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TOWARDS AN EQUITABLE AND LIBERAL SOCIETY: 20TH CENTURY LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORIES

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Abstract

Literature attains its academic value when assessed through the tools offered by literary theories and tradition of past and present. The very word ‘theories’ may sound abstract and reductive by nature if understood in the postmodern sense but given their technical/academic means and measures accumulated over a period of time based on the philosophical and ideological concepts, they pave a way for identifying the emotional and social conflicts in the changing socio and cultural scenario of the societies. The present paper focuses on the 20th century Literary theories beginning from Deconstruction associated with Jacques Derrida ranging across Post structuralism, Post colonialism and New Leftist Cultural Theories of Raymond Williams in their attempt to highlight their empowering aspect of dealing with the hierarchical elements of society based on gender, class and ethnicities. The paper finds its relevance in the current globalised, capitalist and consumerist society that tends to ignore the difference or the presence of small voices, as of the marginalized group- be it women Blacks, Asians, Dalits or the poor. The hierarchical structures embedded in the society as human constructs and hegemony as something to be understood and tackled are the main focus of the literary theories discussed in the paper.

Keywords

Hierarchical, Author, Identity, Truth, Centre, Gender, Marginalised

1. Introduction

Literary critic, as a reader, not only assesses literature through the personal/impersonal agency but also lays down parameters for others to follow in regard with the literary work. Literature consists of the three main aspects- author, text and reader. Traditionally, the importance of 'author' or the belief in the absolute meaning that could be that of the author delimited the vast and open arena of life presented by the text. In the 20th century, with the popularising of Reader Response Theory in the 1970's, the reader became the producer of the meanings along with the author and it was believed that any good text ought to be read and reread in order to reach the multiple meanings embedded inside it. Hence the reading became as important as what was being read. It was something contrary to the earlier 20th century practices of New Criticism that believed in the self sufficient characteristics of the text. In the words of Stanley Fish, "It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but the playing of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities".

2. Traditional Concept of the Author

The concept of the dominance of the author endorsed by the traditional literary theories encouraged the hierarchical structure by which author, being in the centre stage, tended to dictate the meanings of life to the readers. It was something akin to the presence of a monarch or dictator who exercised a totalising power over his subjects and controlled them through his discourse. The very awakening of the reader from the sleep of passivity, to which the society relegates him, displaces the very position of the author as 'father' or God in other words, from the position of privilege. Roland Barthes, an exponent of poststructuralist movement while declaring the death of the author suggests, "... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."(Lodge & Woods 2011).

3. Deconstruction

Deconstruction, an intellectual and literary movement almost synonymous with Post Structuralism and associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, served a great purpose of the society that had always been in the habit of looking for a 'transcendental signified', a central voice, presence, entity, God, 'guru' for the dispensation of the value system or the patterns of life to them. How easy it is to look for a 'presence' when we are enveloped all around by darkness of ignorance or encounter the suffocation of an existential crisis! In such a scenario, we desire someone some voice to speak to us and guide us- someone, whose all pervasive presence could consume us so much so we are ready to look at

the reality through 'his' sort of rationality. In many cases, such dependence proves fatal and results in the sufferings and destruction of the humanity.

3.1 The Problem with the 'Centre'

The 'centre', without which the structure is impossible, tends to marginalise and freeze the free play of other meanings in a text. Jacques Derrida, with his most radical and subversive stance made the readers aware of the already deconstructed position of the 'centre'. In his seminal lecture "Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" that he delivered at Johns Hopkins University Baltimore US in 1966 he tried to demonstrate that the centre that seems fixed is, in fact both inside and outside the structure it tries to control and rule over. By adding the term 'différance', to the 'difference' already suggested by Ferdinand Saussure, a linguist Structuralist, Derrida drew the attention towards the permanent postponement of the meanings of a sign or a word spoken or written, thereby reflecting the variety and richness of the meanings hidden beneath the language in the form of traces or sediments left by its various and earlier usages etymologically and culturally. That the 'meaning' is not only relational but is also marked by its chameleon like existence that is, its instability was the very thrust of deconstruction.

3.2 Challenging the Authoritarian Voice in the Text

The concept of the stable meanings in a text confirms the authoritarian voice of the author which is being challenged by Roland Barthes in his famous essay 'The Death of the Author': "We Know now that the text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the 'message' of the Author- God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." Barthes suggests. (Lodge 2011). The same applies to life in general which is to be read as a text. The very fundamentals of an overarching voice rest on the exclusion of the 'margin' or the underprivileged and neglected, thus perpetrating divisions in the society through polarisation and categorisation.

Derrida, like German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, warned against being prisoners of the fixed perspectives. Humans, as a general rule are inclined towards perceiving reality in terms of the binary opposites such as self and other; superior and inferior; good or bad; pure or corrupt etc. The very fundamentals of traditional metaphysics are challenged for causing such oppositions in culture as between speech and writing, Christian and Jew, Christian and Muslim, Man and Woman, White and Black etc. In such binary oppositions, the centre is always on the left side indicating its prior positioning as the eye reads from left to right the written language or the tongue utters the first word by virtue of its being more important than the one that follows it.

