



THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORY: A STUDY IN OUTCOME-BASED LEARNING IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The paper is undertaken to investigate the nature and function of Literary Theory. Since the phrase 'Literary Theory' (LT) is not a new word, it has been explained and elucidated by many LT practitioners and professionals before this paper is being conceived. All the LT professionals have opined their viewpoints on the nature and function of the LT, yet its application as an approach to Literature, Culture Studies, Arts, Social Sciences and their cognate sub-branches is yet to be diffused among young scholars and students. The paper demonstrates the responses to the question why it happens at institute and organization level because from heretofore the scholars continue their journey to the world of research. Hence, the paper is a well-organized structure of the knowledge comprising with its sets that are ideas about what Literary theory is, how it emerges, where it can be used, and what its outcome is.

KEYWORDS: *Literary Criticism, Literary Theory, English Literature, Reading Skills, Critical Thinking, Western Philosophy, Humanities, Social Science, Comparative Literature*

INTRODUCTION

Generally, every student of English literature must study Literary theory (LT) and Literary Criticism (LC) while pursuing BA. and M.A. & MPhil. The LT & LC are prescribed as courses of Literature, Culture Studies, Political & Development sciences and Media Studies and their cognates in almost all the universities in India and abroad. The curriculum is designed becoming conscious of the coverage of 300 BC to 2000 CE: from Socrates (when we read Socrates, we must read about writers whom Socrates cites so it covers the extra timelines) to Jacques Derrida, Deleuze and Spivak. The students complete the course with affirmations that they did not understand or comprehend literary criticism and theory. This is only because the learners do not know about some basic things related to LT and LC such as the nature of LT and LC, difference between both the phrases, and differential study of both the concepts, and above all its outcome that means its utilization in personal and professional activities. The present review paper, therefore, presents research reviews of the nature and function of LT & LC and arguments for their applications and

utilities. Personal pronouns are used in this paper for directness of ideas following analytical qualitative (non-numerical) research methodology.

WHY WRITING AND LITERARY THEORY?

Is writing itself a literary theory?(Eagleton 2008) Why writing?(Sartre 1988) Let's first find answer to this question. I studied LT & LC to understand what critics and theorists establish and apply their perspectives to see the imaginative literature. For example, I read Literary theory of Deleuze and Guattari (D&G) once for comprehending what he writes, but now I see and witness the connectivity of Deleuze and Guattari's works(Deleuze, Guattari, and Brinkley 1983) much more than I could do earlier. There is a big gap of the function of reading the G&D writing then and now. The present paper demonstrates that gap in terms of why a person writes. What factors do effect an author to become a social activist?(Eagleton 2008) Why does he write? And what factors are behind which compel him to write? For whom does he right? And



who are the authentic readers to read him? Does an author write for witnessing a change in society? These questions are very much related to the major question of the research paper that is why Deleuze and Guattari in Indian universities? Why should Deleuze and Guattari be read and explored by Indian academic scholars/readers? Why should literary theorists like them be considered in India? What is the need of seeing them? How should we read Deleuze - as an author, as a philosopher, as a critic, as a thinker, as an atheist, social reformer, NGO owner, and as a social technocrat? These questions are very pertinent questions of the paper and the entire paper answers to these questions. The questions would lead to understand why literary theory an integral part of the curriculum is. And unless we understand the utility of anything, we do not wish to consume it. Literary criticism (LC) is all about who to write about literature while literary theory is about how literature takes birth, how to write Literature, and create art. The LC writes about what is in the text while LT writes about what is in and around the text.

DISCUSSION: LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM

In fact, In India the literary theory is used as adopted perspective to see literary arts whereas literary criticism studies the causative symptoms to call a writing an art. With these two functions, we end the act of reading. Let us understand with a few examples: During our reading, we look for Arnoldian seriousness and moral value; Eliotic sense of tradition; Aristotelian ethics of cathartic effect; Wordsworthian ideas of pantheistic criticism as the subjects for looking at a work of art, binaries of thoughts, contradictions, dictions, styles etc. in literary arts as readers. In doing so we forget that academic levonorgestrel implications of philosophical discourses (in any stream of knowledge) on man, life and death enforced literary persons to persuade reasons and roots of megalithic reality, belief, custom, experience, belonging, existence, agnostic and pragmatic assertions of great thinkers contained in discourse, text or a work of art. Criticism, thus, is no more rhetorical but epistemological *entity* of a creative mind. We can henceforth understand that literary theory is an epistemological enquiry of the text. Roland Barthes's *Truth and Criticism* (Barthes 1968; 2007) elucidates criticism as theory in the poststructuralist (Castle 2007) terms. Roland Barthes rightly said 'Criticism is not science. Science deals with meanings, criticism produces them ... it gives a language to the particular discourse [pure parole] which reads literature and gives one voice'. It discovers in the work a certain intelligibility, and in that, it deciphers and

participates in an interpretation. However, what it reveals cannot be signified ... criticism is not a translation but a paraphrase. (Barthes 2007, 81-87).

