

CAN THERE BE AN INDIAN APPROACH TO READ A LITERARY TEXT?

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If we take a look at the whole activity of criticism in the present and the past 20th century and some of the ways in which critics, particularly western critics discuss literature, it becomes quite evident that the literary text has always been at the centre place. And literary criticism has been universally acknowledged as that academic activity in which one makes analysis, interpretation and evaluation of literary text. It is really interesting to note that recent criticism as a whole can be characterized as displaying a shift from an emphasis on the author to an emphasis on the text and then a shift from the text to the reader. But any kind of approach is bound to assert its relevance or validity in terms of the text only. So, when in recent times, critical theories, one after another -challenged established ideas about literature and rejected the assumptions inherent in traditional criticism, the question of reading the text bore the greatest significance in the study of literature.

A great number of critics attempted to theorize what a text is about and how the reading of the text should be made. And their theories differed so much about the reading of the text that there prevailed a scepticism regarding the very existence of the text itself. Very interestingly we hear of Author's text, Reader's text or as many texts as are the readers or critical approaches! Some even went to the extent of announcing it the termination of text or the death of criticism itself. The common student of literature was altogether confused. He could apply only one approach at a time and it had its severe limitations, the application of multiple theories at the same time was practically impossible. Each theory was the product of its historical and social need and was best suited to the literature of

that historical and social background. It gave impetus to the thought to critically examine all major literary theories with a view to see how each one of them has dealt with the question of the reading of the text and to see if there can be any valid or practically viable method for the reading of the text especially in the Indian context where the literary text has always had prime importance.

Keeping our sole interest on the reading of the text in the modern literary criticism, if we examine the history of contemporary literary criticism, we notice that the first phase of the 20th century was dominated by the Marxist theory of literary criticism. According to a typical Marxist critic, the text has to be seen in relation to Marxist view of history in which the idea of class struggle is central. The emphasis was that the connections between the literary text and economic structure of the society in which a work of art is written or created must be taken into account. The famous critics like George Lucacs, Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherry have been more interested to examine if the literary text presents a suitably full picture of the society or not. While traditional Marxist theory simply relates to the text to a view of the social reality of the time in which literary text is written, Neo Marxist critic like Terry Eagleton is interested in the social and political questions that a text raises. According to the Marxist theory of literary criticism in general, a text becomes more valuable as an expression of society or the expression of the political ideas of Marx than a piece of art. This critical approach has led a Marxist critic to look searchingly at the contradictions and problems inherent in bourgeois culture, exploring the ideology inherent in literary texts to see where and how ideological values begin to prove

inadequate and incomplete Terry Eagleton echoes this concern in these words—"If we are inspired only by literature that reflects our own interests, all reading becomes a form of narcissism" (*How to Read Literature*, 2013). Broadly, this approach attempts to explore both literature and history, making a connection between the text and the world. The Marxist criticism which was basically concerned to see how the class of the "have-nots" had been represented in literature gave rise to a critical methodology in which the representation of the weaker sections of the society, the underprivileged class or the suppressed class in literary works was critically examined. It surely inspired Feminism to a great extent. But in practice, the traditional Marxism amounted to the sheer neglect of the fine excellences of the text as a piece of literature.

Almost contemporary to the Marxist theory was the emergence of Aesthetic theory. Great figures like T S Eliot, Richards and later F R Leavis advocated the close reading of the text. They argued that instead of concentrating on literary history and biography, reader should analyse the words on the page. T S Eliot in his *Selected Essays*, I A Richards in his *Practical Criticism* and F R Leavis in his *Great Tradition and Revaluations* paved the way of modern practical criticism. The purpose of such close attention to the text of the writing was to reveal the complexity and subtlety of what was being said. Text, to Eliot, Richards or Leavis was important neither as a biographical document or as an expression of society but as a piece of art. Eliot says, "when we are considering poetry, we must consider it primarily as poetry and not as another thing" (*The Sacred Wood*, viii-ix). The reading of the text was made to examine what the text says and how it says it as a piece of literature. It was interesting to note that all the three great critics Eliot, Richards and Leavis had a strong notion of culture and society, still they laid focus more on the text than the artist or his social or cultural background. Their stress on the text and the close reading of the text was something that remained central in whole of the modern literary criticism.

This Aesthetic movement in England had a profound influence in America where a new school of critics took birth popularly known as the school of New Critics. Most prominent of these critics were J C Ransom, Allen Tate, RP Blackmur, William Empson and Cleanth Brooks. Much influenced by Eliot's thoughts on literature and Richards' practical criticism, New Critics looked closely at texts. To a New Critic, the text of literature has a special kind of knowledge it says things that cannot be paraphrased, it has organic unity and the role of a critic is to analyse the complex verbal structure of the text, the meaning revealing itself through such close analysis. Cleanth Brooks, the chief practitioner among the New Critics, believed there was no need of judging the text in terms of the biographical, social or historical background of the text as language of the text itself embodies such concerns.

