

Reading Literature: Postmodern Scenario

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Abstract: Reading of literature witnessed a sea-change in the 20th century with the emergence of literary theory. No longer an innocent aesthetic experience for the writer and the reader, literature is now a complex field of various interdisciplinary knowledge systems, interacting simultaneously with varied kinds of texts that were created in the past, or being created now in the present, or possibly may get created in future. Factors which have affected the hermeneutical and interpretive practices are many - language, ideology, history, culture. The implications of interpreting such literary texts are yet to be explored. In the present paper, I have tried to make sense of these influences on the reading and writing of literature. In this endeavor, I have drawn from the theories of various postmodernist thinkers, especially those of Lyotard and Linda Hutcheon.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Metanarratives, Ideology, History, Representation

In *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard defines Postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). This simple statement is loaded with all kinds of implications - implications for the knowledge systems, for the cultural studies, for theological, scriptural readings and others. Reading of literature has been problematized by the postmodern theories. The loss of faith which began with the publication of *Origin of Species* in 1859 is now complete and literary appreciation too cannot escape the resulting instabilities. The development of structuralism and post structuralism is closely related with the loss of faith in syncretical mode of knowing and knowledge. The dynamics of knowledge systems, including that of literary studies, have changed now completely forever. Human imagination was the space of finest artistic creations even before the birth of literature as such. The oral traditions of literature gave those aesthetic pleasures to the generations that were perhaps the most pristine experiences of literary readings and writings. Literature was considered to be the instinctive response of a mind which was creative, rational and imaginative, the mind which was “the property of a transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual” (Belsey 7). The reader's belief in the creative capacities of the author was complete without question. He was the gifted individual who could perceive and reproduce the universal and timeless truths of human existence in

aesthetic forms through the medium of language; he was akin to the divine "Maker" who, as Shakespeare says in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, gave to "airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" (Act V, Scene I). He was the one who vivified and reincarnated his imagination to render the 'brazen' world of Nature 'golden'. There was no Foucault who dubbed the author as 'scriptor', no Derrida for whom the author was merely a 'bricoleur', one who borrowed his concepts from a heritage of textual discourses, and no Barthes who declared the death of the author in the "neutral, composite, oblique space called 'writing', the "negative where all identity is lost" (Barthes 118). As the author was denied the autonomy and the power of creating literary texts, the concept of literature altered radically.

Literature, up to the Victorian Age, was viewed as unitary and totalizing experience, a coherent, homogenous body, comprising of 'grand narratives' - the socio-cultural manifestations of knowledge which *legitimate* knowledge production and through which a society defines itself. Almost always encapsulating a message, it was basically and originally written for the masses. Being the 'Criticism of life', it sought not only to 'delight' but to 'instruct' mankind. Its ultimate objective was social and ethical amelioration - not only the reflection but the enhancement of life. Voicing the truths which were independent of time, the poet took on the mantle of a prophet. The Modernist movement in the twentieth century challenged the Victorian cultural certainties. There was a rising discontent with the traditional literary themes, modes and structures as they were found inadequate to mirror the diverse and complex experiences of the post-war world - 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history', as T.S. Eliot would term it. There was a serious awareness, on part of the literary artists, of the 'new' realities, the 'angst' of human existence. In order to render the fragmentation and degradation of contemporary society in literary writings, they experimented with new forms and styles. The basic assumptions and conventions of traditional literary genres were subverted, giving way to fragmented utterances, discontinuous narrative, colloquial phrasing and other innovative modes of representation. In this pursuit of experimentation, literature, especially poetry, became more of an 'organization of human experience,' rather than an expression of the poet's feelings and emotions. The literary author, blessed with a mind to create, was perceived as an agent of the prospective renaissance. New Criticism, although it challenged the traditional orthodoxy by its emphasis on the objective and practical criticism of the text in isolation from all 'external' points of reference, yet it could not do away with the humanist problematic. The aesthetic and humanistic idealization of the text as a timeless verbal object was too 'totalizing' a tendency to challenge or deconstruct the literary canons.

It was with the advent of structural theories, especially in the linguistic formulations of Ferdinand de Saussure, that the author was finally

