

# Dramatizing Abu Ghraib's Plight: A New Historicist Reading of Judith Thompson's Palace of the End

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## Abstract

Providing an in-depth understanding of Abu Ghraib's overwhelming experience through the venue of literature requires a neutral approach of literary criticism and literary theory. In this context, New Historicism, which appears in the last decades of the 20th century via the works of Stephen Greenblatt (1943 – present), seems to be one of the most objective critical approaches that simultaneously interpret literature and history. The proposed paper aims at reflecting on the muffled voices of torture inside Abu Ghraib prison as well as the American sense of Selfness and patriotism by peering into the socio-historical and politico-cultural backgrounds that surround and permeate Judith Thompson's Palace of the End (2007). The play, arguably speaking, provides a peculiar representation of Abu Ghraib's abusive events through the perspective of the convicted American soldier Lynndie England.

**Keywords:** Abu Ghraib, New Historicism, Palace of the End, Self and Other.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

New Historicism is an approach to literary criticism and literary theory that interprets literature through the backdrop of history. The context of history, according to New Historicists, of course, is not fixed but rather dynamic. The approach appeared in the 1980s through the works of Stephen Greenblatt whose book *Renaissance Self Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) is usually considered as its beginning. New Historicism emerges from the pressing need for a well-balanced strategy for interpreting literature under the umbrella of the socio-historical and politico-cultural contexts. As such, it opposes, above all, the autonomous aesthetic merit of literature stressed by Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, and Hermeneutics (Cuddon 469). Due to the fact that the previous historical approaches, namely Old Historicism, consider literature as a mere reflection of history that consists of fixed and close-ended truth, New Historicism puts literature and history within an

equal scale of interpretation each influencing the other and questions the validity of historical records and archival sources.

James Collette (3) defines New Historicism as a contemporary literary theory that concentrates on how the politics, history, and culture of a society affect a written text. In a similar context, Sara Upstone describes New Historicism as “a reading practice in which fiction and non-fiction texts are read alongside each other with equal attention being given to each source” (227). Within the same framework, Peter Barry argues that New Historicism advocates “a parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts” (166). Barry suggests that this equipoise of analysis is offered by the New Historicist Louis Montrose, whose concept of “the textuality of history and the historicity of the text” seems to foreground this idea. For New Historicists, mainly influenced by Michel Foucault's “The Life of the Author” (1969), the author's life simulates the mechanism by which the text is



manufactured. The structure of the text, in this regard, is colored by the author's ideology, beliefs, and other factors. Following this, however, the systematic examination of the functions of the authors is one of the peculiarities of the approach.

New Historicism, with no doubt, is a post-modern trend in literary theory, a practical recipe for historiography, and a peculiar model of culture study. In addressing culture, Clifford Geertz (1988 - 1921), being inextricably related to the cultural soil of New Historicism, intends to investigate the complicity of cultural codes with ideologies that reinforce or shape the cultural domain. In his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz defines culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (89). He formulates the idea that culture itself is a text and, therefore, must be examined along with literature. Most importantly, the Geertzian model of "thick descriptions" stands out as one of the most crucial configurations that New Historicists rely upon. The term was coined by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976) but then developed and popularized by Geertz, who used it to help him within his own scheme of ethnography. If things are thinly described, Geertz argues, an incoherence meaning would arouse.

That is, New Historicism deemed a literary text as placed within the discourses that model "the overall culture of a particular time and place and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes." (Abrams 182). Norman Denzin, in the same context, explains that: "A thick description goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. It inserts history into experience" (83). That is, thick description evokes the voices, actions, and feelings of marginalized individuals.

Recognizing that culture is fashioned by an ambit of counteracting codes of discourse, New Historicists penetrate deeply into discovering

and analyzing the padded conflicts of power during a particular time and place. Thus, a reader is presumed to grasp the nexus between the text and its cultural milieu (Baht 15). The purpose of thick descriptions is to recover the meanings culture has for particular phenomena and uncover "the general patterns of conventions, codes, and modes of thinking that invest the item with those meanings" (Abrams 183). That is to say, recognizing culture, according to New Historicism, conduces to a precise and plausible understanding of literature (Hölbling and Tally 112).

