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Abstract:

From its inception, "Theory" has aroused strong reactions. As early as 1960's caveats were heard regarding its foundations and practices. Yet such was the excitement generated by Theory as it promised, first, to revitalize literary studies and then other humanistic fields that dissenting voices were largely unheard or created no more than a brief stir destined to soon fade as the march of Theory continued. But in the last few decades, however, vigorous critical challenges have been raised against it. One can perceive how critics strain to make the text compatible with each theory in the list of "isms". The obligation of literary criticism to make the great works of literature available not only to academics but to general readers without any special intellectual equipment has been shirked in recent decades by some of the most acclaimed academic critics. It is an obligation that the humanistic tradition from Aristotle onwards, has repeatedly recognized and met.

Key Words: Humanism, Theory, Post modernism, Literature & Humanities

The theory and practice of literary criticism right from Aristotle to Eliot falls into the orbit of Liberal Humanism. The humanistic tradition according to James Seaton follows Aristotle in paying due respect to common sense while turning to literature for insight into human life rather than for knowledge about gods or for access to a higher spiritual realm. Aristotle succeeded in salvaging the art from the merciless damnation by Plato through providing a constructive definition of mimesis. It was his definition that became the ground on which all the magnificent edifices of various theories of representation were created from the Renaissance to the modern times. In them all, as was laid down by Aristotle, it was accepted that mimesis is based upon a study of life as we see it and that it is delightful and at the same time educative. It was credited a moral function. Mathew Arnold was a great champion of this age old conviction. He hoped to illuminate and prove mankind by propagating the 'best ideas' through literature. In 'Literature and Science' he admits that science is a better guide to nature of universe than literature but argues that literature provides us a "criticism of life". He believed that since religion has been rendered ineffective, it is literature which may replace it as a consolidating force to cement the gulf that has surfaced between various sections of society. In "A Study of Poetry" Arnold goes on to say that "the future of poetry is immense because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as the time goes on, will find an ever surer stay". He believed that in the time of crisis, it is the healing power of poetry which would be able to interpret and sustain the social values.

In academic sphere, the most influential spokesman for Arnold's vision was the young expatriate American poet T.S. Eliot who had settled in London before the First World War. In the early 1920s Eliot did what Arnold had largely avoided. He set out to define the criteria that 'the best that had been thought and said in the world' would have to meet and he undertook the mission actually to identify them in so far as they had been expressed in literary form. The canon, the list of good and even great literary works, that he set out to construe in the 1920s dominated virtually all English and American discussions of literature until the 1970s and still remains a powerful influence. Eliot saw the artistic tradition as a massive whole; complete in itself. Any new work which enters into a dialogue with the tradition eventually becomes a part of it thus changing the shape of the monolith. Because of this dialogue every artist must know the tradition, otherwise their work would not fit in. In his essay Tradition and Individual Talent, Eliot tries to break away from the romantic legacy of Wordsworth. He insists that poetry is not turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality. Eliot thus objects to highly emotional outpourings because they tend to focus readers attention on the poet rather than the poetry. For him, the emotion of art is impersonal and the artist can achieve this impersonality only by cultivating the historical sense by being conscious of the tradition. According to Eliot, a poet needs to look for "an objective correlative" which is "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion". (Hamlet and His Problems)

Like so many young intellectuals of the period, Richards had deep misgivings about a contemporary world which seemed to have lost its bearings. He, too, saw in poetry an antidote to the spiritual malaise that seemed to pave the way for chaos. If the moral order would indeed fall apart because of the loss of traditional values that he saw around him, we would, Richards suggested, 'be thrown back, as Matthew Arnold foresaw, upon poetry. It is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos' (Richards 1926: 83). Poetry, and the arts in general, could save us because it is there that we find what is truly, and lastingly valuable – what gives meaning to our lives:

The arts are our storehouse of recorded values. They spring from and perpetuate hours in the lives of exceptional people, when their control and command of experience is at its highest, hours when the varying possibilities of existence are most clearly seen and the different activities which may arise are most exquisitely reconciled, hours when habitual narrowness of interests or confused bewilderment are replaced by an intricately wrought composure. (Richards [1924] 1972a: 110)

For him, the arts are our storehouse of recorded values and 'supply the best data for deciding what experiences are more valuable than others'. Literary art, then, helps us to evaluate our own experience, to assess our personal life. It is all the better equipped for this because its language is not scientific but emotive. Literature, then, conveys a certain type of knowledge which is not scientific and factual but has to do with values and meaningfulness and which makes use of language that expresses and manipulates emotions.

