

Emergence of “Theory” As A Genre

Dr. Anand K. Mishra

Shri Ramswaroop Memorial Group of Professional Colleges Lucknow

ABSTRACT

In literary and cultural discourses there is a serious discussion on ‘theory’ in general which nowadays as a genre is subscribed by all disciplines alike and which in its turn belongs to no particular discipline at all. Obvious question is ‘theory’ of what? ‘Theory’ in fact is not a theory of any comprehensive theory of things in general. At first impression ‘theory’ seems to be an array of names such as Derrida, Lacan, Foucault for instance. ‘Theory’ seems to be fraught with reading of psychoanalytical, political and philosophical texts. It seems ‘theory’ signals ‘speculations’. ‘Theory’ definitely however is more than a hypothesis. This study takes up various schools of thoughts and shows how they due to their disciplinary commitments lack ideological depth and diversity. ‘Theory’ as a genre by absorbing the insights of these schools of thoughts moves ahead of them and renders a great service to free flow of concepts by being more inclusive and comprehensive in its spectrum of ideas than various schools of thought within their disciplinary commitment could ever manage to be.

PRIMER OF ‘THEORY’ AS A GENRE

"Everything that is meaningful is not basic." (Petrovie, p.331). As a departure from the basic and also keeping in view the complexities involved in literature, the discipline of literary criticism has acquired a multi-disciplinary mode. Various *literary theories* guide literary criticism in acquiring this mode, which in turn are guided by theories in general. As the pursuit here is to fight the bewilderment caused by the explosive advent of the multi-disciplinary mode, therefore it is important to understand, first of all, the basic differences among literary criticism, literary theory, ‘theory’ in general, and literary studies, which will also in a way provide a context to situate the discussion of the emergence of contemporary ‘theory’ as a genre.

1. **Literary Criticism** - It is fundamentally the evaluation and estimation of a work on grounds of insights and impacts, the personal and /or the cultural significance of the themes, uses of the language, and the aesthetic implications. However, the judgement of the value of a work is not simple because it entails an exploration of the constitution of value itself to comment upon the personal, social and aesthetic aspects of a work of art. Moreover, as the text is generally marked by complexity and ambiguity, so it needs a careful attention of what guides, constitutes and legitimates interpretation. And it is precisely at this point a *literary ‘theory’* of interpretation is needed.
2. **Literary ‘theory’**- Literary ‘theory’ is an understanding of the nature and function of literature. It studies the relation of the text to the author, to the reader, to society, to the language, and to history. It also studies the understanding of what frames the judgement and the *frames* of judgement as well. As literary ‘theory’ acts as a guide to literary criticism, which, in turn, acts as a guide to literature, so it is given the status of a servant of the servant.
3. **Literary Studies**- Roman Jakobson in his brilliant essay, "Linguistics and Poetics" differentiates 'literary studies' from literary criticism. Literary studies deal with biography, fact of authorship, aesthetics, the pressures and modulations of contexts, historical influences, rewriting and publication, etc.
4. **‘Theory’ in general**- ‘Theory’ in general with which we are concerned here is an autonomous institution which operates as a frame of values and expectations itself. As it does not bear any rigorous boundaries, it theorizes freely about expectations, assumptions, other disciplines of human learning, and theorizing itself. ‘Theory’ is open to everything. It lacks disciplinary commitments.

The conception of division, however, especially between literary 'theory' and 'theory' in general, is too simple to cater to the complexities of the post-modern scenario, because both literary 'theory' and 'theory' in general have approached each other only to get merged so as to keep pace with the recent developments. That is to say, the domain of literary 'theory' is not now pure because most of its interesting developments do not address to literature. In the same way, 'theory' in general has been, in recent times, more or less used directly in literary studies. The use of the theories of Marx, Freud, Erving Goffman, Saussure and Jacques Lacan in literature is a glaring example of this move. These recent developments which merged literary 'theory' into 'theory' in general, have led to the formation of this new *genre* which might be called *textual 'theory'* (nicknamed simply as 'theory'). As Richard Rorty comments, "a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all of these mingle together in a new genre." (Rorty, *Georgia Review*, pp.763-64)

This genre named 'theory', is heterogeneous and multidisciplinary. That is why its practitioners are associated with distinctive discourses, for example, Lacan is associated to psychoanalysis, Goffman to empirical sociological research, Gadamar to a particular branch of German philosophy and so forth. And thus the works associated with this genre are studied inside as well as outside the proper disciplinary matrix. In other words, the 'theory' functions as a genre through its ability of challenging disciplinary boundaries. Again, if the new genre is called "theory", rather than 'philosophy', it is because 'theory' owes its origin more to literary criticism and literary 'theory' than directly to philosophy in general. As Richard Rorty says, "I think that in England and America, philosophy has already been displaced by literary criticism." (Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.168) Recent European philosophy-the Frankfurt School, the works of Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, Serres, etc. came to England and America as well as to the other parts of the globe through literary theorists, rather than philosophers. Literary theorists consumed European or Continental philosophy in their works, and therefore, worked as an advertising agency to articulate them.

