

## CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM AND EDWARD SAID

**Dr. Prabin Sinha**

*Associate Professor, Department of English  
D. A. V. P. G. College, Gorakhpur, U. P., India*

### ABSTRACT

*Contemporary literary criticism had long been in the grip of Formalism which had a long tradition from new-criticism and Russian Formalism to structuralism and post-structuralism. Contemporary literary criticism has long been in the grip of formalism. From Russian Formalism through New Criticism and structuralism to American deconstruction. New Criticism held centre stage in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It derived its inspiration from elements in I.A. Richards' Principles of Literary Criticism (1924) and Practical Criticism (1929) and from the critical essays of T.S. Eliot. It opposed the prevailing interest of scholars, critics and teachers of that era in the biographies of authors, the social context of literature and literary history by insisting that the proper concern of a literary critic is not with the external circumstances or effects or the historical position of a work, but with detailed consideration of the work itself as an autonomous entity, independent and self-sufficient by itself. Structuralism postulated that we derive meaning from texts through the differences between words, which are arbitrary signs which refer to themselves instead of any object. Post-structuralism went further ahead to postulate that texts are autonomous entities which are open to limitless interpretations.*

**Keywords:** *Edward Said, Derrida, text, interpretation, discourse, circumstantial reality*

Edward Said's intervention in literary criticism came at a time when criticism was in the grip of formalism with emphasis on critical jargon, structure of texts and theories of interpretation. Literary theories eschewed circumstantial reality completely from literary texts and proposed that words are signs which signify nothing outside the closed world of language. This was aggravated by deconstruction of Derrida and its interpretation for literary criticism by critics like Paul de Man and Christopher Norris. Norris in his *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* reduces all deconstruction to an assertion of the rights of language or rhetoric over Reason. This leads to the undue emphasis on the limitlessness of interpretation. Michael Ryan says in his paper, "The Marxism Deconstruction Debate in Literary Criticism" that Christopher Norris and the Yale School critics deflect the quasi-materialistic and historical insight of Derrida's deconstruction into an assertion of the autonomy of rhetoric and the undecidability of meaning. Said does not subscribe to the contemporary critical postulates emphasizing the limitlessness of interpretation. Said says that the undue emphasis given to the limitlessness of interpretation has 'derived from the conception of the text as existing within a hermetic, Alexandrian universe, which has no connection with actuality.<sup>1</sup> Said demurs from any such critical position which disaffiliates a text from its worldliness. He says, 'This is a view I do not agree with, not simply because texts in fact are in the world but also because as texts, they place themselves -- and indeed are themselves, by soliciting the world's attention. Moreover, their manner of doing this is to place restraints upon what can be done with them interpretatively.<sup>2</sup>

Said's position is that there cannot be a disjunction between a text and its circumstantiality: it is rather their constitutive interaction, their interplay that makes possible the generation and conveyance of meaning. By commending the middle age Arab linguistic tradition of the *Zahirites*, which considered the text as infrangible from its circumstantiality, Said calls for the literary critical community to incorporate circumstantiality and worldliness in their critical discourse. The Zahirite position is Said's position which says that a text is an event; it has a significant form in which worldliness and circumstantiality are incorporated. The text has sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency. It has a specific situation in the world (both spatially and temporally) and this situation places restraints upon the interpreter and his interpretation 'not because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery, but rather because the situation exists at the same level of surface particularity as the textual object itself.'<sup>3</sup> Said counter poses the text's situation in the world against the post structuralist notion of polysemanticization. Simply said, Said holds that the closeness of the text's body to the world's body compels the reader to take both into consideration and thus, by closeness to the world's body texts impose constraints upon their interpretation.

Texts solicit the world's attention and speak to the world. No doubt, they do not speak in the ordinary sense of the word. However, the diametric opposition asserted on the one hand between speech bound by situation and reference and on the other hand the text as an interception and suspension of speech's worldliness is untenable. Paul Ricoeur puts the opposition thus:

In speech the function of reference is linked to the role of the *situation of discourse* within the exchange of language itself: in exchanging speech the speakers are present to each other, but also to the circumstantial setting of discourse, not only the perceptual surroundings but also the cultural background known by both speakers..... Language, and in general all the ostensive indicators of language serve to anchor discourse in the circumstantial reality which surrounds the instance of discourse. Thus, in living speech, the ideal meaning of what one says bends towards a *real* reference, namely to that "about which" one speaks.....

