

Literary Text and Modern Contexts

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The Question of reading the text

If we take a look at the whole activity of criticism and some of the ways in which critics, particularly western critics discuss literature, it becomes quite evident that the literary text has always been at the centre place. And literary criticism has been universally acknowledged as that academic activity in which one makes analysis, interpretation and evaluation of literary text.. It is really interesting to note that recent criticism as a whole can be characterized as displaying a shift from an emphasis on the author to an emphasis on the text and then a shift from the text to the reader. But any kind of approach is bound to assert its relevance or validity in terms of the text only. So, when in recent times, critical theories, one after another ,challenged established ideas about literature and rejected the assumptions inherent in traditional criticism, the question of reading the text bore the greatest significance in the study of literature.

Text vs texts

A great number of critics attempted to theorize what a text is about and how the reading of the text should be made. And their theories differed so much about the reading of the text that there prevailed a skepticism regarding the very existence of the text itself.

Very interestingly we hear of Author's text, Reader's text or as many texts as are the readers or critical approaches! Some even went to the extent of announcing it the termination of text or the death of criticism itself. The common student of literature was altogether confused. He could apply only one approach at a time and it had its severe limitations, the application of multiple theories at the same time was practically impossible. Each theory was the product of its historical and social need and was best suited to the literature of that historical and social background.

It gave impetus to the thought to critically examine all major literary theories with a view to see how each one of them has dealt with the question of the reading of the text and to see if there can be any valid or practically viable method for the reading of the text especially in the Indian context where the literary text has always had prime importance

The Marxist theory of literary criticism

Keeping our sole interest on the reading of the text in the modern literary criticism, if we examine the history of contemporary literary criticism, we notice that the first phase of the 20th century was dominated by the Marxist theory of literary criticism.

According to a typical Marxist critic, the text has to be seen in relation to Marxist view of history in which the idea of class struggle is central. The emphasis was that the connections between the literary text and economic structure of the society in which a work of art is written or created must be taken into account.

The famous critics like George Lucacs ,Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherry have been more interested to examine if the literary text presents a suitably full picture of the society or not.

While traditional Marxist theory simply relates to the text to a view of the social reality of the time in which literary text is written,

Neo Marxist critic like Terry Eagleton is interested in the social and political questions that a text raises.

The Premise of a Marxist Critic in general

According to the Marxist theory of literary criticism in general, a text becomes more valuable as an expression of society or the expression of the political ideas of Marx than a piece of art. This critical approach has led a Marxist critic to look searchingly at the contradictions and problems inherent in bourgeois culture, exploring the ideology inherent in literary texts to see where and how ideological values begin to prove inadequate and incomplete. Broadly, this approach attempts to explore both literature and history, making a connection between the text and the world. The Marxist criticism which was basically concerned to see how the class of the “have-nots” had been represented in literature, gave rise to a critical methodology in which the representation of the weaker sections of the society, the underprivileged class or the suppressed class in literary works was critically examined. It surely inspired Feminism to a great extent. But in practice, the traditional Marxism amounted to the sheer neglect of the fine excellences of the text as a piece of literature.

Aesthetic/Textual Criticism

Almost contemporary to the Marxist theory was the emergence of Aesthetic theory. Great figures like T S Eliot, I A Richards and later F R Leavis advocated the close reading of the text. They argued that instead of concentrating on literary history and biography, a reader should analyse the words on the page. T S Eliot in his *Selected Essays*, I A Richards in his *Practical Criticism* and F R Leavis in his *Great Tradition* and *Revaluations* paved the way of modern practical criticism. The purpose of such close attention to the text of the writing was to reveal the complexity and subtlety of what was being said. Text, to Eliot, Richards or Leavis was important neither as a biographical document or as an expression of society but as a piece of art.

The reading of the text was made to examine what the text says and how it says it as a piece of literature. It was interesting to note that all the three great critics Eliot, Richards and Leavis had a strong notion of culture and society, still they laid focus more on the text than the artist or his social or cultural background. Their stress on the text and the close reading of the text was something that remained central in whole of the modern literary criticism.

