



New Historicism in Thomas Keneally's *Shame and the Captives*

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Abstract : *New Historicism is all about paying a close attention to the historical context of the novel. It reflects the values of culture in a specific time and place. Like a new historian, the author Thomas Keneally reflects the historical and social cultural context in this fiction Shame and the Captives. Keneally wrote 29 novels so far. In his fifth year of literary career the author suggested Shame and the Captives which reflected his richness, classicism and a grand narration. The novel also talks about the history and stood as an unfamiliar and powerful example of the madness of the wars. His novels question the refurbish sense of how to live through those terrifying times. Shame and the Captives strangely uplifts the readers and it is even horrendous, sobering and civilized. The novel Shame and the Captives takes back to the culture, relationships and the past. It gives an insight into how imprisonment even brutal imprisonment can be evolved something worthy of the human race. The unfolding of the author is extraordinarily suggestive. He made the readers to go insight into the minds of the Japanese prisoners. He gave vivid human faces to the victims and the performers of the war. There is a magic in his writing which makes a reader to fall under his spell.*

key words: *Imprisonment, Prisoners, Psychological affects, Shame, World War II.*

Introduction: The author was inspired by the incident that happened in South Wales in 1944 when he was at the age of 9. He explored the lives of the ordinary with extraordinary events. With this subject again about History, he once again proved that he is a Historical Novelist. The tale brings out the true historical incident of a massive outbreak of the prisoners of the Camp at the small town Cowra in New South Wales in 1944. *Shame and the Captives* is a Historical Fiction of the author that parallels the Cowra Outbreak.

During the Second World War thousands of Axis Prisoners of war were forcibly interned in Australia. Inspired by the real incidents took place in his home town , the author who was living in Sidney then had made a text of it in spite of his feeling of family fear as the enemy was in. The story tells about the incidents of the revolt by the Japanese prisoners in an Australian prison camp. The characters are the local farmers and their wives, their family members, neighbors and Japanese, Korean, Italian prisoners of the war. The novel highlights the lives of the ordinary



people who played out against the real events of the world. When the outbreak took place more than 230 Japanese were killed during the escape and all the survivors were recaptured.

'Shame' has seized its power in the novel. 'Shame' is a term which used metaphorically in the novel to distinguish something that was associated with a person or a group as shameful. It is a symbol that reveals the public embarrassment. It is also a customary feature that is characteristically connected with enslavement, confinement and imprisonment. Tengan said: "Those ashes can't be revived into the shape of a living return. We were caught between the heaven and hell and now this plan of separation has been foisted on us. I know more sharply than ever that we must be released from this state of neither life nor death" (Keneally, 2013:237)

Goda asserted: "Each man should build the intention within his own soul." (238). Ban was a Christian convert in the novel. He had scarified himself in order to warn the authorities about the impending Outbreak. He was a Japanese Presbyterian who insisted that 'it is prisoners duty to live'. He said: "Gather not my soul with sinners, prayed Ban, not my life with bloody men..." (Keneally, 2013:245)

The novel totally revolves around the word 'Shame'. 'Shame' slaughters the soul, the intellectual mind and weaken the emotions of the individual. 'Shame' impairs. It strained the Japanese to labor in dry places under dishonor, disgrace, disappointments, delays and confusions. The shamed captives would constrained their emotions of failure. It

can be called and reported as overpowering emotion in all the prisoners seeking psychotherapy. It recalled the interpersonal behavior of the prisoners. It can be categorized as patho-logical and social disharmony. 'Shame' will eventually takes captives at a price no one wants to forfeit. 'Shame' is something that paralyzed few characters and mislead them and even killed them too.

"*New Historicism* was a shift away from a criticism centered on verbal icons towards a criticism on the cultural aircafts." (Green Blatt Learning 3). *New Historicism* studies the text in the 'background' or 'context' of history. *New Historicism* renders a political reading of the text by giving a venue to the culturally and psychologically oppressed and marginalized men in the society. *Shame and the Captives* is a historical novel which introduced its readers to their culture, psychology and margins in the lives of the men who lived and passed away .

