▪ Global Social Sciences Review (GSSR) ▪ Vol. VII, No. IV (Fall 2022) ▪ Pages: 48 – 55
▪ DOI: 10.31703/gssr.2022(VII-IV).06 ▪ URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2022(VII-IV).06
▪ L- ISSN: 2520-0348 ▪ p- ISSN: 2520-0348 ▪ e-ISSN: 2616-793X
▪ Citation: Khan, R., Aryan, A. A., & Riaz, S. (2022). New Historicist Study of Geoffrey Chaucer's poem Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. *Global Social Sciences Review*, *VII*(IV), 48-55. https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2022(VII-IV).06

Cite Us

New Historicist Study of Geoffrey Chaucer's poem Prologue to the Canterbury Tales

Raees Khan * Ayaz Ahmad Aryan † Sana Riaz ‡

Contents:

- Introduction
- Framework
- Review of the Related Literature
- Methodology
- Analysis of the Text
- Discussion
- References

Abstract: *The current study examines the historical and social elements of 14th century England, through Geoffrey Chaucer's poem, Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. the study also unfolds the analogy of the current situation of developing countries with Chaucer's era. The research is carried out, using the lens of New Historicism as a framework. New Historicism is a postmodern critical theory presented by Stephen Greenblatt (1943). The purposive sampling technique is used to proceed with the study because the research is descriptive in nature. Geoffrey Chaucer is considered as a father of the art of characterization. He placed his characters in the prologue from almost every walk of life, the characters reflect the historical and cultural background of 14th-century England. The history of Medieval England is traced down by analyzing the writings of Chaucer. Chaucer picked coomon characters from various fields to give an accurate picture of 14th-century England.*

Key Words: New Historicism, 14th Century England, Moral Decay

Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer was a striking literary figure of the 14th century, he was a poet, author, civil servant, and noblewomen's page. He was born in London, United Kingdom in 1340 and died in 1400. Chaucer was born in a wealthy family. he was the son of a vintner; his father was associated with the royals and elites of 14th-century London. Chaucer remained affiliated with the royal family throughout his life therefore, he got the best education and training of that time. It was his innate genius, which enables him to mirror the lower, middle and upper classes accurately in his prologue, although he wasn't directly related to all of the social classes of the 14th century. He was well-versed in French, Latin, and Italian languages. Chaucer's works are translated into modern English by numerous writers. it was probably his stay in France and Italy, which resulted in his taste for poetry. His best-known works other than *Canterbury Tales* are *The Book of the Duchess, The House of Fame, The Parliament of Fowls, Troilus and Criseyde, and a translation of Boethius.* He is considered as a father of English literature. He was the first poet to be buried in Westminster Abbey, which is called "Poet's Corner" since then. He is also considered as

* Lecturer, Department of English, University of Buner, Buner, KP, Pakistan. Email: raees.glaxy@gmail.com *(Corresponding Author)*
† Lecturer, Department of English, Abdul Wali khan University Mardan, Mardan, KP, Pakistan.
‡ Demonstrator, Department of English, Abdul Wali khan University Mardan, Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

the master of the art of characterization. The 14th century was the time when French and Latin were the language of the court and Church, Chaucer himself wrote in the French language because it was considered a language of the learned class of English society. Chaucer's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* is a magnum opus in English literature. The work is studied under the lens numerous literary theories. Being a Minute observer, Geoffrey Chaucer vigilantly observed his society, and reflected it; in his literary contributions objectively. He tactfully, left it to the reader to extract any idea from his text after reading it. Chaucer scarcely included his personal worldview in his poetry. The researcher uses New Historicism as a tool to analyze the study critically. The study reveals that England faced various issues in the 14th century, including corruption, moral decay, injustice, and dishonesty surrounding English society in Chaucer's time. New Historicism is a critical theory presented by Stephen Greenblatt in the 20th century. New historicists believe in the historicity of the text and the textuality of the history. Chaucer's characters in *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* reflect the social, cultural, and political norms of the 14th century.