This is no longer the case when a text takes the place of speech..... A text.... is not without reference; it will be precisely the task of reading, as interpretation, to actualize the reference. At least in this suspension wherein reference is deferred, in the sense that it is postponed, a text is somehow "in the air," outside of the world or without a world: by means of this obliteration of all relation to the world, every text is free to enter into relation with all other texts which come to take the place of circumstantial reality shown by living speech.<sup>4</sup>

What Ricoeur says is the same as Barthes says when he distinguishes between the indicative and the expressive functions of language. Speech has an expressive function because the presence of the speakers to each other and to the circumstantial -- perceptual and cultural -- situation ensures expressivity. When we enter the sign system of writing, the words on the page have an indicative function as opposed to expressive function as the perceptual and cultural situation which ensures expressivity is absent. Until the indicative signs are 'actualized' the text stays in a state of suspension, "in the air", without any footing in the world and therefore without expressivity. According to Ricoeur, therefore, speech and circumstantial reality exist in a state of presence, whereas writing and texts exist in a state of suspension -- that is, outside circumstantial reality -- until they are "actualized" (translated into circumstantial reality or worldliness) by the reader - critic.

Said speaks against Ricoeur's concept and says that worldliness does not come and go and Ricoeur has put this argument without sufficient justification with argument. The reader critic in whose head the translation from indication to expression takes place is regarded by Ricoeur as without worldliness or circumstantiality. Said says that the reader - critic is not a mere alchemical translator of texts into circumstantial reality or worldliness for he too is subject to and a producer of circumstances irrespective of the objectivity that his critical methods possess. 'Texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarified forms are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society - in sort, they are in the world, and hence worldly'<sup>5</sup> - Said supports this statement by the fact that texts are sometimes in currency and at other times relegated to oblivion, sometimes on the literary shelf and at others not; sometimes considered dangerous while at others conducive to social harmony or supportive of the social order : these matters have to do with the fact of the text being in the world which is a more complicated matter than the private process of reading.

Texts are worldly not only in being enmeshed in circumstances - there are other ways of dealing with their worldliness, their materiality. The theory of the theme of literary influence first enunciated by W. J. Bate and elaborated by Harold Bloom shows the awesome and ponderous materiality of texts. In Bloom's theory, a poet, but specially the romantic post-Miltonic writer is almost bodily aware of his predecessors as occupying a poetic space he now wishes to fill with his poetry.<sup>6</sup> 'The "belated" poet's attitudes to his precursor, like Freud's analysis of the oedipal relation of son to father, are ambivalent; that is they are compounded not only of admiration but also (since a strong poet feels a compelling need to be autonomous and original) of hate, envy and fear of the precursor's preemption of the descendant's imaginative space.'<sup>7</sup>

The belated poet tries to read the predecessor's text defensively so as to distort it beyond his own conscious recognition. However, he cannot prevent embodying the distorted parent poem in his own hopeless attempt to write an unprecedentedly original poem; the most that he can do is to write a poem so "strong" that it affects an illusion of "priority" -- that is, an illusion that it has escaped the precursor poems' precedence in time and that it exceeds it in greatness. The inter- textual struggle is a fierce battle for the poet which spills over in the poetry of the new poet. The materiality of the text lies in what the poem *is* and this materiality occupies a space for which the battle of contention rages. For the new or the belated poet, each line is an achievement, a space snatched from the clutches of the predecessor, filled by the poet with his own verse which in time will be fought over by a successor.

Said rues the fact that the new literary theory which presented itself in the late 1960's, which had insurrectionary origins and which came as a protest against 'the traditional university, the hegemony of determinism and positivism, the reification of ideological bourgeois "humanism", the rigid barriers of academic specialties,' which proposed itself as a synthesis overriding the petty fiefdoms within the world of intellectual production uniting all the domains of human activity, retreated into the labyrinth of "textuality." The contemporary literary theory, in the wake of Derrida and Foucault -- the most recent apostles of European revolutionary textuality -- now explicitly accepts the principle of non-interference. The peculiar mode of appropriation of texts by this new European literary theory (textuality) is not to appropriate in the appreciation of texts anything that is worldly, circumstantial or socially contaminated. As it is practiced in the academic circles today, literary theory has for the most part isolated textuality from the circumstances, the "physicality" that made it possible and renders it intelligible. The circumstances and the physicality that inform texts - make

them possible and intelligible - are alluded to by the texts. The text *affiliates* itself directly to the circumstances. Said says in his introduction to his collection of essays titled *The World, the Text and the Critic*:

‘My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.’<sup>8</sup>

European literary - critical textuality or functionalism as Said calls it talks about ‘what a text does, how it works, how it has been put together in order to do certain things, how a text is a wholly integrated and equilibrated system.’<sup>9</sup> This may seem to be an impoverishing view of literature but Said has the perspicacity to see that it has had a salutary effect on criticism by doing away with empty, rhetorical testimonials of a text’s greatness, humanistic worth and so on. What it has done is to retrieve academic criticism from its consideration as a branch of *belles- lettres*, that is to say, functionalist criticism makes an extremely sharp break between the community of critics and the general public. The assumption behind this is that writing a work or writing a criticism of it are specialized functions with no equivalent in everyday common experience. This assumption leads to the employment of a specialized critical vocabulary or technical vocabulary found in the writings of I.A. Richards, to name one of the progenitors of technical jargon in literary criticism. What I.A. Richards and the disciples like the New Critics did was to search for critical exactness and preciseness without appealing to the prestige of literature, everyday experience or such things as humanistic worth. This hankering after exactness and preciseness induced lapses into a sort of scientism. For the critics using rigorous technical critical vocabulary, reading and writing became instances of regulated, systematized production as if the human agencies involved were irrelevant.

Post structuralist criticism has carried forward the rigors of the leaders like I.A. Richards and the New Critics to further heights. The scientism of the functionalist approach has erased the role of human agencies in the creation and explication of texts. As we have already seen, this comes about as a result of the fundamentally anti-dynastic attitudes -- to the work, to the critic, to knowledge, to reality -- of the contemporary critical discourse. Said says,

‘Orphaned by the radical Freudian, Saussurean, and the Nietzschean critique of origins, traditions and knowledge itself, contemporary criticism has achieved its methodological independence by forfeiting an active situation in the world. It has no faith in traditional continuities (nation, family, biography, period) ... Its culture is a negative one of absence, anti-representation and (as Blackmur used to put it repeatedly) ignorance. Post structuralist functionalist critics do not take into cognizance the tidy distinction between bloodless theory and practice or between literary criticism and philology, philosophy, linguistics, sociology.’<sup>10</sup>

Subjectivity has weakened. It can no longer be held that the writer is the producer of the text. Taine’s data (race, moment, and milieu) no longer exhaust and define the writer. Even as staunch a defender of the fertile authorial consciousness as Georges Poulet accepts before anything else, the eccentricity, contingency and instability of self, its mutability and powerlessness before the text. ‘Reading, then is the act in which the subjective principle which I call “I” is modified in such a way that I have no longer the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my “I”.’<sup>11</sup> Such statements are made possible by the fact that critics’ authority is built upon a linguistic, an institutional base, not a psychological, social or historical one. This means that language is considered as a constituted community of language users and not merely a vertical means of communication. It is intersubjective

of course, but it has codes that give it order, coherence, intelligibility. Production of significance through these codes is the principal capability of language and the concern of the critic is to look into how language signifies, what it signifies and in what form.

Can literary theory dissociate itself so radically with the worldly, circumstantial reality? Said's position is that the worldliness and circumstantial reality are a part of the text's textuality. The circumambient circumstantial reality that the text embodies and that makes possible the creation of texts cannot be obliterated from the scene of critical discourse. Said gives the example of Auerbach's *Mimesis*, one of the most admired and influential books of literary criticism ever written. Erich Auerbach's attempted "the representation of reality in Western literature" and in the last lines of the epilogue he gives a methodological explanation of his work:

'I may also mention that the book was written during the war and at Istanbul, where the libraries are not equipped for European studies. International communications were impeded; I had to dispense with almost all periodicals, with almost all the more recent investigations, and in some cases with reliable critical editions of my texts. Hence it is possible and even probable that I overlooked things which I ought to have considered and that I occasionally assert something that modern research has disproved or modified..... on the other hand, it is quite possible that the book owes its existence to just this lack of a rich and specialized library. If it had been possible for me to acquaint myself with all the work that has been done on so many subjects, I might never have reached the point of writing.'<sup>12</sup>