There are several other reasons too for literary 'theory' to play a dominant role in the genre of 'theory'. Since literature articulates human experiences, therefore, it touches nearly every aspect of human life. This feature of literature makes it a very complex phenomenon which gives shelter to varied theoretical projects. Thus literary 'theory', because of its vast domain, comes very near to 'theory' in general. Literary 'theory' explores issues of intelligibility, rationality, signification and self-reflexivity posited in literature. To take a clue from Alvin Gouldner, who defines rationality as:

The capacity to make problematic what had upto now been treated as given; to bring to reflection what before had only been used; to transform resource into topic; to examine critically the life we lead. This view of rationality situates it in the capacity to think about our thinking. Rationality as reflexivity about our groundings premises an ability to speak about our speech and the factors that ground it. Rationality is thus located in metalinguistic communication. (Gouldner, p.49)

As literary 'theory' deals with the limits of intelligibility and rationality in Gouldner's sense, therefore, it entails varied speculations upon language and categories through which we express ourselves in general. Thus, literary 'theory' works as a general 'theory' in addressing the diverse problems of framing, language and metacommunication (communication upon communication).

Literary 'theory' keeps an eye on new theoretical developments. And this makes it something more than the 'theory' of literature, and transmutes it into 'theory' in general. Now it is clear that the new genre of 'theory', though centrally constituted by literary 'theory', is something more than merely addressing to the issues of literature. Thus, when one speaks of 'contemporary theory' one may or may not deal with the problems of literature. In this study, schools of thoughts therefore are seen as 'theory', rather than literary 'theory' or literary criticism, but it in no way means that dealing with 'theory' in general, does not address major issues of literature and literary studies.

CROSS-SECTION OF 'THEORY' AS A GENRE

It would definitely be very interesting to note how various developments in critical schools of thoughts look so bleak visualized vis a vis 'theory' as a genre. However it is equally interesting to see that such disciplines and schools of thoughts themselves contributed in emergence of 'theory' as a genre.

Russian formalism of Roman Jakobson, Boris Eichenbaum and Victor Shklovsky emphasised on verbal strategies that make a literary work literary. They focussed on foregrounding of language itself. They redirected attention from authors to verbal devices they used. For them literary devices were the undisputed monarchs in literary studies. They reoriented literary studies towards form and technique. As the name of their school suggests they made literary criticism totally form based. How oversimplified such an approach looks before the emergence of 'theory' as a genre. Yet how much these formalists contributed to 'theory' as a genre.

New criticism of I. A. Richards, William Empson and Cleneth Brooks focussed on literary works as aesthetic objects rather than historical documents. They focussed their attention on verbal interactions within texts instead of historical circumstances and situations of the author. They focussed on ambiguity, paradox, irony and imagery as elements contributing to literary works a unified whole. Nevertheless it is clear enough that new criticism as a school of thought lacked theoretical insights which is clearly evident from the theoretical perspective this school of thought offered. We however can never deny what a great role formalistic insights of new criticism and Russian formalism played in emergence of 'theory' as a genre simply because something like formal analysis of a work took centre stage in some way or the other when it comes to overall insights of 'theory' as a genre.

Quest for insights in new perspective saw new heights in the school of phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, J. Hillis Miller, Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser. Unlike formalists they focussed on a literary work as it appeared to consciousness. And this way subjectivity is also introduced by them alongside the objectivity of a work of art. It was an attempt in the direction of making human thinking more lifelike. They stopped focusing on ontology, epistemology and knowability of this world. They stopped doing analysis of the ultimate reality of the world; instead they took up the world as it appeared to human consciousness. Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser as reader response theorists treated work as experience of reader. They focused on how reader produces meaning and how he adds between the lines. Phenomenological studies inspired aesthetics of reception of Hans Robert Hans which termed a work of art as an answer to questions posed by a horizon of expectations. Aesthetics of reception as a theoretical school took a work of art in perspective of history of how literature is received vis-a-vis changing norms of aesthetics that allow it to be read in different eras. This shows how formalism is added with subjectivity and subjectivity is added with historicity and this way 'theory' as a genre borrowed from various disciplines and moved ahead of them.

Historicity was not any homogenous recording of chronological facts in the latter half of the twentieth century. Neo historicism as a theoretical movement emphasized that a work may not be a social construct as it is often supposed to be. Literature every so often is a contestatory, subversive and antagonistic activity in its social milieu. For instance literature had subversive energy during renaissance against the religious and theological ideology of that time. Neo historicism of Stephen Greenblatt took historical studies to a new level of subversive energy. Theory as a genre however absorbed all subversive energy in its kitty.