3.3 How does Deconstruction Work?

Deconstruction concerns itself with decentring and unmasking the problematic nature of the centres. As an application to the literary texts, it first makes the critic or the reader aware of the privileged position of the centre or the dominant discourse. Next, it draws the attention towards the marginalised location of the other voices by bringing them to the centre. After this inversion of hierarchy, it ends up reflecting the play of meanings in which no meaning remains stable and the text becomes a spectacle of the variety of meanings that keep appearing and disappearing simultaneously.

4. Postmodernism – its Radical Standpoint

Human life or culture is like a text that needs to be deciphered in a multiple or even contradictory ways. Post Modernism considered being a post world war II wave, ushered in this attitude in the intellectual world. It was the period of the doing away with the Meta narratives i.e. the universal humanistic concerns which sideline the local or mini voices based on the individual or community's distinct or specific experiences. The human race that was marked by the difference (different from the dominant) based on gender, class, caste, region, birth or religion was not to be judged by such circumstances or choices rather all value systems beliefs and truths are to be welcomed and included and given equal importance. Impacted by the decentring notions of deconstruction and post structuralism, postmodernism deems to celebrate the presence of not one by many meanings, voices, truths and realities while deriding the hierarchical structure of power relations.

5. Feminist Literary Criticism as an Empowering Strategy

The notion of author as 'God' or 'Father' draws its thread from feminism or feminist literary criticism dealing with the dominant voice of the 'author', 'male' or 'father' as its major concern that subsumes the voice of woman as 'other'. Feminist literary criticism identifies the misrepresentations of women in terms of their binary categories of wife or whore, wife or mistress, angel or prostitute so much so that the real woman always go missing even in the texts considered to be the classics .Following the concepts of Jean Paul Sartre, an existentialist who reverses the traditional philosophical views that the essence is immutable and precedes the existence, they make a clarion call for women to unite and carve their own pattern, essence, and reality or truth as one doesn't possess any inherent identity or value. This substantiates the feminist notion that women are not born to be inferior, weak, irrational and irresponsible as compared to the other sex and that the oppositions between feminine and masculine are mere cultural 'constructs' that needs to be addressed for an

equitable society for all the sexes. As Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work 'The Second Sex' opines, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman"

5.1 Post Structuralism and Feminism

Applying the Poststructuralist critical tool, the feminist literary critic unearths the lost voices of women, voices which are independent, subversive challenging the stereotypes of their exclusivity in the conventional patriarchal texts. In the bold strategy of 'reading against the grain', the feminist literary criticism tends to subvert the complacent fixities and even all theoretical praxes or standards laid down by the male literary tradition and could be termed as "cultural politics than a theory or theories"(Seldon & Widdowson 2005). Elaine Showalter advocates a separate female literary tradition on the ground of the essential difference between men and women's writings due to their specific biology, language, psychology and culture so as to do justice to their literary world. While dealing with specific stylistic features in women's writings as an oppressed group, she highlights that through 'palimpsest', one gets hold of the double discourse ie the main discourse of submission along with the other one of subversion in a literary text. "...woman's fiction can be read as a double voiced discourse, containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story, what Gilbert and Gubar call a 'palimpsest' "... an object /field problem in which we must keep two alternatives oscillating texts simultaneously in view..."(Showalter).

5.2 Multiple Voices in Feminism

The current usage of the word 'feminisms' rather than 'feminism' suggests the ever evolving nature of the feminist discourse grounded on specific cultural needs and issues of the women all over the globe "opening up a new fluidity of boundaries and presenting the alternative perspective of others" (Tim Woods, 2010). In this vein, one cannot ignore the anxiety of the black women who felt doubly marginalised by the main stream white European and north American women, as well as on the basis of their race. The third wave third world feminist critical theories attempt to address such concerns of the complex cross currents of gender, class, race and nation etc. There is a growing recognition for instance of the 'interlocutionary', or 'dialogic' aspect of black women's writings, "not only the 'Other' of the Same but also other of the other(s)"(Bennet & Royale 2008). Helen Carby in her essay "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood" discusses the way Western Feminism have failed to see themselves as the oppressors of the black women by putting to silence her story or the specificities of their concerns. White Feminists have also been blamed for following the orientalist practices by terming the social practices of other races like black or Asians as barbarous and backward. "The actual struggles that Asian

women are involved in are ignored in favour of applying theories from the point of view of a more 'advanced', more 'progressive' outside observer."(Mc Leod 2010).