The author in his literary mastery made all his readers to remember and reimaging the drastic events of the night where more than one thousand Japanese Prisoners of war staged the largest and bloodiest prison escape of Second World War. The author depicted the graphic description of life in the camp. He enlightened the psychology of the Japanese prisoners. He has set the readers into the combat of Japanese-British-Italian relationship in the war camp.

"With some of the same skill he employed in Schindler's Ark, Keneally shaped the real events into a satisfying fiction." [Nick Rennison, The Sunday Times] .*New Historicism* has its impact



on the study of text, culture and history in concrete way. Greenblatt frames it: "There has been in effect a social rebellion in the study of culture, so that it figures hitherto keep outside the proper circles of interest, a rabble of half crazed religious visionaries, semi liberate political agitators, coarse faced peasants in hobnailed agitators, have now forced their way in or rather have been invited in by our generation of critics."

New Historicism includes the religious aspects in the text. In *Shame and the Captives* the author explored the religious beliefs in some of the characters. The Roman Catholic family Abercare, the Protestantism in the town, the Buddhism is followed by few prisoners, the Christian belief of not committing suicide till the end of life, the concept of death were depicted in the novel which brought the creed and principles of a particular religion. The reader finds the ridiculous and alarming nature of the Japanese who were against the principles of the religion. They suffered despair, depression, hopelessness and self-loathing.

The author has re-created Australian history in *Shame and the Captives*. *New Historicism* is all about paying a close attention to the Historical context of the novel. It reflects the values of culture in a specific time and place. Like a new historian the author reflects the historical and social cultural context in this novel *Shame and the Captives*.

He made the readers to live in the year 1944 and detailed what people thought and felt that historical moments. He approached interdisciplinary. He threw history, literature, anthropology, sociology, and economics together here. New Historians often view the work of as

'Cultural Effect'. But culture is rarely defined in New Historicism. The author brings out the theme of cultural effect in this story. He draws the cultural differences of Australia, Italy, Japan and few other nations. The author had reduced the literature to a footnote of history in his works.

The narrator acknowledged not only a work of literature influenced by its times and circumstances but also he was influenced by his environment, belief and prejudices. He was correctly called the child of the Second World War. He detailed the historical context as he was influenced by the impact of the Cowra Outbreak when he was 9 years old. *New Historicism* is both about the writers times that effected the work and accounts how the work reflects the writers time. The novel reveals more about the history especially to the modern readers. He explored the use and dispersion of power and marginalized the social classes within the work. He focused on revealing the historically specific mode of truth and the authority in this book *Shame and the Captives*.

New Historicism not merely discusses the chronicle of facts and events but rather a complex description of their notions. The novel *Shame and the Captives* highlights the theme of 'shame' revealing the psychology of ever human character. It speaks about the way of thinking at the time: ideas of organization, prejudices, taboos etc. The author has taken the work through its historical context and understood the intellectual and cultural history of those times through literature. As a new historicist, Keneally aimed to interpret his literary text as an expression of our surrounding society. He emphasized the historicity of the text by



relating it to take the configurations of power, society or ideology in a given time.

The war in Europe was ended with the unconditional surrender of Germany. American government charged its terms and dropped the atomic bombs in Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945. But Japan refused to surrender under its terms. The supreme power was being enjoyed by Soviet Union and the United States. , British, American and Chinese forces had defeated the Japanese in march. In 1944, Germany once again made an attempt on the Western Front.

In the words of the historian Gavin Long, the following night: "At about 2am a Japanese ran out of the camp gates and shouted what seemed to be a warning to the sentries . Then the Japanese bugle sounded. A sentry fired a warning shot. More sentries fired as three molls of prisoners shouting 'Bonzai' began breaking through the wire on mob on the Northern side, one the Western and one on the Southern. They flung themselves across the wire with the help of blankets. They were armed with knives, baseball bats, clubs studded with nails and hooks, wire stilettos and garroting cords."

The novel points out a small discussion about Fascism. Most of the Italian prisoners especially Giancarlo was an antifascist. He dislikes Fascism and disrespects Mussolini. Mussolini established the Fascism in 1919 which makes him the dictator and holds the power in Italy. predisposed by the dictatorship of Hitler, Mussolini had instituted the discrimination policies against the Jews in Italy. He had entreated Hitler to contemplate on defeating the British-American forces.