Historicity in a way has definitely something to with psychoanalysis as well. This theoretical movement pioneered by Jacques Lacan in its later developments said that truth of a patient is not analyst's interpretation of him but patient and analyst caught up in interplaying the past of the patient. Therefore a text is a complex assemblage of subjectivity, objectivity, consciousness and historicity. This way psychoanalysis claimed that a text defies mastery in terms of objectification because it's essentially a mutual interplay. 'Theory' as a genre hugely absorbed from theoretical discourses of psychoanalysis.

Emergence of feminism as a theoretical critique of the heterosexual matrix operating as opposition between man and woman subverted all structures of patriarchal discourse. In fact feminist theorists like Kaja Silverman remodelled patriarchal formulations of psychoanalysis and reinvented it for understanding psyche

of a woman. 'Theory' as a genre moved ahead but not without absorbing the remodelling and reinventiveness of psychoanalysis by feminist theorists.

Structuralism is one of the most inexplicable movements of the 20th century. Key terms of it are unstable, that is to say, what they signify at one level, do not signify at the other. It is a multi-disciplinary exercise, and hence, very complex. Structuralism defies any attempt to summary. Structuralism as a theoretical movement focussed on structures that make explanation possible. Claude Levi Strauss introduced it in anthropology and mythology and from there it came in literary and language studies and taken over by 'theory'.

Post-structuralism moving parallel to structuralism created a rift in structuralist poetics by making apparent how texts create meaning by violating any conventions that structural analysis so meticulously tries to locate. 'Theory' absorbed this fiddling on conventions by post-structuralism.

When we speak of deconstructive 'theory' in general, a debate between structuralism and post-structuralism springs up, as deconstruction is a post structuralist movement, and thus it has surely something to do with structuralism. Frank Lentricchia writes:

Sometime in the early 1970s, we awoke from the dogmatic slumber of our phenomenological sleep to find that a new presence had taken absolute hold over our avant-garde critical imagination: Jacques Derrida. Somewhat startlingly, we learned that, despite a number of loose characterizations to the contrary, he brought not structuralism but something that would be called 'post structuralism'. The shift to post-structuralist direction and polemic in the intellectual careers of Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, Edward Said, and Joseph Riddel - all of whom were fascinated in the 1960s by strains of phenomenology-tells the whole story. (Lentricchia, p.159)

Deconstruction of Jacques Derrida turned all hierarchical oppositions in structure upside down and made relationship between signifies and signified arbitrary. He teased out warring forces within the text to claim that meaning is never final. All this rendered great service to 'theory' as a genre because it incorporated all these insights in its theoretical base and thereby tremendously contributed in overall development of thought.

CONCLUSION

The concluding phase of the twentieth century is contending and contentious, confusing and confused, baffling and baffled. This phase is the phase of cross-cultural communication, disinherited mind of a post-modern culture thinking of the future as shock, multi-storied giant machines flying in the sky; forests replaced by steel; electronic revolution ushering in an information society; horribly complex studies of Strauss, Althusser and Ellul; the 'present' treating the 'future' as a threat and the 'past' as a burden; submerged morality and deceptive new anchorages celebrating the spiritual crisis; rationality suppressed in favour of irrationality; cybernetic and kitsch culture, with the spread of television, cinema, computers and internet, threatening the study of literature as a humanistic activity. In such a complex situation, every activity is most likely to be difficult, and literature is no exception as it only mirrors the society. The complexities of the literary productions of this phase are too evident to need any special mention. And thus one can equally well imagine the wild complexities of 'theory' as a genre which patrols the undefined boundaries of the post-modern literary productions. 'Theory' is essentially a presentation of issues and debates rather than schools. This in a way has paved the way for a free flow of ideas and holistic thinking. This is a great service done by 'theory' as a genre. The discourses which have most significant impact on 'theory' are reflections on language and metalanguage, analysis undertaken by deconstruction and psychoanalysis in general, gender and sexuality studies undertaken by feminist theorists, and various gender studies including queer 'theory' etc., various historically oriented studies including post-colonial 'theory', neo historicism and cultural criticism. The cumulative effect of these modes has definitely rendered some sort of service in broadening the horizon of human knowledge never seen before. It is in fact 'theory' as a genre which has paved way for multidisciplinary studies which are so much in vogue in the contemporary times.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Anand K. Mishra is Professor and Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Shri Ramswaroop Memorial Group of Professional Colleges, Lucknow. He has got his doctoral degree in Deconstruction and is extensively well read in Continental as well as Indian Philosophical Tradition.

Contact: 8887881074, 9415470528

Email: dam2797@gmail.com

Address: In front of ESI Hospital,

619, Hind Nagar, Kanpur Road,

Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

Pin Code: 226012

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