

Paradigm Shift in Literary Studies: From Literary Criticism to Political Criticism

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ABSTRACT: *Literature has been studied in every age according to the critical tools available to the readers and critics of that age. Literature has been studied in humanist perspective with its focus on objectivity, universality and originality for a long time. Realism has been its hallmark for centuries. Saussure's focus on language as a system of signs resulted in what has been called 'linguistic turn'. Linguistic turn drew attention to literature as a construct, which comprised signs deriving its significance from the system that produces it. 'Cultural turn' was occasioned by Williams' and Althusser's reinterpretation of Marx's materialist approach to literature. Cultural studies equate literature with cultural artifacts and ideology. Postmodern turn challenges all the traditional claims to objectivity and originality. Edward Said's Orientalism is called 'Political turn'. This political turn ushered in postcolonial theories of literature which focus on literature as a site of conflict between the colonizer and the colonized in the contemporary intellectual milieu.*

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Literature and criticism have always been conditioned by the social, cultural, political and ideological circumstances. Literature has always enjoyed a high place in all the imaginative arts by virtue of its creativity, originality, objectivity and for its appeal to human passions and emotions. It has always responded to the dominant social, cultural and political values and issues. Literature has always carried with it the spirit and ethos of its age. Criticism likewise has traditionally been empiricist and humanist, focusing on the form and function of literature. It has tried either to justify the existing literary practices or to suggest changes to it looking for new trends and tendencies. The critics have always agreed that literature does serve some kind of end. It may be pure aesthetic pleasure or some moral purpose. Literature and criticism have always had a close reciprocal relation with the developments in one field affecting the other.

The word literature is derived from the Latin word *litteratura*, which means the ability to use letters or to read. With the passage of time, the word literature became more and more exclusive and its usage came to be associated with learning, scholarship and creativity. In the 18thC, the word literature came to be associated with imaginative writings, including poems, plays, novels, short stories and drama. Somehow in its history of evolution the word literature acquired sacrosanct position and its creators started assuming superior position with claims to being divinely inspired and especially gifted genius who were above the rest of humanity. The focus on author as god like figure and literature as a work similar somehow to scriptures kept focus away from the artificiality and constructed nature of both the author and the work and the social function which they invariably performed.

Literary criticism privileges a balanced analysis of the literary texts. The critics generally focus on both the merits and demerits of the text using the register of the discipline and putting the text in its proper place in the genre and canon. There are number of schools of criticism that seek to interpret the texts according to their formulae and context. These schools privilege some aspects of the text over the others. Different critics use and recommend different strategies and modes for reading the texts. Traditionally critics have been formalists and they appreciated works on their literary merits ignoring the contexts and milieus of their production and interpretations. Different hermeneutic strategies have also been in vogue that focused on meaning. Author's intentions also played a key role in the analyses of the texts. Structuralist analysis focuses on the underlying and unchanging patterns and structures in the text preferring immutability of the text to the diverse changing matrixes of interpretation.

Leavis' Method:

F R Leavis' approach to literature and criticism is regarded as the quintessence of traditional approaches to literature as it embodies all the key principles of approaches to literature prior to the advent of theory. His approach is now generally called 'Leavis method' (15) and his followers are dubbed as 'Leavisites'. L Eaglestone (15-16) has summarized the key points of 'Leavis method' as under;

- The study of literature has a 'civilising mission' to 'humanize' people
- A text can and should be studied and judged 'objectively'. Writing in third person rather than first person is assumed to be more objective.
- The reader must demonstrate sensibility or an individual response to the text which happens 'naturally' when a literary text is read.
- Practical criticism is the most effective method for studying literature.
- There is 'canon' or authoritative list of great literary works that everyone with sensibility should study and admire.
- A literary text is free from history and time, and has *intrinsic artistic worth*.

A major shift in the contemporary intellectual milieu has been from literary criticism to literary theory. This shift marks a decisive break in the approaches to the study of literature and its appreciation. Literary criticism is a broad term which refers to the appreciation, evaluation, elucidation and analysis of literature. It is normative, evaluative and analytical in its approach. While literary critics criticized literature from various angles and perspectives they never questioned their own perspective or the tools which they were using for their purposes. Goring et al.³, in 'Understanding Literature' 'distinguish criticism' from 'theory' by suggesting that they have different objects of investigation. Theory is metacriticism. It provides tools for the business of criticism. The tools are patterns of thought that form the basis of literary criticism.

