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Representation of the 1930s Ireland: A Contextual Reading of Frank McCourt's

Angela's Ashes

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By

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Abstract

This research paper explores Frank McCourt's Angela's Ashes as a contextual document from the perspective of New Historicism. It pays a particular attention to the issue of the marginalized Irish people and the socio- economic and politico-cultural situation of Ireland during 1930's. In Angela's Ashes, Frank McCourt portrays the bitter and unforgettable history of Irish especially Northern Irish in Southern Ireland with various events and moments that he himself experienced, saw and listened from other Irish people. The confrontation of Ireland with England before the partition of Ireland and the confrontation between Southern Ireland and Northern Ireland after partition make the innocent Irish people victim, homeless, identityless, and lifeless. So, by applying new historicism as a methodology, especially the concept of Louis Montrose, Michel Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt as a tool, this research claims that Angela's Ashes is a contextual document and an alternative history from the perspective of Frank McCourt that reflects the socio- economical and politico-cultural situation before and after 1930s and repressed voice of marginal people, that is, common Irish people in general and common Northern Irish people in particular.

Key Words: New Historicism, Irish History, Religion, Identity, Poverty, Stereotypes, Partition.

This paper makes a contextual reading of Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes* from the perspective of new historicism. It focuses to the voice of marginalized Irish people and the socio- economic and politico- cultural condition of Ireland during 1930s. In *Angela's Ashes*, exposing Ireland of 1930 with a time when people suffered

much due to the confrontation between Ireland and England as well as between Southern and Northern Ireland, Frank McCourt advocates for Irish people's marginalized voice for their identity, peace, and normality of life. Therefore, this research makes a point that any literary text consists of a diversity of dissonant voices and these voices express not only the orthodox but also the subordinated and subversive forces of the era in which the text is produced. A literary text is formed and structured by a particular condition of a time and place. It questions mainstream criticism which views literary texts as an autonomous body of fixed meaning. It also regards that history is nothing more than a jumble of stories that always moves back and forth. So, by giving the evidence of history, *Angela's Ashes* is a contextual document and an alternative history that reflects the then socio- economic and politico- cultural situation of Ireland and raises the voices of marginalized Irish people. To support the claim, the researcher draws the theoretical insights from Louis Montrose, Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt.

Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* is a memoir of Frank who is American by birth and who goes to Ireland with his parents. Frank's father Malachy Sr. is northern Irish and mother is southern Irish who get married in America and when Frank is just four years old, they return to Limerick, a southern city of Ireland in 1930's. When they go there, they have to face different sort of difficulties. Even they are taken as immigrants and behaved differently though they are from the same country. Frank's father Malachy has a northern accent that arouses suspicion in Catholic Limerick. Again and again, McCourt's mother Angela sends her eldest son to bring home Malachy before his earnings are spent. Conditions are brutal. They cannot afford fuel for the fire. Malachy objects out of pride to pick up the coal that falls from coal wagons and they shiver. The six family members sleep on one bed, under flea and lice

ridden rags. Hunger is constant. Illness is the norm. Twin boys die within six months of each other and the second spends much of his last week standing at the window and waiting for his lost brother to return. During World War, Malachy leaves to work in a factory in England. He fails to send home the promised wages and gradually disappears. Frank has no words to see his mother begging in the streets. They are cursed by man, forgotten by God, remembered by the church. Priests and nuns spread spiritual terrorism. Once, when Frank was about to eat something which was not allowed, he was frightened by a woman with the help of the religion. Frank narrates, "She gives me a clout on the head that brings tears to my eyes. She screams at me like a banshee and jumps around the kitchen and threatens to drag me to the priest, the bishop, the Pope himself if he lived around the corner" (137). The school masters are tyrants especially with those boys who are the children of the poor and Northern Irish. The routinized insult of the class system is always faced by Frank.

Frank presents his and family's intense suffering, struggle, poverty and religious conflict among Irish along with terrible situation of Ireland. His father, in his own country does not get job because he is from Northern Ireland. Though Ireland has been free from England, it has been facing socio, economic, political turmoil. The southern Irish do not take a person of Northern Ireland as human being. In the society, Frank's psychology is strongly guided by different things like hatred of the English, filling hungry stomach by stealing the breads, earning money for family instead of studying and being submissive in front of Irish children whatever they say. He and his brother time and again become the object of laughter for Irish people. Frank expresses "At one house they push up the window and the children point and laugh and call to us, Look at the Zulus. Where are your spears? Malachy makes faces at them and wants to throw coal at them but I tell him if he throws coal there's less for the pig and

we'll never get our dinner" (100). He is even disliked by his grandmother because he is a son of Northern Irish father. He is taught to believe in tenants of Catholicism, to hate English and to be loyal to his family but he is not told why to hate English and believe in Catholicism. Frank is the representative of the then marginalized northern Irish people. Violence, hunger, poverty, pollution, rain and indifference, all these have been like a daily routine of Irish.

In *Angela's Ashes*, Frank explores his childhood in Limerick City of Free State of Ireland (Southern Ireland) and the havoc from the lens of his own personal experiences. By covering the misery of the Northern Irish in Southern Ireland, Frank presents the fact that Ireland was under English Empire for eight hundred years and even after being free Nation in 1921, the condition of Irish especially Northern Irish is miserable. Frank also presents that Ireland before under the England's colonization was a beautiful and tranquil land of all Irish.

The text *Angela's Ashes* exhibits the miserable and hidden history of all Irish people. It speaks of anarchy, cruelty, exploitation, domination done by the power holder over the innocent Irish people. Frank manifests "Malachy is in fifth class now with Mr. O'Dea and he likes to tell everyone he's learning the big red catechism for Confirmation and Mr. O'Dea is telling them all about stage of grace and Euclid and how the English tormented the Irish for eight hundred long years" (203). It is a vivid representation of how the everyday life of common people in Ireland has been altered by England. After the partition, Northern Ireland was under England and Southern Ireland became independent. And the major question was what was to be the status, identity of those Northern Irish people who were in Southern Ireland. And it is also believed that no text can be produced beyond the socio-economic and politico-cultural context. So, by applying the methodology of new historicism as a tool, I will

prove that *Angela's Ashes* is a new version of history of Ireland from the perspective of Frank.