In his introduction to his book *A Shaping Joy* (1971), he observes, "At the most primary level there are very words that the writer employs, for language is itself the product of society, living through history. Language is an amalgam of representations of reality both abstract concepts and valuations" (vii).

So, New Critics' emphasis on the close reading of the text and its idea of the text as self-sufficient entity was much condemned by later critics especially by Chicago critic R S Crane and they were charged of cutting off a literary text from its author and the society.

The year 1957 is important in the history of modern literary criticism as Northrop Frye published his monumental book *Anatomy of Criticism* which may be regarded perhaps the most enduring critical work of the century. Frye's was the myth and archetypal criticism. He systematized the whole literature and believed that all literary expression is controlled by a small number of abiding literary universals, in his words, "four narrative pre-generic", categories which are logically 'logically prior' to the usual literary genres. These pre-generic 'mythoi'-these models of all models- these deepest of structures, which are the inevitable constituents of a literary imagination, became the fundamental object of the critical consciousness and a critic's task

was to receive those structures and convey to the readers. So, the object of the reading of the text was to discover the underlying mythical patterns in literature. Frye believed that Myths are the (sacred) stories that tell a society what it is important for (us) to know. Hence, the literary text was a mythic discourse a literary universe and the reader's duty was to read it in that perspective. Reading the text became surely a difficult task but it surely enriched the understanding of the text and revealed how human mind has conceived literature through myths, irrespective of man's geographical and ethnic differences.

In the late 1950 's, we see the rise of Phenomenological Criticism. The originator of Phenomenology was the German philosopher Husserl who regarded it as an attempt to describe human consciousness. Phenomenology as an approach to literature is usually associated with the theory and practice of Geneva school of critics, most notably Georges Poulet and J Hillis Miller. .Poulet's *The Metamorphosis of the Circle* (1966)and Miller 's *The Disappearance of God* (1963), and *Poets of Reality* (1965) ,came with a rush and coherence on the literary scene and suggested new methodology- the criticism of consciousness. However ,J Hillis Miller subsequently rejected such an approach ,opting instead structuralism and Post structuralism. His early work on Dickens and Hardy shows the heights of phenomenological Criticism This sort of critical approach seeks to bridge the gap between biography and criticism by approaching the author through the text. It starts with the work and through it attempts to trace the pattern of the author's mind .In practice, reader discovered his own consciousness while discovering the consciousness of the author.

In the late 1960's one sees the rise of Structuralism in literary criticism. Structuralism applies great linguist Saussure's ideas about language to literary texts. It believes that the text is a self- sufficient system .A Structuralist primarily concerns himself with the words as 'signifiers' and 'signifieds' and studies the internal order of the language Sassure maintains, " the linguistic sign is

arbitrary"(1916).It rejects a conventional interest in life beyond the text and prefers to see every text as a construct working by certain rules. A typically Structuralist approach adopts a position of not seeing things within the cultural context of society. French critic Rolland Barthes with his brilliant books *Writing Degree Zero* , *Critical Essays* and *The Pleasure of the Text* etc. has applied the techniques of structuralist approach successfully. Structuralism attempts to focus on the text alone rejecting the interpretation in favour of a description of the text's operations. It takes into account both paradigmatic and syntagmatic patterns of language and drives out the meaning of a text. This approach failed to give adequate attention to the vision or world view implicit in a literary work and resulted , at the worst in a very mechanized activity on the part of the reader and proved to be an artificial ordering system.

It was in Germany in the early 1970's that the role of the reader was emphasized by critics like Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden. Iser in his book *The Implied Reader* (1974) and *The Act of Reading*(1978) give rise to the Reader Response Criticism .According to this theory, the text largely determines the response but it suggests that the text is full of gaps which the reader fills in his way. Another critic Robert Hans Jaus is more concerned with the general response to literature over a period of time than with the individual response and this is an approach known as Reception Theory. This theory stresses on the text that provides a certain stimulus and reader completes the process. In the terminology of Reception theory ,the reader concretizes the literary work , which is in itself ,no more than a chain of organised black marks on a page. Without this continuous active participation on the reader's part ,there would be no literary work at all. In such sort of reading, the text became no more than a series of 'cues' to the reader - an invitation to construct language into meaning. To a Reception Critic, the text comes ready equipped with indeterminacy and the reader must concretize it correctly. Really ,a tough task assigned to a reader!

