



## NEW HISTORICAL CRITIQUE OF MOHAMMAD ASAD'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY THE ROAD TO MAKKAH

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### Abstract

*This research aims to critically examine Muhammad Asad's autobiography The Road to Mecca, by using new historicism as a primary methodology. This research work explores the text through this critical framework to uncover the socio-cultural factors that shape its meaning. This study examines the writer's personal experiences, ideology and cultural identity which influence the representation of ancient and cultural contexts in the text under study. The impact of socio-political conditions are eminent in the text, it is clear that his writing was affected by some certain socio-political factors. The text is the depiction of Europe in the post-World War 1 scenario, which reflected a sense of disillusionment and fragmentation. Asad's conversion to Islam can be seen as a response to this disillusionment. The text is analyzed under the lens of New Historicism specifically the socio-cultural and historical perspectives presented in this text.*

### Introduction

New historicism is a literary theory which investigates to comprehend literary works as the product of their historical and cultural contexts. It is against the new critics' idea that literature is only the product of individual author's imagination rather it is considered to be the result of the amalgamation of time, location and historical conditions. The literary works are formed by the social, political, and cultural forces of that time. New historicism accepts view of Derrida that there is nothing out there, everything about past is in the textualised form. It emerged in 1980 as a response to traditional historical approaches that saw history as a direct evolution of events.

The foundation of new historicism was laid on the ideas of Stephen Greenblatt who emphasized the importance of understanding literature as product of historical context. Foucault (1969) a historian should aim to search that what are the ways employed by history to reveal several pasts, how connections are established among several forms, several hierarchies expressing significance and several networks of determination.

New Historicists also emphasize on the effect of perception in relation to events. Basically, the focus of the new historicists is the idea that change over time is eminent in the historical narrations, while historicists highlight the absolute and unchanged idea of historical facts. New Historicism is a form of approach used to examine pieces of literature particularly those which have associations to their external frameworks. Greenblatt (1982) shaped the principles of New Historicism: literature is a historical narration that means that all literary texts are the outcome of various societal and cultural situations and powers. Literature establishes another viewpoint to the history. Works cannot exceed history and are frequently formed by social and administrative powers. Literary texts are the creation of the philosophy of the phase in which they are composed. Literature must be understood in relation to its historicity since history shapes all literature.

Historicism can be comprehended as literary works can guide us to comprehend the time where they are established – realist writings in the specific contexts deliver creative illustrations of particular historical



situations and incidents; though, fictional texts are secondary to historical documents. Though new historicism is described as literary works are connected with further discourses and linguistic organizations; they belong to a history that is still being written. (Muller, 2013)

Muhammed Asad was an Austro-Hungarian Jewish, later he converted to Islam and he worked as journalist, writer, traveler, political theorist and diplomat. His father was barrister and married to daughter of rich local banker. His uncle Dorian was a psychoanalyst and one of the primary disciples of Freud. He was the one who invited him to visit Arab, which become turning point in his life. As he wrote in his book that if anybody had informed me that moment that my main connection with the Islamic world would extend far beyond a mere holiday experience and, indeed, become a moment of transformation in my life, I would have mocked the idea as completely ridiculous. (p.74). In 1914, he escaped from school and joined Austrian army under a false name to take part in First World War. He studied history of art and philosophy at the University of Vienna. But he wanted to pursue his career as a journalist; he dropped out from university in 1920 and travelled to Middle East where he transformed to Islam in 1926.

His remarkable work is 'The Message of the Quran', an English translation of Quran. Asad's *The Road to Makkah* is one of his significant works. It was published in 1954, it's a memoir and travelogue, this book is about his conversion to Islam and journey towards Makkah. This book is divided into three sections; Asad's early life as a Jewish journalist, his experiences in the Middle East and conversion to Islam and journey towards Makkah and experiences with King Ibn-e-Saud's court. It's a text of autobiographical nature and he wrote about the happenings and things that inspired him and brought a change to his life completely. This book is about his personal experiences, cultural and social impacts on his life and challenges which he faced on his journey towards Makkah.

