



Contemporary Critical Theories

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Abstract— A brief introduction to literary criticism and literary theory are given at the start. In any genre, the critic must be, in a sense, a political thinker, sociologist, and psychologist, as well as a literary historian and aesthete. Additionally, this paper examines various critical, literary concepts and finally the conclusion is drawn by means of the review of literature indicated. Literary theory is the systematic study of the nature of literature and of the methods for literary analysis. It is the body of ideas and methods we use in the practical reading of literature. By literary theory we refer not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what literature can mean. Literary theory is a description of the underlying principles, one might say the tools, by which we attempt to understand literature. All literary interpretation draws on a basis in theory but can serve as a justification for very different kinds of critical activity. It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work; literary theory develops the significance of race, class, and gender for literary study, both from the standpoint of the biography of the author and an analysis of their thematic presence within texts. In simple words, it is a perspective with which we look at and interpret a text.



Keywords— *Literary theory, traditional critical theories structuralism, formalism, feminism, Psychoanalytical, modernism, New – Criticism, Marxism*

I. INTRODUCTION

In this research paper, we are going to undertake a brief overview of the rise and development and criticism, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, the purpose of interpretation then was to discern the author's intention which would unlock the textual meaning of the work. However, with time, critics began to focus more concertedly on the text itself, hence meaning came to be seen as residing with the reader. This research paper will enable you grasp the basis of literary theorizing and criticism by relating them to your everyday experience. It is also expected that by the end of this paper you should be able to apply theoretical perspectives to literary works. literary criticism and theory are unavoidable part of studying literature. Their aim is to explain, entertain, simulate, and challenge the student of literature. They make literature refreshing, informative and stimulating in many ways which help us to achieve a better understanding of literature.

The practice of literary theory became a profession in the

20th century, but it has historical roots that run as far back as ancient Greece (Aristotle's Poetics is an often cited early example), ancient India (Bharata Muni's Natya Shastra), ancient Rome (Longinus's On the Sublime) etc. The aesthetic theories of philosophers from ancient philosophy through the 18th and 19th centuries are important influences on current literary study. The theory and criticism of literature are tied to the history of literature.

In the 20th century, the emphasis shifted to the work of art, especially under the influence of the new criticism. When the critic views art basically in its own terms, seeing the work as a self-contained entity, he is using the objective theory. Some critics have talked about theoretical and practical or applied criticism. Theoretical criticism attempts to arrive at the general principles of art and practical criticism applies these principles to the works of art. Literary critics have also talked about other types of criticism such as historical criticism which examines a work of art against its historical background and the author's life while impressionistic criticism emphasizes the

way that a work of art affects the critic.

Textual criticism applies scholarly means to a work of art to reconstruct its original version while analytical criticism tries to get at the nature of a work of art as an object through the detailed analysis of its parts and their organization. Judicial criticism judges a work of art by a definable set of standards and moral criticism evaluates a work of art in relation to human life while mythic criticism explores the nature and significance of the archetypes and archetypal patterns in a work of art.

Above all, in this research paper we will discuss briefly some of the major modern critical theories which are quite significant for those who are interested in literature and they are structuralism, post structuralism, Russian

formalism, Reader response criticism, psychoanalytical criticism, deconstruction, feminism, new historicism, post colonialism, modernism and postmodernism and they will be illustrated respectively.

Literary Theory

The terms —literary theory‖ and —critical theory‖ refer to essentially the same fields of study and now undergoing a transformation into "cultural theory" within the discipline of literary studies, can be understood as the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary texts. A theory as a body of rules or principles used to appraise works of literature while literary theory on its own, tries to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rest. Literary theory refers to any principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretive situations. The fact that literary theory is an indispensable tool which literature uses to realize its goal of sensitizing and educating the audience.