New criticism

This aesthetic movement in England had a profound influence in America where a new school of critics took birth popularly known as the school of New Critics. Most prominent of these critics were J C Ransom ,Allen Tate, RP Blackmur, William Empson and Cleanth Brooks. Much influenced by Eliot's thoughts on literature and Richards' practical criticism, New Critics looked closely at texts. To a New Critic, the text of literature has a special kind of knowledge it says things that cannot be paraphrased, it has organic unity and the role of a critic is to analyse the complex verbal structure of the text, the meaning revealing itself through such close analysis. Cleanth Brooks ,the chief practitioner among the New Critics, believed there was no need of judging the text in terms of the biographical , social or historical background of the text as language of the text itself embodies such concerns. In introduction to his book *A Shaping Joy* (1971), he observes:

At the most primary level there are very words that the writer employs, for language is itself the product of society, living through history. Language is a amalgam of representations of reality both abstract concepts and valuations(vii)

So, New Critics' emphasis on the close reading of the text and its idea of the text as self sufficient entity was much condemned by later critics especially by Chicago critic R S Crane and they were charged of cutting off a literary text from its author and the society

Myth and Archetypal Criticism: Northrop Frye

The year 1957 is important in the history of modern literary criticism as Northrop Frye published his monumental book *Anatomy of Criticism* which may be regarded perhaps the most enduring critical work of the century. Frye's was the myth and archetypal criticism.

He systematized the whole literature and believed that all literary expression is controlled by a small number of abiding literary universals, in his words, "four narrative pre-generic" categories which are 'logically prior' to the usual literary genres. These pre-generic 'mythoi'—these models of all models—these deepest of structures, which are the inevitable constituents of a literary imagination, became the fundamental object of the critical consciousness and a critic's task was to receive those structures and convey to the readers.

So, the object of the reading of the text was to discover the underlying mythical patterns in literature. The literary text was a mythic discourse – a literary universe and the reader's duty was to read it in that perspective. Reading the text became surely a difficult task but it surely enriched the understanding of the text and revealed how human mind has conceived literature through myths, irrespective of man's geographical and ethnic differences.

Phenomenological Criticism

In the late 1950's, we see the rise of Phenomenological Criticism. The originator of Phenomenology was the German philosopher Husserl who regarded it as an attempt to describe human consciousness. Phenomenology as an approach to literature is usually associated with the theory and practice of Geneva school of critics, most notably Georges Poulet and J Hillis Miller. .Poulet's *The Metamorphosis of the Circle* (1966) and Miller's *The Disappearance of God* (1963), and *Poets of Reality* (1965), came with a rush and coherence on the literary scene and suggested new methodology the criticism of consciousness.

However, J Hillis Miller subsequently rejected such an approach, opting instead Structuralism and Post structuralism. His early work on Dickens and Hardy shows the heights of Phenomenological Criticism.

This sort of critical approach seeks to bridge the gap between biography and criticism by approaching the author through the text. It starts with the work and through it attempts to trace the pattern of the author's mind. In practice, reader discovered his own consciousness while discovering the consciousness of the author.

Structuralism:Ferdinand de Saussure

In the late 1960's, one sees the rise of Structuralism in literary criticism . Structuralism applies great linguist Saussure's ideas about language to literary texts. It believes that the text is a self sufficient system.

A Structuralist primarily concerns himself with the words as 'signifiers' and 'signifieds' and studies the internal order of the language .It rejects a conventional interest in life beyond the text and prefers to see every text as a construct working by certain rules. A typically Structuralist approach adopts a position of not seeing things within the cultural context of society.

French critic Roland Barthes with his brilliant books *Writing Degree Zero* , *Critical Essays* and *The Pleasure of the Text* etc. has applied the techniques of structuralist approach successfully.

Structuralism attempts to focus on the text alone rejecting the interpretation in favour of a description of the text's operations. It takes into account both paradigmatic and syntagmatic patterns of language and drives out the meaning of a text.

This approach failed to give adequate attention to the vision or world view implicit in a literary work and resulted , at the worst in a very mechanized activity on the part of the reader and proved to be an artificial ordering system.

Reader Response Criticism and Reception theory

It was in Germany in the early 1970's that the role of the reader was emphasized by critics like Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden. Iser in his book *The Implied Reader* (1974) and *The Act of Reading* (1978) give rise to the Reader Response Criticism. According to this theory, the text largely determines the response but it suggests that the text is full of gaps which the reader fills in his own way.