The most influential critic prior to the theory movement was F R Leavis. Like Arnold, Leavis too assumed that the study and appreciation of literature is a precondition to the health of society. He too distrusted abstract thought and looked for a system of literary appreciation, which by-passed fixed criteria, arguing instead for an openness to the qualities of the text. Like Arnold, he rejected any attempt to politicize either literature or criticism. He preached and practiced an approach to literature which

advocated a close attention to the text. He opined that the study of literature was the only thing that could save us from the dehumanization inherent in the impersonal civilization of technological age. He always insisted that "literature matters because life matters". His works on English fiction represent the most original part of his contribution which until then had gone largely unnoticed. Given his interest in representation of life in its totality, Leavis inevitably came to focus on the novel, with its endless possibilities for presenting character, setting, theme and social background. The Great Tradition demonstrated that novels should be analyzed in terms of the words on the page. He declared:

A novel, like a poem, is made of words; there is nothing else one can point to. We talk of a novelist as creating characters, but the process of creation is one of putting words together. We discuss the quality of his vision, but the only critical judgements we can attach directly to observable parts of his work concern particular arrangements of words ... the quality of the response they evoke. Criticism, that is, must be in the first place (and never cease being) a matter of sensibility, of responding sensitively and with precise determination to the words on the page. But it must, of course, go on to deal with larger effects.

This piece though written in context of the study of novels, describes the method Leavis uses in the study of a lyric, along poem or a play by Shakespeare. He never talks of "vision" without "particular reference to the particular arrangements of words". For him, literary criticism is primarily a question of "responding sensitively and with precise determination to the words on the page". In the introduction to *Revaluation*, Leavis says that it is the business of the critic to see the poetry of the present as the continuation and development of the past. Leavis' own work is marked with force and clarity. He believes that even if the critic is wrong in his valuation, he has served the business of criticism, because he is open to correction and has profitably participated in the debate. Criticism for him is "the profitable discussion of literature".

Although the Liberal Humanistic perspective dominated the literary scene for centuries yet its empire was shaken by the advent of new theories. Freud's demonstration of the fragility of conscious selfhood and its subordination to irrational drives and wishes erased the concept of enlightened rationality. At the same time, Saussure's radical concept of language denied man's authority and command on his own speech by revealing language as a system of signs which are arbitrary and conventional and have not taken their particular form because of what they mean but from being different from other signs. Thus the authenticity of speech and sovereignty of rational consciousness which constituted the essence of humanism was punctured. New theoretical concepts like superstructure projects an illusion of reality around the base in such a skillful and subtle way that base takes it as a reality. Thus the wily superstructure terribly deludes the base which becomes blind to its own conditions because of the effects of what is labeled as ideology'. Marx in *German Ideology* states:

"Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real active men, as they are conditioned by a particular development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process."(1998:253)

Louis Althusser, a widely known theorist of ideology in his seminal essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" (1968) establishes a radical concept of ideology. His theory of ideology draws on Freud's and Lacan's concepts of the unconscious and Mirror-phase self. His concept of ideological state apparatus includes family, language, media, the educational system, the political system, the law and art.

They all perform ideological work and all of them are relatively autonomous. He sees an overdermining network of ideological interrelationships running among all these relatively autonomous institutions. Therefore, our sense of self is not natural but a social construct.

Marxist critics thus opined that consciousness is the product of society, culture and history and can never be the product of truth or reality. Writers as subjects can't transcend their own time and place hence work solely within the horizon of culture. They emphasized that work of art is a vehicle for power as it is inevitable that ideological constructions in which authors live in become part of their work. They regard literary texts as significant apparatus of ideology.