He remained as a leader of Italy and the founder of Fascism from 1922 to 1943. He was captured by his own Italian Partisans and was shot on April, 1945. He was loathed by Italian people because his policies were the influence of Hitler.

If life at Cowra was so easy going, why did all the prisoners decide to stage their suicidal break out together? Most of the Japanese Soldiers, Airmen and Sailors were mortified by the humiliation, great dishonor and the shame of being survived in the camp. An extreme pain, anguish, torments the prisoners by the shame of captivity. They had assumed the false identities in order to bear their families from that shame and disrespect. Some of them were striving to save their own life.

Japanese were mortified for being taken alive to the prison. They preferred the violent death instead of living as a puppets in their hands. So they planned an outbreak which resulted a shattering and far-reaching consequences for all the citizens around them. Hey have already considered themselves as dead. They carried the distrust of the camp commanders. They felt ashamed by their own survival.

The author made a remarkable attempts to get into the minds of the people. He has always been a fine story teller. He made his characters to distinguish by their humanity and discriminating the moral sense. His narration had weaved a number of fictional plots around a factual historical event. Unlike Japanese, Italians believed that imprisonment may be a misfortune. They opined that there was no feeling of shame. Life has to go on. Italians re-write the history. They deny their fascist attachments. They



were in the hope of going home town. Many of this anti-fascists like Giancarlo were even quite happy to be in Australia. Some of them suspected that Giancarlo would lead his entire life there itself in Australia if he was allowed to do so.

The characterization revealed eroticism and sexuality. Many of their atrocities were muffled in the context of shame. The incredible aspect of Japanese military behaviour on the Second World War had re-enforced the lack of humanity. "Never live to experience the shame of being taken prisoner by the enemy... that's what the Imperial Japanese military regulations say, hence there must be no prisoners. So what's happening here now are the dreams of Ghosts."- From Cowra no Hancho Kaigi [Honcho's meeting in Cowra]

Shame and the Captives brings out the cultural differences of East and the West and about the line between the brutality and compassion, principles of ideals and violence. The author had used the terminology like oriental, fathom, comprehend, inscrutable, slit in the terms of eye etc to illustrate the issues and to interrogate the western prejudices, irrational hostile attitude of incalculable Japanese soldiers.

They were highly convinced that in order to overcome this Guilt, this disrespect, their duty was to die instead of surviving as a prisoners, as the captives and to kill as many as possible on their way out of the camp. Because of all the points the novel can be described as restrained, sicken and even mysteriously uplifting novel. The second part of the novel deals mainly about the emotions of Japanese captives and their desperate attempts at self-destruction. To the citizens of Australia the Japanese prisoners seem to

be dangerous. But they have a good opinion towards Giancarlo and other Italians. The author had depicted the continuum of individuals and representative types among those Maroon-clad prisoners. *Shame and the Captives* speaks less about the war and more about the cultural and individual differences, psychosis, culpability and shames of the characters.

Concerning to the fundamental values of Japan's warrior Keneally writes..."We did not understand their motives which lay beyond the horizons of our cultures and imagination. We judged them to include the intent to do unspeakable damage to women, children and men in that order." "With this profoundly gripping and thought provoking novel, inspired by a notorious incident in New South Wales in 1944, he once again shows why he is celebrated as a writer who looks into the heart of the human condition with a piercing intelligence that few can match" [Sunday Telegraph]

The novel *Shame and the Captives* stands for its truthful reflection of the human spirit. This outbreak was the biggest outbreak in the modern times especially a panic developed in the local Farming community. It was said that Keneally himself had an aunt, a sturdy woman, who lived near Cowra was alarmed that for a few days she slept with an axe beside her in the bed.

