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An Exploration of Politics, Identity and Cultural Consciousness in Tony Kushner's Selected Plays.

A Ph.D Thesis In English Literature Submitted by

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

مَنْ يَهْدِ اللَّهُ فَهُوَ الْمُهْتَدِ وَمَنْ يُضِلِّ فَلَنْ تَحِدَ لَهُ
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Great respect is due to my late father who wished to witness this moment. I wish to dedicate my humble work to my family who were very patient and helpful.

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Abstract

This study attempts an examination of the literary works of Tony Kushner (1956-) who preaches his political ideologies and beliefs through his drama. His plays reflect the hidden conflicts in the American society. He wrote plays that reveal his views about the social and political issues that troubled him as well as the minorities all over the world. His plays discuss various important themes like national identity, gender, social problems, anxiety and despair brought by man-made disasters. He visualizes the painful progress of seeking self-awareness and hope in the future in addition to the possibility of redemption for the human race in the present era through progress.

The thesis studies Kushner's drama in relation to politics, individualism, and cultural awareness. It examines his drama following the criteria of New Historicism approach.

The study comes to a conclusion that activism and change are the main tools Kushner used to move his audience towards progress.

*Key words: cultural identity, political identity, tolerance, minority literature, racial discrimination, progressivism.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This thesis attempts an analysis of Tony Kushner's plays from a New Historicist perspective. Within the thesis, the plays are arranged not according to a chronological order but rather to a thematic order. It studies nine of Tony Kushner plays; *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985), *Hydriotaphia, or the Death of Dr. Browne* (1987), *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part One: Millennium Approaches* (1991) *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (1992), *Slavs! Thinking about the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (1994), *Reverse Transcription: Six Playwrights Bury a Seventh; A Ten-Minute Play That's Nearly Twenty Minutes Long* (1996), *Homebody /Kabul* (1998), *Caroline, or Change* (2005), and *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy* (2003).

New Historicism is a school of literary criticism that was developed in the 1980s through the work of Stephen Greenblatt. As a literary school/approach, it became more influential in the 1990s. This theory is coined by Stephen Greenblatt (1943), a renaissance scholar and one of the co-founders of the literary-cultural journal *Representation* in 1983. He introduced the term 'New Historicism' through his articles and books that studied Shakespeare and the Renaissance. He often referred to his critical practice as 'cultural poetics'. He first used the term 'New Historicism' in his introduction to *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*. Greenblatt developed a methodology for reading the text in relation to history. The critic achieves this through moving away from the fixed history that forms a background for the imagination of the writer and looks at that historical moment as a source of conflict that moves on toward the present moment. M. H. Abrams defines New Historicism as "a mode of literary study that has its proponents oppose to the formalism they attribute both to New Criticism and the critical Deconstruction that follow it." (248). Greenblatt argues that the

text is very much related to the cultural, political and social context. He refuses the theory which says that the text is meaningful and can stand alone aside from its historical context. In *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, Greenblatt explains that the critic can depend primarily on the social, political and economic context to study the text. He calls this 'historicity'. The new historicist argues that the literary work or "literature should not be thought of as individual creations but as emanations of a cultural system and have to be understood in relation to the codes that operate to create meaning within that cultural system." (qtd. in Newton 113)

New Historicism is also defined as a term which is applied to a trend in American academic literary studies in the 1980s that emphasized "the historical natures of literary texts and at the same time (in contradistinction from 'old historicism') the 'textual' nature of history." (Drabble 719) As a reaction to the purely formal and linguistic critical schools like New Criticism and Deconstruction, the New Historicist makes new connections between the literary and the non-literary texts. The critic studies the text and finds links to the historical background showing how literary works are related to the events of its time. They are not just reflections of historical moments, but rather influential facts that might create or re-create. It does not tend to interpret the text, but rather gives theories about its meaning and discovers relationships between the literary text and the historical moment.