displaced as the agency of 'making' meanings. According to Saussure it is not the human mind, but language that creates meanings and structures the world. Departing radically from the assumptions and presumptions of traditional authorship, Saussure located the genesis of meaning in the arbitrary and differential relationship between the signifier (the acoustic image of the word) and the signified (the 'concept'). The consciousness of the author is merely a 'space' wherein pre-existing linguistic systems, codes and conventions are catalyzed into 'making' meanings. Literature, being the progeny of language, is also conceived as a structure of signifiers which absorb and reconstitute the signified. Extending and reformulating the tenets of structuralism, the Russian Formalists envisioned literature as a specialized mode of language – the 'verbal art', and located a fundamental dichotomy between language of literature and ordinary language. Looking upon a literary work as a self-contained, self-focused form, Roman Jakobson claimed that a literary work is distinguished by its "authorless literariness". The literary utterance is structured, dense and opaque as against an ordinary utterance which is random and transparent. For Shklovsky, "Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important" (Shklovsky 17). The essence of 'literariness' lies in 'defamiliarization' or 'deautomatization' – a device to obliterate habitual, automatic perception. According to the Czech theorist, Jan Mukarovsky, the 'literariness' of a work consists in the "maximum foregrounding of utterance". The term refers to the range of deviant stylistic structures which are used and restructured for creative purposes, whether at phonetic (alliteration, rhyme) level or at grammatical (inversion, ellipsis) level or at semantic level (metaphor, simile). Later on, due to its excessive reliance on linguistic tools, Formalism as an approach of literary studies was rejected. The fear was that it would dehumanize literature which it asserted was not a creation but a rediscovery of pre-eminent forms.

With the emergence of poststructuralist theories, the history of ideas changed irrevocably. In "Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Jacques Derrida refers to the three philosophers who challenged the logocentrism of all kinds of texts – Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Nietzsche. The challenge to the 'given' and accepted view of social order (from where literature derives its sap) was first given by Karl Marx. The theory of ideology as expounded by Marx exposed the non-essential character of the essential, dominant ideas which were accepted without any question by the masses. Literature, being one of the superstructures, was viewed by the Marxists as a text circulating the dominant ideology. The skepticism of literariness, of the innocence of literature, began with such exposures. The synthetic, organic form of literature started getting cracks under such Marxist investigations. Freud challenged the conscious, innocent, and hence superficial reading of literature. For Freud, literature is a space to fulfill the unconscious desires. Other psychoanalysts might have improved or deviated from

Freudian theories of reading literature (dream-creations), but the basic tenet of psychoanalytic theory, remains that literature, which is a creation of language, speaks either more or less; or, in fact, hides more and speaks less. Whatever it may be, but again the sufferer was the innocent reading subject (i.e. the reader). Existentialist theories of philosophy also had their impact on the reception of literature. Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, all viewed human experience as contingent, unhinged from the past and future. Such nihilistic voices affected the writing and reading of literature. The literary writer draws from human experience and if the human experience is sliced into fragments without any coherence and stability, then the literary creations based on such experiences can generate only incoherent responses from the reader. In the poststructuralist theories, the assumptions about fixed, concrete meanings and the autonomy of the author are challenged. The Saussurean 'Sign' is done away with and the signifiers are perceived as floating endlessly in the human universe, independent of their 'signified', multiplying in the ever widening space of texts. The poststructuralist thinkers become sceptical about the possibility of achieving any knowledge through language. As Nietzsche says, "there are no facts, only interpretations" and truth (created by language) is perceived as "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration..." (Nietzsche 146). Language is deprived of all sense, essence, and meaning-making power, just as the author is denied all autonomy or initiative. Literature, instead of a unitary and totalizing experience, becomes 'a heterogeneous configuration' of diverse linguistic and extra-linguistic elements, interacting with innumerable texts, influencing one another in complex ways. Besides, several marginalized points of view and realities have emerged into multifarious branches of literary studies such as subaltern studies, multiculturalism, feminism, diaspora studies, etc.

A significant feature of postmodern literature is the blurring of boundaries - between high and low forms of art, between serious and popular art forms, between reality and illusion. Rigid genre distinctions are done away with as the emphasis is on 'intertextual' elements such as pastiche, parody, bricolage and allusion. In addition to the undecidability and fluidity of meanings, the politics of meaning through various representational practices is also highlighted by some postmodernist thinkers. Linda Hutcheon, in the book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) argues that the meaning as generated through language, is always and already embedded in the web of ideological institutions. The ideology creates meanings through language, and language as a meaning-making system exists only with and through the ideological representational practices. Hutcheon emphasizes that the postmodernist idea of unreliability of meaning or substance in meaning

