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Contemporary Critical Theories: An Overview

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Abstract:

This research paper briefly overviews the rise and development of literary theories and criticism, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the most significant features of literary theory and criticism is meaning in a text. In literary criticism, it was assumed that meaning resides with the author and not in text. However, with time, critics began to focus more on the text itself, hence meaning came to be seen as residing with the readers. Literary criticism and theory are necessary part of studying literature to make it revitalizing, informative and inspiring to achieve a better understanding of literature.

The emphasis is shifted to the reader and it made work of art essentially the internal to external. In the 20th century, the attitude is changed to the work, under the influence of the new criticism to work as a self-contained unit. Modern literary criticism is written in a various genres. In any sort, Critic is in a role of political thinker, sociologist, and psychologist, as well as a literary historian and aesthetician.

Thus, this research paper will discuss briefly some of the major modern critical theories such as 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.

Keywords: Literary theory, bibliographical annotation, literary historian and aesthetician, structuralism, formalism, feminism, deconstruction, modernism.

Introduction:

Literary criticism and theory are unavoidable part of studying literature and aim is to explain, entertain, simulate, and challenge the student of literature. It makes literature refreshing, informative and stimulating in many ways which help us to achieve a better understanding of literature. The analysis, study, and evaluation of any literary works are called as Literary Criticism.

Literary theory and practice is a major aspect of Criticism. It is a term which is applied since the seventeenth century to judgment of Literary works. M.H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* talks about different critical theories. The attitude is changed to the reader, and the critic views art in terms of its effect on the audience. A pragmatic theory that was dominant up to the end of the eighteenth century, the emphasis shifted to the poet in nineteenth century changed work of art essentially the internal made external. In the 20th century, the emphasis shifted to the work of art, especially under the influence of the new criticism seeing the work as a self-contained entity and some critics have talked about theoretical and practical or applied criticism.

Literary critics have also talked about other types of criticism such as historical criticism, impressionistic criticism, Textual criticism, analytical, judicial criticism and mythic criticism. There are many critical theories such as 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 criticism is interpretation of literature which proceeds from the general methodology of the study of literature. The theoretical definition of literary criticism is approached historically. For example, in the 17th and 18th centuries, criticism demanded only a dispassionate assessment of a work based on common sense with individual faults and beauties. In the 19th century criticism evolved into a literature where writer was considered in relation to his periods and to society. The history of literary criticism in the West is closely related to the history of literary schools and movements only.

Undoubtedly, literary criticism can influence the course of literary development and the entire literary process. Marxist criticism is based on the interests of society and stands in opposition to impressionistic and subjectivist criticism. Criticism points out the virtues and

vices of a works to the authors helping them to widen their intellectual horizons and improve technical mastery. We know that Modern literary criticism is written in a variety of sorts. In any sort, Critic is in a role of political thinker, sociologist, and psychologist, literary historian and aesthetician. Literary criticism deals with analyzing, classifying, expounding and evaluating a literary work in order to form one's opinion.

The terms "literary theory" and "critical theory" refer to essentially the same fields of study and now undergoing a transformation into cultural theory. It can be assumed as the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining literary texts. A theory is as a body of rules or principles that used to judge works of literature while literary theory on its own tries to explain the assumptions of remaining literary criticism.

Literary theory refers to any principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts and external to the text which is applied in multiple interpretive situations. We all know that different people will experience the same event differently. It follows that different people will approach the same literary text differently. Literary theories emerged to explain different people's views to literature rather than insisting that one view. Literary theory attempts to find the values in all views that are based on a careful study of the literature. There are number of literary theories which are evolved in the course of time.

Structuralism is considered as one of the important literary theories which emerged in France in 1950 and Ferdinand Desassure is the founder of it. It is applied to many other fields such as philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology, literary theory and even mathematics. This literary theory is based on 'a system of ideas' used in the study of language, literature, art, anthropology and sociology that emphasizes the importance of the basic structure and relationship of that particular subject. It is a system used by sociologist, anthropologist and linguists and other people to show how all aspects of culture are based upon some underlying structure. It was an intellectual movement which is based on universal truth. Structuralism is mainly concerned with knowing how language works as a system of meaning production and how does language function as a kind of meaning machine.