The impact of First World War on Europeans is also described in this book in such words the initial years of 20<sup>th</sup> century stood as the symbol of a spiritual emptiness. War created feelings of bitterness and insecurity among the people. Asad had no faith but he felt dissatisfaction in his inner self. As he wrote that "there is one thing, I cannot comprehend that it is difficult to achieve through intellect alone to knowledge and to virtuous life; belief is required. But how does one achieve faith if one has none?" (p. 78). Asad described the world as materialistic world in *The Road to Makkah* in such words, all people were focused solely in external social and economic conditions to build better and happier world. And they had elevated their materialistic idea of history to a form of anti-metaphysical metaphysics. The typical European whether republican or socialist, physical employee or theoretical appeared to know only one progressive faith: the worship of material development.

Destruction of World Wars had an undeniable impact on the authors of the age. Several well-known authors were murdered in those World Wars. Many people got severely injured in conflicts. On the other hand, capitalism and mechanization were manipulating excluded, miserable, depressed, troubled, deprived, and destitute and lower class of society. Development occupied the public with violence. Individuals were flourishing enormously at the price of spiritual, ethical and spiritual standards. Therefore, these things led to the world a more ridiculous place for existing. Authors of the period were significantly affected by these conditions. They portrayed these conditions in their works. Muhammad Asad's autobiography *The Road to Mecca* is nominated in current literature. This book is a well illustration of present people of Western mystical impoverishment and isolation. This volume is a rich debate on people of western spiritual bareness that disperses isolation throughout their lives.

Even modern author is concerned to portray through his texts by what he means how these modifications impacted people. How an individual might endure in this world and conquest the world. In the current era, systematic development is happening. People are busy in developing machineries. Due to this systematic



development people started to consider that they could even govern their own destiny. Everybody is busy in making efforts to advance. Nobody is concerned about the other person. Each individual starts to consider himself as a pivot point of this world. Nothing persists significant for them except for their own life. Philosophers symbolize an individual in their text as Muhammad Asad emphasizes individuality in Western circumstances in his book *The Road to Mecca*. Muhammad Asad merges representation of West with the pictures of Muslim world.

### **Objectives of the study**

This research work aims to focus on the following objectives;

1. To analyze Asad's *The road to Makkah* under the lens of New Historicist theory,
2. To examine the role played by historical events, like world war and collapse of the Ottoman Empire on Asad's journey.

### **Significance of the study**

This research work delivers a deeper comprehension of how cultural and social factors impact the character's lives and these beliefs and cultural norms shape their perspectives and choices. This work aims to explore social, cultural and historical factors in new historicism approach because it is untouched which makes this study significant and authentic. *The Road to Makkah*, which is quite famous autobiography, needs to be explored in this new approach which helps to understand the play in new personal and historical perspective.

### **Research questions**

This work will give the answers of following questions:

1. What is the historical context and time period of author's life in which book was written influence the narrative and themes of "*The Road to Mecca*"?
2. How can New Historicism enhance our understanding of historical cultural and personal experiences during early 20<sup>th</sup> century? Why there is a need to explore *The Road to Makkah* in new historicist approach?

### **Limitations of the study**

The research focuses only over a single work of writer, and its findings are specific to this work alone. So, the results should not be generalized to the writer's other work which may exhibit different themes, style or characterizations.

### **Literature Review**

Greenblatt (1980), gave a new framework for analysis that offers a fresh perspective on Muhammad Asad's autobiographical work, "*The Road to Makkah*". This approach emphasizes the connection of literature and history, encouraging a nuanced understanding of the text within its cultural, social, and political contexts.

New historicists generally begin to examine a literary work through placing it with a non-literary work that can be referred as a narrative. New historicists organize this to connect the literary text with reality as well as in doing so, draw few broader conclusions. Michael Payne (2005) observes that a common method in new historicism is to start by a prominent occasion or narration that has the consequence of developing uncertainty about magnificent historical narratives or oversimplified metaphors of a historic age like the Renaissance.