Theory does not talk of taste of rhetoric but of thinking. Kafka's *The Castle*, *The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*, (Deleuze, Guattari, and Brinkley 1983) Sartre's novels, Beckett's texts like *The Waiting for Godot*, (Graver 2004) Ionesco's plays like *The Chair*, Eliot's *Four Quartets*, (Eliot 1963) Pound's *Canto* (Pound 1975), Joyce's experimental *Ulysses* (Hall and Waisbren 1980), Artaud's *The Cenci* and so on are not only for evaluation, valuation, or textual analysis. For they tried to catch *the abstract* in soulful words. We can read the longest speech of Lucky in the Act One of *Waiting for Godot* (Graver 2004) which is spoken in one breath fruitlessly. He spoke around 800 words without any pause. Which school of literary criticism can elaborate it? Which philosophical school of theory can interpret its (un)spoken thought? Existential perspective, to be sure, will fail to interpret it. It does not demand analysis on/over its existence but supplement to it. The author fails to interpret the deep-seated thought, then and there a literary theorist assists to complete it by writing as supplement to it. For a theorist, good or bad does not matter but exploration of thinking and question so that it can produce a discourse. This is beautiful: beauty of literature and beauty of reading. Beautiful is resolution. But the fruitful, the productive, and hence the artistic principle is that which we call reserve. (Mann 1947) Auden's saying "Was he happy? Was he free? / The question is absurd" (Auden 2020; Edward Mendelson 1979) is an example of "infinite" irony that accords Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Eliot 1963) but raises innumerable questions before readers' resolutions. Meaning cannot be explicit until one does not answer to the questions like what is 'happy'. What is 'free'? (Auden 2020) What is 'absurd'? (Auden 2020) And above all, what 'question' is. The word 'question' is a matter of irresolution in the modern literature. Of irresolutely condition of modern life, literature of the period became irresolutely literature of questions and answers too. After 1950, philosophy begun to guise itself in literature: literature of question. Consequently, literature could not remain for common readers who tried to seek pleasure as the source of entertainment. The works, I mentioned above, are beyond understanding of common reader or student of undergraduate level. But reading them one can produce a theory of reading. They insist to think over and again, else the text is in chaotic and complex to understand. Their thematic study will fail to tell their spectrality. Here we need to apply the theory of deconstruction. Deconstruction seeks and



finds the hidden meaning of a text because it teaches how to subvert the text.

Outcomes of Learning Literary Theory and Art of Literary Research

Many people look at the literary pieces, now, with some philosopher's perspectives. The features of passionate, polemical, and judgmental and rhetorical arguments are repelled from contemporary field of criticism, and replaced by ambiguity, neutrality, and nuanced description of literary element perhaps this is the end of literary criticism because the root ethics of traditional criticism is no more. "Early twenty-first century art critics may or may not be university trained: in a way it does not matter, because virtually none are trained as art critics." (Elkins 2003) It was overpowered by or say upgraded with Literary theory refurbishing the traditional judgmental practices for literary epistemology and went beyond inductive and deductive methods of logical enquiry. To this James Elkin criticises as ambiguous in negative terms, which is not so. This is a unique feature of human being which is celebrated as an attribution to the Poststructuralist literary theory. I appreciate James Elkins attack on Art materialism: "Art criticism involves a fair amount of money by academic standards, because even modest exhibition brochures are printed in large numbers, on coated stock, with high-quality plates that are rare in academic publishing... a ghostly profession, catering for ghosts, but in a grand style."(Elkins 2003) He explained how the word 'criticism' is misused and based on this idea only he devised the seven types of criticism: 'catalogue essay', 'academic treatise', 'cultural criticism', 'conservative harangue', 'philosopher's essay', 'descriptive art criticism', and 'poetic art criticism' (Elkins 2003) I object to these futile exercises of the art historian and see the 'criticism' only into two categories: 1. Technical Literary Criticism, and 2. Creative Literary Criticism. The functions and utility of both the categories are different. The first is mostly used for materialistic satisfaction, whereas the second is used for self-satisfaction. Elkins forgets that every art must be valued and learning of any art must have materialistic outcomes. If someone earns out of the knowledge of 'criticism'-be it historical, cultural, business, art, aesthetical design or whatever- based on the ethics of social engineering, there is no harm in doing so, rather it attributes to the outcome of learning about the history of writing or literature. I insist on knowing about the utility of learning about Literature and its valuable outcomes. If someone is M.A. in English Literature and join a company as a content writer, or a person of technical description of scientific objects / software or review writer of

aesthetical design, or owns the domain of film review, it is an outcome of his or her learning about how to write and read about things. Experts in the domains of Literary Criticism and Literary Theory must be appointed for such occupations, because they know what aesthetics is and what the value of words are. In India, there are many Engineers who are good poet and aestheticians. They write and compose and publish for their self-satisfaction. For example, Chandra Shekhar Malvi a Professor of Mechanical Engineering composed *Baaten* (Talks)¹ I observe that the poem written in Hindi covers all human sentiments and depicts every aspect of human life. Durjoy Dutta turns his engineering career to novelist, screenwriter and entrepreneur his famous show is *Sadda Haq – My Life, My Choice*. Prof Alok Kumar Sharma² is professionally an Engineer and architect but performed many roles as stage actor depicting philosophic and religious fervour of India. The New York Times reports, "the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history" is Chetan Bhagat who is an IIT alumni. Except their creative writings, they also perform shows and are known for writing social and cultural criticism. These facts justify that critical thinking and creative art have social materialistic outlook and help the Literature learners to decide and identify the outcomes of knowing about literary theory and criticism.

