

LANGUAGE AND LITERARY STUDIES

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Abstract:

Since its emergence, critical faculty has been following literature. The major concerns of critical enquiry have been focused upon the interpretation, evaluation and appreciation. Moreover it was engaged in affirming the canons of literary studies. Literature and literary studies are two different enterprises. The first one is concerned with creativity whereas the second one is related to learning. The faculty of critical study belongs to the second category. It is about the science of literature. Critical study analyses literature in terms of its nature and function. In all attempts defining literature, critics deal with contemporary instances of literature. While doing so critics focus on the content, and the biography of author. In other words he/she tries to decipher the text in terms of its social, economic and cultural underpinnings. This scholarly endeavour went through several transformations over a long period of time. It is interesting to see the evolution of critical study as a branch of knowledge. In recent times language brought havoc in the very perception and reception of literature. Twentieth century critical studies engage extra contextual factors for its enquiry. Language, gender, race, reader, reception, and environment are the current interests of the critical studies. This paper highlights the role of language in contemporary critical studies.

Key Words:

Literary studies, literary theory, unconscious, structuralism, post-structuralism, langue, parole, metonymy, metaphor, estrangement, close reading, episteme, lebenswelt

Introduction

“The task of criticism is not to bring out the work’s relationship with the author, but rather to analyse work through its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form and the play of its internal relationship.”

Michel Foucault

The term literary studies have been used in this paper as it encompasses all forms of the studies in literature. Therefore literary studies can be used interchangeably with critical studies. Both terms have been used with the same connotation.

At the outset, there are two essential concepts to think upon. These are literary criticism and literary theory. Precisely these two concepts can be called as two subsequent phases in the critical history. The phase from Aristotle to F.R. Leavis can roughly be termed as criticism. The second phase can be traced from the emergence of Russian Formalism and New criticism in Europe to the Pragmatism.

Criticism is more or the less concerned with all the traditional claims of liberal humanism. It is a work of commentary on the works of literature. Criticism lays emphasis on the meaning of literature. It deals with the individual works of art for the understanding and appreciation. It treats literature as the manifestation of human values and virtues. The work and the artist had the authority. The authority had the privilege for both to address universal human traits to the common folks. It is commonly accepted that to understand a text means to study the text in isolation, detached from all the contexts. The close reading is accepted mode of scrutiny. Simply, the job of criticism is to offer the meaning to the reader.

It is evident that from Plato to the Modern critics, language was one of the important parts of their deliberation. Almost in every age the language has been treated as the part of Rhetoric. Due importance was given to the style, diction and clarity of the language. None the less, much of English criticism is of descriptive nature where critics focus is on individual works and writers. They study the aim, method and the effect of work of art.

On the contrary, literary theory has a different connotation. It is not related to the meaning, evaluation and to the appreciation. Rather it is related to the conditions that makes meaning possible. It is concerned with description and analysis of the determinants that brought the subject into being. Literary theory studies literature in terms of historical, political, economical and gender contexts. It visualizes literary activity as consequence of power relations. Traditional meaning of the word theory as ‘practice’ is quite embarrassing. Theory is the method or an approach through which practice is derived. Theory is a speculative undertaking to be

applied on the text. In a way theory resembles philosophy because theory questions the very foundations of the subject matter. In that sense theory is sceptical.

The sceptical attitude towards language and its meaning can be traced back to Aristotle. In his treatise, *'On Interpretation'* he defined language as, "*sound that is meaningful Kata syntheken.*" It means that meaning is not the result of any kind of natural necessity but it is the outcome of history and tradition, which is already set. The tradition of critical enquiry in the west believed the principle of language as functional. Several thinkers made use of the functionality of language with different connotations. The English equivalent for the same is 'arbitrariness'. Equivalent translations for the word were used by western philosophers as *'ad placitam'* in Latin, *'arbitraire'* in French and *'Willkuur'* in German. The gradual shift from a view of language as a representational medium to language as functional entity has come up with several new horizons to deal with.

The attitude of scepticism has been evolved through the revolutionary ideas of Hegel, and Nietzsche. The challenges posed by later thinkers to the set and conformed ideas paved the way for re thinking. The thinkers include Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and James Frazer. These thinkers brought human selfhood, religion, god and morality under question. The scepticism proved to be crucial through the *'Das Kapital'* of Marx, where he says the very economic relations and means of production are the basis of human culture. His treatment as a product of human labour to God is path breaking. According to Marx, the social and economic factors determine what we perceive.