Hayden White (1973) and Dominick LaCapra (1985) have demonstrated how historical narratives are constructed and shaped by the author's subjective experiences, biases, and cultural background. Applying this perspective to "*The Road to Makkah*", we can examine how Asad's conversion to Islam and his subsequent journey to Makkah are not only personal transformations but also reflections of the tumultuous historical context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Martin Kramer (1999) that it is a remarkable book in history and fusion of two different genres of literature: A memoir and travelogue which narrates the journey of conversion to Islam traversing the deserts of Europe and Arabia. He analyzes that the journey of Mohammed Asad led him to its real destination.

Greenblatt(1982) launched the term New Historicism in his edition of the journal "Genre". New Historicism aims to reveal to situate literature in the context of the societal, administrative and financial conditions reflecting the period at which that one was written. According to New Historicism, literature is deeply connected to the world's political, socio-economic factors. It blurs the line between literature and its context, seeing all works as component of a larger social and radical landscape (Ali & Otoluwa, 2021).

Literature, according to New Historicism is attached from communal, civil, and financial practice as it is a part of literature. From this, the separation between external and internal can no more be upheld. Since all the texts are the similar, both fictional and non-fictional, is a power struggle from ideology (Budianta, 2006a)

New historicism views historical reports as narrative, as stories, which are usually not normally avoided from the point of view of those who wrote them. In the thought of new historicism, historical facts are not absolutely indisputable, because history itself consists of various versions that are full of contradictions, plurality and very various underlying motives. Based on the above quotation the connection among fiction and non-fiction is the intertextuality linkage between various kinds of texts both fiction and factual produced at the same time and at different periods of time (Budianta, 2006b).

Barry (2002) New Historicism emphasizes on the revolutionary nature of writing. He also presents that new historicism is inclined to be rebellious, always indirectly aligned with liberal models of individual independence. Later, the association among New Historicism and power connection is prepared through numerous opponents and writers of literary theory.

Giddens resists that writing should be construed in its communal, national and radical circumstances: to understand the values of a text considering how its original authors and readers would have interpreted it. It means to explore the text in the eyes of those wrote and read it at first (Giddens, 1986)

Ferguson describes that Literature was considered as a (copied) image from the ancient time when it was shaped. Moreover, history was observed as a clear, factual, and accurate story of what really occurred. It is also an indication of diversity of new historicism from other analytical concepts are the amalgamation plus reflection of social, communal, radical, and cultural dissertations influence society at any time. This broad method works as a bridge among new historicism with cultural materialism and cultural studies, combining together through shared methodologies and concerns. (Ferguson, 2010)

Sibaii describes that this book is more than just unique description of his adventures and it blends with history, politics, intellectual exploration and novelistic storytelling book. He refers to it as a novel book because it is a personal narrative that depicts the life of Asad, delves into the world of Islam and Muslim culture, his experiences and inner struggles. He distinguishes Asad from other Western writers who write about Islam superficially, without genuine understanding. Instead, he immerses himself in the Muslim community, engages in in-depth discussions with Islamic scholars, and observes the community closely, allowing him to write about Islam with a depth of knowledge.

Pietruszynski (2006) says that new historical theories believe that the meaning of a book depends on when and where it was written and it not comes from the text itself. He also notes that New Historicism provides a framework which helps us to use literature to understand current social problems by examining the context in which texts were written.

Collette describes new historicism as a modern literary theory that focuses on how to explore societal factors such as actions, settings, and cultural norms within a society to shape the meaning and



interpretation of a written work. New historicists examine the references to historical features, events and cultural norms of the time period in which they were written. (Collette, 2012)

Wiedenmann (2007) observes that new historicism aims to reveal and analyze the hidden power dynamics and social associations rooted within the text. She claims that every text is measured as a product of its time and shaped by specific historical circumstances and thus filled with national, radical and communal components.

Colebrook (1997) new historicism investigates the relationship between text and historical context. However, she says that the interaction between the text and the world, and materiality of text and its interpreted meaning should be examined by any critical approach. The relationship among the text and its historical context is dynamic, as history can be viewed as a text, and the text is shaped by non-discursive forces.

Gallagher (1989) suggests that the technique of analyzing a literary text through a new historicist lens which involves reading both fictional and nonfictional texts as part of a broader historical narratives that exist both within and outside the text. It suggests that it considers both context and co-text elements of a text.