Drawing on Michele Foucault's influence on New Historicism, Parmod Nayar believes that New Historicists assess the text as nexus of power relations. Nayar states that "power is everywhere and the task of the critic is to reveal the workings and different forms of power within texts from the past" (275). As such, the crux of the approach is to locate power relations within a particular period as they are embedded in literary and non-literary texts of the period. As in the words of Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore, New Historicists look at "the interaction ... between State power and cultural forms and, more specifically, with those genre and practices where State and culture most visibly merge" (3). Stuart Sim and Borin Loon divulge that "a much-imitated aspect of Greenblatt's analytical method is the juxtaposition of literary and non-literary texts in order to expose the power struggles of the time" (204). Based on Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogism, New Historicism also proclaims that literary texts contain multiple conflicting voices that symbolize the multifarious conflicts of power within a period.

Greenblatt argues that literature must be understood vis-a-vis socio-cultural discourses, historical beliefs, and political nexus that took place when it was written. In his book, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy* (1988), Greenblatt describes how literature is the product of "collective negotiations and exchanges," and to produce literature; writers must negotiate with the power relations that exist within networks of social relationships via "analyzing the literary texts with historical and cultural



consciousness” (Baht 16). Exploring the Greenblattian model of negotiation, of course, provides an extraordinary approach to scrutinizing the interconnectedness between the literary work and its cultural codes. The core of Greenblatt’s ideas is that each literary text embodies multiple codes and conventions that always extend its interpretation.

The scandal of Abu Ghraib and its aftermath unleash a literary spectrum that historicizes and documents the traumatic experience of the Iraqi detainees. This literary response, however, plays a critical function in shaping a public outcry, though limited it was, against the U.S. crimes inside the prison. The U.S. government always tries to justify these bizarre acts of abuse and humiliation. In this vein, Judith Thompson endeavors to verbalize the wounds of the Iraqi detainees as well as peer into the psychology of the American perpetrators. *Palace of the End* offers a fertile ground for

## 2. Discussion and Analysis

The power correlation between history and literature has the ability to transcend readers beyond the definite closure of meaning. It offers, of course, a stylized simulation, a proximal validity for the historicized literary text. It is crossroads of questioning or believing what once took place. New Historicists see that the power of history can open a seamless and continuous path of ideological remobilization for all people at all times. This, however, might explain why some writers re-create particular historical incidents through their literature.

Nevertheless, there are always motives behind the manufacture of literary texts. To know these motives, New Historicists believe, the audience/reader must investigate the author’s life. Drawing on Louis Montrose’s argument of “the textuality of history and the historicity of texts,” New Historicism studies the literary text with its socio-cultural background and the author’s social and biographical background. Remember, it is not to search for the author’s intended meaning but rather, as Foucault puts it, to analyze the driving forces behind writing

the text that might have a hand in constructing its meanings. Thompson’s *Palace of the End* (2007) reflects on history through the unique reconstruction of Abu Ghraib’s historical anecdote. The play, furthermore, is a conglomeration of both real and fictional events.

Judith Thompson (1954 - present) is an award-winning and widely-known contemporary Canadian dramatist and director whose avant-garde style profoundly affects Canadian theater. Literary critics such as David Krasner states that “Thompson is a pioneering playwright whose drama is on the cutting edge of post-colonialist dramaturgy” (449). Robert Nunn (3), within this framework, highlights that “[Thompson] is the greatest playwright [Canada] has seen, now or ever.” In 2007, Thompson wrote and published her most enduring play, *Palace of the End*, which won the Susan Smith Blackburn Award and the Dora Mavor Award in 2008. In the play, Thompson scrutinizes the subject of Iraq’s overwhelming history through the dialectics of pre and post-2003, as embodied through the discourses used by each character. Consequently, the play was written against the backdrop of the Abu Ghraib scandal, the hoax of WMDs, and the symptoms of Al-Ba’ath’s ascension to the throne; as a result, Thompson endeavors to elevate the pained world consciousness on a larger scale of shared responsibility and virtual collective memory that awakens Iraq’s deep wounds.

As a Canadian, Thompson might have been proud that her country had refused to join the Iraq war of 2003 and thus are not responsible for its consequences, including the tragic events of the Abu Ghraib prison. Because on 17 March 2003, the Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien declared that Canada would not take part in the Iraqi invasion. Yet, “nothing could be further from the truth,” that which Richard Sanders and other social activists reveal. The Canadian troops secretly participated in the invasion and provided critical assistance to the U.S. forces. It was only a myth that Canada played a peacemaker role in the Iraq war. A myth that Thompson herself realized and therefore felt in a shared responsibility for what



a tragic flaw her government had done. Though Thompson never visited Iraq, nevertheless, she got caught by the guilty complex that she found herself in. This accumulative feeling of guilt, mainly due to what atrocities that war has brought to Iraq, such as that of Abu Ghraib, propels Thompson into an act of moral practice that works on melting away her repressed feelings. Dramatizing the torture of Abu Ghraib and other war issues is, without a doubt, an act of moral practice.

