

Introduction to Literary Theory
Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Lecture – 35

Conclusion

Welcome all of you to this final lecture in our series on Literary Theory. Today though we would be briefly touching upon eco criticism and Reza theory; my main focus would be on opening up certain fundamental questions, which should help you to think about literary theory and think about it by going beyond what we have already discussed during the course of this lecture series.

Now, if you look at the various kinds of literary theory that have been gaining ground from around the second half of the 20th century, you will see that almost all of them speak in terms of decentring something or the other. So, for instance with feminism you have the decentring of male centric discourses with post structuralism you have the decentring of the author and indeed of all notions of transcendental signified that can fix meaning from outside the language system.

With post colonialism you have the decentring of the west and of the euro centric discourse of colonialism. And all of these various decentring projects have come together have added up to form what leotard defines as a postmoderned condition that is characterized by an incredulity towards meta narratives in general.

Now, when we turn towards such contemporary trends in the field of literary theory like eco criticism, we find this decentring gesture taking a radical new form. Because, in eco criticism what is being decentred is the idea of human itself and all the anthropocentric that is human centric grand narratives pivoted on man.

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- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Margaret Fuller
- Henry David Thoreau

Though eco criticism majorly draws its inspiration from the works of three 19th century writers namely Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau, it only came to prominence in the anglophone sphere of literary studies especially in America from around the last decades of the 20th century.

And its main thrust has been to undermine the idea of human being as a dominating force vis-à-vis nature. Instead of regarding man as the master of his physical surroundings, the eco critics try to situate human beings as merely one of the many elements within a complex ecosystem. In the post-renaissance best a man or more specifically the white adult human male was upheld as the measure of all things. Nature with all its living and nonliving components was imagined in the form of a pyramid, where man is posited at the very top as a triumphant master.

This notion of man as the master was even further bolstered by the tremendous technological advancements made in the west during the centuries following the enlightenment. But, as we saw in our lecture on modernism and post modernism; the devastation created by the two world wars shook this confidence in the grand narrative, which posited man as a supreme master; who exercised control over all inanimate and animate beings. And of course, this included women and the quote unquote immature and barbaric inhabitants of the colonies; who were regarded to be at best aspirants to the status of fully developed human beings.

This confidence in man being a sane mature and even protective master of the world was jolted as I said by the two World Wars. But it was also jolted by the real fear of our ecosystem running out of various necessary resources; like clean water for instance or clean air after centuries of systematic exploitation. And this fear of we running out of necessary resources have been growing aversions the II World War at least.

So, within this scenario of fear and despondence; eco criticism mainly tries to address these four issues. The first issue that the eco critics try to address is that of how man's conceptualization of himself as a dominating force in nature disrupts and destroys and sometimes irretrievably so, vital aspects of the ecosystem. The second issue that concerns the eco critics is that of imagining man as a part of rather than as the master of the ecosystem.

So, the first and the second issues act as counterparts to each other, the third issue with which eco criticism deals with which eco critics highlight is the issue of canon formation. And especially the issue of creating a canon out of the contemporary eco literature and what do I mean by eco literature? Well eco literature is a body of contemporary literature which draws attention to environmental crisis and which helps us imagine possible futures for our ecosystem. The fourth issue also deals with a canon formation, but from a different perspective.

So, eco criticism concerns itself not merely with contemporary eco literature, but it also tries to reread the established literary canons from the perspective of ecological concerns. Therefore, within the field of eco criticism you will find readings of works of William Wordsworth for instance, Thomas Hardy for instance and they are read through the lens of the twin concerns that I have spoken about in points 1 and 2.

So, now that we have a rough idea of what constitutes eco criticism, this is the question that I want to open up for you. In this series of literary theory we have seen how the activity of literature has always been understood in human centric terms. Let us try and understand this through examples; say for instance one way of looking at literature as we have discussed has been author centric, has been theories which revolve around the figure of the author.

And the author is made the pivot on which literary creation rests this is a view of literature where the human centricity is most clearly evident because in such kinds of

theories revolving around the author; literature is understood as the creation of an extraordinary human mind.

But, this same degree of human centrality is also evident for instance in ways of looking at literature which foregrounds the reader and which foregrounds the methods in which literature involves the readers human cognitive abilities and his or her human emotions. Even literary theories which foreground language are also actually centred around human beings because, language is ultimately a part of human social relation; human communication and that human aspect of language is very much present in all the language centred literary theories that we have discussed so far.

Now, if we consider a theory like eco criticism; where man is not at the centre, can we then have a substantial discussion on literature at all within its framework? In other words, does eco criticism breach a very fundamental boundary; the fundamental boundary of human centrism within which literature has been created consumed and discussed; for centuries now if we decentre man does literature itself become decentred.

These are the questions that I would like to leave open for you for you to ponder. But, I would also like to add a few more questions to this set and I would like to do so by first talking very briefly about the Reza theory. Now, as I had mentioned early on in this lecture series one of my intentions has been to connect the field of literary theory more closely with our position as students of English literature located in India.

Recent developments like the rise of post colonial studies when the field of literary theory has made this project even more viable. Because, it has succeeded albeit unevenly to decentre the west from its pivotal position within the departments of anglophone literary studies all around the world actually and one of the signs of this decentring is that names of authors like Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian author or the Caribbean author Derek Walcott or the Indian author Salman Rushdie; they now appear in the syllabus of various English departments across the world with quite interesting regularity.

This was of course, unthinkable even say 60 or 70 years ago; when the syllabus would almost exclusively consist of white male literature produced in the west. But though the literature that is studied within the English departments have been becoming more and more cosmopolitan more and more eclectic. And largely thanks to the inclusion of works

produced in the global south; what we understand as literary theory from within the framework of our English departments that has still remained largely western.

