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Paper Authors

MS A MADHAVI LATHA



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THE METHOD OF ENGLISH STUDIES IN THE FIELD OF LITERACY CRITICISM

MS A MADHAVI LATHA

Associate Professor, Malla Reddy Engineering College (A)

madhavalatha1674@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The following is an archival work of the syllabi using the method of English Studies in the field of literary criticism. It does not claim to be an authority on it but is simply opens up the question of how the idea of literary criticism has been shaped in academia.

Introduction, Objective and Research Question:

English studies are an academic discipline that includes the study of literatures written in the English language, English linguistics and English sociolinguistics. More broadly, English studies explores the production of and analysis of texts created in English (or in areas of the world in which English is a common mode of communication). It is common for academic departments of "English" or "English Studies" to include scholars of the English language, literature (including literary criticism and literary theory), linguistics, law, journalism, composition studies, the philosophy of language, literacy, publishing/history of the book, communication studies, technical communication, folklore, cultural studies, creative writing, critical theory, disability studies, area studies (especially American studies), theatre, gender studies/ethnic studies, digital media/electronic publishing, film studies/media studies, rhetoric and philology/etymology, and various courses in the liberal arts and humanities, among

others. But in the wake of what is termed as the 'Crisis in English Studies' the whole discipline has come under question not only in terms of its definition but also its scope of study like cultural studies, Criticism and Theory etc. The aim of this paper is to explore the dynamics of the site of Conflict in the discipline of Literary Criticism and Theory on the basis of an examination of the syllabi of the same .

Scope and Methodology:

This paper will examine the curriculum and texts being taught in the department under the titles like "History of Literary Criticism", "Theory of Literary Criticism", "Modern Literary theory and Criticism", "History of Criticism and Theory" etc. The method of examination will be a quantitative analysis of the data mentioned from which observations will be drawn and studied on the basis of the framework provided by works of Suvir Kaul "The Indian Academic and Resistance to Theory" and Chris Baldick's "The Social Mission of Criticism".



Observations:

A quantitative analysis of the data reveals that the structure of syllabus both at undergraduate and post-graduate levels has remained the same both at the undergraduate and at post graduate levels with changes being made over-time in the texts being taught at a gap of every three to five years. The basic structure however is that at the undergraduate level the texts which are being taught offer a historical account of the discipline of Literary Criticism right from ancient Greek criticism to the present Post-Modern areas like New-Historicism, its basic concepts, critical terms, and formation of English critical texts and critical traditions with the exception of syllabus from 2004-07 where one unit was dedicated to practical criticism. While at the Post Graduate level the papers of Literary Criticism and Theory include works of individual critics and authors divided either chronologically or genre wise on the basis of the policy of Board of Studies The detailed analysis further reveals that the had a unit dedicated to the 'Indian Poetics and Theories' which was absent in any of the earlier syllabuses and was later removed. An optional paper at post-graduate level in the fourth year is dedicated to practical criticism which includes Feminist, Psychoanalytic and Structuralist approaches and their application in poetry. There has been noted an absence of application of such approaches to prose texts. Also earlier the syllabus followed an annual pattern of designing wherein the whole course was taught in an entire academic year and was

evaluated at the end of the year by a single examination. But later on with the introduction of Choice Based Credit System(CBCS) as a pattern of teaching and evaluation of students has divided the academic year into two semesters with two examinations being conducted at the end. Hence the papers on Literary Criticism and Theory to have been divided into two papers I and II with Four Units respectively. Also, since than the paper includes a fourth self-study unit a feature which was absent in the annual pattern.

The study also seems to be suggesting that students might find it quite challenging with the significant presence of western critical texts and theories, which might alienate the readers and students from the discipline coupled with all the technical language, and neologisms of especially the Structuralist and Psychoanalytic theories. One scholar gave their view on Literary Criticism and Theory. The views were that this paper has been kept at various levels because it begins always at the beginning right from Aristotle and newer concepts keep on adding. It was not possible to have all this under one paper. "It gives us critical abilities not just in literature but also in life, develops our critical sensibility and critical thinking but with an attitude of questioning." Finally there is a laments of the lack of Indian Poetics and Theories, its perspectives and ideas in the syllabus which she suggests can be done by keeping any exhaustive anthology on Indian Criticism and Poetics in Syllabus.