It concludes by stating that the difficulty often encountered in a literary text is often resolved by subjecting it to a particular theoretical analysis. However, a persistent belief in "reference," the notion that words and images refer to an objective reality, has provided epistemological (that is, having to do with theories of knowledge) support for theories of literary representation throughout most of Western history. Until the nineteenth century, Art, in Shakespeare's phrase, held "a mirror up to nature" and faithfully recorded an objectively real world independent of the observer. Modern literary theory gradually emerges in Europe during the nineteenth century in one of the earliest developments of literary theory. The current state of theory is such that there are many overlapping areas of influence, and older schools of theory, though no longer enjoying their previous eminence, continue to exert an influence on the whole.

The once widely-held conviction (an implicit theory) that literature is a repository of all that is meaningful and ennobling in the human experience, a view championed by the Leavis School in Britain, may no longer be acknowledged by name but remains an essential justification for the current structure of American universities and liberal arts curricula. We all know that different people will experience the same event differently. It follows, then, that different people will approach the same literary text differently. One person may be offended by a character's actions, while another finds them comic. One reader is energized by a story's political implications, while another is awed by the same story's philosophical bent. Literary theories emerged as ways to explain different people's views and responses to literature rather than insisting that one view is the best or correct view, literary theory attempts to find value in all views that are based on a careful study of the literature.

Femanism

‘Feminism’ is taken from the Latin word ‘Femina’ which means woman. Charles Fourier, a utopian socialist and French philosopher, is credited with having coined the word ‘féminisme’ in *Theorie des Quatre Mouvements et des Destinées Générales* (published in 1808). Feminist literature covers the canon of nonfiction, fiction, poetry, essays (and more) that relates to women's equality in all arenas including social, political, and domestic. Essentially, feminist literature covers a wide range of written expression, but what they all have in common is a focus on the female experience and how it changes, expands, and evolves.

The 'women's movement' of the 1960s was not, of course, the start of feminism. Rather, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society, and (in some cases) proposed solutions. These books include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which discusses male writers like Milton, Pope, and Rousseau; Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911); Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which vividly portrays the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood; and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which has an important section on the portrayal of women in the novels of D. H. Lawrence. Male contributions to this tradition of feminist writing include John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Woman* (1869) and *The Origin of the Family* (1884) by Friedrich Engels.

Waves of Feminism

The first wave of feminism (1890s-1960s) took place in

the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States, emerging out of an environment of urban industrialism and liberal and socialist politics. First wave feminism sought political and legal equality specifically, women's right to vote

The second wave of feminism (1960s-1980s) began in 1960s and was sparked by the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystery* (1963). The second wave was also a result of the protests against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City in 1968. In this phase, sexuality and reproductive rights of women were prominent issues

The third wave of feminism (1990s-2010) began in the late twentieth century and is instructed by postcolonial theory. The name 'Third Wave' came from Rebecca Walker's article —Becoming the Third Wave. This wave grew with the emergence of the Riot grrrl, a subcultural movement that combines feminism, punk music and politics in Olympia, Washington, in the early 1990s. Third wave feminists embrace individualism in women and diversity and sought to redefine what it meant to be a feminist. Major focus was on women's different colour, ethnicity, nationality, religion, culture etc.

Fourth wave feminism (2010-present) refers to rejuvenation of interest in feminism that began in 2010s. The fourth wave strives for greater gender equality with a focus on gender norms and the marginalization of women in society. Its majorly focuses on sexual harassment, rapes, molestation etc., in the era of social media.

Marxism

Marxism is a social, political, and economic philosophy named after Karl Marx. It examines the effect of capitalism on labor, productivity, and economic development and argues for a worker revolution to overturn capitalism in favor of communism. Marxism posits that the struggle between social classes—specifically between the bourgeoisie, or capitalists, and the proletariat, or workers—defines economic relations in a capitalist economy and will inevitably lead to revolutionary communism. Marxism is a method of socioeconomic analysis that uses a materialist interpretation of historical development, better known as historical materialism, to understand class relations and social conflict as well as a dialectical perspective to view social transformation.

Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German philosopher, and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), a German sociologist (as he would now be called), were the joint founders of this school of thought. Marx was the son of a lawyer but spent most of his life in great poverty as a political exile from Germany living in Britain (he was expelled after the 1848 'year of revolutions').