Linguistic Turn:

Paul de Man (8) in 'Resistance to Theory' has attributed the advent of literary theory to 'linguistic turn' and rejection of the non-linguistic historical and aesthetic approaches to the study of literature. According to him literary theory emerged when the object of discussion shifted from the

product to the tools of production and linguistic terminology became pivotal in the metalanguage about literature. He equated resistance to theory with resistance to the rhetorical or typological dimensions of language. He believes that rhetorical function of language is more obvious in literature than in anything else and it should be foregrounded in criticism also.

Literary theory has shattered the basis of the humanist Anglo-American literary tradition and has replaced it with post-humanist, post-positivist and post-structuralist principles which deny the very assumptions on which the traditional criticism has rested its claims.

Some apologists of the western tradition argue that the theory is uncalled for and literature can still be read without it. Why there should be a theory? Answer to this question is that there has always been some theory at work whenever literature has been written, read and criticized and the only difference is that we have recognized its presence now. Newton contends that to be unconscious of or uninterested in theory does not mean that theory does not exist. Theory is always implied in reading literary discourses. Bertens in 'Literary Theory: The Basics' also suggests that interpretation of literary texts and literary theory are not two different things. A text is always studied from a theoretical perspective; one may or may not be aware of it. Selden⁷ stresses the point further when he says that the even the opponents of theory cannot deny the fact that interpretation and reading of text cannot avoid implicit theory. He further says that critics take refuge in common sense and talk about writer's personal experience, the social and historical background of the work, the human interest, imaginative 'genius', and poetic beauty of great literature. He hits the nail on the head when he says that critics criticized literature without disturbing our picture of the world and in this way they were champions of status quo one way or the other. He decries the traditional privileging of feeling, imagination, genius and reality as part of the dead theory.

Bauerlein in *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy* says that critics now raise theoretical points as a quick mark of departure and a heuristic angle on the material being interpreted. He believes that the term 'theory' signifies non-empirical, conceptual or abstract.

The rise of theory has opened up a Pandora box for the western world and has great consequences for the repressed, ignored, silenced, and colonized 'others' who lie on the margins and periphery. Wolfreys says that theoretically informed approaches have provided vantage points from which different 'voices' could be heard. These approaches bring to surface

the identities which are different from the implicit Christian, humanist, western, male European identities.

Contemporary theory has impacted the whole domain of human knowledge and existence. Theory which is multidisciplinary. It draws its tools from various fields of study and has outlived its sources and is now in the driving seat with other fields following it. As Mohanty in 'Literary Theory and Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics' (1998) says that contemporary criticism is a larger social phenomenon. It has supplanted history, philosophy and religion as the site of cultural and moral pedagogy.

Cultural Turn:

'Cultural turn' sheds light on art and literature from a new angle and establishes them to be products of culture. Culture becomes all the more important when we realize that it is the site where all the forces of the society compete and contest for hegemony. All the power relations among the various segments of the society actually find their expression in culture. Cultural critics agree that it is in culture that the inequalities of class, gender and race are naturalized.

Cultural critics examine the way literature emerges as a form and influences and competes with other cultural artifacts in a culture. The text itself becomes less important as compared to the context that produces it. The cultural critics focus on the social contexts that give birth to the text. They also focus on the factors that cause a text to be written. The circumstances in which a text is produced, circulated and read become more important than the text itself. One of the main concerns of the cultural criticism is to erase the boundaries between great literature and popular literature. They undermine literary canon and boundaries between high culture and low culture. Culture is no longer viewed as static. Rather it is viewed as dynamic, interactive and changing. Literature is not privileged as an aesthetic object. It is seen in the wider social, cultural and economic conditions and relations that are crucial to the production and circulation of literature. Questioning of canon and disciplines is key to cultural criticism.