5.3 Problematising the Representations of Women

The issue of representation of the third world women as a marginalised group or the subalterns and subalterns in post independent India is problematised by a deconstructive poststructuralist feminist, Gyatri Spivak. Spivak asserts that the First World Feminist often indulges into the folly that she is authorised to speak for the third women as a privileged woman. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her famous essay "Under the Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial discourses" points out the treatment of third world women as a category that ignores the differences within women through homogenisation of their experiences. As a post structuralist, Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" argues against treating the human subject as transparent as one that can be spoken about. Can the oppressed women's voices be recovered from the archive? She raises this question while hinting at the problematised nature of the Subaltern Studies Scholars Group led by Ranajit Guha and others thereby demanding the relationship between researcher and her research to be more interactive. "If in the contest of a colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as a female is more deeply in shadow" Spivak argues. (Bill Ashcroft et al P.32)

6. Postcolonial Critical Assessments

The hierarchical relations between coloniser and colonised and the cultural construction of the latter become the major issues taken up by the postcolonial theorists. Post colonialism is broadly concerned with the experiences of exclusion, denigration as well as resistance under the system of the colonial rule whose impact continues even after the end of the empire in the form of the interiorised knowledge of the natives of the erstwhile colonies. Edward Said in his book 'Orientalism' highlights orientalism as a kind of organised knowledge constructed by the coloniser seeping through all the social disciplines literature and art etc reflecting the colonised or the orient as the inverted image of the colonised. It strengthens the stereotypes between the coloniser and the colonised in opposite terms as rational versus irrational, civilized versus uncivilized, familiar versus strange, masculine versus feminine etc.

While depicting the psychological effects of colonialism, Franz Fanon in his book **Black Skin White Masks** narrates the distressing picture of his own inner self when a stranger used derogatory remarks on his 'difference' of skin. He writes: "That day... ..I took my self far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else

could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I didn't want this revision this thematisation .All I wanted was to be a man among other men" (Mc Leod 2010). Both Said and Franz Fanon bring home the idea that the representation and modes of perception were used unscathingly as weapons of colonial power in structuring the colonial discourse, where the language played a great role. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer views: "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world."(Mc Leod 2010)

6.1 Deconstructed Position of the Coloniser and the Colonised

Homi K. Bhabha emphasises the same point in his seminal work 'The Location of Culture': "The objective of the colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of the degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha 1994). But unlike Edward Said and Franz Fanon, Bhabha draws attention towards the already fractured nature of the relationship between coloniser and the colonised. Influenced by psychoanalysis and post structuralism, he makes some thought provoking observations through the notions of repetition, mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence. In his attempt to construe the colonised through the repetitive use of stereotypes, the coloniser enters into a deconstructive position revealing "the underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonial power" that apart from taking away his power of supremacy ultimately announces the failure of any such attempt towards a one way relationship and breaks down the fixities of the epistemology. (Stephen Slemon P.51)

On the other hand, the colonised in his attempt to be like the coloniser, by exercising his or her choice and through instruction indulges in 'mimicry' that dilutes the power of the colonial and consequently enables him to subvert the position of the colonial authority. Going by the coloniser's view point based on the stereotype, the colonised is a radically strange being that is bizarre, eccentric as well as the object of concern and curiosity. The deconstructed nature of the received notion mark an ambivalent relationship between the two and locates the colonised both outside and inside the Western Knowledge. Bhabha argues that the construction of 'otherness' of the colonised is thus split as the colonised is both the 'other,' yet entirely knowable.

"If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridisation rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that

uncertainty that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention". (Ashcroft 1995). Homi Bhabha's theoretical assertions, though verge on mystification and obfuscation as critics like Dirlík point out, nevertheless help in sorting out some issues concerning those who are made to internalise the negative knowledge about themselves in respect with the authoritarian forces. The notion of the deconstructive position of the hierarchical relationship in terms of race and region in the post colonial space does offer some kind of hope for resistance and change.

7. Cultural Materialist Critical Tool

The subjugation of the marginalised or the working class by the bourgeoisie is the basis of the cultural theories brought forth under the brand of Cultural Materialism by the British New Leftist, literary and culture critic, Raymond Williams. Williams critiqued the orthodox Marxist ideas of base determining superstructure as though culture exists in such neatly cut categories. He emphasised that culture needs to be considered as a complex phenomenon where no one relation remains static for a period of time. Culture is continuing, evolving and changing phenomenon. It embodies varied and variable elements of dominant, subordinate, emergent and residual which remain simultaneously present in a given phase and form a complex relationship of incorporation, negotiation and contestation. Rejecting the linear view of history through dialectical processes, Williams in his essay 'Dominant, Residual and Emergent' argues "... no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant social culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practices, human energy and human intention"(Williams 2009). Had it been so there would have been least possibility of change in the society. Therefore, the focus is on identifying the untouched or not exhausted areas in human culture and psyche.

8. Conclusion

Hence the powerful literary strategies and critical tools as discussed above, help in erasing the dominant voice of patriarchy, bourgeoisie and the colonial mindsets in the texts, generating awareness about the presence of multiple truths or values and leading the society towards liberalism and equitable power relations.

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