Framework

New Historicism is applied as a theoretical framework to analyze and proceed the study. The theory has its roots in the primitive philosophy of Marxism, specifically to the idea of Base and Superstructure. According to Marxist philosophy, base refers to the forces of production, which society needs, and superstructure means, social and religious institutions. New historicism is a striking literary theory initially developed by Stephen Greenblatt. The theory was presented in the 1980s primarily through the works of Greenblatt, it aims to probe intellectual history through literature, and literature through its social and cultural context. Greenblatt coined the term in his collection of essays. Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning; from More to Shakespeare* (1980) is an exponent work, in terms of New Historicism. Analyzing the social and cultural aspects of the people of the Renaissance, Greenblatt argues that the fashion of noblemen and women is reflected through portraits. Literature, arts. Numerous contributions of the Renaissance echo the historical aspect of the 16th century. Similarly, Chaucer's era is depicted through *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.* There are many other eminent figures who contributed in this regard, most of the theories of Greenblatt are influenced by French sociologist and historian Michel Foucault (1974-1984). J.W lever's *Tragic State, Study in Jacobean Drama*, Louis Montrose's assertion regarding new historicism "textuality of history and historicity of text", are the prominent contributions to New Historicism. Montrose's essay *The Mid-Summar Night Dream* also reflects New Criticism. Michel Foucault's Epistome (knowledge) also affirms to probe deep into the context of any text, which means that social, historical, and political aspects are the context of the literary or non-literary text. Jacque Derrida believes that there is nothing outside the text, he affirms that historical, social, and political knowledge lies in the literary and non-literary text of any particular era. Harol Aram Vesser's *New Historicism* (1989), was a volume of essays, it advocates a similar idea presented by Greenblatt. Tales and anecdotes of any particular era are also important to know the history of that time, it is a co-text to help understand the context comprehensively (Multitasker, 2019).

Review of the Related Literature

The reflection of any specific era is unavoidable in the writings of any writer, likewise, the historical and social factors of 14th century England are investigated in the text of *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales,* using the lens of New historicism. Bachir (2017) argues; many historians believe that literature is the byproduct of its time. Geoffrey Chaucer is widely known for sketching his characters in such a way that, it becomes immortal to the readers. The study reveals that the 14th century was marked by prevalent corruption and moral decay. The characters in the general prologue are pictured in a way that, the reader can explore the historical and social reality from Chaucer's Prologue. England remained on back step in the walk of social and moral progress due to the ills of corruption and ostentation. It is affirmed by Donald Keith; that the Wife of Bath, Harry

© 2022 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Bailly, the Miller, the Heeve, and the Squire are more clearly alive· today, these characters are unfolded as more than stylized speakers on a rather formalized stage; they reflect human's life, and human's foibles, therefore, these characters are immortal creation (Keith,1967). The study explores that Chaucer's Prologue to the Canterbury Tales is not only a poem but it is a vivid record of the history of 14th century England. Characters are taken from the aristocratic, middle and lower class to depict society on a major scale. *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* is written in Middle English, it was a kind of language structure, which was developed with a mixture of old English and French language. Chaucer is said to be the first poet who popularized English vernaculars, with his fictional writings. English was scarcely used in the elites of English society in the 14th century. The Latin language was used in Church, while French was the language of the court. Religious duties were offered to show off, in 14th century England. It is explored in the study that; all of the Characters in the Prologue are masterly exposed with the descriptions if their characteristics. Worshipers and religious leaders were morally corrupt, their service to God was just a pretension. The wife of bath married five times; besides that, she has affairs with several other people. Stephen H. Rigby argues; people went up to make their offerings according to their social standing, an occasion at which Chaucer's Wife of Bath insisted on taking pride of place, Chaucerian England was a world of profound social tensions and intensifying class conflict (Rigby, 2014). The pilgrims in *Prologue to the canterbury Tales* are the reflection of 14th-century England as a whole, although Chaucer doesn't criticize them openly, but their intentions and objective are made clear by their actions. Rigby affirms in this regard; The pilgrims function as yardsticks by which the behavior of the others may be judged, even if they are not criticized in a candid way (Rigby, 2014). Rigby (2014) writes about Chaucer's time that Nuns were prosperous, and their affiliation with the church gives them enough means to be well clad as well.