Williams questioned the dualism of 'art' and 'reality'. He traced the presence of this dualism from Plato to Renaissance and suggested that Renaissance marked exaggerated emphasis on the notion of art as a special creation. To him Romanticism by focusing on the imagination of the artist showed that art was creation of the individual, the artist. However there was no change in the basic assumption that art and reality are two distinct

entities. Williams claimed that the purported dualism of art and reality was false. He contended that biology of perception reveals that all perception is conventional. All the individuals see the reality same way but the angle varies and the world is never given in intelligible form. Each individual makes sense of the world according to his/her own sense. Williams further says that reality that we experience is human creation. Learning and communication are cultural processes and culture is not image of the world but a mode of its constitution. Without these two processes i.e., learning and communication, it is not possible to make sense of the world. As creation is not exceptional rather cultural, it is ordinary.

Turner in *British Cultural Studies* says that impact of Saussure's theory of language endows language with great determining power. 'Reality' becomes 'construct' and language becomes determiner of reality. Meaning is the function of culture. People of different cultures view world differently. "Culture, as the site where meaning is generated and experienced, becomes a determining, productive field through which social realities are constructed, experienced and interpreted" (14).

The cultural studies have done away with the distinction between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' culture and literature. Literature has always been favorably appreciated as compared to popular fiction which is believed to cater to the low taste. The question of valuation of literature is also a question of culture. Cultural elite decides what elite literature is and what is not. Milner in *Literature, Culture and Society* says that distinction between literature and fiction and between 'elite' and 'popular' cultural forms clearly reflects the differences between the elite and non-elite social groups. Popular fiction has never been accepted by the literary critics and has always been recognized as catering to low taste i.e. the taste of those belonging to low classes.

Bennett et al. also argue that monopoly of 'cultural value' of a particular canon of literary, music or artistic works is not tenable now. The claim of 'intellectual elite' to any special value for any 'preferred cultural activities' over the other cultural groups is unjustified.

Bourdieu contends that aesthetic judgments are not objective, autonomous aesthetic logic rather they are determined by the class differences. The distinctions of taste fortify the divisions between classes. He calls this phenomenon 'cultural capital'. Cultural capital is the ability to appreciate art and culture and he asserts that this ability is not equally distributed among the social classes.

Berube in 'The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies' considers it necessary to study popular forms of culture for proper understanding of 'social subjectivity'. He suggests that any attempt to isolate or circumvent the popular culture will not encompass the total reality of culture. Thus the importance once given to the elitist literary and artistic culture is no longer the desired goal.

Frow contends that these are the literary regimes which control the institutional practices which determine which set of values is to be promoted which is to be ignored. "Texts and readings are in the first instance not entities but functions, values within a system, and texts and reading count as literary or nonliterary by virtue of protocols which govern this distinction and specify the process by which it is ongoingly realized" (52). Mulhern in 'Culture/Metaculture' says that culture is a signifying practice which is based on "the same general process of selection and combination of terms and relations from already-given code" (102).

Literature and Ideology:

Literature is ideology. Literature is ideological in the sense that whatever it is, it is ideological; its very being serves some function which may or may not be stated one. Ideology is not something which is remote in the realm of ideas and abstract thinking or some philosophy which is manifested in manifestos or the declared principles or ideals of some persons or groups of people. Ideology conditions our existence and shapes the way we think, behave and respond to the world. Its expression is unconscious and does not require any deliberate effort. The action that is performed automatically without any conflict or pangs of conscience is the most ideological. Ideology is the unexamined and unquestioned way of living and expression. Ideology governs our thinking, decisions, likings, disliking, prejudices and biases. Whatever is taken as for granted and common sense is ideological.

Ideology reflects the social cultural, economic, political and religious practices of a people and goes with the dominant political and institutional practices. Ideology manifests itself as common sense, realism, and reflex action. Belsey says that ideology is inscribed in discourse. Ideology is not a theory or philosophy that exists independently and separately of texts and human actions. Rather it reflects itself through the texts and interactions. She says that ideology is a "way of thinking, speaking, experiencing" (5).