In the late 70s, we have the French philosopher Jaques Derrida's pronouncements that stirred the critical world a lot. He said that all readings are mis-readings in the sense they impose ordering strategies. According to him, the text should be seen as just an endless stream of signifiers with words only pointing to other words without any determinate meaning. His theory popularly known as Deconstruction fails to acknowledge the possibility that a text (literary or philosophical) can confront experience in a way that communicates itself to the reader. A typical deconstructive reading emphasizes the contradictions, the writer cannot control or shows how a text becomes confused and puzzled because there is such a gap between the feeling and the expression. Derrida believed that words do not have determinate meanings and the critic's job is to analyse and analyse and draw its meanings. What he calls 'Differance' is not absence of meaning but absence of absolute meaning. He says, "The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance and signification" (qtd in Belsey 118).

With such critical theories at hand, a modern reader is bewildered as to know what may be the correct approach for the reading of the text. A

Nothing else by itself can make good poetry in the absence of Vakrokti. Bhamaha's theory of Alamkara had two exponents- Dandin and Vamana. Dandin in his *Kavvadarsa* talked of concept of Guna or points of excellence. and narrated 10 intrinsic qualities of poetry. Vamana (8th century) in his *Kavyalankara Sutra* talked of the soul of poetry and propounded the theory of 'Riti' a specialized kind of diction. To him, 'Riti is determined by 'Gunas'.

Anandsardhan's Dhvanyaloka (9th century) proposed the theory of Dhvani -suggestion. To him, there are three kinds of meaning in poetry- Abhidha- literal meaning. Lakshana -extended meaning. Vyanjana- the suggested meaning. and there are three kinds of Dhvani- RasaDhvani, Alamkara Dhvani and Vastu -Dhvani where ideas are suggested.

reader especially in Indian context may well peep into his soul and ask if Indian poetics has any answer to the present dilemma regarding the question of reading of the text. India has been proud of preserving a very rich and long tradition of textual criticism since the days of great critic Bharata.

Bharata's *Natya Shastra* (about 500 BC) primarily is concerned with drama —its theory as well as acting and staging. The most outstanding contribution of Bharata to aesthetics and art activity is his theory of Rasa which he believes each work of (dramatic) art must evoke in a reader or audience. In recent years, scholars have observed that Eliot's idea of objective correlative has close affinity with Bharata's theory of Rasa in terms of adequate vibhavas etc.

Bhamaha propounded the theory of Alamkara in his work *Kavyalamkara* (7th century). He recognizes two types of beauty -natural beauty and the Beauty endowed by the poet's art. Bhamaha cites the analogy of beautiful face of a woman who is rendered more attractive by ornaments. Use of figures of speech results in external embellishments while intrinsic beauty of expression lies in the correct usage of the different parts of speech. But Bhamaha valued both. Bhamaha states that all poems must be endowed with the vital principle of Beauty i.e. vakrokti or 'artful expression'

After Anandvardhan, we had Kuntak's concept of Vakrokti -deviant use of language. He believes in his *Vakroknjeevitham* that deviant use of language is not Vakrokti, but only that which has ahlad (appeal or special effect) on the audience. Further Kshemendra gave the theory of Auchitya — propriety. He was of the view that each part of the composition must have virtue of propriety or context-based value. To him-no theory of poetry is universal only the context Auchitya tells which theory is to be applied to a popular kind of text.

So one sees the primary concern of Indian critics has been the reading of the text. It studies the way the internal constituents of a literary work function. The Rasa-Dhvani theory in particular, studies how the objective - the sensuous

representational contents such as situation ,character, imagery language have a subjective co-relative that is — reader's affective response and how this target state of mind is evoked by its objective equivalents in the inscribed or performed text by what is essentially a process of suggestion.

In the recent times, Indian literary critics and scholars notably professor KR Srinivasa Iyenger VY Katak, P S Shastri ,V k Chari, K Ayyappa Panicker VK Gokak, Sisir Kumar Ghosh, SC Sengupta Krishna Rayan , CD Narsimhaiah, MS Kushwaha and Kapil Kapoor have made critical and comparative studies of major theories and concepts of Indian Poetics. Possibly a valid approach to read a text would be a synthetic approach where the virtues of Indian aesthetics will be synthesized with those of Western critical theories A critic in Indian context will have to analyse a literary text on the basis of his remodelled critical theories of Dhavani and Auchitya and has also to study the text with reference to the poet and the society discarding much of the excessiveness of Western critical theories .Working on the same line famous Indian scholar Krishna Rayan developed the theory of suggestion in his books *Suggestion and Statement in Poetry* (London 1972) and *Text and Subtext* (Arnold Heinemann,1987).One may move

forward with the precaution suggested by Prof Kushwaha, “Indian poetics ,in order to rejuvenate itself, will have to evolve a discursive idiom ,and, on the other, broaden its ambit to include the literatures of other languages besides Sanskrit” (9).One may positively hope that in a very near future an Indian school of literary criticism is going to make its mark on the literary horizon and surely it would surprise the literary world with its all-inclusive approach to the reading of the text.

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