 60).

Discourse is another significant factor in New Historicism. According to Brannigan, "discourse, by which is meant all sign systems and generators of meaning, is the only material subject of study, and therefore the only route to the past, to self, to any form of knowledge" (62). In this view, therefore, discourse is the medium through which we shape our understanding of the characters as well as the way they were shaped by the author.

My China Doll

Golshiri's incredible "My China Doll" offers the story of a young Iranian girl, Maryam, who wonders about her father's fate since he has been taken away for ambiguous reasons. The story is narrated through stream of consciousness method in which we continually hear the girl talking to her broken china doll and a dwarf while she locates and relocates them in her room. Through her monologue we are presented with disrupted condition of her family with her father being in jail and finally executed. She presents us with all her family members by playing their roles. Thus, we encounter her mother, her uncle Naser, and her old grandmother who are continually negotiating the critical condition of her father while she seems to be perplexed by their words as a child who cannot exactly make sense of what critical events are going on around her. Golshiri begins the story with "Mommy says he's coming back, I know that he's not coming back. If he were coming back, Mommy wouldn't be crying, would she?" (Monajem 1). From the very beginning we are encountered with the dejected tone of the girl who is concerned about her father and her mind wanders from home to prison.

The Interplay of Discourses

Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* provides an example of a new historicist reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which can be readily applied to Golshiri's story as well. He argues that "Conrad's novel debunks the traditional historicist belief that history is progressive, that the human species improves over time; and its narrative structure, which obscures plot events behind a hazy veil of subjective description, implies that we do not have access to a clear, unbiased view of the past" (294). As many critics have remarked, Golshiri's narrators commonly reflect the continuing political rises and falls as well as portraying the agonizing victims of such conditions. Moayyed points out that "Golshiri engages his characters in a debate about the never- ending failures of political systems, repressive regimes, police brutality, ignorance of the masses, and lack of liberty and safety- particularly for intellectuals and dissidents" (14) .

Due to the publication of *My little Prayer Room* in 1975, the setting of "My China Doll" which appears in that collection is most probably in the uproar of the seventies Iran. Actually, the period between 1971 to 1978 is a remarkable period in the history of Persian literature and particularly in story writing as well. It was the period in which the greatest contemporary Persian writers appeared and published their most notable works. Fiction writers developed a new tendency towards the fundamental question of identity and its subjectivity within the society in which one lives. Gradually, the relationship of individual and society became one of the greatest concerns of the authors. Also, an interest in national and cultural heritage rose among literary circles.

Politically speaking, the condition of society was extremely oppressing and violent as a terrible guerrilla atmosphere dominated the society which caused a blunt and aggressive tone in the literature of the time. Persian literature of the period was highly influenced by both international and national events. The World War II and such movements as Socialism, Fascism, and Nihilism are among the transnational

impacts on Iranian writers of the time. Socialist movement provided an opportunity for Iranian writers to articulate the class struggle and misery of their people which was prevalent in the society. The concepts of rebellion and social insight altered the young generation of society. Armed campaign of those years changed people's perception of social struggle and created a new spiritual atmosphere in the country. What gradually appears in literature of the time consists mainly of the appreciation of armed campaign, description of prisons and tortures, and an expectation of something new to happen. "My China Doll" is affected by this political turmoil as the father of the family is apparently in jail for political reasons, most likely because of his anti-establishment activities.

The major political party of the period was The Mass Party (Hezb-e-Toude). As a communist party, it managed its activities mostly through the medium of nationalism with an emphasis on the individual rights of the people. However, gradually it came close to its collapse as an opposing force of the Islamists forces at the time.