Literature has always been ideological, though this aspect came under scrutiny only in the wake contemporary intellectual milieu. Marx

was the first to point finger to this direction. He believed art and literature are part of exploitation and go by the dominant or official line and prepare way for the smooth functioning of the system and maintaining hegemony of the ruling class. The ruling classes perpetuate their ideology very systematically. The dominant ideology is propagated through discursive and non-discursive practices. The recipients of ideology absorb it unknowingly and unquestioningly. When this happens the domination becomes complete because it implies that this ideology has been subscribed by everybody and there is no resistance to it.

Althusser says that ideology is not promoted and maintained by RSAs i.e. repressive state apparatuses; rather it is maintained by ISAs i.e. Ideological State Apparatuses. He says that schools, churches, and other institutions ensure that the ruling ideology functions smoothly. This is done by turning individuals into subjects. As he says, "All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject" (461). English literature has also been ideological as it has always been the site of social cultural economic and religious politics. At its every stage it has worked for the dominant ideology. Renaissance marked the beginning of colonization. Ground for colonization was paved by literature. English literature has always been capitalistic. Novels of Dickens, Hardy and George Eliot bear ample testimony to it. It has been political. It has been discriminatory and instrumental in silencing the women, the blacks or simply the others of the western society. As Bennett and Royle say,

Literary texts do not simply or passively 'express' or reflect the ideology of their particular time and place. Rather, they are sites of conflict and difference, places where values and preconceptions, beliefs and prejudices, knowledge and social structures are represented and, in the process, opened to transformation. (177)

Postmodern Turn:

'Postmodern turn' takes 'cultural turn' to another level. It challenges the basic assumptions of the modernist beliefs and tenets. Postmodern cultural theory challenges the universality of reason and questions the presence of external reality. It interrogates the enlightenment philosophy of rationality which posits a consensus among the human beings what is just, right, and humane. It suggests that there is only contingency, temporality and situational logic. Adam and Allen suggest that "this type of cultural theory

destabilizes our multidisciplinary reliance on a realm amenable to the practices of ‘objective’, ‘detached’ and ‘neutral’ research enquiry” (xiv).

Postmodernists break traditions through experimentation with new literary genres, forms and styles. They question ‘order’, ‘system’, ‘discipline’, and ‘coherence’. They privilege chaos, fragmentation, absurdity and irrationality. Alienation and meaninglessness of human existence become the cornerstone of the postmodern fiction. Fear, depression, desperation, and void become a register in postmodern discourse. Postmodernism objects to classifications, hierarchies and boundaries. Elitist approaches succumb to marginality. High art becomes a pejorative term in postmodern milieu. Mimetic philosophies of art and literature are rejected in favor of anti-mimetic and anti-humanist doctrines. Art and literature are not seen as representing reality, rather they considered reality themselves. Language does not describe reality; rather it constructs it. The famous maxim that literature mirrors society becomes a conjecture in postmodern era as literature is seen as a construct.

Postmodernism destabilizes foundations and centers and privileges antifoundationalism and decentring. Claims to objectivity and universality are rejected in favour of subjectivity and provinciality. Reason, science, and systems become causalities in postmodern thought. The sanctity of text is undermined by the claims of intertextuality. Texts become polyphonic and dialogic. Thus postmodernism trivializes whatever has been privileged as sacred and obligatory.

Postmodernism is both a reaction to modernism and goes beyond it. Postmodernism is a critique of discourses of enlightenment and challenges traditional generalizations, beliefs, and assumptions of universality. It marks death of grand narratives. It also rebuffs arguments of teleology in the scheme of universe. Postmodernism shatters all the claims to objectivity and establishes that access to objective knowledge is impossible; and all knowledge even scientific knowledge is cultural. There is no reality; there is only hyper- reality or simulation in art, literature or movies. Postmodernism breaks the boundaries between the ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, art and literature and thus deals a blow to the canonical and elitist approaches to the study of art and literature. Postmodernism challenges the traditional views of representation, realism, individual and common sense and stresses the need of dedoxification of all cultural forms. Postmodernism rejects western canon and teleological explanations of life, universe and general scheme of things. Postmodernism rejects traditional theories of representation. It also rejects modernist and humanist view of the theory as the mirror of the reality. Postmodernism privileges

perspective and relativism and holds that all representations are historical and linguistic constructs.