In *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: A History*, M.A.R. Habib argues that within the formula of the New Historicism matrix, all systems of thought, phenomena, institutions, works of art and all literary texts must be put within a historical perspective. This means that either texts or phenomena cannot and will not be torn from history and be examined or analysed in isolation or outside of the historical process. Habib refers to the fact that New Historicism believes in the inevitability of reading literature within a cultural context that separates the writer from his age and allows the critic to look at history through the literary man's eyes for a better understanding of history, culture and politics. It aims at understanding a literary piece through its historical context and comprehending the cultural and intellectual history through

literature. A new historicist searches in a literary text for points of struggle in order to give a clear definition of a certain entity or group in relation to power (147-150).

It calls for examining the text within an economic context as part of a structure of political and cultural discourse. In this case the economic dimension is given an equal priority like the political and the cultural but no more. In "Resonance and Wonder", Stephen Greenblatt argues that "cultural artefacts do not stay still, that they exist in time, and that they are bound up with personal and institutional conflict, negotiations, and appropriations" (11). According to him, culture is a living entity and the interaction within its components creates a lively energy that results in the creation of history. Greenblatt says that the main interest of a new historicist critic lies not in the "abstract universal but in particular, contingent cases, the selves fashioned and acting according to the generative rules and conflicts of a given culture" (12). He argues that facts like class, gender, race and national identity are forcibly influencing changes in the course of history. For him, every form of action is actually a strategy, for example revolting or taking a flight is in fact a significant social behaviour and staying put is likewise. Such behaviour is represented by a frame of an 'agency' within a social and historical context. The individual is no longer looked at apart from his social context, his behaviour, attitude and beliefs are examined to be part of a collective, social agency. Greenblatt believes that what appears to be an isolated power of the individuals' system of thought is in fact related to a larger collective social energy. Nothing appears to be decisive and final in this system of thought; what appears to be progressive in a certain frame turns into reactionary in another (34).

The New Historicist's intention, then, is to examine literature as one discourse among many cultural, political, and economical discourses. In other words, the New Historicist is involved in studying the entire complex pot in an attempt to figure out the final proportions of the formula named history. Within this process of examination the critic refuses to engage in categorical generalizations or commit himself to any political view point. Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" examines the concept of being an author, and gives clues and ideas that were

later taken up by New Historicism through arguing that analysing literature must not be restricted to the text itself or to the author's psychology and background, it should rather be a means to examine the context and cultural conventions in which that text was produced.

Greenblatt assures that he used the term 'New Historicism' to give the audience the feeling that it is totally different from the classical 'Historicism'. He is very specific when he writes "I used the term 'New Historicism' to describe an interest in the kinds of issues I have been raising-in the embeddedness of cultural objects in the contingencies of history"(24). He argues that there are three meanings for the term 'Historicism' which he discussed and tried to oppose in his article "Resonance and Wonder". The first meaning is that it refers to the belief that processes are at work in history and cannot be defied or altered by man. His answer to this is that if a critic looks at the issue from this perspective then definitely it is a very hard job for man to change or defy, yet looking at a set of "representational and political practices in the late sixteenth century could produce and even batten upon what appeared to be their own subversion" (24). Showing this does not mean that the idea of changing history is impossible but rather it reflects the "aestheticized and idealized politics of the imagination" (Greenblatt 24).

The second meaning of Historicism is that it must avoid all value judgments in the study of past periods or cultures. Greenblatt says that any neutral or indifferent relation between the past and the present is impossible since being neutral is in itself a sort of political position; it is a decision to give support to the policies of both the academy and the state in one way or another. Thus a critic cannot separate himself or be prevented from bringing analogies and causalities to understand both the past and the present since they are very much related. Finally, Historicism is meant to be veneration of the past, or of tradition, and in this field Greenblatt argues that new historicists have been more interested in the unresolved conflict and the contradiction rather than integration. They are very much interested in both the centre and the margins turning away from examining and celebrating the achieved aesthetic order to explore more about

the ideological and material bases through the production of the order called literature. He comments that as a result of the above;

there is a tendency in at least some new historical writings ... for the focus to be partially displaced from the work of art that is their formal occasion onto the related practices that had been adduced ostensibly in order to illuminate that work (Greenblatt 26) .