is political, as the canons of every kind that existed in the past can be and dismantled only by exposing the untenability of linguistic meanings. The essence of linguistic meanings is exposed by calling them just language-games. This seems to be paradoxical, because on the one hand it is claimed that the meaning is ideologically motivated, and on the other that the meaning is an illusion created out of language-games. However both these approaches have exposed the classical approach to literature, wherein the literature was read as a creation of divinely motivated spirit, communicating the truths of life. Post-modernism is too complex a term to be defined in isolation. It has multifarious connotations, characterized by diversity of interests. It may be called an eclectic movement, appearing in a wide variety of disciplines such as aesthetics, architecture, literature and philosophy. Linda Hutcheon, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, seeks to focus on the politics of representation in postmodernism. Exploiting the theory of Carnavalesque, she tries to establish the rationale of postmodernism. According to her, politics and postmodernism are inextricably intermingled: "Politics and postmodernism have made curious if inevitable bedfellows" (Hutcheon 2). Power dynamics prevails over postmodern scenario, with various forces trying to gain hegemony over each other. Power is not unitary, it does not flow, but it circulates. Power-relations exist in every society. Linda Hutcheon asserts that although postmodern art claims to challenge any kind of politics, subconsciously it is political in nature. In contemporary criticism, there has been a tendency to brand the postmodern as apolitical, due to its "narcissistic and ironic appropriation of existing images and stories and its seemingly limited accessibility" (Hutcheon 3). This narcissism is evident in various forms of post modern art as "they focus on and debate their own ends and processes and thereby de-naturalise their content" (Barry). Due to this self reflexivity and aesthetic preoccupation with self, one might be led to think that postmodern art is apolitical. Hutcheon finds this trend 'politically naïve" (Hutcheon 3). She contests that all forms of representation of postmodern art, its images and stories, however politically naïve and transparent they might seem to be, are grounded in some ideology. Ideology is the latent content of social consciousness through which we perceive the world around us. The world that we occupy and perceive depends on the discourse of culture, of ideology. The dominant ideology in any culture does not represent the foundational truth or reality; it rather constructs the truth, which again is contingent on the culture system. Hence, according to Hutcheon, ideology is an unavoidable part of every social system as a system of representation. Traditionally criticism has been based on expressive, mimetic or formalist approaches. Art in general and literature in particular, is believed to either express or imitate the truth. To some extent, it also serves to provide aesthetic pleasure. But postmodern art is more concerned with the making of

meaning i.e. how meanings are generated in a particular society. It contests the notion of realism and dispenses with the idea of any stable or permanent reality. There is, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, a "loss of the real" (Baudrillard, qtd in Barry 87). Hence postmodern art focuses more on virtual truth or 'hyperreality.' Hutcheon challenges this apparent apolitical innocence of postmodernism. She claims that all the representations in postmodern art are governed by culture and subsequently by the dominant ideology. She concentrates on those forms in postmodern art like painting, music and architecture which have been traditionally and invariably associated with realism in representation. But, in postmodernism, direct representation is abandoned in favour of abstraction. In literature, there is a reaction of traditional realism, melody and harmony are put aside in music and in painting, direct pictorial representations are done away with. Even in architecture, traditional forms and materials are rejected in favour of plain geometrical shapes and forms. Here the situation becomes quite 'paradoxical'. On the one hand, we believe in the continuity and authenticity of visual and narrative representation, on the other, as postmodernism manifests, there is a loss of faith in the power and inexhaustibility of these representations. Thus the politics in postmodernism consists in how we represent ourselves to ourselves. The formal technique used is parody because it has a double structure which assimilates the twin foci of postmodernism i.e. difference and continuity. Another theory that Linda Hutcheon seeks to analyse from the political perspective is feminism. While asserting that postmodernism partly coincides with feminism, she also endeavours to analyse the discrepancies between the two forms of discourse. Both share a similarity in challenging literature as a unified whole, a coherent representation of reality. But, feminism is a theory of positive action against patriarchal oppression, whereas postmodernism negates any theorization as such. Feminism deconstructs representation in order to reveal the misrepresentation of the female by the male and strives to rewrite the literary canons from a female perspective. Postmodernism is content with showing what needs to be deconstructed and undone. Hence postmodernism has been subjected to severe criticism by feminists who feel that it is something for and by comfortable white intellectuals. The reading of literature has been further problematized by the onslaught of science and technology. The hegemony of computers has had serious repercussions not only on the production and circulation of literary works, but also on their reception by the reader. Literature has become a commodity to be consumed and legitimized in terms of consumer value. The 'Grand narratives' or metanarratives of humanity that were perceived as the carriers and legitimizers of absolute knowledge, essence and truth have crumbled down, giving way to a series of contingent, localized, 'mininarratives' or what Lyotard more commonly

referred to as *language games* (a notion he adopted from Ludwig Wittgenstein). Consequently, there has been a plethora of literary activities, directed at mass consumption, devoid of fine sensibilities. Amidst this scenario of proliferation, caught in the labyrinth of theories, the ordinary average reader stands baffled - whether to approach, interpret and appreciate literature via theory or resist theory as a hindrance that occurs in the process of '*Rasāsvādāna*' (deriving pleasure). However, the paradox that has been created cannot be overcome by only slogans of literary essence and aesthetic pleasure; we cannot overlook the kinds of insights and knowledge structures provided by various theories, as we cannot overlook the aesthetic pleasure, the truth or falsity of human experience in literature. All the knowledge structures of postmodern times, be it New Historicism, Post colonialism, Deconstruction or Feminist studies, ultimately draw their strength from literary narrative that in the last analysis is called literature. Literature might be considered as one of the discourses, but all the categories of discourses have their own territories, context, speaker, tone, addressee, tenor, and the discourse of literature can be located in the territory of literature alone.

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