

POLITICAL TRADITIONS AND POWER STRUCTURES IN H.G. WELLS'S: *THE ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU*

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Abstract: The objective of the paper is to portray New Historicism as a literary theory to explain political traditions and power structures in the scientific novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H.G. Wells, a leading American novelist who is today best known as “The Father of Science Fiction”. The protagonist Montgomery stands as a positive symbol of exploration and realization, whereas, Dr. Moreau creates human-like beings from genetic manipulation of animals and treats them in a really harsh and cruel manner by imposing strict rules and regulations. The present paper explores H.G Wells’ personal experiences in Victorian Age, and it also analyses how his meeting with Hitler and Joseph Stalin in Soviet Russia has a great influence on this work. The paper also gives vivid details of political traditions and power structures of the human-like beings created by Moreau.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘New Historicism’ is coined by Stephen Greenblatt (1943), an American literary critic in the early 1980s. It is not radically new, but represents a return to certain focus of analysis as developed by previous tradition of historicism (Habib 760). New Historicism is a theory in literary criticism that suggests literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. It is a method of literary criticism that emphasizes the history of a text by relating it to the configurations of power, society or ideology in a given time (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>).

Historical and Cultural Aspects

Literature must be read within the context of culture, discourses, politics, religion and its economic context. The history has given importance to certain identifiable laws, predictability and explanatory power. The recognition that societies and cultures are separated in time, values and beliefs helps one to understand a literary text at its best.

The circulation of literary and non-literary texts produces associations of social authority surrounded by a culture. *New Historicists* believe that all texts of expression are embedded in the material circumstances of a culture. Texts are examined to show how they reveal the economic and social realities, especially as they produce ideas and represent authority. It gives attention to historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis.

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New Historicism as a Paradigm to Study the Literary Text: *The Island of Dr. Moreau*

Louis Montrose says, New Historicism deals with the “textuality of history and the historicity of texts”. Textuality of history refers to the idea that history is constructed and fictionalized, and the historicity of text refers to its inevitable embedment within the socio-political conditions of its production and interpretation. Foucault’s primary concern has been the role of power relationship and the discursive formations in society that make knowledge possible. Foucault has understood power as continually articulated on knowledge and vice versa; that knowledge always endorses the position of the powerful and that knowledge is created by power structures.

Like Foucault has analysed the influence of the power structures on the knowledge of work produced, these cultural facts have a great influence on this work. Apart from the embedment within the socio-political conditions of Queen Victoria, his meeting with Hitler in Germany and Joseph Stalin in Soviet Russia also has an important role in this novel. His own political views including his aversion towards their autocratic government, especially their rules and hegemonic ideals imposed on the people are also reflected in the novel. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is a synthesis of all the facts discussed above.

An Introduction to the Novel: *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896)

The Island of Dr. Moreau is the second science fiction novel written by H.G. Wells, who has called the novel as “an exercise in youthful blasphemy”. The novel is narrated by Edward Prendick, the nephew of the protagonist, Prendick. Prendick is a shipwrecked man rescued by Montgomery who is left on the island home of Doctor Moreau. Moreau creates human-like beings from animal’s genetic manipulation.

The Portrayal of Class and Government in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*

The events of the story provide an unflattering account of authoritarian rule, by showing how humans have formed some rules to control the beast men. Moreau has created a race of sub humans; he plays a role of a dictator and Montgomery as second-in-command. Wells’s class sympathies and his later communism are embedded in the novel. The Beast Men even take a Marxist revenge toward the end of the story. They have destroyed all things and killed Montgomery and Moreau who are the representatives of the hegemonic authorities.

The Victorian age has showed great development of scientific invention and great evolution. It is well reflected in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. In the novel, he has used the concept of animal vivisection. This novel indirectly deals with the political relationships and power structures. For instance, the antagonist Moreau himself creates a separate government and creates strict rules against Beast people.

So New Historicism is the suitable theory to analyse this novel as it deals much with power structures, politics, and religion as well as cultural relationship.

Scientific Imperialism and the Aftereffects Portrayed in the Novel

In this particular time, the Victorian people have believed that based on scientific inventions and developments, all the problems can be solved. Even though H.G. Wells has belonged to Victorian Age, he has viewed that all the problems cannot totally be solved by the scientific developments. He says that if we do not use science in proper manner, it can be the sole reason for the destruction of the world. These ideas are reflected in his early novels including, *The Time Machine (1896)*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau (1896)*, *The War of The Worlds (1898)*. In this novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, H.G. Wells explicates about scientific imperialism, because in this novel apart from the Victorian political tradition, he constructs a different political tradition. These ideas are shown through the character Dr. Moreau. He has done his graduation in Biology under Huxley in London. Then he starts to do his vivisection experiment in London but he does not continue his vivisection experiment because the people of London does not co-operate with him. So he pushes off from London and starts his vivisection experiments in the Island. Then he continues the experiment with the help of his assistant Montgomery and they import animals from Africa, and Moreau creates human-like beings using these animals. Then he controls all beings but at last Moreau gets killed by those Beast people which he has created. So Dr. Moreau has done all those things through the idea of scientific biology, thereby he misuses his scientific education. He has used scientific vivisection experiment. So this great experiment happens only through the impact of scientific imperialism.

Possible Dangers of Scientific Progression

In this novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Moreau's actions are monstrous. Wells has not created a one-dimensional antagonist. Moreau is urged by scientific curiosity and lacks compassion. This particular scientific objectivity is understandable if it is for the betterment of human beings. Even his actions are not purely objective. It is quite contrary; they result from his overlapping desire to cause scientific "progress", which would finally lead to his own destruction.