New Historicism then proposes a new or an alternative history to the conventional established historical accounts and practice through which literary texts have been largely studied. This study attempts a comprehensive analysis of the historical context of Tony Kushner's plays as well as the playwright's ideology and thought. It shows how literature is strongly bound to its political, social, cultural, and economic context. Thus to achieve the goal of the study certain techniques will be followed; first, the study will seek to find meaning in the text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. Second, it will be concerned with the political function of literature and with the concept of power, the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce it. Finally, it will focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority (not a "truth" but a "cultural construct") reflected in a given work.

The selected plays represent a hectic era in the history of modern America and the world. Through these plays, Kushner comments on the political scene with an attempt to change it. Thus, the study attempts to investigate the following issues in his theatre; first, whether refusing the 'Other' is considered to be the reason behind social and political conflict. Second, whether literature is able to re-read history in a way that create rapprochement between foes. Finally, whether Kushner was able to achieve his goal in giving a theory that replaces the known existing theories in which he offers a solution to the current situation humanity is facing. After the Second World War, the face of the world had changed and human beings started to look at life

from different perspectives. They were driven by an urgent need for change which they expressed in different ways.

In America, people witnessed radical change after the Second World War. Roosevelt started to work on a project that unites industry with the government through offering business executives key positions under his own supervision. This created a partnership that brought science, government and business together creating a strong and solid foundation for the future progress. This project, which started in the 1940s, gave way to the seeds of the 'American Dream' to grow stronger and shine brighter. Despite the fact that the war ended with a tremendous number of American casualties, the victory Americans felt was not because of winning the war, but rather because they achieved the progress and managed to pass the economic crisis successfully. Such a victory shaped the image of the United State as a leading political and industrial power. Ruland believe that after the Second World War America moved away from the experimental excitements of the 1920s, and the frightening radical self-analysis of the 1930s. With the coming of the late- 1940s, America was living an era of post-war, and postmodern culture (Ruland 370). The five decades following the Second World War proved that America was moving towards achieving scientific, technological, economic and military power over the world.

Yet, within this frame of power, there were different struggling forces that held a strong impact on the American society. This struggle was expressed in different ways, and the most obvious means of which were literary works. The question of 'Identity Politics' was rising among the social and political activists revealing the division in the American society. It showed America as a boiling pot, a multi-cultural society, or as Thomas Davidson describes it a nation of nations in which different cultures are struggling to reconcile (1037). The fact that American society consists of various minorities fighting for identification and acceptance is not new. It goes back in history to the time when America was still an emerging British colony. Since that date, minorities were marked and labelled according to different categories and titles be they religion, political orientation, colour, or even sex.

Coming out of the Second World War with a victory that astonished the world and introduced a new power in the political scene moved America into a new level in world politics. Richard Ruland comments that this position of power is reflected by the American writers who grew more open to history and the global proliferation of style and form. They expressed the sometimes depressing new span of human knowledge (372). They shed light on the difficult life of people who had long been seen by the American society as the 'Other', and they achieved their aim through showing everyday conflicts those 'Others' were facing. They demonstrated that the means by which the American history and culture were presented have excluded the role of the minorities. Discussing the issue of 'Identity Politics' revealed that history did not acknowledge the real and effective role these people played in shaping modern America simply because they were considered 'Others' and not really part of the general society.

Conservatives, on the other hand, saw 'Identity Politics' as a dangerous weapon that would destroy American unity and thus fighting back was inevitable. This struggle was between the 'Other', who include all the minorities in the United States, and those who called themselves defenders of the American unity, or real Americans, or the White-Americans. It started early in the history of America and reached its peak during the 1960s. Davidson writes that for Americans in all walks of life, the conflict that controlled America in the 1960s was influential and strong. Symptoms as well as results of this conflict could be seen in schoolrooms and lunch counters of the South, in the college campuses of the North, in the slums of the East, and the Western migrants' labour camps. The society was sinking in a wave of hatred and enmity (978).

The events that hit America during the 1960s grew out of the social conditions that preceded those years. It was the result of a suffering that lasted for a long time and was mainly caused by racial segregation. This racial segregation was basically directed against the biggest group among the minorities. It was obviously shown in the manner White-Americans dealt with African-Americans. One of the practices that reflected segregation against