In discussing New Historicism, one of the main principles of the theory is the equilibration between the content and the form when analyzing a literary text. Thompson's *Palace of the End*, within this context, belongs to the verbatim theater since it only deals with real persons and their own stories. She asserts that: "each monologue is inspired by news stories or research on real events, but the persona or character in each monologue has been created by me, and everything other than the real events springs from my imagination." Accordingly, the play is "both a documentary play and a philosophical play: no matter how faithful a playwright is to the real person the character is based on, as soon as the character is written it is fiction inspired by a real person." (Thompson, Interview 2015). Intrinsically, Thompson employed verbatim theater for its superior capability of representing the traumas, sufferings, and disturbances experienced by individuals.

As previously stated, New Historicism considers a literary text as a product of the chronotope of its composition rather than an isolated substance. The play might well be categorized as a historical play since it re-creates a historical anecdote based on a subjective analysis of history. New Historicism concentrates on how events, politics, and culture within a particular society influence a literary work. *Palace of the End* is history-oriented, which means that it is a product of mixed political and socio-cultural circumstances and forces. The play, particularly its first monologue, draws another vision, not a version, of the history of the Abu Ghraib cruel events. This unprecedented vision, in one way or another, tries to dip deeper into the

psychological structure of the Abu Ghraib convicted U.S. soldiers, neglecting that of the detainees.

The play starts with the monologue of the convicted American soldier, Lynndie England, who, from the very beginning, struggles to show how her life was and is still extremely miserable so that she could gain the empathy of the reader/ audience. Thompson, however, names her character 'Soldier' in order to "give her a national and general identity" (Salih et al. 289). "SOLDIER. Cause I grew up with roaches, dude. Roach shit on the counters every damn morning. Seen roach shit on my toast before! I didn't eat it. Heard roaches poppin every time I went to cook a pizza in the damn oven" (5). As such, England's first words are characterized by the repetition of the word 'roach,' which conveys a negative connotation in both Western and Arabic cultures. The word roach is repeated four times in successive sentences and in a rhetorical strategy to show the psychological toll on the soldier. Meanwhile, England deliberately speaks in an American colloquial language in order to convey where she comes from and to what social status she belongs. "PRENINT... mebbe... fuckin... y'all... themselves... might... ain't" (1-13). These words, of course, are a sample of colloquialism found in the first monologue. The ungrammatical structures, on the other hand, are moreover evident in England's monologue. For instance, "I likes.. we was makin... I seen... The necks is soft" are all obvious examples of ungrammatical sentences used by the author. Salih Hameed (100) contends that "the obscene language she uses is not merely employed to depict the 'low' language of soldiers, but it is meant to emphasize their hollow-mindedness". That is, colloquialism has, however, been used in the play to imbue a sense of credibility and reality.

The audience/reader soon learns that the memory of Abu Ghraib prison is what is all-consuming in England's mind. "She looks at the computer longingly, makes sounds of an inner struggle) Ohhhh... Don't do it don't do it do not google yourself, girl...She googles herself, mouthing the spelling of her name as she does, goes to first site". (5-6). She finds out



that there are six hundred thousand results about her and sees that she becomes a “WORLD famous” (8). Nonetheless, when she reads the comments on these websites, she realizes what kind of fame she has earned. She is being called “Slut, bitch, white trash a whore, an excuse for a human being, worst of all feminist.” (8-9) to which she reacts proudly: “Pink cotton candy cowards afraid of being at war. Afraid of your own SHADOW” (9). As stated by John Colleran, this illustrates “a hideous slice of American culture, heightened and actualized through cyber violence” (186). Such unbearable and abusive comments cause her to reflect on what she has done in Abu Ghraib prison from brutal torture to the innocent Iraqi detainees. This leads her to speak a long monologue in which she is torn between the pride of serving her country and the guilty complex for abusing the Iraqi detainees, which she resists admitting.