Generally, it is believed that autobiography is subjective mode of writing and history is objective mode of writing. Autobiographies are intended to narrate about struggles, ups and downs, happiness and sadness of one's life and histories are regarded as factual evidences. However, there are some similarities and differences between autobiography and history. The writers Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography* argue that "Sometimes people read autobiographical narratives as historical documents, a source of evidence for the analysis of historical movements or events or persons. From this perspective, autobiographical narrative and history writing might seem to be synonymous" (10). This statement vividly shows the connection between autobiography and history.

Even the critic Carolyn Kay Steedman in *History and Autobiography* writes "History and autobiography work in the same way as narrative: they use the same linguistic structure, and they are both fictions, in that they present variations and manipulations of current time to the reader" (qtd in Mitchell 1). Here, *Angela's Ashes* too can be read as historical documents and source of evidence for the analysis of Ireland's and Irish history. Frank presents Limerick city of Ireland as:

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the river Shannon and settle forever in Limerick [...] from October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations [...] Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we know it was only the rain.
(12)

In these lines, Frank explains the real picture of Limerick city and the suffering faced by the common people. There is no warm place for people in Limerick. Frank satirizes Limerick city saying that for the outsider, it is a holy place but no one knows its reality except the common people living there.

The writer Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson claim that "Autobiographical narrators establish for their readers a different set of expectations, a different pact, than the expectations established in the verisimilitude or suspension of disbelief of the novel or the verifiable evidence of biography and history writing" (12). Here, Smith and Watson clarify the idea that though both are subjective, autobiography gives different sort of ideas to the reader. What the history cannot tell can be told through one's autobiography. The critic James B. Mitchell also explains "When official documents tell 'truths' that differ from those offered by alternate records, individual accounts, or memories, the historian is faced with the dilemma of trying to reconstruct a 'readable' reality from the fragments that appear most plausible"(2). It means there are somehow differences between official and individual account and becomes necessary to read one's life story to understand something new.

As the book encompasses the issues of Southern Irish in Ireland, it has got many critical responses from different critics around the world. The critic James B. Mitchell in the review entitled "Popular Autobiography as Historiography: the Reality Effect of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*" analyzed *Angela's Ashes* comparing it with *Landscape for a Good Woman* By Carolyn Kay Steedman through Roland Barthes's notion of the 'reality effect' and asserts his idea that McCourt's text reflects more reality of past than Steedman's text. Mitchell compares:

In their very different books, Steedman and McCourt both cite memory as an alternate, legitimate source of historical truth. In this study, I will follow

Jerome Bruner's lead in asserting that "an autobiography can be read not only as a personal expression, as a narrative expressing 'inner dynamics,' but as a cultural product as well. (2)

In this extract, Mitchell analyzes that McCourt's text is not only the explanation of his personal life rather it is a cultural product of Ireland. Steedman emphasizes that even a memoir can carry some facts. Frank, in his memoir presents the communal history of Irish people as Mitchell argues "By de-emphasizing Frank's individuality, McCourt underscores the communality of the Irish culture he experiences as a youth" (3). Frank presents personal as well as communal life at the same time in his text. Mitchell argues "Mccourt shares a complicated relationship with Irish Stereotypes" (2). Through the reality effect, he argues that what he has presented is more factual in comparison to Steedman's text, however, he does not pin point on the root causes behind the suffering of Northern Irish in Ireland.

Another critic, Eric P. Levy in an article "The Predicament of Individuality in *Angela's Ashes*" analyzes *Angela's Ashes* as a history of individual and writes that "Angela's Ashes pits two cultural attitudes against each other. One concerns a conviction of 'doom', and derives from 'colonialism, poverty, insularity, and the Roman Catholic church. The other concerns 'a culture of the modern, of the way out', whereby Limerick is imbued 'with the idea and fact of passage" (1). In this extract, Levy projects his agreement and disagreement on facts presented in *Angela's Ashes*. Levy also emphasizes that though prejudice is faced by common people, religion is the protector for them. Levy's critical lens on *Angela's Ashes* centers on how Frank presents the events. He only supports those events that supports Southern Irish and rejects some ideas presented by Frank. But he simply remains silent towards the historical fact of the then society.

Similarly, Edward A. Hagan in the review entitled "Really an Alley Cat? Angela's Ashes and Critical Orthodoxy" states that "Frank presents his life from chaos theory where he becomes familiar of British cruelty, Catholic suffering. Many slight and stock characters abound: the disappearing uncle, the mother with a secret, the sadistic priest-teacher, and the angelic younger sister carried off 'by' disease" (48). Here, Frank was familiar with the problems and difficulties that were in Southern Ireland. All people are problematic one way or other for Frank. He further argues: "McCourt questions why a child would want to become an adult in the world of Irish Catholicism, Irish Nationalism, and the Irish Revival. McCourt's passage underscores a major thrust of his book: the revelation of the uncertainty that underlies the certainty of ready-made linguistic forms of religion, nationalism, and literature" (49). Frank wants to become adult because he can understand the reality and can make his life meaningful. In the childhood, he was forced to do many things against his will. Some rules were fruitful but many were harmful for him. So, Frank wants to become adult to understand all these religious and national confrontations. However, the critic does not give emphasizes on the history of Ireland and Irish people's hope for peace, identity, self- respect, culture and freedom.