Engels had left Germany in 1842 to work in Manchester for his father's textile firm. They met after Marx had read an article by Engels in a journal to which they both contributed. They themselves called their economic theories 'Communism' (rather than 'Marxism'), designating their belief in the state ownership of industry, transport, etc., rather than private ownership. Marx and Engels announced the advent of Communism in their jointly-written *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. Marxism is a materialist philosophy: that is, it tries to explain things without assuming the existence of a world or of forces beyond the natural world around us, and the society we live in. It looks for concrete, scientific, logical explanations of the world of observable fact. (Its opposite is idealist philosophy, which does believe in the existence of a spiritual 'world elsewhere' and would offer, for instance, religious explanations of life and conduct). Marxian economics focuses on the criticisms of capitalism, which Karl Marx wrote about in his book *Das Kapital*, published in 1867.

Psychoanalytic Literary Theory

Psychoanalytic literary criticism (emerged in the 1960s), is literary criticism or literary theory which, in method, concept, or form, is influenced by the tradition of psychoanalysis begun by Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis itself is a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders 'by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind'. The classic method of doing this is to get the patient to talk freely, in such a way that the repressed fears and conflicts which are causing the problems are brought into the conscious mind and openly faced, rather than remaining 'buried' in the unconscious. This practice is based upon specific theories of how the mind, the instincts, and sexuality work.

This theory works on the psychology. It adopts the methods of reading employed by Freud and later theorists to interpret texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author's own neuroses. Psychoanalysis attempts to understand the workings and source of unconscious desires, needs, anxieties and behavior of writers, readers and specific cultural phenomena. They want to understand human behavioral patterns and cultural behavior patterns. Through the scope of a psychoanalytic lens, humans are described as having sexual and aggressive drives. Psychoanalytic theorists believe that human behavior is deterministic. It is governed by irrational forces, and the unconscious, as well as instinctual and biological drives.

Due to this deterministic nature, psychoanalytic theorists do not believe in free will. Practitioner: Sigmund Freud, Ernest Jones..

Russian Formalism

Russian formalism was a school of literary criticism in Russia from the 1910s to the 1930s. It includes the work of a number of highly influential Russian and Soviet scholars (mentioned below) who revolutionised literary criticism between 1914 and the 1930s by establishing the specificity and autonomy of poetic language and literature. Russian formalism exerted a major influence on thinkers like Mikhail Bakhtin (not basically a part of Russian Formalism but is important) and on structuralism as a whole. The movement's members had a relevant influence on modern literary criticism, as it developed in the structuralist and post- structuralist periods. Under Stalin it became a pejorative term for elitist art.

The term "formalism" was first used by the adversaries of the movement, and as such it conveys a meaning explicitly rejected by the Formalists themselves. Russian Formalism is the name now given to a mode of criticism which emerged from three groups, MLC: The Moscow Linguistic Circle (1915) OPOJAZ group (1916) and Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC): to which Roman Jakobson also contributed.

Basically, Russian Formalists are concerned about the form of a literary work that what type of literary devices are used in the formation of a text. Although, Russian Formalism is often linked to American New Criticism because of their similar emphasis on close reading, the Russian Formalists regarded themselves as a developers of a science of criticism and are more interested in a discovery of systematic method for the analysis of poetic text. Russian formalism is distinctive for its emphasis on the functional role of literary devices and its original conception of literary history. Russian Formalists advocated a "scientific" method for studying poetic language.

New Criticism

New Criticism was a formalist movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century. New criticism is an analytic literary criticism that is marked by concentration on the language, imagery, and emotional or intellectual tensions in literary works. It emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The movement derived its name from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*.

The work of Cambridge scholar I. A. Richards, especially

his *Practical Criticism* and *The Meaning of Meaning*, which offered what was claimed to be an empirical scientific approach, were important to the development of New Critical methodology. Also very influential were the critical essays of T. S. Eliot, such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Hamlet and His Problems", in which Eliot developed his notions of the "theory of impersonality" and "objective correlative" respectively. Eliot's evaluative judgments, such as his condemnation of Milton and Dryden, his liking for the so-called metaphysical poets, and his insistence that poetry must be impersonal, greatly influenced the formation of the New Critical canon.