This methodology is a field of study that is engaged with the social investigation of senses and practices of daily life. Social practices include the techniques to engage people in specific practices in a particular cultural context. It developed in the late twentieth century. Many academics have argued the social viewpoint as an approach of study. Bauerlein (1997) says that social studies conceal daily life containing social practices, finances, policies, layout, past, competition, group, civilization, concept and training, sex, and authority. By employing these key concepts of society some undeniable results can be extracted.

Nawwab (2002), Assad as a talented young writer, a traveling linguist who boarded on a journey to Makah, as reflected in his book the road to Mecca. This travelogue brought to surface the hardships and the reasons behind his way to Makkah

Kramer (1999) considers the road to Makah a remarkable book that combines biography and travelogue genres, telling the narrative of Assad's transformation to Islam and his travels across Europe and Arabia. Kramer's study also explores various aspects of Assad's life.

Muhammad Asad in the text of road to Mecca emphasizes the internal state of individuals residing in the Western world. He describes the internal distress, isolation, psychological distresses, and leer stellars and "solitary masses" of westerns outwardly appear joyful, peaceful and content. Muhammad Asad discovered concealed pressures and concerns behind their beams. He depicts the culture, seemingly developing, prosperous, thriving, blossoming and progressing but in fact fading, failing, decreasing and declining.

Asad's work can be perceived as a negotiation between his European heritage and his embrace of Islamic culture, echoing the tensions between tradition and modernity that characterized the era. New Historicist analysis allows us to situate Asad's narrative within the broader discourse of Orientalism, colonialism, and the search for spiritual identity that defined the time period. The literature review reveals that New Historicism offers a rich framework for exploring the intersections of history, culture, and personal narrative in "The Road to Makkah", providing a more nuanced comprehension of Asad's experiences and the context in which he wrote.

Devera (2008) proposes the author's journey towards Islam, this thing does not make it unique, rather the thing makes it unique is despite being raised in a Jewish community and studying with rabbinical scholars, and he didn't feel drawn to Jewish culture. Instead, he became interested in Eastern languages and studied the Quran. And ultimately became an Islamic scholar rather than Jewish Talmud.



Tugulan (2012) considers it as a type of literary criticism that explores how a writer's life and time period influence their writing. This approach examines the connection between a writer's biography and their literary works. He elaborates that biographical criticism isn't just about author's life but also about how the writing itself reflects the attitudes, tones and other elements of time and place in which it was written.

### **Theoretical framework**

This research employs a New Historicist approach to analyze Muhammad Asad's "The Road to Makkah", examining the text as a cultural antique rooted in a complex network of historical, social, and political contexts. Through this lens, we will uncover how Asad's experiences as a Jewish-born convert to Islam, his engagement with European modernity, and his involvement in Islamic reform movements inform his narrative. By situating the text within the intersecting discourses of colonialism, orientalism, and Islamic reform, this study will reveal how Asad's work reflects the intellectual and political currents of his time, offering a nuanced understanding of the text's cultural significance and its continued relevance in contemporary debates on religion, identity, and globalization.

This research work will deal with the question how First World War impacted on the minds of westerners as the war's aftermath led to a crisis of identity in the West, and traditional values and beliefs were questioned. Asad's conversion to Islam can be seen as a response to this crisis, as he seeks a new sense of purpose and meaning.

### **New Historicist framework:**

New Historicism is an approach employed in literary studies especially those that have connections to their broader perspectives. Stephen Greenblatt introduced this concept in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its main principle is the explanation of texts with respect to the background from where it developed. Historicism is described as an approach in literary texts so it can benefit us to comprehend the period at which those are established – radical works especially deliver creative depictions of particular ancient moments, occasions or eras, where fictional writings are secondary to historical accounts.

### **Cultural Framework:**

Cultural analysis approach is a method of research which engaged with the social study of implication & approaches of everyday routines. Cultural approaches consist of the methods individual make sure of specific things in a society. It established in the late twenties. Numerous intellectuals argue that social perception offers a valuable approach in research. Kharbe (2009) describes cultural studies as an interdisciplinary field that fuses perspectives from political economy, communication, sociology, social theory, literature, film and video studies and art history to understand cultural dynamics within various societies.

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