

Theories, Signs, Structures and Anti-Centricity: From Structuralism to Feminism

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Structuralism, rose as a movement in the second half of the 20th century, in France, with the writings of Roland Barthes and French anthropologist Claude Levi – Strauss. The movement is inspired from the writings of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) where he holds his theory that language is a self- contained system of signs. The structuralists suggest that the language not only should concern to speech and writing but to signs and signification. In literature, the word ‘structure ‘is used in its specialized sense. It is a system as a whole where the arranged elements will modify the structure but not the structure.

The meaning of the term ‘structuralism ‘can be taken as ‘Poles of Signification ‘which is binary. The meaning is hinged on some ‘arbitrary signs’ or ‘signifiers ‘. According to the structuralists , the word (signified) won’t change , but there can be a change in the signs or symbols (signifiers). For an instance , word or idea ‘ table ‘ remains constant , but the sign or the symbol for it shall go through a change. With the help of this sign system we can easily communicate or comprehend the relationships or interdependence. The theory can be sound as rigid or monotonous.

Saussure’s theory is the central apprehension for the movement ‘structuralism’. He propounded the concept that texts as a sign system or structure can only be understood individually when they are inter-related as a whole rather than to an external ‘ meaning ‘ that is established by author or reader. So, the ‘relational’ nature of the linguistic signs constitutes a language determining its meaning. A sign can give meaning only when its related to the www.ijellh.com

totality of other signs. The main idea behind structuralism is found in Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Generale* (Course in General Linguistics, 1915), as he writes: "The linguistic sign writes not a thing and a name but a concept and a sound image."

According to the structuralists, an isolated individual work got no importance. It can only be appreciated when its related to the structure present in the reader's mind. Understanding becomes more significant than to just interpreting the work. Intellectual compositions such as 'literature' and 'poetry' are conventions that doesn't represent things accurately from the exterior, but through our intellects, how we discover and shape or structure reality. The main concern of the structuralists is discovering rather than simply directed. Species (poem) is more significant instead of specimens (e.g., *The Ancient Mariner*).

Structuralism explicitly opposes any form of view that literature is a medium of communication between authors and readers. It argues that 'the novelty of a literary text' can lie only in new structure rather than in the detailing of character development and voice in which the structure is expressed. Structuralism gives no importance to the 'author' but the 'mind of the author' which seems impressionistic where everything takes place and hence can be taken as important. The mind of the author is an assigned 'space' within which the 'always – already' system of literary language, conventions, signs, and rules of combination gets precipitated into a particular text.

The structuralist movement animated the works of thinkers like, Michel Foucault, Claude Levi – Strauss, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, etc., and their contemporaries on the continent and America. The structuralist theories of Barthes (1915 – 80) reveal a very general interpretation of the term 'language' as social practice. He depicted social practices involving food and clothes as sign systems which functions on the same model as language. Thus, he ornamented the idea that there is a 'garment system' which works like a language. Garments in general are the system (what Saussure would call 'langue'); a particular set of garments is the parallel of a 'sentence' (what Saussure denotes as 'parole'). He is one such structuralist who expressed dramatically, in his work, (*The Death of the Author*) "As institution, the author is dead. " Its an overthrow of the traditional humanistic view.

To fulfill the statement structuralism replaces the author by the reader as the central agency in criticism ; but the traditional reader , as au courant , purposeful , and feeling individual is rendered into the impersonal activity of “ reading “ , and what is read is not a text bathed with meanings , but ecriture , writing. The focus is on the impersonal process of reading , which , by bringing into play the essential conventions , codes , and expectations , makes literary sense of the sequence of words , phrases , and sentences that complete a “ text “.

“Poststructuralism” appeared as a complement to structuralism in the 1970s. It questioned about its tangibility by presenting the alternative modes of interpretation and explanations that it could have worked on. The poststructuralists like the structuralists also based their theories on the ideology of Saussure. They welcomed the Saussurean concept of distinction between the signified and the signifiers and that there cannot be a fixed meaning hinged on the signified. But they refused the approach of the inter-related nature to determine meaning. Its Jacques Derrida, who took poststructuralism to its zenith by publishing his paper, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’. He argued that in a system of signification, the relational nature of the words cannot arbitrate a definite meaning; for the meaning is unstable.