According to De Saussure, every language has different signs and these signs are combined of signifier means sound image of the word and signified that is concept behind the word. These signs give the meanings to the text so we cannot study text in isolation. He gave the concept of Langue and parole. Langue is the grammar rules, system and structure of the

language and parole is the act of utterances.

Next literary theory is Post Structuralism emerged in France during 1960s as a movement criticizing structuralism. Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault is the founder of post structuralism. It is grounded in the concept of over determinism. Theory is not separate from reality nor is reality separate from theory. Post-Structuralist worries about the existence of actual reality. Post structuralism rejects the notion of single truth and criticizes theories that claim to uncover truth including religion, social science and realism. It is a modern approach in philosophy and literary criticism. It is opposition to the structuralism. It denies the existence of universal principles which create meanings and coherence and the theory of Ferdinand Desassure of Signifier and Signified. It examines the other sources of meanings i.e. reader, cultural norms and other literature etc. Here readers replace the author. It is simultaneously rejection of Structuralism. Here no meaning and sign are stable. There is nothing outside the text. Post structuralists accept the idea of binary opposition and subsequently applied. Post structuralism underlines the role of knowledge and it is always centered contextual, partial and fragmentary. For Post structuralism it is necessary to understand the system of knowledge and an object that produced it. Post structuralism stresses history which means diachronic to analyze the descriptive means synchronic concepts.

After Post structuralism, Russian Formalism was developed in 1910 in Russia. Its official beginning was marked by an establishment of two organizations, the Moscow linguistic circle and the society for the study of poetic language. A formalistic approach to literature is also called new criticism comprises a close reading of the text. Formalistic critics believe that all information essential to the interpretation of a work must be found within the work itself and there is no need to bring in outside information about the history, politics, or society of the time, or even about the author's life. Formalistic critics are interested in analyzing irony, paradox, imagery, metaphor, setting, characters, symbols, and point of view of literary works.

For formalists, literary criticism is separate from other forms of analysis. It focuses on how language and literature works and not what literature is about. They were primarily interested in the way the literary text achieves their effects and in establishing a scientific base for study of literature. In short, Formalism is a critical approach that analyses interpret and evaluate the essential features of a text. Here we can study text in isolation. There is nothing

extra textual. The text is the most authentic itself. We pay greatest attention on the forms of the text and focus on language and study linguistic devices in order to get maximum meaning of the text.

Reader Response Criticism is a school of criticism which emerged in 1970, focused on finding meaning in the act of reading itself. Richards, Louise Rosenblatt, Walter Gibson, Norman Holland are the chief practitioners of this theory. It is a school of literary theory that focuses on the reader and their experience of a literary work; and not pays the attention primarily on the author or the content and form of the work. There is Reader Response Criticism that analyzes the reader's role in the production of the meaning. The text itself has no meanings until it is read by a reader and here the reader is a producer rather than a consumer of meanings

Sigmund Freud's the psychoanalytic theory of personality development formed through conflicts among three fundamental structures of the human mind that is 'id', 'ego', and 'superego'. This theory works on the psychology adopting 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. Psychoanalysis tries 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 and cultural behavior patterns. Psychoanalytic theorists believe in deterministic behavior. It is governed by irrational forces, and the unconscious, as well as instinctive and biological drives and so psychoanalytic theorists do not believe in free will. Sigmund Freud, Ernest Jones are the main Psychoanalytic theorists who applied this theory to analyze the literary works.

Deconstruction is a philosophical critical approach to textual analysis related with the work of Jacques Derrida. He gives the idea of binary opposition. The deconstructive method emphasizes on flexible and unstable meaning of a literary text. Jacques Derrida says that all communication is characterized by uncertainty because there is no definitive link between a signifier and signified or concept. Once a text is written it ends to have a meaning until a reader reads it. There is no concrete meaning to the text or even no possibility of absolute truth. Thus, Deconstruction is an approach to understanding the relationship between text and meaning.