Auerbach was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany. His quiet tone in the quoted lines conceals much of the pain of exile. By being out of touch with texts, libraries, research institutes, other scholars, Auerbach seems to be threatened by the loss of cultural continuity. He was precariously placed in Istanbul -- the home of the terrible Turk, the Orient, the home of Islam, the great Oriental apostasy incarnate - where he was in danger of the concrete realities of exile. What he undertook as the representation of reality in Western literature in *Mimesis* was an act of cultural or even civilizational necessity. By trying to write *Mimesis*, he was trying to continue his *affiliation* to the Western tradition and thus overcome the dangers of exile - the danger of becoming a hopelessly disoriented outcast from sense, nation, and milieu.

Auerbach explicitly says that it was precisely this distance of home that made such an ambitious task possible. In writing *Mimesis*, Auerbach transposed exile from risk, from impingement on his European selfhood to a positive mission. The question is how this distance from home actively contributed to the writing of *Mimesis* and whether the same ambitious task could have been tried at home, that is in Europe.

When we speak of culture, we speak of a system of ideas, an environment -- social, religious, political, institutional and such like in which individuals and their works are embedded. The idea of culture is a vast one with proliferating meanings, what concerns us here is that culture is possessed by the individuals and likewise culture possesses individuals. What is meant is that culture forcefully distinguishes between what is intrinsic to it and what is extrinsic and by thus demarcating a boundary between what is intrinsic (acceptable within the established culture) and what is extrinsic (unacceptable), culture indicates what is possible within it and what is not. By its elevated position, culture is able 'to authorize, to demote, interdict and validate: in short, the power of culture to be an agent of and perhaps the main agency for powerful differentiations within its domain and beyond it too.'<sup>13</sup>

Had Auerbach remained in Europe, he says that *Mimesis* would not have been possible. He thereby refers to the hegemony of culture which it exerts over its members through its agencies - the powerful grid of processes, techniques, codes, conventions, and ethics -- imposing on the individual scholar its canons of how literary scholarship is to be conducted. As Auerbach says, had he tried to write *Mimesis* in the traditional scholarship mode - the mode which culture authorizes -- he would never have been able to even undertake such an ambitious, audacious task. Culture itself with its authoritative and authorizing agencies would have prevented so audacious a one-man task.

The concept of culture entails the concept of hierarchy. Matthew Arnold says in his "Culture and Anarchy" that 'culture is the best that is known and thought' and that 'the great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of the society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive.....'<sup>14</sup> This concept of culture has two quite different ramifications : (a) the positive doctrine of diffusing and making prevail the best ideas and thought of the age and (b) the combative position in which the best ideas and thoughts have to compete with 'less than best' ideologies, philosophies, dogmas, notions and values. Said stresses the combative position in which the system of values or the best ideas and thoughts that we name culture, is, and says that what is overlooked is the fact that apart from the avowed purpose of cultivation of individuals, culture is defined and is made identifiable by the successful achievement of hegemony over all other contending ideas in the society. This hegemony of culture (the dominant ideas and thoughts) won after marginalizing contending ideas, thought and system of values makes the position of culture superior in the society and the exercise of this hegemony over the society gradually makes the canons and standards of the culture so invisible that they look 'natural' and 'objective' and 'real'.

Looking into the matter from the combative position, Said says that 'culture is a system of exclusions legislated from above but enacted throughout its polity, by which such things as anarchy, disorder, irrationality, inferiority, bad taste and immorality are identified and then deposited outside'.<sup>15</sup> If it is true that culture is, on the one hand, a positive doctrine of the best that is thought and known, it is also on the other hand a negative doctrine of all that is not "best."

Said admires Michel Foucault's concept of the hegemonizing institutionalized process that is honorifically called culture, by which certain alterities, certain Others are kept silent and outside. In his books whose English translation read *Madness and Civilization, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and *The History of sexuality*, Foucault has shown the processes by which the irrational, the immoral and the sexually deviant have been systematically muted and marginalized. It is precisely the purpose of culture to keep intact what is considered appropriate and to marginalize and keep muted all that is considered inappropriate and a threat to the reigning culture.