Taking inspiration from the Marxist theory of social construction of individual subjectivity and the concept of ideology, women's movement of the 1960s took a firm position which ultimately led to the establishment of the Feminist literary criticism. This movement realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature and came forward to combat and question their authority. The representation of women in literature was seen as a form of socialization where male dominated texts associated women with passivity, emotions and subordination. The endeavor of the feminist critics is to reveal the implicit politics of the literary text by exposing the mechanisms of patriarchy. They claim that the androcentric ideology pervades those writings which have been traditionally acclaimed as 'great' literature. The women in this kind of literature have been marginalized and portrayed as inferior intellectual beings, witches, temptresses, angels who are always at the altar of sacrifice.

The emergence of Postcolonial Literature further deflated the liberal humanistic thought. The postcolonial writers emphasized that a writer be seen in the context of his own culture which informs his writing. They interrogated the claim of canonical texts representing universal ideas and facts. They argued that these texts are actually European in a universal guise and promulgate the Eurocentric perspective. Postcolonial writers uncovered the politics and the colonial ideologies implicit in the European text about the non-European "other". Edward Said, an eminent scholar of Postcolonial Studies, in his work *Orientalism* (1978) makes an "attempt to map the politics of knowledge" (Williams 2004: 272).

He draws our attention to western discourse---literary texts, travelogues, histories, etc by exposing how all these discourses "construct" the orient. In novels, the orient is constructed by the Europeans through imagination; in histories and travelogue they resort to seemingly factual descriptions by claiming that they possess sufficient knowledge about oriental culture and histories. The literary texts according to Said rely upon a series of binary oppositions and each of them treat the orient as inferior. Thus Postcolonial writers exposed the hidden ideological machinery by certain strategies like reworking and revisiting some canonical texts.

Though Humanism had been under attack from all types of theoretical anti-humanisms like structural Marxism, Post colonialism and radical Feminism, it was the emergence of postmodernism in 1960's that entirely changed the manner in which texts were written and understood. Postmodernism waged an all-out war on the assumptions of liberal humanism. With its onslaught on reason, Postmodernism refuses to see language as a stable means of communication conveying the ultimate truth by an authentic and autonomous self.

This postmodern perspective questions the fundamental tenet of Humanism i.e. to think of oneself as unique unified and self-conscious autonomous rational being. Here, the world is seen as much more complex and uncertain. Reality is no longer fixed or determined. All truth within postmodern context is relative to one's view point or stance. The world is a representation. In other words, it is fiction created from a specific point of view only and not the final truth. In the postmodern context the quest for truth is a futile exercise. Postmodernism gave rise to ontological uncertainty and epistemological skepticism by collapsing the notions of stable linguistic meaning and existence of unmediated objective reality and thus closes the possibility of grounding our knowledge in certainty and truth.

The enthusiasm for critical theories that has predominated in literary studies since decades has not been shared by many critics. Proliferation of literary theory wittingly or unwittingly motivates a writer to appropriate his writing to the cause of theory. These critics feel that theory has taken over the study of literature. What theory has finally left us with, these critics argue, are tools to debunk works of literature with, to subject them to critical interrogation and dismantle all that is good, beautiful and pleasurable about them. Politics and ideology are now seen as the only substantial things, whereas value of truth and beauty are deemed unattainable or flatly denied. In many scholarly writings more exclusively centered on the literary object, the call for a return of the aesthetic has manifested itself repeatedly as the return of the 'literary' as articulated by critics like Richard Rotry, Marjorie Perloff, Tzvetan Todorov and many more.