Another scholar who has taught this paper since 1998 at regular intervals also gave their views. The response was that they did not find any such major change in the structure of the syllabus over the period of time and that “it has remained same and monolithic and has now become obsolete in the sense that the contemporary areas of study like ‘The New Media Studies’ and ‘Digital Humanities’ which have been around for about the past thirty years have not yet found place in our syllabuses”. However, they did point that “this particular paper was one of few in the country which has a separate section on English studies as a disciplinary self-reflection and introduction of areas like Post-Colonial studies here make it more relevant to the Indian context”. Talking about the reception of the paper among students they said mostly that they have found this paper “challenging and boring”. Finally commenting on the practical application of this paper “Its significance has increased in terms of applicability after the introduction of projects in higher education.

Another scholar who has also taught both theory and practical papers on criticism commented that “This course was designed to bridge a gap between the theory and practice of criticism which we have achieved. The lacuna which they find is the division of the paper into theory and praxis which makes it difficult for them to first teach theory than go to praxis. Hence it might be easier if both these papers were combined under a single core paper.” Commenting on the differences between the

teaching strategies of this paper in India and West they respond “A lot of difference is encountered in the teaching of this paper everywhere in the world. In the west, the students undertake active learning and their contribution is lot more than in Indian classrooms where they have to teach basics of theory than the practice. Here, passive learning takes place; hence suddenly students find it difficult to perform active practical learning.” Another problem which teacher face according to her is especially practical criticism papers “The lack of application of isms to prose passages. The system might restrict such prolonged applications hence if the literary criticism and theory papers were combined and restricted to maybe one or two isms the application can be more exhaustive.” Commenting on the lack of Indian Poetics one scholar comments “We should have Indian Poetics and Theories at least at post graduate levels as students responded much better to them.”

The final observation is that the earlier syllabus seemed to be more exhaustive, process oriented and there was a deeper engagement and understanding with the texts whereas the current pattern seems more evaluative and product oriented.

Resistance to Theory: An Overview of Indian Academia and Pedagogy:

The position of literary theory and criticism in Indian academia is quite complex. It is a site of a major conflict about acceptance and rejection of the western concepts of literary theory. This filters directly into the site of



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what post-colonial critics have called the 'crisis of English studies'. A major position of such Indian academicians like Suvir Kaul is that of resistance to literary theory and an attempt of creating an alternative pedagogy in Indian classroom in his "The Indian Academic and Resistance to Theory". It serves an entry point in the study of an ambivalent position of literary theory in India. Kaul's position is that most members of Indian university and college departments ignore the entire production of contemporary literary and critical theory. They reject any examination of the ideology and history of their academic activity. For traditional academics, this is justified in the name of Arnoldian and Leavisite models of literary and cultural values. For younger academics, this is the result of the restricted exposure to the curriculum and pedagogy that celebrates certain concepts and rejects all other social, philosophical and historical concerns.

Most Indian academics and students of Indian literature are concerned with largely giving demoralized lectures, taking examinations and sticking to guide-books of Kunjis for model answers. Teachers are less interested in recent theoretical examinations of the problems and presuppositions of literature and pedagogy. They are encouraged to develop a strictly professional, non-academic and anti-intellectual and sterile concern with the syllabus dictated to them by university authorities. They do not choose their classroom texts, structure of their courses etc.

While there are some academics in Indian universities whose postgraduate studies in progressive departments of literature have trained them in the various forms of theoretical enquiry, it will be a tremendous overstatement to claim that it is solely or largely their efforts which are challenging the ideologies dominant in these departments. This theory debate is combined with the efforts to broaden syllabi to include courses in Indian Writing in English, Commonwealth literature, in African and Afro-American Literature etc. to modernize the departments. These decisions about the academic canon involve all the issues of language, race, gender, colonialism and the class co-ordinates of cultural production that have so energized theoreticians in the last two decades. It is not the theory that is at the root of demands to expand the curriculum. Such demands are most often the product of the exigencies of academic specialization and when such new courses are allowed they are usually taught in the same ways and communicate the same values as the earlier orthodox courses of English literature. The canon is occasionally expanded but the canonicity and the ideological formations of canon are rarely made the explicit subjects of discussion and inquiry which the present project aims to do. Such an expansion of curriculum for Kaul does not interrogate but actually strengthens notions of the universal validity of those cultural and literary criteria which show the achievement of English literature. For Kaul to teach literary criticism as a way of rendering their very idea of literature problematic, as a way of