Texts incorporate discourse. Foucault says that a discourse consists 'of anonymous and historical rules, always specific as to time and place, and which for a given period and within a social, economic, geographic or linguistic zone, define the framework within which the enunciative functions are exercised.'<sup>16</sup> The focus in this definition is on 'historical rules' governing discourse. This focus necessarily affiliates the text to the world, to circumstantial reality. Moreover, the word anonymous in Foucault's definition chimes with Said's view in Orientalist discourse where the Western representation of the Orient is shown as the result of institutionalized guild scholarship and not the result of individual agency. It is precisely the purpose of Said to show that the Orientalist view

or representation of the Orient was not premised on individual presentation but was the result of a more impersonal determinant, discourse.

Culture being the dominant set of ideas, the best that is thought and known, in a given society, it is identifiable with a determinate class which uses it to enforce its rules and regulations and foster its interests. Culture therefore is identifiable with power. Knowledge, truth, and discourse, according to Foucault are identifiable with the hegemony of a particular social group. Discussing intellectuals and power with Deleuze, Foucault stressed the underpinning politics in theories: the role of theory is 'no longer a striving to attain consciousness but simply a struggle "for undermining and capturing authority"'. Theory is not like a pair of glasses; it is rather like a pair of guns; it does not enable one to see better but to fight better.'<sup>17</sup>

Foucault treads on Nietzschean paths of disclaiming the veracity of truth and equating all knowledge and truth claims to strategies of power. Of the three masters of suspicion, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, it was Nietzsche who taught to distrust reason and truth. Foucault too, 'is deeply suspicious of truth claims; to him every knowledge, even science is a tool of the will to power. Epistemes are merely species of the genus power apparatus; particular branches of knowledge obey strategies of domination, in fact "invent" their objects so that man and earth can be better controlled. Reason is a technology of power; science, an instrument of domination'.<sup>18</sup> This concept of ubiquitous power pervading all knowledge and truth claim is echoed by Said when he says, "Politics in everywhere; there can be no escape into the realm of pure art or, for that matter, into the realm of disinterested objectivity or transcendental theory".<sup>19</sup>

In tracing the genealogy of the modern subject, Foucault takes a Nietzschean perspective in concentrating of power-knowledge (*Pouvoir-Savoir*); a perspective in which all will to truth in already a will to power. Knowledge is enmeshed with power for Foucault. He says rather succinctly that power properly speaking is really over others, not over things -- that is, it is a matter of domination, not of capacity.

There are many theories of power - the economic theory that sees power as a function of class domination; the repression theory or the non-economic theory which says that power is above all a relation of force and finally a third one that sees power not in economic or repressive terms but as war. 'Power is war, says Foucault, a war continued by other means',<sup>20</sup> More precisely, power, within a given society, is unspoken warfare: it is a silent, secret, civil war that re-inscribes conflict in various social institutions in economic inequalities, in language, in the bodies themselves of each and every one of us.<sup>21</sup> Foucault says that the repressive theory and the war theory of power are in fact one. The purpose of the war within a society is to repress that which is considered dangerous and/or deviant. Foucault says that in a given society, 'the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures whose role is to avert its powers and dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality'<sup>22</sup> Discourse is the systematic conversion of power relationship between controller and controlled into mere written words. This leads to saying that the discursive positions are not equal -- that is, it is not a relationship of equality between hearer and speaker or between the writer and reader. For Said, the discursive situation is like the unequal relation between colonizers and colonized, between oppressors and oppressed.

Texts are written discursive formations or discourses. Discourses effect the perpetuation of the domination of the classes whom they serve. Discursive strategies are planned and executed in such a way that they simultaneously serve the purpose of undermining the Other (with its extra-discursive conditions of existence) and at the same time elevating discursive conditions as guarantors of the discourse's validity. 'The primary discursive task is to position forms of the subject. A discourse selects modes of subjectivity to constitute, first, an effective authorial subject (the addressor) and second, the addressee subject through whom the text is ideally read'.<sup>23</sup> Discourses place, fix and orient subjects to desired positions. The politics of discourse talked about by Foucault, Said and other post-colonial critics is anticipated by Antonio Gramsci when he says: 'Every relationship of hegemony is a pedagogic relationship.'<sup>24</sup>

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