Different social classes can be observed with their distinctive outfit and mannerism. People of Chaucer's time were classified as lower class, middle, and bourgeoise. The higher social group was likely to be more respectable and privileged, Monks, priest and other religious people try to affiliate themselves with the privileged people. Merchants of the 14th century are also reflected in the prologue, the businessmen have depicted in such a way that the only considerable objective for them was their personal benefits and accumulation of wealth, they wouldn't hesitate to cheat their countrymen if they had to. John H. Fisher explains; The court of the royal, inns of the court, and the rich business community of London city was beginning to enter into the corporate business enterprise (purchase property, wool export and grain export) in Chaucer's time. These groups developed an educated, secular, bourgeois audience for sophisticated poetry in English (Fisher,53, Benson,2000). The research examines that Chaucer exhibits comprehensive mastery over the art of writing. His style is simple and easier to be followed by common readers. He comes up with a narrative, reflective and descriptive writing style in his prologue. Chaucer remains peerless in humor, irony and satire. His sentences and short and soft, unlike Jonathan Swift. He leaves it to the reader of his text to delve deeper into the historical, social, political and cultural aspects of English society of the 14th century. Chaucer avoids bombastic vocabulary and sentence structure; therefore, a common reader can enjoy his poetry. English society is documented in his complete sketch the characters of 14th century. The description of Miller, the Wife of bath, the Monk, the Friar, and many other characters reflect one side of the society, the Knight, the Parson the Clerk depicts the other aspect of 14th century society. Mr. DRIAS Bachir affirms; The Pardner asserts at the end of his story, that he has relics and pardons, and then he invites all of the pilgrims cordially, to receive the pardons. The reflection of the pardoner is an accurate reflection of the danger of sin, avarice, and love of money that can lead a society to destruction. Chaucer uses here the secular clergy to demonstrate how the major representatives of the Church are also corrupt in late fourteenth century (Bachir, 2017). Chaucer pins down the social, political, and religious elements,

and its follies and lapses in highly delightful way, as Mathew Arnald (1822-1888) suggested that poetry should entertain readers, with instruction. Arnald is of the view; poet needs to explore the beauty of society in an artful way. According to Arnald poetry is a criticism of life, but it shall not be bleak and austere, it should expose the follies of society in a delightful way. Chaucer's approach towards poetry best suits Mathew Arnald's definition. As it is affirmed; Mathew Arnold expresses his true inner feelings on what poetry is and how it ought to be. To Arnold, poetry itself is the criticism of life: "The criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the law of poetic truth and beauty (Emmanuel, 2015)".

Chaucer's Characters in the Current Developing World

The study explores that the history of 14th century England, reflected in the Prologue through different characters, is being repeated in the current developing countries. Religious scholars like Pardner, Priest, and Nun are abundantly found in third-world countries, who are witnessed to be disloyal towards their religious, and social obligations. Developing countries, including Pakistan face the issue of moral bankruptcy currently, which is depicted in Chaucer's era in Europe. Saila Sarmin affirms; there is a widespread public view in Pakistan and Bangladesh that family ties are a major cause of violation of merit in appointments called nepotism for appointing nephews famous since the Catholic Church (Sarmin, 2022). Common people were strongly affiliated to the religious body of English society in England, the hold of ecclesiastical authorities was so firm that nobody would dare to go against their view. The great number of priests and clergymen would use religion as a medium as a profitable business. Similarly in the current developing Muslim would, dogmas, blind following of some religious scholars can be easily observed. As it is asserted; Hierarchically structured religions have very hard doctrines and practices that do not allow space to challenge the retrogressive practices. This is specifically so in countries like Pakistan, where a hybrid brand of democracy is implemented, and there is a nexus between the clergy and the state (Sarmin,2022). The study examines that, Chaucer's prologue is an eye opener for the current developing world. It is evidently clear from Chaucer's era, that corruption, trivial norms, and customs causes downfall of society as a whole. As it is stated; Any society with pathetic working conditions, corruption creeps in and up as an indispensable choice of the people of these states. The social values around are not in intact rather exposed to a harmful situation which usually leads to the emergence of gap that is filled by corruption (World Bank, 2004, Ullah. A., M. Shah., A. U. Jan and G. Ali. 2013). Chaucer's prologue gives a glaring picture of corruption in the members of religious institutions, such as the depiction of Nun, Priest, and Monk. They all remain ostentatious and disloyal to their religious duties, rather they prefer to use religion as weapon for worldly objectives. The researcher analyzes similar corrupt elements in the current developing countries, specifically Pakistan and Bangladesh. Religion is used to manipulates opinions of common people, and to practice the abuse of power. As it is argued; The military took over Bangladesh by General Ziaur Rehman in 1975, and General Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan in 1977 successfully used Islam to legitimize their authoritarian rule. (Sheikh, Ahmed 2019, Sarmin, 2022).