The concept of feminism is concerned to an analysis of the trend of male domination

of the society; the general attitude of male towards female, the ways of improving the condition of women. Feminism is a belief that women should have equal rights to men. The basis of the feminist movements, both in literature and politics is that western culture which is fundamentally patriarchal, created by men, controlled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and evaluated by men. The period nineteen sixty gave the rise of a new feminist approach to literary criticism. The works of female writer's about females and male were examined by the same standards by male writers before the emergence of Feminist Theory. Old texts are reexamined, and the portrayal of women in literature is reevaluated and new writers create works that more accurately reflect the developing concept of the "modern woman." The feminist approach is partly based on finding that negative attitudes toward women in literature.

Feminists are interested in exposing the ways of women in literature both authors and characters are undervalued. Some feminist scholars have even divided individual words in western languages, suggesting that the languages themselves reflect a patriarchal worldview. They argued that the past times in the west have been dominated by men whether politicians in power or the historians recording it. Feminist critics argue that western literature is male bias and an inaccurate. It is harmful portrayal of women and wants to repair the potential harm achieving balance. They insist for the work by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective. It was the movement in favor of women. Jane Austin, Francis Burney, Virginia Woolf, George Eliot were the famous Feminist writers.

There are three waves of feminism and in the first wave, the term commonly used to the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to gain voting rights and opens the professions to women in European and North American. The key concern of the first wave feminists were education, employment, the marriage laws and plight of intelligent middle class single women. Kate Millet was committed to the treatment of women at the hands of male. Marry Elman's thinking about women, Kate millet's sexual politics are the main endeavors to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture and internalized its assumptions about female nature.

In the Second wave, the term feminism commonly used to refer to social New Movement dedicated to raisin consciousness about sexism and patriarchy emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Europe and North America. It was also dedicated to the legalizing

abortion, birth control and attaining equal rights in politics and economic realms and gaining sexual liberation. The slogan “the personal is political” sum up the way in which the second wave feminism did not just strive to extend the range of social opportunities open to women but also, through interventions within the sphere of reproduction, sexuality and cultural representation to their domestic and private life. The second wave feminism has also continued to inspire the struggle for women’s right across the world.

In second wave feminist during 1880-1920, women protest male values, advocate separatist 'sisterhoods'. They used literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood. It shows the direct analysis of women to literature. Female writers and their significance were studied. Elaine Showalter’s a literature of their own in 1920 is the best example of it. In Third wave, and third wave feminists believe exactly the opposite things. Indeed, third wave feminism is not a withdrawal, but rather an expansion of second wave work with focus in new directions. In third wave feminism women create 'female writing' in self-discovery.

After that, New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interprets within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. It is based on literary criticism of Stephan Greenblatt and influenced by the philosophy of Michael Foucault. New historicism acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances but his environment, beliefs and prejudice. It examines both how the writer's times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer's times. New historicists don't just want to appreciate literature through history; they want to know history better through literature. New Historicism understands intellectual history through literature, and literature through its cultural context.

Another theory, Post Colonialism is the critical analysis of history, culture, literature and modes of discourse, specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France and other European colonial powers. It also focuses on third world countries. The interaction between imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices is the base of Post-colonial literatures. It is also used to analyses the texts and other cultural discourses that emerged after the end of the colonial period. It rejects the master-narrative of western imperialism. It concerns with the formation of the colonial and post-colonial subject. Edward Said, Homi k. Bhabbha, Chinua Achebe and Joseph Conrad are the few post-colonial writers.

Modernism is a period of four decades from early 1900s to the early 1940s. Emily

Dickinson and Walt Whitman are considered to be the mother and father of the movement. According to M.H. Abrams, the term modernism is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts and style of literature and other art in the early decades of the present century. T.S. Eliot is the pioneer of Modernism and his two works like *The love song of Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land* are well-known outcome of it. Modernism is the rejection of traditional 19th century norms and earlier arguments and represented by orientation towards fragmentation, free verse, allusions and Victorian and romantic writing.

Postmodern literature is based on narrative techniques and it is emerged in the Post-World War II era. Postmodern literature uses the earlier styles and conventions, different artistic styles, media, and general theories. Jean Boudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Richard Rorty, Fredrick Jameson are the few famous post-modernists.

Conclusion

Thus, I think that literary criticism and theory are the mandatory parts of literature. This research paper focuses on 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. Criticism is a term applied to the description, justification, analysis, or judgment of works of art. They make literature revitalizing, useful and animating from multiple points of view which help us to accomplish a superior comprehension of literature.

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