He has believed that socialism can bring advancement to the society. However, he has been aware of the fact that certain scientific advancements can be dangerous to the society. Wells has been tapping into a common concern about amorality of "progress", because many people in his period have worried that man is overstepping his authority and entering the domain of divinity. Moreau's vivisections have expressed the dangers of science and technology. Moreau's speech to Prendick in defense of his activities is especially relevant, he claims among other things that

pain and pleasure are irrelevant. But as a man of reason, Prendick find it difficult to go with his ideologies.

The Limitations of Men on the Control of Natural Behavior

In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the Island setting is low and covered with thick vegetation, chiefly of palm trees. The beach is of dull grey sand, and is sloped steeply upon a ridge perhaps sixty or seventy feet above the sea-level. Moreau has done his experiment in vivisection and has created creatures like human beings. Their appearances are totally different from human beings. Moreau has continued his experiment and has tried to control their emotional feelings and food habits. So he creates prohibition law and makes them to eat vegetarian food. At last, when Moreau has killed Leopard man, beast people have started to think about their originality and behave like human beings. Suddenly their Monster characters come out of them, and they show their monstrous character towards Moreau, Montgomery and they killed them. Moreau has successfully changed their appearance and even controlled their food habit to a certain extent, but he cannot control their own animalistic behaviour and emotions. Their own naturalistic character comes out through their genetic and through the influences of the society. It shows that all the things happen through the nature and nature cannot be controlled by a man and when men forget this fact it leads to their own destruction.

The Limitations of Autocracies in Producing a Stable Society

In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, H.G. Wells has written against autocracy because he has met Hitler in Germany and Joseph Stalin in Soviet Russia, and he has disliked their autocratic government, especially the way they imposed the hegemonic ideals on the people. So H.G. Wells has represented these influences in this novel through the character of Dr. Moreau. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* presents a totalitarian regime, and Moreau is totally autocratic because his vegetarianism has been compared with Hitler. Through his experiments, he has produced human like beings including, Leopard Man, Sayer of the Law, Hyena Swine, Sloth Creature, Dog Man, Ape Man, etc. These Beast people have a separate village and they live as a small society. In this society, Moreau has created more than hundred people who are innocent. They are expected to chant the prohibition law created by Moreau. But these prohibition laws are not beneficial for the beast people. It is only beneficial and comfortable for Moreau, because all the works are done by the beast people and he uses beast people like slaves for his works. These beast people are totally dominated by Moreau like Hitler who has dominated his people and his country. In the beginning, beast people are scared of Moreau and Montgomery, and they respect and response to them out of fear, but later they started disobeying his laws by eating flesh, drinking wine and tasting blood. Then Moreau and Montgomery find out that Leopard Man has begun

to behave against their law. So they kill Leopard Man, and this creates a realization in the beast people and they start thinking about their own lives. Finally they kill Moreau and Montgomery in a very cruel manner. Likewise in Germany, Hitler has dominated people and at last they have retaliated back at Hitler and tortured him very cruelly. In the novel, Moreaus' dead body is found in an unknown place in the forest, which resembles that of Hitler's condition. So in this novel, Dr. Moreau's autocracy cannot produce a stable society, which again is a mirror reflection of the final consequence of Hitler's rule.

Deception and Exploitation of the Middle Class (Animals) By the High Class (Humans)

There are two different power structures in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*: Beast Folks who represent Middle Class people and Human beings who represent the high class people. Moreau, Montgomery and Prendick belong to High Class society because all the three have done biology under Huxley, and they have given less importance to the beast people because they belong to a different community. Beast people do not know how to behave and speak with others. But High Class people speak good English. In this Island, Moreau has created prohibition laws to the beast people that they should not drink blood and wine and should not to eat flesh or fish but only herbs and leaves, however human beings have never followed these rules. Montgomery and Prendick eat non-vegetarian food and drink wine. Though beast people are deceived and exploited by human beings, they are totally dependent on beast people, because without beast people they cannot live. Likewise in London, capitalists deceived the labour class.

The protagonist of the novel Prendick never supports the ideologies of Moreau and Montgomery, he is against the way they exploit the beast people. H.G Wells own life has some similarities with that of the protagonist. Even though he has been a member of the Socialist Fabian Society, he has moved away from the society when he has found their ideologies are different from his perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Even though the whole story has fantastic and dreamlike elements in it, it actually connotes the political background of the era. The rule of Hitler in Germany and Joseph Stalin in Russia has not been much different from Moreau's version in the Island. Like the leaders, he also suppresses the beast people without giving them much opportunity to think freely. It is well evident when Moreau kills the Leopard man who realizes that they are controlled by Moreau in an injustice manner, and he realizes that they have the real power within them to rescue themselves from the hands of Moreau. He therefore volunteers to be the leader to bring together the suppressed beast people, but Moreau takes the worst step and kills him. The

people living in Germany and Russia have had similar life style where they have been expected to bear everything silently without questioning.

In the same way, the Victorian people's excess passion for science and scientific experiments is also portrayed in the novel in a satirical manner. The beast people also represent the real people of England during that time. They quarrel each other without respecting each other. The beast people represent the lower class people of England, whereas Prendick, Moreau and Montgomery represent the higher class people of England.

From the above analysis it is evident that all these political traditions and power structures are important for the better understanding of the novel. The author's own personal experiences also play a significant role to impart meaning to the novel. Therefore the new historicistic way of reading is effective to understand different layers of meaning of the particular novel rather than the New Critics way of reading a text as a whole entity.

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