Methodology

Research methodology in literature, deals with comprehensive analysis, scientific order, clarity, and sequence of various steps. The current study is descriptive, and qualitative research method is applied to proceed the work. Purposive sampling technique is used in the research, because the study is meant to be conducted with the help of population which is directly relevant to the study. Research instruments are the primary, and secondary sources of the study. Geoffrey Chaucer's poem, *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* is selected through purposive sampling technique. *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* is the primary source of the study; secondary sources of the study are research articles, magazines, newspapers, T.V Programs, and YouTube videos, which are relevant to the selected

study. Lin (2009) argues that, the foundation of qualitative analysis is philosophy method, qualitative method is used to investigate similarities and differences between things or any phenomenon through logic and reasoning in objective way. Lin further asserts; qualitative method seeks answers of various questions, such as, what are the facts? What are the reasons? What is the conclusion of the study? The current study explores the research problem according to the mentioned methods. The text of general prologue is analyzed in the framework of New historicism, the study brings similarity of 14th century English society to the surface, with the current developing world. Initially, the poem *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* is thoroughly studied, then the relevant data is collected from various authentic sources. Primary and secondary sources are critically analyzed, and the research problem is comprehensively explored with the help of available materials. The characters in general prologue, and society of the current developing countries are comparatively analyzed.

The study is limited to the analysis of historical, social, and religious norms of 14th century England. The scope of the study entails to the social, religious, and historical elements of the current developing world, in the context of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. New historicism is prominent literary theory of English literature, it is applied in the study as a framework. APA (American Psychological Association) is a writing style which is applied in the study. APA is a standard format which is adopted throughout the world in academic writings. Finally, the study is concluded through extensive study. New historicist theory is aptly applied in the study, there is a great deal of similarity in the history and society of 14th century England and current third world countries.

Analysis of the Text

New historicist philosophy is extensively explored in the current research with the help of primary source, the text of *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* echoes the historical, social and religious background of 14th century England specifically, and generally Europe. The characters in prologue are placed objectively. A reader can delve deeper into the text to bring the history of 14th century England to the surface. Unlike Jonathan Swift's Harsh Satire, Chaucer uses humor and irony to criticize the follies and lapses of his contemporary society. His criticism is a criticism of life as Mathew Arnald suggested in his essays. His style is catchy and simple to follow, he doesn't exhibit his technique through his writings, rather he makes it really easier for his reader to understand the vocabulary and narrative style. The text of general prologue gives a vivid description of every single character with distinctive characteristics. Chaucer paints his Knight in such words; "At many a noble army had he be. At mortal battles had he been fifteen, And foughten for our faith at Tramissene (*Prologue to the Canterbury tales*, P,25)". The knight reflects a perfect brave soldier with immense experience of battles and expeditions across Europe, he is an accurate representation of a brave Medieval soldiers. He goes to war for a great cause with genuine intentions. Prioress is a head of convent, she was supposed to be highly simple, devoted to her religious duties, but contrary to her position, she prefers to be a perfect fashionable lady. She extensively cares about her pet dogs and mice. She is expert in the art of mannerism and antiquates. Chaucer sketch her in his simple words; "She let no morsel from her lippes fall, nor wet her fingers in her sauce deep (*Prologue to the Canterbury tales*, P,25)". The Nun is also well versed in French language, which was the symbol of pride and elite class at that time. She is also interested in worldly love, which is reflected through her bracelet. Chaucer's sense of humor is noteworthy in his text in general prologue. The readers lough at the description of the characters, and at the same time, the history of 14th century English society can be traced in the text. Chaucer's Monk is another interesting character, who is fond of hunting, he has many precious horses in his stable. The Monk is ironically inclined towards activities which is not a job of a sincere monk. He uses his religious position to fulfil his own objectives (*Prologue to the Canterbury tales*, P,26,27). His head was clean and shiny, it would be considered as a sign of gender complexity in 14th Century. The monk is gifted with a good voice, he sings hymn whenever he