And by that I mean the literary theory that gets studied by us as students of English literature; still gets generated within western academia. And interestingly enough this also includes post colonial theory because as you will remember from our earlier discussions be it Edwards Side or be it Homi Bhabha or be it Gayathri Chakravathy Spivak all of them are or were in case of Edwards Side primarily associated with elite western universities like Columbia or Harvard. Moreover the philosophical template on which these theorists have built their theories have also been primarily European template.

So, for instance we find Edwards side building on Fucose philosophy of discourse, Bhabha engaging with Freud and his notions of the unconscious. Spivak finds her interlocutors in people like Emmanuel Kant for instance, Friedrich Schiller, Karl Marx, Jacques Derrida so on and so forth and in fact, she also declares she admits that she is a Europeanist.

Now, here since I am making some generalized comments about the west and since I am talking about a European philosophical template or a western philosophical template; let me try to at least partially absolve myself from the charges of essentialism by quoting a passage from the best Chakravathy's seminal text Provincialize in Europe.

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“[T]he so-called European intellectual tradition is the only one alive in the social science departments of most, if not all, modern universities. I use the word “alive” in a particular sense. It is only within some very particular traditions of thinking that we treat fundamental thinkers who are long dead and gone not only as people belonging to their own times but also as though they were our own contemporaries. In the social sciences, these are invariably thinkers one encounters within the tradition that has come to call itself “European” or “Western””.

(cont'd.)

And I want to present this passage in my defence. Chakravarthi writes and I quote; the so called European intellectual tradition is the only one alive in the social science departments of most, if not all modern universities. I use the word alive in a particular sense; it is only within some very particular traditions of thinking that we treat fundamental thinkers; who are long dead and gone not only as people belonging to their own times, but also as though they were our own contemporaries. In the social sciences, these are invariably thinkers one encounters within the tradition that has come to call itself quote unquote European or quote unquote western.

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“I am aware that an entity called “the European intellectual tradition” stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history. [...] The point, however, is that, fabrication or not, this is the genealogy of thought in which social scientists find themselves inserted. [...] [F]ew if any Indian social scientists or social scientists of India would argue seriously with, say, the thirteenth-century logician Gangesa or with the grammarian and linguistic philosopher Bartrihari (fifth to sixth centuries), or with the tenth- or eleventh-century aesthetician Abhinavagupta.”

(Provincializing Europe, Dipesh Chakraborty)

I am aware that an entity called quote the European intellectual tradition stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history. The point however, is that fabrication or not this is the genealogy of thought in which social scientists find themselves inserted.

Few if any Indian social scientists or social scientists of India would argue seriously with say the thirteenth century logician Gangesa or with the grammarian and the linguistic philosopher Bartrihari fifth to sixth centuries or with the tenth or eleventh century aesthetician Abhinavagupta. What Chakravarthi says about the broader field of social sciences also holds true about the narrower field of literary studies and literary theory in particular.

So, for instance even when we see Bhabha or Spivak engaging with India and with the literature coming out of this subcontinent; as their subjects of inquiry we do not find them engaging with let us say such ancient Indian institutions and literary theorists like Bharata Muni, who wrote the Natya Shastra or Anand Vardan; who established the Dwani theory and who is known as the author of Dany Alok.

So, here is a project that I want to talk about; what if we try to decentred the primacy of the west or Europe by re engaging with such ancient Indian institutions from within the framework of English literary studies. It might be interesting for instance to see how something like the Reza theory, that is based on the idea of emotional essences and that is mentioned among various sticks; that is mentioned in Natya Shastra. How that can be made alive and I am using alive here in the sense that deeper Chakravarthy uses the term alive within the context of the departments of English literary studies.

I would definitely encourage you to pursue this line of thought, but I think there is also a catch here and let me bring that up for you. As I have been saying from the introductory lecture itself theory when the field of literary studies cannot exist independently of literature; it does not make any sense.

We have the seal how the emergence of theories like feminism for instance post colonialism or even eco criticism is also marked by the four grounding of new literary canons and or at the very least a conscious revaluation of pre existing literary canons. If we decide to engage with the Reza theory or even with the Dhvani theory for instance what kind of literature should we apply them to? In their original context these theories were complemented by certain traditions of Sanskrit dramatic and poetic literature, but these literary traditions are unavailable to a modern student situated within the department of English literature.

So, should we then try and modify these ancient aesthetic theories into tools of literary criticism that will help us read the kind of literature that is usually read as part of our English literature syllabus. But then will such an attempt at radical modification completely dismantle; the very basic tenets of these ancient ascetic theories. On the other hand we can try to enlarge the kind of literature that is studied within the English departments and we can try and include Sanskrit dramas and poetry that originally complemented the Reza theory and Dhvani theory. We will such an expansion of the

field of our studies result in a dilution of our fundamental understanding of English literature and will it not take us altogether beyond the boundary of the category of English literature.

Well I do not have answers to these questions; do I think that they are important questions, which is why I would invite you to think about them and to see where these questions lead you to. And with this I will end this series of lecture; I am acutely aware of the many topics that I have not been able to touch at all or touch only very briefly. However, that was somewhat a conscious decision because, what I wanted to do most was that I wanted you to grasp some of the major concepts in this field in sufficient details rather than to just give you a comprehensive and superficial summary.

I therefore, hope that you will use this lecture series as a first step that will lead you to inquire further into this field of literary theory and I wish you all the best for your future research, good bye.