England’s reflections indicate how perplexed and delusional she is. Sometimes she symbolically describes herself as a heroic character: “I am like Joan of Arc- being burned at the stake!” (12), and at other times she sees herself as a martyr “See I guess I’m a bit of a martyr.” (18). The symbols of heroism and martyrism both signify that she feels no regrets about any crimes against those detainees “like Napoleon, [she] will return one day, an American hero”(12) because, for her, it was a “vanquishing the enemy, vanquishing the evil ...[Iraqis] are not men, they are terrorists... I was doing what had to be done... I was softening them up; like you might put out hard butter on window sill” (8-10). She asks the Western audience/reader, “Tell me how much you care about them Iraqi men when they are sawing the head off one of your boys. Tell me fucking that” (9). In fact, this meets England’s actual words in an interview with the BBC:

compared to what they would do to us, that’s like nothing [...] because if you think of it, I mean what, they, at the same time, they were cutting our guys’ heads off, burning bodies, and dragging them through the streets of Baghdad and hanging them off bridges. And this

happens at colleges or whatever, here in the US all the time” (“Lynddie England – Big storm”).

In textualizing culture, following Clifford Geertz and his concept of “thick description”, the Abu Ghraib prison becomes a fertile ground for establishing a culture of violence. It becomes obvious that England, like any other U.S. soldier, has her own conjectural cultural reasons, which she thinks are enough to legitimate her savage acts. This, in speaking of culture, all goes back to the Western ideological system where once Charles Darwin morally justifies “the extinction of the lower races as a great step forward for humanity” and Charles Kingsley who once says “I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw. I don’t believe they are our fault.” (Curtis 84). In the same manner, England describes the Iraqi detainees as “The APES AT ABU GHRAIB” (12) and how they were like “monsters in the shape of human beings... It was like workin on a farm in a way. The animals you gotta just handle” (13). This hostile behavior against the so-called ‘unfit’ or ‘inferior’ cultures, which Iraq is a part of, therefore, has its own long-standing roots. As in Hameed’s words, “The US colonialism is systematically determined to rob the Iraqis of their politico-cultural codes and impose other ones” (101).

The abusive and insulting speech used by England emphasizes and highlights the colonizers’ belief of superiority vis-à-vis the inferiority or the ‘animality’ of the colonized. This is, of course, accompanied by a “planned psychological depreciation of the [colonized’s] self-worth and of [his] culture and history” (Abd Aun and Mohsin 15). She is fully aware of how insulting and scornfully abusive it is to joke on ‘men’s privates’; but being mobilized that the Iraqi detainees are nothing but ‘others,’ and so as a colonizer, she does that mortification primarily to “get to the intelligence and that according to their culture, me laughing at their willies was worse than beatin way worse” (15). In this context, however, England’s monologue systemically meets with the concept of cultural distinction.



The U.S. imperial and colonial forces are less apparently yet continuously endeavor to preserve inequality among the world's cultures. England admits that when onetime she went to the church, she saw her former friend Lee Ann Wibby, who looked at her and soon realized "what all happened at the clubhouse had been more than a joke for her" then England, with all her heart, "did pray for forgiveness about Lee Ann Wibby" for the misbehavior she showed so long ago. Nevertheless, she never wishes forgiveness for torturing the Iraqi detainees, because, for her, "Lee Ann Wibby is an American, she was VERY different from the APES AT ABU GHRAIB" (12).

The ruthless acts of torture exercised upon the Iraqi detainees are neither indiscriminately nor haphazardly conducted, but are rather politically, culturally, and physically well-planned and systemized. England is culturally-aware of the Iraqi social norms and traditions. It is purposeful to mention that the objection and protest made by the Iraqi detainees expose the big lie of Western multiculturalism. England deliberately commences with one detainee who understands "little English," just because he has called her a dog; she has instantly decided to take "the guy around on a leash...You think I'm a dog? You think I'm a fuckin dog, you monkey fuckin let's go for a fuckin walk you wanna go for a walk" (16). England and the other U.S. soldiers preserve rape on the Iraqi male prisoners in order to "achieve more of the strategic goals of war" (Elaf Salih et al. 287). As in Inger Skjelsbæk's words, "the purpose behind [raping] victims is to masculinize the identity of the perpetrator and feminize the identity of the victim" (225). Both the masculinized and feminized identities are hierarchically situated within the matrix of power where masculinity lies at the top and femininity down at the bottom (Ibid 226). Nonetheless, the matrix of power is reversed in the play: the female England exercises power on the male detainees. Therefore, the rape of men becomes a key role in intensifying the power hierarchies inside Abu Ghraib. This aggressive behavior, which England has considered a sign of allegiance to her country, reinforces her into a cycle of dynamic acts of

violence and abuse. Under the guise of the Iraqi detainees are 'terrorists' and 'barbarians', the U.S. soldiers are encouraged to exercise such demeaning acts of defamation.