finds himself inside the church. It is examined in the description of the characters in prologue, that hypocrisy, disloyalty, and ostentation was on its peak in Chaucer's time. On the other hand, devotion, bravery and honesty of 14th century England is also mirrored through the characters of Knight, Parson, Clerk but, they were few in numbers. Likewise, it is analyzed in the current study that, in the current developing countries, honest religious scholars, businessmen, judges and administrators can be found, but they are not able to bring any positive change in society because they are less in numbers comparatively. Friar is also a part of general prologue, friar's position was looked down upon, in 14th century England, but he was smart enough to place himself in a respectable position. Frair isn't affiliated with monastery, rather he is free roaming professional, similar to the present-day freelancer. The Frair was master in selling penance for sins forgiveness. He convinces people that they should give charity to poor friar instead of longer prayers. Chaucer sketches him; "Therefore instead of weeping and prayeres, Men must give silver to the poore freres (*Prologue to the Canterbury tales*, p,29)". The Friar was so expert in hymn that, he could secure money from the poorest people of the town. The description of Merchant gives an account to the business class of 14th century. He was smart in his bargaining, the Merchant places himself in the privileged class of 14th century England. Contrary to the disposition of Merchant, the Clerk painted in the text of general prologue, is in shabby condition, although he is perhaps the most learned person among all of the pilgrims. He spends money on books, and he hardly speaks. The words of Chaucer's Clerk are full of logic and wisdom, whenever he speaks. The Doctor, the Franklin are also depicted with their typical approach of 14th century. the Wife of Bath, is one of the prominent characters in Chaucer's prologue. She lives in a Bath (town), The Wife of Bath married five times, and her numerous sexual affairs with many people are apart from her married life. She is depicted as highly expert in the art of love. There is a gap in her front teeth, which was considered a sign of beauty in 14th century. Parson is one of the few characters, who is presented with positive characteristics. He is a poor person, but immensely rich in his thoughts and beliefs. The narrator says about him; "That was a poor PARSON of a town: But rich he was of holy thought and work (*Prologue to the Canterbury tales*, P,36)". The researcher unfolds the customs and approach of 14th century people of England in the text of general prologue. hardworking, diligent, and serious members of the pilgrims are neither appreciated not rewarded. Sycophants, boastful, and cheaters were able to place themselves on good positions due to the rotten social and cultural norms of 14th century England. it is investigated in the current study that, the current developing world echoes similar picture of 14th century English society. Singing hymns, qawwali, and presenting religious sermons have become a profitable business in developing countries, such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Serious and competent people are not given key positions, they are suppressed and kept silent in the current third world countries. Judiciary, religious institutions, merchants. Physicians, and people from politics and education, reflect the characters of general prologue.