acknowledging the historical contingency of ethical and social values, as a way of investigating the ways in which linguistic and semiotic systems construct, naturalise and thus mystify cultural meanings have not yet reaches the top of the pedagogical and academic agenda in Indian Universities.

Thus, our pedagogic crises for literary theory and criticism must emerge from the contradictions of our classroom experiences. Working out the nature of these experiences of alienation and belonging to literary theory and criticism is coming to terms with the historically and structurally overdetermined processes that Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan has described in her 'Social Scientist' article, 'After Orientalism:

Colonialism and English Literary Studies in India': "Having been constructed unproblematically as members of the community of western readers or western texts we find ourselves as critics a) naturalised into the role of western type critics, b) suffering from a sense of inferiority or lack of worth as second order critics (lacking in true language facility, sufficient scholarship etc.) and c) experiencing a loss of natural identity and alienation from lived experience."

The Social Mission of English Criticism Revisited: The place of criticism and literary theory in the Indian pedagogy can also be studied and critiqued in terms of its utilitarian, ideological, cultural, socio-political and psychological functions. One such move was made by Chris Baldick in his "The Social Mission of English Criticism"

which gives this topic its title. It has frequently been argued that the study of English literature is in "crisis." At the same time, so broadly has the literary institution become naturalized in education that it is rarely recognized just how recent is the emergence of "English" in its privileged curricular place, or how deeply its emergence, consolidation, and particular shape have from the beginning been entangled with the ideological structures, objectives, and fortunes of literary criticism. The novelty of contemporary literary disputes rests on the sharp challenges raised against the canons and traditional assumptions of both English Literature and literary criticism by a rising oppositional network within the literary institution.

Baldick justifiably draws attention to the "ridiculousness of literary culture's ambitions for bringing about social change". But the claim implicit in this frame is that literary studies cast in an approximately Leavisite mould have acquired a major role in the educational and thus the social scene. Were they a political intervention or were they not? And if not, what significance have books on the literary elite and its ambition? One route towards demonstrating that significance might lie through making more use than Baldick does of theories of hegemony. As he demonstrates, the Leavis project was to develop and bond together in a common pursuit a "minority," an elite raised on the study of major texts who would go forth and do battle with false "mass cultural" values. It is on the presumption that the self-recognition of the

elite was the primary aim that we should understand the Leavises' distaste for theory, their appeal to self-evidence, to sensibility, to assumed common values. But the success of the campaign was to say the least ambiguous. On the one hand 'Scrutiny' successfully infiltrated tertiary education, the colleges of education, and on the other, its discourse turned out to be less than critical of the structures of wealth in society. The meaning of this ambiguity - and indeed of the project as a whole might be more fully graspable if Baldick's work were set alongside that of Renee Balibar on the development of the national language and the national literary tradition in France. Baldick's excellent work, "A Civilizing Subject" could suggestively be developed by cross-reference to a linguistic imperialism not simply international (look at the role of language and literature in India) but between regions and sociolects in Britain. One way to extend Baldick's work would be sociological - to describe the spread of literary criticism through the educational apparatus, to account for the differences of practice which arose in different sectors, and to speculate on how those practices contributed to wider cultural processes.

Conclusion

The area of criticism and that of English studies is indeed under crisis with constantly changing dynamics and texts in terms of concepts and canons and trying to find its own space, identity and pedagogy in the Academia and classroom and meeting with resistance and reticence leading to the

marginalization and alienation of the reader/student. This paper does not claim to be the sole authority on the dynamics of literary theory and English studies in academia. What it tries to do is to open up the question of resistance and alienation from literary theory and criticism in India and to highlight various entry points of study of the same.

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