Rotry attributes to literary reading the power to cure us of our egotism, our illusion of self-sufficiency (Rotry, 2001). He characterizes the atmosphere of literary studies these days as dry, sardonic 'knowingness' "a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe" rendering one "immune to romantic enthusiasm". He feels that the new generation of literary scholars has lost the ability to idolize in the fear of ideology; instead they are trained 'to clothe resentment in jargon'. Literature that was once the most prominent humanizer has become 'one discursive practice among many others, in a complex, shifting, and often contradictory field of cultural production'. (Bernheimer 1993). The expressions of art and culture are too often reduced to statements about the construction of categories of sex and gender, race and ethnicity, often coupled with a disregard for the particularities of the medium or the art form itself and its specific effects. (Perloff 2000). A literary text is thus foremost a symptom of culture, an index to a particular historical or cultural formation. In literary study driven by ideology critique and focused on identity politics, he stress falls on textual content and extra textual context. Everything is representation, however, the focus has shifted from how to what art represents, from the signifier to signified. David Bromwich in his essay 'Literature and Theory' opines:

Theory exists now in a protected condition, in comparison with which the situation of literature as well as criticism in the past may look admirably unprotected. Still, it would be pointless to ignore the drift of things. The objects of study are gradually being redefined, both for advanced students of literature and for the students whom they instruct in turn. To isolate a single effect: someone informed by theory, and aiming to write on a certain author or a group of texts, will read more widely than he would have done a decade ago, but also more thinly. If, for example, the result is an article on Frankenstein, then Rousseau and Nietzsche may be brought in, together with several current theorists. In the economy of the argument, they displace other works by Mary Shelley and her contemporaries, as, in the thinking and reading that helped to construct the argument, a similar displacement is likely to have occurred. The visible result is a change in the look of interpretations – or interrogations, to use the up-to-date word. A larger and less obvious change has to do with the traits that are looked on as useful in a critic.

Having deflated time honored interpretive tools such as tact, appreciation of complexity, competence as "constructed" entities. The postmodern theory turns literary criticism into a very different kind of pursuit where genre divisions, historicity, meanings and even the human presence dissolves. The "all or nothing propensities" of many theory experts lead them, as observers of human life, to read culture as a "seamless general text", while these same theorists misleadingly give their own practices political labels. When intelligibility is surrendered as an ideal, and when equal weight is given to any aspect of a work, it hardly makes any difference whether our analysis is of a work of art or of a mass cultural product. Brownwick argues that instead of capitulating to these devitalizing trends, criticism should aim to comment competently on literary texts in order to reveal in them, time and again "the hidden power of men and women".

Marjorie Perloff in her essay "Crisis in Humanities" argues that the uniqueness of literature as art is beyond the grasp of contemporary criticism. The practice of cultural studies favored by theorists, Perloff feels, would dispense with literature altogether, as can race and gender studies, globalization and other fashionable pursuits that dominate English departments, where teaching "anything but literature" has been fostered in the recent decades. Perloff nonetheless is confident that the pleasures of literature are bound to prevail. Stein Haugom Olsen and Peter Lamarque in their essay "Literature and Fiction" advocate for the recovery of role of literature as a repository of human values, without which it is meaningless. Literature appeals to readers because it promotes a special kind of interest in human life; this is what distinguishes it from fiction understood as made-up descriptions and invented stories. The post structuralist theory has undermined this vital distinction between literature and fiction in favour of the sweeping proposition that all literature is fiction and it can make no claim to any kind of truth. To Theory, the very possibility of 'saying something about' does not exist. They argue that this denial has led to the transformation of literary works into 'texts'. This shift cancels out all the distinctive features of literature vis-à-vis every other kind of writing. Olsen and Lamarque, throughout their essay, urge us to hold on to the concept of literature as an evaluating pursuit which represent life and speak to us of things of lasting human interest. As teachers of literature it is our obligation to acquaint students with guides like Homer, Dante, Dickens and Austin. Teaching few doctrines is much easier but less rewarding than turning attention to what Austin has to say about relationships, Dante about the Divine and Homer about war and other great masters about the human condition. Ofcourse one cannot teach without making theoretical assumptions, but one can attempt to use

theory not as an end in itself but as a means to come to terms with the works themselves. The future of humanistic literary criticism is therefore one with the future of literature. If novels, plays and poems exercise their hold on us then the future of humanistic literary criticism is assured since its only necessary ground is a significance and authority of literature.

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