Another key figure, Freud provided new dimensions to the human psyche. He was the first who gave due importance to the unconscious. He dismantled the very concept of self hood. Later Lacan re worked on the Freud's ideas in terms of the structuralist linguistics. Where he hailed that, "*Unconscious is structured like a language.*" He applied two basic linguistic devices metonymy and metaphor to the workings of unconscious as *'the dream house'*. The processes take place in dream house namely condensation and displacement are alike the two basic poles of language. Further he developed the model of the subject, 'I' in relation to other through language.

The focus of literary study has gradually been shifted from content to other factors. The language is one of the key factors that cause literature. The new approach to focus language has brought many changes how we perceive literature. The attempts were made by critics to achieve objectivity in analysis of the literature. The advocates of linguistic scrutiny believe objectivity in critical business can be brought through language. Language is seen by these critics as a neutral and traditional way of representing rather than copying the world. The change could be seen in

attitude of Matthew Arnold in his essay, 'The function of Criticism in Present Time' where he insisted upon the neutrality of literary study in the following way,

“Criticism is a disinterested endeavour to learn & propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.”

The same cult of mind was nurtured by New Critics in England. The main thrust of New Critics was on the language and the form of literature. New criticism holds that the literary work as a linguistic construct. Earlier Russian Formalists believed in the *estrangement or defamiliarization* i.e by disrupting the modes of ordinary linguistic discourse, literature has the capacity to renew or makes strange the perception and it renews readers lost capacity for new experience. Formalism views literature as the special mode of language and make distinction between literary language and the common language. The influence of Russian formalism can be seen on later developed critical approaches such as stylistics and narratology. New critics were trying for scientific accuracy in literary study by differentiating literary use and common use of the language. The literary language is to feel and experience whereas common language is for communication and used to convey information. The focus of study was on form rather than the content.

The prevailing notion of language as self sufficient entity is rejected by structural and post structural critics. They discarded the idea of resemblance that operates between words and designated objects in favour of binary nature of language. The belief that language no longer consists only of representations and utterances that represent the things and come up as thread of meaning is replaced by language is made up with formal elements that are accumulated in a system and that impose on the sounds, syllables and emanates an order that is not that of representation.

The impetus was given by anthropologists and structuralists to think literature in terms of linguistic structures. Claude Levi Strauss studied myths as underlying principle of human race. Strauss was interested in the underlying structures of the system that governs it. Moreover, Ferdinand De Saussure's proclamation, '*language as a system of signs*' paved the way for later theorist to carry critical study towards new direction.

The intellectual movement Structuralism which emerged in France has its root in the thinking of De Saussure, a Swiss linguist. The structuralist enquiry largely derived from the linguistic formulations of De Saussure. He was revolutionary in the sense, by studying language synchronically instead of diachronically. He analysed language in its present use. Where he focused on how meanings are upheld and established at a given point of time. His claims about language are very interesting what he says linguistic structures. He held that the essential nature of language is arbitrary i.e. there is no inherent connection between word and what it designates.

Further, he argues that language is relational i.e. every word has its meaning in relation to other words. Lastly he asserted that language constitute our perception i.e. meaning is always designated to an idea or object by the human mind.

Moreover, De Saussure provided two different terms. These two terms are *langue* and *parole*. By *langue* he means the large body of something i.e. the body of language and by *parole* he means individual use of large body as a part i.e. the use of language by any person. This view has provided endless larger structures to the structuralist criticism. As Peter Barry observes the enterprise of structural enquiry in terms of *langue* and *parole* in the following way,

“Structuralists make use of the langue/parole distinction by seeing the individual literary work as an example of a literary parole. It is too only makes sense in the context of some wider containing structures.”

Structuralist critics try to interpret literature in terms of underlying patterns with the structures of language derived from modern linguistics. Structuralists claim that the world is constituted through language and we don't have the access to reality other than linguistic medium.

The post structural social historian Foucault has treated language as a part of an '*episteme*'. He means episteme as entire way of understanding and knowing in given epoch. The Phenomenology was established by German philosopher Husserl. He proposed that human consciousness is a unified Intentional act. He tends to analyse human consciousness as '*Lebenswelt*' i.e. lived world. In Roman Ingarden's study, a literary work is an outcome of the intentional acts of its author. He supposes that there is discrepancy in meaning generated by intentional acts of consciousness and the units of language connected with the meaning.

Thus, over the years, language has been the key component of the critical activity. In earlier times it was the part of rhetoric. Later language became as style in the critical purview. However the main focus of critical enquiry in the history was confined to the ornamental and representational use of language. A new perspective to deal literature and all the human sciences has come up with the shift from representation to the conditioning of meaning. In this language has played a crucial role. The twentieth century literary theory by and large is a product of the language. The treatment to language by critics has opened up new horizons for literary studies in the future.

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