Likewise, Krishna Prasad Jaisi, in his M.A. thesis entitled "Projection of Gender Subaltern in Angela's Ashes" analyzes only the identity of protagonist Angela and her life within patriarchal society. He stresses:

It is the married life that leads Angela to sadness. She is not accepted by her own siblings when she is married to Malachy. Her suffering increases more because of being a woman. She is a real victim in the text. Her family is suppressed by colonial ruler and her voices are limited within herself and in her premises of her house hold. (3)

Jaisipresents an idea that *Angela's Ashes* is the text that presents the voice of subaltern by foregrounding the life of a poor, economically as well as socially deprived woman. Jaisi only analyzes the text from the perspective of gender subaltern but not from the perspective of new historicism. He argues that because of the domination of male characters, female characters have been suffered bitterly. But, he does not care the suffering of all Irish people.

Critic Shannon Forbes, in an article "Performative Identity Formation in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*" reviews:

Mccourt highlights the fact that his text is an account of his life in Ireland - an 'autobiography', according to notable Irish intellectual R.F. Foster¹ - and one may make the claim, as does Paul Eakin in 'Breaking the Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration,' that the term 'autobiography' suggests a truthful account, fact based, and the true history of one's life. (1)

In these lines, Forbes claims that what Frank has written in *Angela's Ashes* is a true account of his life. He focuses on Frank's narrative but does not link with the concept of new historicism. The critic does not give emphasis on the history of Irish and Ireland which is one of the major factors in the text.

The above mentioned critics have concentrated their views on the different aspects of the memoir but none of them has sufficiently focused on its contextual reading from new historical perspectives. Most of the critics have praised the genuine literary skill and creativity of Frank McCourt. Some critics have emphasized on the authenticity of fact presented in the text. And some critics addressed the issue of historicity of Ireland. Their conscious effort to analyze the suffering of Irish people is much noteworthy. However, all these critics view *Angela's Ashes* as just the collection of individual memory that may or may not be factual. What their criticism fails to

unearth is why *Angela's Ashes* was written and how it reflects the then society. Therefore, this project gives emphasis on the context of the then Ireland and highlights intense suffering of Common Irish people from the perspective of new historicism in a critical way.

In order to understand why the intense suffering, struggle, poverty, religious conflict, and anti- English sentiment of Irish are seen, the critical examination of establishment and development of Irish Free State is very much crucial. What was the position of Irish people in Ireland before and after 1921 and how have their rights and identity been questioned even after the partition? Is it Irish's policies alone or the ongoing power policies of Britain over Irish territory is a core factor of common people's suffering and trouble? Who is responsible for religious confrontation, poverty, unemployment, scarcity of food, violence, uncertainty of life in Ireland? If so then why the stakeholders have not approached the path of peace building and thereby helping the real wise of people. This real wise is all about self- determination and autonomy, peace and freedom, harmony and brotherhood, justice and normality of life, which Frank elaborates with the horror of the 1930's and 40's Irish in *Angela's Ashes*.

Ireland, once a relatively peaceful and sovereign and independent land of Irish people, got colonized in 1541 when King Henry VIII declared king of Ireland and Head of the Church in Ireland. It got geographically divided into two parts as Irish Free State in Southern Ireland and Northern Ireland under British after Anglo- Irish Treaty in 1921. "It is this bitter fact of the partition history that Ireland was forcedly divided in the line of 'two- nation theory' that Southern Free State represents Catholic and Northern Ireland is of Protestant, leaving thousands of common Irish families in shock and incurable trauma and religious war" (Kenny 3). To the misfortune of

ordinary Irish people, the power holder'politics destroyed Ireland culturally, socially, politically and economically. After the partition, the Southern Free State underwent different religious, social, economical turmoil and different versions of discourses and truths came out. It is Frank McCourt who tries to pick up this issue in memoir *Angela's Ashes* linking it with the suffering and turmoil of Irish especially Northern Irish people in Southern Free State. While doing so, Frank has been able to show the religious prejudicial image of Southern Free State very vividly to the world society. Frank reveals "Dad says he's glad to see the spirit of Christ alive in Limerick and they tell him they don't need the likes of him with his northern accent to be telling them about Christ and he should be ashamed of himself dragging a child around like that like a common beggar, a tinker, a knacker" (75). Here, being a northern man, Frank's father is hatred by southern catholic people. His father is not allowed to utter the name of the God.

Frank's *Angela's Ashes* exposes the past and present socio- political status of Ireland in a genuine way. In this regard, Louis A. Montrose in his essay *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture*, argues "the writing and reading of texts, as well as the processes by which they are circulated and categorized, analyzed and taught, are being reconstructed as historically determined and determining modes of cultural works"(15). It means even the text and context are interrelated where text refers to present and context refers to past. To understand Ireland's socio- economic and politico- cultural history, we have to go back to 1541 when Ireland came under Britain and after the partition of Ireland. Ireland has often been described as both the first and the last colony of the British Empire. Many historians give different opinions regarding the history of Ireland and the British Empire. The historian Kevin Kenny in his text *Ireland and the British Empire: An Introduction*, argues that there are many

historical discourse made by people of Ireland and Britain. Kenny questions "Was Ireland a sister kingdom, or equal partner, in a larger British archipelagic state? Was it, by virtue of its location and strategic importance, the Empire's most subjugated colony? Or was it both simultaneously, its ostensible constitutional equality masking the reality of its colonial status?" (1). Questions of this sort can only be answered historically. He even further argues "Modern Irish history unfolded in tandem with the rise, unprecedented expansion, and eventual decline of the Empire; and, just as Irish history does not make sense without this imperial entanglement, British imperial history assumes its full dimensions only if Ireland is included" (1). It means Ireland and England come together while unfolding the history.