Poststructuralism subverts basic assumptions of structuralism and demystifies many of the traditional concepts and beliefs about the nature of language, author, text, meaning and reading practices. Saussure posited the relation between the signifier and signified, though arbitrary, as socially fixed. Poststructuralism breaks loose the connection between the two and frees signified from the hold of signifier. This loosening the link between the signifier and signified has opened up the Pandora box. Language has all of a sudden become a suspect medium instead of being a natural and transparent medium. Language is socially and culturally mediated and different languages construct reality differently as is suggested by Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Meaning is unstable and not fixed; text is only the echo of other texts and author does not have any monopoly on the text any longer. Poststructuralism exposes the western culture to be phonocentric, phallogocentric and logocentric. Poststructuralism thus changes the whole perception of reality, life and the universe.

Derrida's Deconstruction has been heralded as a major coup in philosophy for its ingenious unmasking of grand narratives of western culture and exposing their underlying assumptions and in-built contradictions. Deconstruction undermines the western metaphysics and brings to fore their inherent contradictions. It exposes the western metaphysics to be logocentric, phonocentric, and phallogocentric. Derrida's telling critique of some of canonical western texts is of great importance for the racial and cultural others who have otherwise remained ignored, suppressed and silenced in the western texts. 'Difference' is Derrida's key strategy for debunking western myths. It is antithesis of logos which is basic structural premise of western philosophy. Derrida deconstructs the binary oppositions and exposes them to be cultural and not natural as they were portrayed in the western texts. Deconstruction has been labeled as apolitical textual analysis which does not serve the cause it espouses to set out. But this claim has been belied by the fact that deconstruction has affected all the branches of knowledge and has given a new direction to human thought and action.

Political Turn:

With Edward Said criticism took a 'political turn' and ushered in Postcolonial theory which has exposed the colonial narratives as legitimizing discourses of the West. He has shown how the grand narratives of the West have been an accomplice in maintaining the

hegemony of the western culture and empire over the rest of the world. Edward Said considered literary theory ineffective on the grounds that it was relativistic and did not take into account the politics of the texts. He considered Marxism as exercise in text and vacuum. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia contend that the criticism for Said is “personal and active and entwined with the world” (32). They further say that Said believed that “the intellectual, through the operation of the oppositional, critical spirit, can reveal hypocrisy, uncover the false, prepare the ground for change” (3).

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said has shown how western philosophers, historians, philologists, novelists, and critics have presented Orient as a knowable, governable and manageable entity. The west used ‘Orientalism’ as ‘the corporate institution for dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views about it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it . Said highlighted the fact that imperialism and colonization were not merely mercenary enterprises. They went beyond it.

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination” (Said 8).

Postcolonial is not just about the history of colonization and its impact on the lives of the colonized peoples; rather it is about the interrogation all the discursive practices which paved way for the process of colonization and provided it with the rationale and justification. The west used all of its intellect, reason and knowledge and science to prepare itself for this adventure. The supremacy of the white man in the garb of civilization and the inferiority in the name of lack of civilization, values, history and rationality were inscribed in discourses which served as ready guides for colonization. All the branches of knowledge contributed directly towards inscribing the European superior, civilized and rational and the rest of the world inferior, barbarian, and pathologically emotional. Postcolonial theory is a composite term which signifies many things at the same time. It is a discipline which cuts across the disciplines like philosophy, literature, history, anthropology and sociology. It is also a methodology which revisits the western metanarratives and discourses to disrupt their stability and expose their contradictions.

Conclusion:

Postcolonial critics are engaged in an intense intellectual battle to challenge, counter and subvert the western cultural forms that have so menacing an effect on their minds and lives that they find it difficult to recover their original innocent cultural forms. Hybridity is the colonial legacy and postcolonial agency. Hybridity is the postcolonial condition. Appropriation, counter discursive practices, cultural resistance and privileging of their own intellectuals are the strategies through which the postcolonial world can grapple with the legacy of the colonization.

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