



**Review of "History of American Literature", Raghukul Tilak,  
Prakash Book Depot, 2009, pp-325**

**Review by Srijani Dutta**

The name of the book justifies itself as it sheds light on the historical description and documentation of the literary sphere of America from the early colonial period to the rise of New Criticism. This is an interesting book that provides a thorough and minute detail of the American literature that consists of poetry, drama, prose/novel, short stories, essays, and criticism. The language of the book is simple that fosters a sense of friendliness with the scholars and students. This book of 325 pages has 22 chapters along with a list of suggested reading. The first chapter is entitled as "The Beginners-Early Explorers and settlers: The colonial period." It examines how the early American literature came into existence. Anne Bradstreet, Cotton Mathers, Benjamin Franklin were the pioneers of the colonial period. Then came the revolutionary period marked by the growth of reason, enlightenment and prose. Thomas Paine, Philip Freneau ('the father of American poetry') expressed their thoughts through revolutionary writings. This age encountered with the swift expansion and development in the various sectors like industry, education, democracy and government resulting in the transformation in the field of journalism.

The French revolution was heralded as the root cause behind the development of American Romanticism. It was a reaction against reason, intellect and logic. Whenever there strikes any disillusionment with the current socio-political state, a new kind of aesthetic or condition is bound to arise. Therefore, stress was given to intuition, inspiration, impulses, natural instincts and selfhood. It was also encouraged by the on-going sentiments of British or European romanticism. The books of great English Romantics such as Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Coleridge etc. were imported to America and the American audience started devouring them rapidly. This age is quite similar to the romantic strains of English romanticism which opposes reason, logic and rules of neo-classical enlightenment. They started focusing on imagination, emotion and freedom. The famous writers of the American Romanticism are Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Poe, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Hawthorne and others. They rejected the set pattern of the eighteenth century verse and experimented with the art of expression. To present the existing themes in a far more interesting and unique ways, they took assistance of mystery, defamiliarization and uncanny. It is like projecting the common things in an uncommon way. Edgar Allan Poe often deals with the trope of supernaturalism, death, dystopia, mystery and uncanny. Apart from emotion and intuition, the romantics were concerned with nature and something remote, unfamiliar and distant. Emerson and Thoreau believed in the unity of man and nature and thus propagating the idea of transcendentalism. They were almost like Wordsworth in their approach towards writings- "Love of wild nature was America's original distinction." (Tilak 28) The American romantics being dissatisfied with the present went to taste the past of American culture and history- "The adventures, exploits and achievements of the great explorers who were the first to reach America or of the first colonisers, were studied and sung by one poet after another." (Tilak 29) After broadly discussing the American Romanticism, the writer, Raghukul Tilak has shifted his attention to analyze the individual writers and how they shaped this particular period.

Edgar Allan Poe carved his niche in the domain of American short story whose style is grotesque, arabesque and ratiocinative. He mastered a new form of writing and it made his tales impregnated with "psychological effect." Then, this chapter focuses on Concord writers who popularized the philosophy of transcendentalism- "'Transcendent' means 'beyond' and 'above,' hence a transcendentalist is one who believes in the existence of a divine world, beyond and above the



world of senses. The divine cannot be known by reason or rational analysis but it can be felt and experienced by the spirit through intuition. The divine is referred to as “the over soul” by Emerson...the transcendentalists stressed the worth of the individual, the dignity of the human soul.” (Tilak 54) Apart from this, this chapter shows how Hawthorne experimented with the theme of transcendentalism and founded his psychological novels.

The chapter 11 discusses the period of civil war and how the socio-political backdrop influenced the literary scene of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America-“The nation was sharply divided into the South, which advocated the right to hold slaves and the right to secession, and the North, which stood for the Abolition of slavery and the unity and integrity of the nation. The nation was lucky in having at the time as its president, a statesman of the caliber of Abraham Lincoln. The war was won by Lincoln and the nation was saved from disintegration...his martyrdom has been commemorated in Whitman’s famous elegy “My Caption! My Caption.” (Tilak 104) During this time, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was written and Lincoln greeted Harriet Beecher with the words “So you’re the little woman who made the book that made the Great War.”

Having said that, the next chapters of this book study the birth and characteristics of Herman Melville’s “Moby Dick,” Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass, Mark Twain’s “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” Dickinson’s great, reclusive poems, the Modern age, Post World war novel and poetry, nature and pastoral elements in Frost’s poems, impressionist expression and the psycho analysis of Eugene O’ Neill’s drama, social and psychological tragedies of Tennessee Williams, alienated American life in Arthur Miller’s drama especially in “Death of a Salesman”, symbolism and allegory in Ernest Hemingway’s “Old Man and the Sea.”

This Modern age does not limit itself into the field of fictional literary production but also witnessed the rapid growth and emergence of the criticism specifically New Criticism or formalistic criticism. The term New Criticism was first used by Joel. E. Spingarn but it came into general use after the publication of *The New Criticism* in 1941 written by John Crowe Ransom. Apart from Ransom, Eliot, Allen Tate, I.A Richards, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks are the other practitioners of this school of criticism. Stressing on the close reading of the work becomes the basic thing of New Criticism. T. E Hulme’s “Speculations” has been regarded as the seed of inspiration behind the rise of modern criticism. They believed that any work of art is complete in itself. It does not need any external consideration. The authorial biography, social-political-cultural-historical environment are seemed to be the hurdles for interpreting and understanding any work of literature. They are anti-impressionistic which is supposed to be vague and subjective. They believe in the close reading of the form, style, aesthetics, design, texture, rhyme and meter of the poetry or any work of art. The sole dependence on the text enables the critics to forget the other important concerns. The demerits of New Criticism gave birth to the rise of The Chicago Critics. Then, the book concentrates on the detailed descriptions of the individual critics associated with New Criticism. This is the way the book ends.

After going through the entire book, the readers can admit that the book is enough to give them an idea of American social background, political happenings and the literary production of the said time. It is a challenging task for an Indian writer to briefly sketch the American culture and literature in a student-friendly way and in this regard, the book becomes successful for serving its purpose.

#### Works Cited:

Tilak, Raghukul. “History of American Literature.” Prakash Book Depot. 2009



**Bio:**

**Srijani Dutta** hails from a beautiful place, Chandannagar of India. She loves reading books, watching movies and expressing herself through colours, words, and images. Her creative and academic writings, paintings have been published in the journals like Setu, Parcham, Contemporary Literary Review India, Story Mirror, EKL review journal, Plato's cave online journal, The Antonym, RIC, Atunis poetry, Das Literarisch, Saaranga magazine, literary cognizance, Borderless journal, Creative chromosomes, Rappahannock review, Fourth river journal, Synchronized Chaos, Beatnik Cowboy journal, Literary Yard, Langlit, Ritvi journal, Yearly Shakespeare and New Literaria. She tries to maintain a balance between her research and her creative practices.