Many claims and counterclaims regarding the Ireland and Britain relationship can be found. Different questions like was Ireland a nation? What was Irish nationality? Was Ireland a colony? If a colony, what sort of colony? came into debate. Some historians present the healthy relationship between Ireland and Britain and some present only colonial relationship. The historian Deirdre McMahon in *Ireland, the Empire, and the Commonwealth* asserts:

In 1880 Sir George Campbell, the former Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, had written in *The Fortnightly Review* that Ireland is a colony which we have only partly colonized, and in which the natives have neither been exterminated nor thoroughly assimilated, and we have the race difficulties in the way of self-governing institutions with which we are familiar in other colonies, but in a more aggravated form. (qtd in Kenny 185)

For Campbell, Ireland was "in a position more analogous to that of the South African colonies, in which only British authority prevents collision between a colonist minority and a native majority" (186). The historian Kevin Kenny argues that "From

1541 onwards Ireland enjoyed the formal status of a kingdom. In the eighteenth century it had its own Parliament. Under the Act of Union, from 1801 to 1921, Ireland was ostensibly an equal partner in the United Kingdom" (2). All these counter arguments claim that there is a healthy relationship between Ireland and England though Ireland was under the colony of English empire.

Likewise, another aspect of Ireland's imperial history is the role of Irish people. Irish men and women were not simply as imperial subjects, but also as players in the Empire as migrants and settlers, merchants and adventurers, soldiers and administrators, doctors and missionaries. As Alvin Jackson in *Ireland, the Union, and the Empire* puts it, "Irish people who might be constrained at home also had free access to the Empire and to the social and economic opportunities it provided. For Ireland, therefore, the Empire was simultaneously a chain and a key: it was a source both of constraint and of liberation"(4). This statement shows the equal treatment and opportunities of Irish people in every sector. It presents that English people did not dominate the Irish people.

The official history blames the Ireland and Irish people. The historian Deirdre McMahon writes "one of the most incendiary speeches came not in Parliament but in St James's Hall in London on 15 May when Salisbury addressed an anti- Home Rule meeting"(187). Salisbury postulates:

One could not trust the Irish because Ireland was not a nation but rather 'two deeply divided and antagonistic nations'. The Irish, Salisbury concluded, had 'become habituated to knives and slugs', while Irish Catholicism, 'this tremendous, this grievously misused weapon', would be used against 'our Loyalist friends, who are in the main Protestant. (187)

The words 'trust', 'confidence', 'security', and 'safe' resonated throughout Salisbury's speech. He even says "one could not place trust or confidence in the Irish because the Home Rule movement was 'animated by passions of antagonism to England'(187). The above statement shows Irish people are like terrorist who have been habituated to knives and slugs. The official history does not reflect the suffering, hunger, poverty of the marginalized people.

As in colonial history, the Irish case involved the co- option, or co-operation of local elites, and presented significant advantages to certain sectors of the native society. McMahon argues "many Irish Catholics proved reactive and responsive to imperial schemes'. Disempowered and dispossessed Catholics were certainly 'victims of English imperialism', but many Irish people, Catholic as well as Protestant, took advantage of their imperial setting to set up as traders and merchants" (4).

This study employs theoretical concepts of New Historicism by borrowing the insights of Louis Montrose, Stephen Greenblatt and Michael Foucault. New historicism is a contextual theory developed in the late 1970s in response to New Criticism and Formalism and other textual theories which ignore importance of historical context of art. It primarily talks about the voices of the marginalized, dominated and voiceless people of the society. The new historicist critic Louis Montrose defines new- historicism as "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of text and the textuality of history" (Abram 191). He states that history is conceived to be not a set of fixed because it is fictionalized. And even the text carries some historical background of the then society in which it is produced. The subject matter of every text is always based on the social, historical, or material reality of the world. Montrose declares the analysis of a text is also influenced by one's historically, socially and institutionally shaped vantage points.

The text *Angela's Ashes* also carries some historical background of the partition of Ireland in 1921. Without understanding the historical background of Ireland, this text cannot be well interpreted and understood. After the partition, Protestants were supposed to live in Northern Ireland and Catholics were supposed to live in Southern Ireland. But, when northern people go to Southern Ireland, they were treated as others. Frank tells "At home our room is filled with big people, Mam, Grandma, Aunt Aggie, her husband, Pa Keating, Uncle Pat Sheehan, Uncle Tom Sheehan, who is Mam's oldest brother and who never came near us before he hates people from the North of Ireland" (87). They were blamed as the supporters of England. At that time, the Northern Irish were dominated and fired from the job. In the text, Frank's father Malachy Sr. is northern Irish man who does not get job in Limerick City of South. Frank father goes to find job but knows that "There is no hope of a laboring man with a North of Ireland accent getting a job in Limerick" (63). Not only this but also the text presents the poverty, hunger, identity crisis, loss of self determination of Northern Ireland.

The errors and fragments of Irish's history are equally valuable as that of its documented history. In this regard, Michel Foucault in his essay, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* argues that genealogical history is always questioning in nature, it believes in gaps and silences. Foucault further writes: "The purpose of history, guided genealogy, is not to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise to return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us" (95). This means genealogical history does not go after final and absolute truth and knowledge of a society rather it attempts to bring out the hidden discontinuities of a time to limelight. So, it is simply a process of looking at the past. Therefore, Foucault's

concept of 'genealogical history' should be taken as a critical lens to focus in the marginalized history of Ireland. For this, as the theory of new historicism suggests, interdisciplinary study is equally important.