Another critic Robert Hans Jauss is more concerned with the general response to literature over a period of time than with the individual response and this is an approach known as Reception Theory. This theory stresses on the text that provides a certain stimulus and reader completes the process. In the terminology of Reception theory, the reader concretizes the literary work, which is in itself, no more than a chain of organized black marks on a page. Without this continuous active participation on the reader's part there would be no literary work at all. In such sort of reading, the text became no more than a series of 'cues' to the reader - an invitation to construct language into meaning. To a Reception Critic, the text comes ready equipped with indeterminacy and the reader must concretize it correctly. Really, a tough task assigned to reader!

Deconstruction: Jaques Derrida

In the late 70s, we have the French philosopher Jaques Derrida's pronouncements that stirred the critical world a lot and paved a path to study and understand history, philosophy and literature with new perspectives and strategies. He said that all readings are misreading in the sense they impose ordering strategies. Advocating a strategy of subverting the hierarchies inherent in texts and discourses, he laid stress to explore inherent contradictions in the text and explaining gaps and silences- exclusions, consciously or unconsciously ingrained in the text.

According to him, the text should be seen as just an endless stream of signifiers with words only pointing to other words without any determinate meaning.

A typical deconstructive reading emphasizes the contradictions, the writer cannot control or shows how a text becomes confused and puzzled because there is such a gap between the feeling and the expression. Derrida believed that words have no determinate meanings and the critic's job is to analyse and analyse and derive its meanings.

His theory popularly known as Deconstruction fails to acknowledge the possibility that a text(literary or philosophical) can confront experience in a way that communicate itself to the reader.

Culture Criticism

Culture Studies and New Historicism both made a sociological turn in literary studies in the 1970's. With the founding of the Birmingham Center of Culture Studies, contemporary English reality and cultural forms including film and mass media were put to scrutiny.

Under the leadership of Raymond Williams, the Cultural critics wanted to break the boundary between high and popular culture and the hierarchy that this implies. They were also critical of the idea of a 'canon'.

Instead of evaluating what is great the cultural critics wished to relate a literary text to its cultural context. As such cultural criticism is interdisciplinary for it involves studying a whole way of life- which includes the social, the political, the economic etc. Williams stated in his book *The Long Revolution* :

I would then define the theory of culture as the study of the relationship between elements in a whole way of life. The analysis of culture is the attempt to discover the nature of the organization which is the complex of these relationships. Analysis of particular works or institutions is, in this context, analysis of their essential kind of organization... a key word in such analysis is pattern(63).

New Historicism

Stephen Greenblatt in his path breaking work *Renaissance Self Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (1980) analyzed the ways in which writers like More, Tyndale, Spenser and Marlowe fashioned their self-identities through a network of social, psychological, political and intellectual discourses. He sees Shakespeare's plays as being centrally and repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder.

Michel Foucault was a strong influence on cultural critics and the New Historicists. He sought to study cultures in terms of power relationships.

Unlike Marxists, he saw power not simply as repressive or oppressive of one against another but as a complex of forces- ways of thinking, speaking etc.

Derrida ,Foucault and Lacan ,though not primarily literary critics, their philosophical, political and psycho-analytical positions have immensely impacted the critical postulations of Feminist critics and Post –Colonial critics like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak to expose the intricate relationship of the powerful and the weak in different texts and discourses of literature.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY THEORIES ON THE READING OF THE TEXT

1. The reality of the world is too hybrid to be captured by the author, so an author's version of reality is not reliable. Authenticity of representation is a farce.
2. Meaning in the text is not Author's construct, author is himself or herself a construct.
3. Meaning in the text is not determinate. One reading is as valid as another reading.
4. Text is not an organic whole, its cues ,slips, silences are to be scrutinized and interpreted.
5. Text is the result of the articulation of language, it is not innocent, subtext and inter-textuality reveal hidden agendas and ideological , social, political, cultural hierarchies .
6. A Reader is involved in the creation of meaning which has no universality.
7. Text is a site where author and reader attempt meaning ,often incapably.

Thank You