The Nature of Literary Theory

1. The LT is interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary and transdisciplinary branch of knowledge. The main reason is that LT teaches you how to interpret things, and how to see things. The knowledge of LT can be applied in the field of IT, IOT, Blockchain, and other developments in technologies. (Pandit and Rahaman 2019; Rahaman 2016; Rahaman, Singh, and Salunkhe 2021; Rahaman 2020b; 2020a). For example, Deconstruction is applied in the field of science and technology.(Devisch and Murray 2009; Shakespeare 2013; Hegzi and Abdel-Fatah 2018; Singh et al. 2019; O'Halloran 2012)
2. The LT is intertextual(Childs and Fowler 2006) writing. Roland Barthes defines literary work of art as 'text' (Barthes 1968) borrowing the idea from *texture*.
3. The LT is 'philosophouros'. Elkins criticizes the cultural criticism saying it as anarchy. In fact, it is one of the characteristics of Literary theory: anarchy of interpretation – reciprocate text to text; literature to literature; literature to criticism;

¹ Malvi CS *Baaten*.

https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Baaten?id=o4SEDwAAQBAJ&hl=en_IN&gl=US

² Director of IITTM Gwalior



literature to philosophy; philosophy to metaphysics; and vice versa. It is unlike literary criticism which focuses on a single work of art when one writes about it.

4. The idea remains that literature is no more rhetorical composition but a philosophy: a philosophy of decomposition, deconstruction of what we say, look and feel and what we neither say, look, nor feel too. Literature plays, not as an emotional game but a rational puzzle in its recess of silence. Roland Barthes can be eluded here in this respect: "Literature is like philosopherous...it shines with its maximum brilliance at the moment when it attempts to die." (Young 1981, 34-45)
5. The LT is full of neologism and coinages. Creation of words is a compulsion of an author. Every coinage must be understood in terms of novelty. T.S. Eliot is rightly suggested: "the novelty is better than repetition" (Eliot 1963; Castle 2007)

UNDERSTAND LITERARY THEORY BY UNDERSTANDING THE THEORIST

It is observed that after 1960 philosophers, media and communication scientists and linguists started taking more interest in interpreting literary texts than literary readers or critics. Most of the critics of human social sciences think that the Post-modernism is the result of constant acceleration of modernism, but we should not completely agree with them. We can also move ahead to see that Postmodernism has its own utility of peculiar ideas and way of thinking. The major cause of such change is the influence of phenomenology and existentialism. The mainstream of contemporary criticism came from both schools of thinkers. Derrida's concept of literature is not for a poet critic but for a philosopher who keeps his aesthetic sense of receiving capacity. He must be a philosopher aesthetic who gets joyous ecstasy does not pleasure to reveal a new text during and after reading some others text. D&G's writing (Köhring 2015) needs more than this. Their writings need the power of connectivity that a reader does with society and thus reading becomes an activist approach to bring a change in society for human welfare. (Rahaman 2020 presented a paper on this research question in D&G Congress JMI Delhi in February 2020)

To reply to these questions, I had to go through the biography of the author and keenly observed how his creativity -better say his critical creativity- came into being. I could observe in what circumstances, an individual was born and how he maintained that soul, that spirit of writing throughout his life career where he fought for individual's freedom from a powerful desire to encroach an

individuality. He was born and brought up in the middle family, he spent his juvenile period at the time of Nazis attack and lost his brother in one of the Nazi's camps. It was a period of transition, it was a period of demand to change the social structure, the national political structures, structural or hierarchical thought processes through which the entire country had to pass. It was a period when freedom of an individual was locked with keys of frenzied power and desire to demolish humanitarian fraternity and global sense of humanitarian unity. At such time, at the very such time you can witness a situation when a sensitive individual turn into an author. So, an author sitting in a private chamber, or a closet write about the problems of global and international human and non-human societies. For example, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Edward W. Said, Jacques Derrida and so on. When you name any of these authors you recall a wave of thinking, a particular way of thinking about shaping a society and giving a kind of system making it away say far away to an established system of the world.

Conclusion

The discussion and analysis of the theorists and LC practitioners demonstrates that understanding the utility of literary theory and criticism in terms of professional career, one must understand the nature and function of literary theory and criticism.

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