Michel Foucault's idea on genealogy refers to the theoretical lens of new historicism. For Foucault, "Genealogy concerns the investigation of what he calls power/knowledge" (Morrison 18). In the given lines, Foucault views that genealogy incorporates diverse range of ideas and issues of the society existing in multiple forms and perspectives. It does not go after final and absolute truth and knowledge of the society. Instead, it depends on details, errors and fragments. This is why, Foucault strongly asserts that genealogical history is oriented towards the study of individual issues and goes against the origin of official history focusing on a wider historical context of a literary work and of the critic or author who writes it. As Foucault says, the text *Angela's Ashes* is also oriented towards the study of issues of marginalized people and goes against the origin of official history. In the official history, it is found that "New policies for controlling the thinly-colonized island were attempted, including 'plantation', which was first introduced under Edward VI. English settlers were given lands confiscated from rebellious Irish families, and the native Irish were supposed to be driven out. However, manpower shortages made this impractical" (BBC). This statement simply states that though England tried to replace the Irish from their homeland, it became impossible because of shortage of manpower. But this can be the politics of divide and rule which were often the hallmark of the British colonial presence. The official history is countered by the text *Angela's Ashes*. In the text, Frank comes to understand from his senior and narrates:

It is said there were no fleas in ancient Ireland, that they were brought in by the English to drive us out of our wits entirely, an'I wouldn't put in past the

English. An' isn't it a very curious thing that St. Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland an' the English brought in the fleas. For century Ireland was a lovely peaceful place, snakes gone, not a flea. (60)

These lines symbolically show the inner grief of Irish people. It shows how the Irish were politically and socially dominated. Here, fleas are the symbol of those English people who are sent to Ireland by England to capture the Ireland. And 'snake' is a symbol of Ireland's power that was taken by England. Alvin Jackson writes "the cultivation of these allies might be linked to the policies of divide and rule which were often the hallmark of the British colonial presence" (130). Being the powerful nation of the world at that time, England and English did whatever they like for Irish and Ireland. In the text *Angela's Ashes*, Mr. O'Halloran clarifies Frank about English politics. Mr. O'Halloran reveals "It's a disgrace that boys like McCourt, Clarke, Kennedy, have to hew wood and draw water. He is disgusted by this free and independent Ireland that keeps a class system foisted on us by the English and, that we are throwing our talented children on the dungheap" (290). English always want to rule over Ireland one way or another.

Similarly, the history of marginalized has been forgotten in official history of Free State of Ireland, that is Southern Ireland. In history of Southern Ireland, only the history of Southern people, Catholic people, Ireland's freedom, and partition has been described. Even it has been written that those who were in support of Catholicism came under Southern Ireland and those who were in support of England came under Northern Ireland. The critic Daly writes that "Even though the Northern Ireland ministers were not party to the agreement, the treaty was styled as the Articles of Agreement for a "Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland". Article 1 stated that Ireland shall have the same constitutional status [...] and shall be style and known as

the Irish free State" (23). It means when Ireland was separated, the Southern part became free but Northern part had to remain under England. Here, we become the crystal clear that the Northern people's voices were not listened to even after the partition. Now, even after the partition, the people who were from Northern part in South had to remain under Southern people. This predicament has not been found in history. However, the text, *Angela's Ashes* presents the prejudices within the family because of such partition. Frank writes "come here till I comb your hair, said Grandma. That's that North of Ireland hair you got from your father, that's the kind of hair you see on Presbyterians. If your mother had married a proper decent Limerick man you wouldn't have this standing up, North of Ireland, Presbyterian hair. She spat twice on my head" (128). These lines show the indifferences and prejudice within the family which is created by partition.

The critic Lois Tyson defines New Criticism as "New critical reading usually confined themselves to the analysis of some aspect of work, for example, its imagery, the role of the narrator or of the minor characters, the function of time in the work, the pattern of light and dark created by settings, or some other formal element" (149). It means New Criticism never gives emphasis on historical and cultural contexts. But, contextual reading of New Historicism gives emphasis to historical context. In the text *Angela's Ashes*, Frank expresses his own experience, memory, events and experiences. In a very critical way, McCourt tries to describe and clarify almost all the events and issues of the economic and political Irish society of 1930s and 1940s and thereby showing the hidden part of Irish and Irish people's situation as it is. McCourt expresses:

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woe of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless

loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (11)

In this extract, we find that Ireland had been politically, economically, and culturally under the shadow of England for centuries. The division between England and Ireland became greater during the 19th century, when England became a major imperial power and Ireland continued to suffer from enormous poverty. As New historicism goes against traditional concept of objective truth and monolithic history and focuses on multiple subjective and heterogeneous histories, Angela's Ashes also reflects the subjective history of Ireland from his own perspective.

New Historicism believes a text is embedded in its context. In other words, it rejects the autonomy of text emphasizing the fact that marginalized voices are always there in a text. Frank states "When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood" (11). From this statement, we come to know that Southern people used to treat northern Irish as others because they used to think that the northern Irish are highly affected by British culture and religion. Though Ireland became free from British colonization, the colonial effects were there at that time. It did not have its full sovereignty and identity. There was a political tussle between England and Ireland for eight hundred years because England always tried to rule over Ireland as her territory. The poverty, pollution, suffering, loss of sense of brotherhood, confrontation between Catholics and Protestants were all because of England because English played divide and rule game with the Irish. The writers J. Peter Neary and Cormac Ó Gráda in the article

"Protection, Economic War and Structural Change: The 1930s in Ireland write" writes "The 1930s were years of political turmoil and economic crisis and change in Ireland. Economic activity had peaked in 1929, and the last years of the CumannGaedheal government (in power since the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922) saw substantial drops in output, trade and employment". This statement supports McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* because it presents economic depression, poverty, unemployment.

Most of the official history books do not reveal the real picture of Irish people and Ireland. History is not a homogeneous and stale pattern of facts and events rather it is subjective. The official history cannot represent the real history of marginalized people. As Foucault suggests that the counter-reading of history is necessary because the history of margin is always excluded. In this paper I argue that, this book serves as the alternative history of Ireland and of Irish people. In the text, Frank explains:

Patricia says she has two books by her bed. One is a poetry book and that's the one she loves. The other is a short history of England and do I want it? She gives it to Seamus. He says I'm not supposed to be bringing anything from dipteria [...] and I'll lose my good job and be out on the street singing patriotic songs with a tin cup in my hand, which I could easily do because there isn't a song ever written about Ireland's suffering I don't know and a few songs about the joy of whisky too.(195)

In the given lines, it becomes clear that if Seamus is fired from the job, he can only sing the songs of Irish Patriotism. He also stresses that the sufferings, poverty, hunger, domination of Irish are excluded. The critic Daly writes that " Britain did not use the term "Ireland" in any official document until the 1998 Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement" (72). It means history of Ireland has not been written in official history

of Britain. Though Southern Ireland became free from Britain in 1921, Britain did not recognize Ireland as an Independent nation. It shows that Britain wanted to control Ireland and Irish.