England, however, utilizes a post-orientalist discourse where the Arabs/Muslims are stereotyped as terrorists. Evidently, England blames the 'Other' for the 9/11 attacks "I thought of the Twin Towers and all them people run" (13). As if she was avenging the 9/11 victims by torturing the Iraqi detainees. Being superior (Self) was a common belief for the American soldiers and deeply rotted in the American unconscious. The word 'mullah,' for instance, has been disrespectfully used by England and the other U.S soldiers. This word is disconcertingly reminiscent of the post-orientalist discourse where antipathy and sovereignty towards the Arabs/Muslims reach their peaks:

Hey you. Wise man, mullah. Fuck him, fuck your friend there in the butt, man! Do it now," [The detainee replies] "There is no reason for this. This I will not do for your entertainment. "So you know what Ronnie does? He hadda take a shit so he takes it right there in a bucket hands it to the man, and Ronnie makes him... eat his shit!. The funniest was Ry; he gets the other Rakee to kiss the holy man with his mouth full of shit? And Manny throws up. Oh my God we razzed Manny about that all night!! (14).

Ostensibly, she recalls her fellow soldiers whose extreme ill-treatment causes immeasurable suffering for the detainees. Though what the other soldiers, Ronnie and Ry, committed is inexorably taboo in all cultures, England still seems so careless about what she did. Relatively, she describes what happened as "The funniest" (Ibid). Up to the end of her monologue, England still attains a sense of pride. A pride that is deeply rooted in the American culture. She metaphorically compares herself to the Eagle, which is the U.S.A's national symbol. She speaks out "I said you don't MESS with the eagle you don't



MESS with the eagle, dude or the eagle tear your eyes out and that's what I did I tore 'em out and I flew, man, for just that night I flew through Abu G." (16). The Eagle is a motto of strength and power. By so doing, England wants to maintain and exercise power over the 'Other.' As if she wants to ensure that 'tearing apart' is the waiting destiny for all those who might spin out of the U.S. control, "I did GOOD for my country" (Ibid).

By considering the influence of the Bakhtinian dialogism upon New Historicism, England's monologue embodies a multiplicity of meanings and conflicting voices, one of which is that the Abu Ghraib U.S. guards' antagonism is an outcome of the political mobilization led by the Bush administration and not by themselves. As the author herself asserts: "It was painful for me to write the character of Lynndie England, but it was clear to me she was just another ignorant victim of American policy-a poor West Virginia girl who went from working in a chicken factory to the theatre of War, used by the Pentagon". In other words, Thompson wants to say that both the U.S guards and the Iraqi detainees are simultaneously victims. According to Al-Azarki, "Thompson turns Lynndie England from a victimizer who horrendously abuses Iraqi detainees into a victim whose trailer trash background, naive patriotism, and bumpkinish ignorance make her a scapegoat and a monster created by American society and militarism" (144-145). This might be partially true but must not justify the U.S guards' war crimes nor makes the audience/reader sympathize with the kind of people like Lynndie England.

### 3. Conclusions

Traumatic experiences have a profound effect on the ideological system of people and societies. Survivors of these unbearable moments suffer a lot in their endeavor to rejoin their societies once again. The Iraqi people have undergone the heavy burden of the 2003 war and its aftermath. The scandal of Abu Ghraib is, with no doubt, one of the most excruciating memories of post-2003 Iraq. The

tortured detainees of Abu Ghraib, be males or females, have experienced different kinds of abuse which spawned a huge outpouring of worldwide concern. These intact acts of physical and psychological abuse, which aim at distorting the Iraqi collective identity, have penetrated deeply into the Iraqi conscious and unconscious. These all lead to the formulation of a Western literary bent that attempts to verbalize both the 'Self' and the 'Other'. As such, Judith Thompson, by using the verbatim technique, reflects on the dilemma of Abu Ghraib by giving voice to the American soldier Lynndie England who is portrayed as a victim of the U.S. policy toward Iraq. That is, Thompson's *Palace of the End* is a construct of mixed politico-cultural factors.

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