New Criticism developed as a reaction to the older philological and literary history schools of the US North, which focused on the history and meaning of individual words and their relation to foreign and ancient languages, comparative sources, and the biographical circumstances of the authors (New Historicism). The New Critics felt that this approach tended to distract from the text and meaning of a poem and entirely neglect its aesthetic qualities in favour of teaching about external factors. On the other hand, the New Critics disparaged the literary appreciation school, which limited itself to pointing out the "beauties" and morally elevating qualities of the text, as too subjective and emotional. Condemning this as a version of Romanticism, they aimed for a newer, systematic and objective method.

New Critics believed the structure and meaning of the text were intimately connected and should not be analyzed separately. In order to bring the focus of literary studies back to analysis of the texts, they aimed to exclude the reader's response, the author's intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from their analysis (Close Reading).

Structuralism

Structuralism is an intellectual movement which began in France in the 1950s and is first seen in the work of the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and the literary critic Roland Barthes. It is difficult to boil structuralism down to a single 'bottom-line' proposition, but if forced to do so it would be that its essence is the belief that things cannot be understood in isolation - they have to be seen in the context of the larger structures they are part of (hence the term 'structuralism'). Structuralism was imported into Britain mainly in the 1970s and attained widespread influence, and even notoriety, throughout the 1980s. In sociology, anthropology, archaeology, history, philosophy, and linguistics, structuralism is a general theory of culture and methodology that implies that elements of human culture must be understood by way of their relationship to

a broader system. It works to uncover the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel. As an intellectual movement, structuralism also became the heir to existentialism.

The structures in question here are those imposed by our way of perceiving the world and organising experience, rather than objective entities already existing in the external world. It follows from this that meaning or significance isn't a kind of core or essence inside things: rather, meaning is always outside. Meaning is always an attribute of things, in the literal sense that meanings are attributed to the things by the human mind, not contained within them. Emile Durkheim based his sociological concept on 'structure' and 'function', and from his work emerged the sociological approach of structural functionalism.

Apart from Durkheim's use of the term structure, the semiological concept of Ferdinand de Saussure became fundamental for structuralism. Saussure conceived language and society as a system of relations. His linguistic approach was also a refutation of evolutionary linguistics. Russian functional linguist Roman Jakobson was a pivotal figure in the adaptation of structural analysis to disciplines beyond linguistics, including philosophy, anthropology, and literary theory. Jakobson was a decisive influence on anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, by whose work the term structuralism first appeared in reference to social sciences. By the late 1960s, many of structuralism's basic tenets came under attack from a new wave of predominantly French intellectuals/philosophers such as historian Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and literary critic Roland Barthes.

Though elements of their work necessarily relate to structuralism and are informed by it, these theorists eventually came to be referred to as post-structuralists. Many proponents of structuralism, such as Lacan, continue to influence continental philosophy and many of the fundamental assumptions of some of structuralism's post-structuralist critics are a continuation of structuralist thinking. In literary theory, structuralism challenged the belief that a work of literature reflected a given reality; instead, a text was constituted of linguistic conventions and situated among other texts. An example of structuralism is describing an apple. An apple is crisp, sweet, juicy, round, and hard. Another example of structuralism is describing your experience at the ocean by saying it is windy, salty, and cold, but rejuvenating.

II. CONCLUSION

To conclude my research paper, I reached to the point that

literary criticism and theory are the mandatory parts of literature. This research paper seeks to introduce students to some of the most important schools of literary theory and criticism in the 20th Century that have had significant impact on the study of literature. Their aim is used to explain, entertain and challenge the students of literature. Criticism is a term which has been applied since the seventeenth century to the description, justification, analysis, or judgment of works of art. They make literature invigorating, useful and animating from multiple points of view which help us to accomplish a superior comprehension of literature.

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