The economy was controlled by British Government. People had nothing to eat. In 1845 the crucial Irish potato crop was attacked by a virulent fungus, causing a partial failure of the harvest. The Critic Alvin Jackson identifies:

The situation worsened in 1846, and remained dire until at least 1848 or 1849. Estimates vary, but perhaps one million Irish people died as a result of famine related disease and starvation in the Famine years. Though the origins of the disaster were natural and ecological, the stunted and begrudging relief efforts of the Whig government in London attracted considerable criticism at the time and ever since. In particular, radical nationalists saw British policy in the Famine years as embodying a heartless expression of London's social, political, and economic interests in Ireland. (130)

Alvin Jackson John writes "Mitchel declared famously that 'the Almighty indeed sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine' (130). In this interpretation, the British were culpable for the deaths of the million of Irish. Once again, it appeared that the British government was brutally prepared to use the Union as a tool of its social and economic strategies.

The official history says that "The 1920's government of Ireland Act created two distinct entities with two separate parliaments: Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. The term 'southern Ireland' crops up regularly in Britain or Ulster unionist references to Independent Ireland" (Mary E. Daly 24). But, this official history is countered by the critic Alvin Jackson who argues that this partition is caused by the British Empire. Jackson states that "Irish national politics, Irish families, and Irish

individuals were divided by empire throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (136). It means the separation of nation is because of England. Even in the text *Angela's Ashes*, Frank shows the division of Irish families and individual. Frank's grandmother always hates Frank because he is a son of Northern father. Once when Frank's Mother stands for bread, the officer behaves her as an outsider. The officer asks "And what's your name? McCourt, sir. That's not a Limerick name. Where did you get a name like that? My husband, sir. He's from the North. He's from the North and he leaves you to get the relief from the Irish Free State. Is this what we fought for, is it? I don't know, sir" (233). This is a clear sign of the prejudices he faces within his community and of his outsider status among his supposed peers. What sort of misbehavior the English did to them. He elucidates:

It is a terrible thing to be a superior because you are doomed forever to the superior part of hell. It's even worse to be an inferior. The master at school said that every time the Irish were about to demolish the English in a fair fight a filthy informer betrayed them. A man who's discovered to be an inferior deserves to be hanged or, even worse, to have no one talk to him for if no one talks to you, you are better off hanging at the end of a rope. (133)

In this extract, Frank presents the behaviors of English to Irish. His teacher reveals the secret of English. On the one hand, living under English colonialism they have lost their identity, freedom, self-esteem, culture, relation, brotherhood. On the other hand, they have lost their life being inferior. This is a bitter cruelty the English did to Irish.

Moreover, it is bitter fact of partition history that Ireland forcedly divided in the line of two nation leaving thousands of Irish families in shock and incurable trauma. In the text, McCourt narrates many historical events and historical figures as

well that have not been narrated in the official history. He describes about historical figure named Cuchulain as "since he was a boy and the English nearly wrecked it with their big guns firing up from the Liffey River. He says, you will see the bullet holes all over the front and they should be left there to remind the Irish of English perfidy"(55). It means that Cuchulain is an Irish historical figure once whom English misbehaves. But, the history of those Cuchulains who sacrifice their life for Ireland cannot be found in official history. Frank just comes to understand this orally.

Likewise, Michel Foucault opines that any sort of a literary text is the product or reaction to the power- structure of the society. He argues that "Analysis of literary texts could not be restricted to these texts themselves or to their author's psychology and background rather the larger contexts and cultural conventions in which texts were produced needed to be considered" (Habib766). Foucault views power as not the domination by one to others rather it is a productive network functioning horizontally in a society. Foucault's central point is that power determines the truth and it becomes discourse that changes in system of power. In *Angela's Ashes*, Catholicism is a source of enormous social and political power in Ireland. in the text Frank ponders "The sister knew what was right and they knew what is wrong and any doubts could be resolved by the One, Holy, Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic Church" (15). Throughout the text, Frank grows knowing the terms with his Catholic education and powers. In short, Catholicism not only shapes the external reality of Frank's life, but also affects his inner life and the decisions he takes. From early on in the memoir, McCourt makes it clear that Catholicism shapes his understanding of his community and his self. It shows that Frank is forced to do unwilling things. Frank is told "They hit you if you don't know why God made the world, if you don't know the patron saint of Limerick, if you can't recite the Apostle's Creed" (80). It shows that children have

to become Catholics to be true human beings in Limerick. Confirmation Day is an important ritual for Frank and his peers. For the first time in his life, Frank has to confess the most personal part of his life as a sin to a priest. It is a true example of how the common people have become victims in the hand of powerful people. As McCourt depicts it, the process of becoming a man in Limerick is a process of learning about Catholicism, becoming a Catholic. In all, Catholicism is an inescapable part of life in Limerick.