Discussion

It is concluded in the current study, that New historicism is an effective philosophy to be used in any text to unfold the history of any specific era. It is examined comprehensively in the study, that Chaucer's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, is not only a fascinating piece of poetry, but it is also an account of the historical, social, religious, and political elements of 14th century England. Chaucer peerless narrative style of descripting his characters makes his reader laugh delightfully at the follies and shortcomings of the numerous characters in general prologue. The text of general prologue is examined under the lens of New Historicism, which resulted in the reflection 14th century history. Heterogeneous standpoints are presented in several Critique on general prologue, such as, Chaucer's writings as didactic, Chaucer as a moralist in his poetry, and lastly, the disinterestedness or objectiveness of Chaucer in his text. The current study examines that Chaucer leaves it to the reader to extract any justification or point of view from the

general prologue. as it is examined; we are likely to consider a third standpoint to, in Strohm's words, 'social Chaucer', one in which the poet is not regarded as having given his audience with obvious conclusions—whether conservative in nature, but is rather appreciated his ability to present his readers with problems and to pose them questions to which they themselves must find the answer (Rigby, 2014). Chaucer doesn't argue about his characters, whether they are correct of incorrect in their approach towards society, he rather gives a vivid description in which characters are painted from their dispositions to their performance in any specific walk of life. New Historicism helps the researcher delve deeper into the history of England specifically, and Europe as whole. It is investigated that 14th century in European society is marked by superficial customs, ostentation, trivial religion norms. The general prologue depicts that, few characters exhibit honesty, bravery and simplicity as their genuine personality traits, but their presence wasn't enough to bring any drastic change in society. The study explores that current England is entirely different than Chaucer's England. They have learnt a great lesson from their past. Eradication of trivial religious norms, eliminating the violation of merit, and hard work bring peace, prosperity, progress, and innovation in English society. Characters of general prologue are scarcely found in the current European world. The study examines that the present developing world is full of Characters sketched by Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. Lack of resources, uncertainty, inefficiency in the rule of law in developing world, are due to the existence of characters, reflected in general prologue.

References

Bachir, D. (2017). *Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales in Context*. University of Abdurrahman Mira of Bejaia.

Blair, T. (2000). Delight, Subversion and Truth in The Canterbury Tales: Chaucer's Talking Birds. *Masters Theses*. https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/1615.

Coghill, N. (1973). Geoffrey Chaucer *THE CANTERBURY.* https://www.penguin.co.uk/.

Crowley, M. M. (2012). *Literature and Education: Recalling Matthew Arnold*. Columbia University.

Emmanuel, A. I. (2015). In Search of the Golden Light: The Classicism of Matthew Arnold in his Essay "The Study of Poetry. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics, 8*, 76-81. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/234692976.pdf.

Gosnell, D. K. (1967). *The development of twentieth century criticisms of The Canterbury tales.* University of the Pacific, Thesis. https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds/1631

Lin, G. (2009). Higher Education Research Methodology-Literature Method. *International Education Studies*, *2*(4). https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v2n4p179.

LUMS. (2010). *Religion, Politics and Society in Pakistan.* Lahore University of Management Sciences.

Multitasker, D. (2019). *NEW HISTORICISM explained in the easiest possible way*. Www.youtube.com. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0u7TDL9Hy0E.

Mustafa, A. (2017). dealism in Geoffrey Chaucer's"General Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales. *Journal of the College of Education for Women*, *28*(5), 1449–1462. https://jcoeduw.uobaghdad.edu.iq/index.php/journal/article/view/1211.

Pearsall, D. (2002). *The Canterbury Tales*. Routledge.

Rahman, Md. M. (2013). Quality Higher Education and Students' Perception: A Study on Private Universities of Bangladesh. *Global Disclosure of Economics and Business*, *2*(1), 9–19. https://doi.org/10.18034/gdeb.v2i1.190.

Rigby, S. H., & Minnis, A. J. (2014). *Historians on Chaucer: the "General Prologue" to the Canterbury Tales*. Oxford University Press.

Sarmin, S. (2022). *Corruption in Pakistan and Bangladesh.* Linnaeus University Sweden.

Scala, E. (2020). The Deconstructure of The Canterbury Tales. *Journal X*, *4*(2). https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jx/vol4/iss2/6.

Ullah. A., M. Shah., A. U. Jan and G. Ali. 2013. Corruption: A deviance, or change in economic norms of Pakistani Society. *Sarhad Journal of Agriculture, 29*(2), 285-290. https://agris.fao.org/agris-search/search.do?recordID=PK2013001020.