Back to the story, the little girl presents and represents what had happened to her family through an internal monologue by talking to her China doll and a dwarf. Somewhere in the middle of the story, Maryam begins to talk about a big table with a large man sitting behind it and talking to her mother and grandma. They seem to have gone to a police station to negotiate her father's case, probably to request a visit:

Now you are that man. Your table is here, a very big table. Everything, I don't know is found on the table. Grandma and Mom and I entered the room. Uncle Naser did not come with us. He said, "You go, I wait for you in the ice-cream shop." (Golshiri 4)

Then, she talks of a woman who apparently comes to inspect them which clearly represents the suffocating and insecure conditions of the time. The way Maryam compares the woman with her own mother and even her father is highly suggestive in its own way. Her mother is represented as quite different from the woman who inspects them; she belongs ostensibly to a quite different class of society, the one who *frequently smile*:

Then a woman came. She was pretty, like my china doll.
No, that doll is Dad because it no longer is; it is Dad. That woman definitely is still around. She was like the women who talks on TV, no like those who read from the newspaper and smile frequently. Mother was crying. The day, I mean that day
"I did say the woman came and said: "Excuse me ladies." Then she said other things. She first put her hand on Grandmother's breasts. Grandma said, "But, Madam, I."
"Grandma!" Mother said.
She said it softly, but her face looked like when she says it loudly, like when she wants to scold me. She doesn't anymore. I wish she did. (Golshiri 5)

As it follows, we come to see that they have suggested releasing him under particular conditions. Golshiri artfully portrays the silencing dictatorship of the seventies that dominated Iran and the horrible social and political atmosphere which was created in society. Through Maryam's monologue it is implicitly stated that the meeting which involves her mom, grandma and herself at the police station is a negotiation to persuade the father to submit to the ruling establishment:

Mother said, "What if he does not accept?"
Dwarf, you should realize that Mother means Dad.
Now say, "Persuade him, repeat a few times till he learns."
Mother said nothing more. Grandma said: "He means my son."

Dwarfy, say, no, first he should knot his hands behind his back and move toward his desk. Then he should say, "Well, well. I don't know what else to say." (Golshiri 7)

Another significant discourse which is explored in a new historicist reading of this short story is the cultural discourse specific to the historical discourse of the story. Considering influential factors in the literary discourse of the seventies, television played an important role in revealing the terrible social conditions of the country. In fact, television had a substantial part in demonstrating the social, political, and cultural crisis that shadowed Iran in those years. "My China Doll" refers to television many times during the little girl's monologue indicating the fact that TV held an important role in their lives; she describes the woman who inspects them at the prison as similar to those women who perform on TV:

That woman definitely is still around. She was like the women who talks on TV, no like those who read from the newspaper and smile frequently. (Golshiri 5)

Now you read it. I don't know what. Just say something, like on the radio, or on Uncle Naser's TV. (Golshiri 4)

Turning to the author himself, Hushang Golshiri was a vigorous political and social activist in the seventies. In 1974, he was sentenced to six months imprisonment for the second time and was deprived of social rights such as his teaching career for five years. Perforce, he moved to Tehran in 1975 and it was there that he participated in weekly meetings with his old sophisticated friends. It was in such conditions that he wrote the collection *My Little Prayer Room*. The fact that Golshiri himself belongs to a working class family makes a contribution to his political and social activities as he suffered from financial problems during his childhood. His father took a job in the oil company in the south when he was five years old and it was during this period that his intellectual and emotional life started to shape. Later in his life, he entered the political field as a result of his own touching experience of oppression and unfair conditions. It is not surprising that his stories should bear strong traces of political and social discourses in which the author himself had played an active role.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, from a new historicist's approach, "My China Doll" is a short story which formed and was formed by various discourses prevalent at its point of origin. It is an embodiment of interrelated connections and relations of cultural, social and political discourses in the society of the seventies Iran.

Hushang Golshiri has artfully portrayed his characters within different contexts and frameworks to provide an overall perspective on a particular epoch of history and at the same time to reflect upon the influences of that specific historical period on literary productions of the age. Himself an active part of the political and social arena of the age, Golshiri presents the story as a product of that particular condition.

References

- Brannigan, John (1998). *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. New York/ ST. Martin's Press, INC.
Castle, Gregory (2007). *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*, Malden/ Blackwell Publishing.
Golshiri, Hushang (2012). *My China Doll*. Translation Roya Monajem. Ed. Katherine L. Clarke., Payvand. N. P. n. d. Web.

- Moayyad, Heshmat. Ed., (2003). *Black Parrot, Green Crow: A Collection of Short Fiction*. Washington D.C/ Mage Publishers.
- Tyson, Lois (2006). *Critical Theory Today: A User- Friendly Guide*. 2nd ed. New York/ Routledge.