Foucault believes that effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false. Truth in Foucauldian light is just a construction which has origin and function in society. And by using this knowledge, people produce and represent discourse in the form of books, articles, speeches, documents, and other sources. Hence, discourse for Foucault is interrelated with power, truth, and representation. In *Angela's Ashes*, Catholicism is another source of social and political power conflict in Ireland. Because of such religious tension, Frank's psychology is guided to hate protestant and to be a part of Catholicism. Protestants are supposed to be northern Irish and supporter of England. The children are taught not be friend of protestant. Frank narrates "On Sunday morning in Limerick I watch them go to church, the Protestants, and I feel sorry for them, especially the girls, who are so lovely, they have such beautiful white teeth. I feel sorry for the beautiful protestant girls, they're doomed. That's what the priests tell us" (172). On the given lines, though he wants to join with his little girls, he is taught not to be friend with the protestant. It means Ireland itself has undergone to it's inter conflict in the name of religion. It is a discourse created by powerful people.

While defining the concept of contextual reading the critic Paul Poplawski in *English Literature in Context* argues that every critics and readers must search what are the major circumstances behind writing any text. Poplawski assumes:

What is somewhat less common is to see historical questions asked of literature- questions, for example, such as how and why particular types of literature should emerge from particular sets of historical circumstances. The academic study of literature usually takes for granted the idea that literature should functions as a critical reflection on people and society in history, and on the ways in which people make historical sense of their lives, but it often glosses over the fact that literature is itself always actively part of the historical process and inextricably bound up with its surrounding historical contexts. (1)

In the above extract, Poplawski focuses every text carries some historical and cultural background. The writer cannot produce any literary texts living out of the society. It is said that literature is the mirror of the society. So, while analyzing the text, the critic must understand the historical context. Without understanding social, cultural, historical contexts, the text cannot be well understood. Therefore, contextual reading of text goes against New Criticism and Formalism.

The political and religious instability is another visible symptom of Ireland described in *Angela's Ashes*. As Frank McCourt portrays it, his family's life in Ireland is dominated by the longstanding tensions between England and Ireland, between Protestantism and Catholicism, between Ireland's North and the South, and between the wealthy and the poor. These constant tensions deeply affect Frank's life as he grows up, and also shape the way he views the world. For example, from an early age, though Frank himself has family from the North, Frank is taught to hate the Northern

Irish. He is taught "Mr. Benson hates America and you have to remember to hate America or he'll hit you. Mr. O'Dea hates English and you have to remember to hate English or he'll hit you" (80). People have different views regarding Ireland. The hot conversation between these two people reflects this idea. "But Ireland is free, says Dad, and that's a grand thing. Free, my arse, the man says. I think we were better off under the English"(52). Though Ireland is free from English colonization, some people want to live under the English because England is Protestant country and some Irish especially northern Irish are protestant. The northern Irish people have a fear that if Ireland becomes free from England, their identity will be in crisis.

This text also shows that Ireland was under the period of great depression. In 1929, the economies of most of Western countries experienced a crisis due to aggressive investment, reckless banking practices, no saving and little income. The writers R.D. Osborne, Vincent T. Covello and Jacqueline A. Ashby in the article "Inequality in Northern Ireland [with Response]" argue:

These changes have not only been generated by civil disturbance but also, and probably more importantly, by such factors as the redevelopment and suburbanization which have greatly altered the social geography of Belfast, the rapid growth in opportunities to participate in higher education, and, currently the most worrying and potentially the most far-reaching, the processes of deindustrialization which are producing unemployment rates in Northern Ireland unmatched since the 1930's. (37)

It means though now Ireland has been capable country, the condition of 1930's is unspeakable. The condition of Northern Ireland remained brutal because of economic crisis that compelled the people to migrate in other countries. As a result, some people

had to migrate in Southern Ireland and faced different sorts of prejudices, oppression, and domination.

In the text *Angela's Ashes*, Frank shows the unemployment and its consequences. While talking about deteriorating economic situation of 1930's Ireland Frank portrays "The twins hold up their bottles and cry for more water and sugar. She leans against a wall and cries. Jesus, we still have to walk all the way to Classon Avenue and I have four starving children" (27). It tells that because of unemployment, the parents cannot feed their children. It is the problem he faces in his teenage phase when great depression in Ireland was going on. But *Angela's Ashes* questions Adrian Kelly's writing in the article "Catholic Action and the Development of the Irish Welfare State in the 1930s and 1940s" where he says "The most important initiatives in this period were the introduction of unemployment assistance in 1933 and widows' and orphans' pensions in 1935" (7). Here, these initiatives were done only for those Catholic unemployed workers and widows and orphans of those Catholic husbands and mothers who were killed in fighting.

New historicism is a practice of reading literature in relation to history, society and politics. John Brannigan argues: "All texts, all documents, are representation of the beliefs, values and forms of power circulating in a society at a given time in specific circumstances, and therefore all texts of a given time are in some ways interconnecting and interactive" (74). Here, Brannigan gives an idea that every literary work presents certain beliefs, culture, and power of the society. *Angela's Ashes* presents the domination of common people in different ways. In Ireland, Frank has felt a victim to various social institutions, including the church, the state, and even the charitable institution, St. Vincent de Paul. The church refuses Frank as an altar boy in spite of his parents' great efforts to teach him the Latin, scrub him clean, and

mend and iron his clothes. Because of a class distinction, his mother concludes that "Tis a class distinction. They don't want boys from lanes on the altar. They don't want the ones with scabby knees and hair sticking up. Oh, no, they want the nice boys with hair oil and new shoes that have fathers with suits and ties and steady jobs. That's what it is and 'tis hard to hold on to the Faith with the snobbery that's in it" (149). The church also memorizes these class distinctions through its educational system:

We go to school through lanes and back streets so that we won't meet the respectable boys who go to the Christian Brothers' School or the rich ones who go to the Jesuit school, Crescent College. The Christian Brothers' boys wear tweed jackets [...] We know they're the ones who will get jobs in the civil He substitutes an service and help the people who run the idealized version of world [...] The Crescent College boys [...] will go to America for a university, take over the family business, run stereotyped the government, run the world. (272)

McCourt's representation is denied in the Ireland, not because of his qualifications, but because of his class. His mother blames the church, telling him, "that's the second time a door was slammed in your face by the Church" (289). Frank finds out that he must join the boys' division of the Arch confraternity so that his mother can tell the St. Vincent de Paul Society and they will know he is a good Catholic. But, Frank wants to be like his Uncle Pa, not giving any care about what anyone thinks and away from the pressures of community living.