The author has let his imagination on the real-incidents happened in front of his eyes. The clash of the cultures had fascinated the author. His novel *Shame and the Captives* was set in any imaginary town Gawell. But the incidents and events highlighted there were not imaginary. Those were the historical facts. Indian writer who was popular



for his creation of imaginary town Malgudi is R.K.Narayan . To the surprise of his readers, no one could believe that Malgudi town doesn't exist in real. Here Keneally also created an imaginary town in the place of Cowra in Western New South Wales. There was another novelist who had set his novel *Dead Men* in the Gawell town . But unfortunately, the novel was banned in 1951. Keneally stated in the introduction that the fictional Town Gawell is itself an engine of many Fictions.

The author listed the major differences between his story and the historical events that encouraged him to tell it. His analysis the best of the two worlds. The author's predictable modes of narration in this novel must be acknowledged and appreciated. But the novel is also defensible as a sombre novel for the boredom and lack of vividness.

Keneally is a War novelist. He made his ordinary characters to struggle for some humanity amidst the violence and horror. *Shame and the Captives* revisits those themes about the Second World War prisoners of the War camp. "This is not a perfect novel. The style was uneven. There were startling images , the nightmarish rows of bodies strung on the Prison on the prison writes are like huge fruit bats- but much of the narrative of the escape is pedestrian , through this may be deliberate to suggest compelling Factuality some of the more florid sentences are unconvincing within the limits of his everlasting deceit, he answered the nonnegotiable kindness of her breasts...; and I did not quite believe that a Japanese warrior would choose death the hands of a female civilian. Yet so much is vivid and intriguing that *Shame and the Captives*

is almost consistently gripping. [Caroline Moore, the spectator]

Keneally is a formulator of fiction. He made his readers to fall themselves as the prisoners of the War, prisoners of the culture, relationships and above all we were all the prisoners of the past. As Japanese were gripped by the Shame of being prisoners they preferred the honorable death instead of bearing the shame of being captured. The disgrace of capture and imprisonment attempted them to flee from the camp. As Australian Military guards were ill-prepared nearly 350 prisoners were escaped into the bush. Two-thirds of them were killed and most of them were wounded, in this unexpected violence four of the Australians were dead.

Australians could not imagine that Japanese prisoners were oppressing by the shame of being capture rather than dying in the battle.. In fact they failed to guess the idea of the Japanese cult of death. The camp leaders of Japanese and the young pilot Tengan alleged that they will be shot by Australians by the time when the Second World War ends. That was indigestible to them. They were not ready to carry this feeling of shame even after their death.

So they prefer to seek death on their own terms. Also they believe that their families have already mourned them as dead because they knew well that it was their responsibly to die in the battle. As the author is an Australian, he sketched his Australians realistically ordinary. From the Australian point of view, the Japanese were characterized as utterly foreign, strangely eccentric in their approach, crazy repellents. Tom Keneally realism is well-built. He



depicts Australian life across the turbulent 20th century. He explored human imperfection in the novel *Shame and the Captives*. In his words, to be a prisoner is like having passed through a mirror. He captures a side of a military conflict in this novel because this concept is rarely explored in the historical novels.

Critic Alfred Hickling commented: "The perception of Australia as a solution to the Victorian crime problem is an emotive subject, which Keneally approaches with great genius and tact, throughout the novel the grand irony of Australia acting as a penal commanders trapped in their own, inescapable continent is never far from the surface. Most of the themes of the author are about 'imprisonment' and 'exile'. This novel has thrown the spotlight upon the Japanese prisoners outbreak at Cowra during the Second World War carrying the major concept of 'Shame' that was being experienced by the prisoners of the Camp."

Conclusion:

In the candid introduction Keneally hits the main differences between his story and the historical events that prompted him to tell it, he is well aware that he could be fairly accused of claiming the best of the both worlds. If so he hoped that his readers of this novel would experience that they were getting the best of both worlds too. At the age of 9, it seemed to him a terrible business an invasion from within the heart land in Australia.

'Shame' suggests that Keneally's late period is as rich as any other in his fifty year career. There is courage in its unflinching exploration of death, both as philosophical construct and as visceral

reality. A 'world-ending wallop' as one Aussie machine gunner memorably puts it as with his excellent last novel, *The Daughters of Mars*, Keneally's elegant classism miniaturizes, grand narratives – here the war in the Pacific without sacrificing subtlety" (James Kidd, Literary Review)

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