In Ireland, the most obvious agent of disgrace is prejudice. One way or other, the people have been facing prejudice. The supporters of English were treated as others. Frank writes "if anyone in your family was the least way friendly to the English in the last eight hundred years it will be brought up and thrown in your face

and you might as well move to Dublin where no one cares" (133). It means if Catholic people find out that someone is friend of Ireland, his life becomes like starving dog of the street. Perhaps the clearest example of unbending prejudice concerns Frank's maternal grandmother's enmity against Protestants is "The babies didn't do it, says Bridey. They're too small. They would if they got the chance, says Grandma. They're trained for it" (182). The remark is ironic in a sense that Briday believes that babies do not do mistake but grandmother believes that northern babies are trained to do mistakes.

In Northern Ireland, there is a political instability. As Northern Ireland is under England, England has dominated Irish Catholic. The confrontation is all in the name of religion. But when the Northern Irish people go to Southern Ireland, they are misbehaved thinking that they are the supporters. The common people who struggle for joining hand to mouth don not have any political and religious fighting to each other. The common people just want to fulfill their hungry stomach one way or other and live a simple life. But they become the victims. The critic Jeff Sluka in "Cultures of Terror and Resistance in Northern Ireland Author" highlights:

Since its creation in 1920, Northern Ireland has existed in a permanent official state of "emergency" and has only been governable through draconian "special power" or "emergency" legislation. This suggests it is basically unsustainable as a political entity without the widespread abuse of human rights. As Rolston has noted, "repression has such a long and respectable history in Ireland that it is the first instrument which the state reaches for when faced with political problems". After twenty-five years, the war has produced over 3,000 deaths and 32,000 injured, resulting in the British government's having achieved the worst human rights record in Europe. (1)

This extract presents the domination done by English and political instability in Northern Ireland and because of such reasons many people are displaced. The people who went to Southern Ireland became the victim of Southern Catholic people.

By depicting the Irish social tension, English domination, Imposition of Catholic beliefs, Frank gives to the world that in every corner of the society, the common people becomes the victims directly or indirectly. Frank depicting such bitter and pitiful conditions of common people in the text calls for peace and shows what will be their culture, identity, freedom, living, heritage, forefathers, and in general their history. Though the official history presents the facts and evidence of the past but it is also subjective in a sense that it is written by person. And the person cannot be far away from the society, he is guided by certain norms and values and ideology. Therefore, the official history cannot remain untouched from one's subjectivity. On the other hand, someone's personal account can reveal certain truths of certain time. In this regard, *Angela's Ashes* is a good example of alternative history that gives the glimpse of 1930's Ireland.

In conclusion, the non- fictional text *Angela's Ashes* depicts the before and after the 1930s chaotic socio- political and economical conditions. Hunger, death, begging, brutalities upon innocent people, atrocities on Southern Irish, misbehavior to protestant in the Southern Ireland, all these ill activities made the life uneasy. This reality is depicted in the text. So, *Angela's Ashes* historicizes these issues of the then Ireland. It deals with the fragile socio- economic and politico- cultural situation. Frank speaks on behalf of Irish people's misery, their loss and death. He has created middle voice in the text. He equally respects to the voices of all marginalized people from the perspective of humanity. Very broadly, Frank tries to address a long silenced Irish people's identity to the world readers. The text is a good example with many

representative historical accounts, events and condition of Southern Irish which shows the then historical reality critically. It speaks of the tears of common people who have been displaced, tortured, made identity less. It describes the fury of the Common people against England and dominant Catholic people of Southern Ireland. Writing on the very setting on the text, Frank not only tries to present the then turmoil and hopelessness of Irish people but also calls for harmony, brotherhood, and peace among all Irish people.

Britain and Ireland tortured thousands of innocent Irish people directly and indirectly without establishing Irish's peace and autonomy in the line of innocent Irish's wish and dream. The common people wanted peace, justice, freedom and normality of life and fulfillment of their hand to mouth problem in the Ireland, but power holders make them puppet of their hands. Both power holder Britain and Southern Ireland valorized their self- centered activities producing different layers of truth in the form of discourse. And this made the common people remain voiceless. Though the history with so called tagged "true" speaks for those power holders, different versions of alternative shows the real condition of common people in Ireland. In this research paper what comes vividly in the eyes of the reader is that Britain and Southern Ireland look at Irish from the perspectives of 'they' or 'other'. It is Frank McCourt's masterpiece *Angela's Ashes* which gives voices to voiceless lower class Irish people.

The issue of displacement, migration, hunger, indifference, loss of identity, religious confrontation, uncertainty of life, decay of social- cultural values have become as a part of life. Because of England's colonization and after the partition, many people became refugees, lost their lives, and were displaced. And every socio-economic and politico-cultural aspects of Irish became very bitter. So, in the text,

Frank questions what sense of Ireland do the common Irish have now? Hence, this text is a good evidence of those displaced and dominated Irish people who have become like refugee in their own land.

In the text, Frank's main focus is to bring the past and present reality of common Irish people. The characters presented in the text represent the common people of that time. They were the real victims who were directly or indirectly affected by the conflict. All the character's stories like his Frank Uncle, his neighbor Mr. Timoney, friend Patrica Madigan and many other people's stories depict the bitter but true condition of that time. As the common people were silenced, Frank gives them voice in this text. Though power holders do not reveal the facts, it is the common people who suffered most during that period. The common people became the scapegoat. Unlike other writers, Frank has become able to show this issue very vividly in the text from of humanism. Apart from this, Frank calls for unity, peace, brotherhood, justice, collective identity, place in Ireland.

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