Derrida noticed “centrism” in Saussure’s theory of language, which was a characteristic of western thinking. It leaned on absolute foundation which is ever needed, but never present. So, the term “antifoundation” emerged based on decentralization mechanism. In other words, Derrida took the immunity from the signified and allotted space for both the signified and the signifier, pulling each other, creating numerous deferments of meaning.

The poststructural theories embraced three common features as-

- a) Importance of theory
- b) Decentralization of the subject
- c) Deletion of the author

A brief discussion of the three features is given below-

- a) Importance of theory: Theory acts as an authoritative part in a criticism. But its nature should be adverse to the traditional doctrines. It should be schemed on the

regular outspreads that clinch meaning in every concern of human production including not only the verbal discourses but also the psychosexual and socio-cultural signifying systems. The poststructural theories are antagonistic, in the sense, to ‘interrogate’ and ‘undermine’ the traditional concepts likely to be the foundation of the western cultures.

- b) Decentralization of the subject: Human being or the human author appears traditionally as a “coherent identity” who designs the whole pattern of a literary work with a definite purpose and intentions. According to the structuralism, the human subject is devoid of any creative function or aim, but is rendered a ‘location’ or ‘space’, where the differential codes of a structured language gets precipitated into a text. But, in the linguistic terms, Derrida takes away every opportunity from the text to control the centre, thereby turning it into a playground of the uncontrolled decentred signifiers.
- c) Deletion of the author: As Roland Barthes with his paper “Death of the Author” shifted the concentration on the reader from the author, which is identified as a poststructural view. But the reader too becomes a part of the impersonal reading behaving like a feeling individual. The text is implied for the reading process merely as a structure of the signifiers. Thus, it loses its identity as a particular, and becomes artificial. But after applying the decentralization, the meaningful possibilities of a text become endless.

Concept of Discourse: The term “discourse” became an interesting feature of poststructuralism. Formally, discourse was related to the verbal exchanges between the literary figures, but soon became a critical practice of analysis in the seventies. Instead of ‘texts’, ‘discourses’ became the subject of literary criticism. The term comprises of literary as well as non-literary verbal conversational usages by focusing the superficiality of the boundaries between them. ‘Discourse’ is variably used by the Marxists to the New Historicists, of whom Foucault represented it by giving an anonymous feature, simply what is meant is ‘that is said’ which is circulated in the writings of the topics of the era, whether literally or figuratively at a given time or place.

Feminism as a theory is highly post-structural because of its anti-centric nature. It concerns with the ways in which literature furthers the social, political, economic and psychological oppression of women. This distinguishing approach to literature was initiated with the Women's Movement in the 1960s. At first they aimed on the thought that women are pretty much similar as men and hence should be treated equally. They traditioned their writings on the works of Mary Wollstonecraft with her ground breaking 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' and John Stuart Mill's 'Subjugation of Women'. But recently Feminist criticism has enlarged and examined the differences between men and women.

Julia Kristeva, a French Feminist, came up with a theory, 'Doormat Hypothesis'. It is based on the symbolic and semiotic modes of the signifying process. Woman was understood as a 'creature' by the early generation, as she is a child-bearing animal. A woman's prime function was to 'serve man' i.e, 'servitude' towards man. She was a non-person, whose own wishes were not to be regarded; he alone would shape her future. She was repressed against her desires and whims. She was paralleled to a doormat, crumpled, molested, ruined, under the shoes of the male-dominated world. So, 'doormat' is thus a metaphor for 'woman'. Symbolically, she stands for an insignificant object.

The Feminists have drawn attention to certain evidences that a male chauvinism is encoded in our linguistic conventions; instances such as, the use of 'man' or 'mankind' for human beings in general, of 'chairman' and 'spokesman' for bodies of either sex, and of the pronouns 'he' and 'his' to refer back to supposedly gender-neutral nouns such as 'God', 'human being', 'child', and so on. The theorists asserted that all the features included in all western languages, are utterly and unfortunately, male-gendered, male-framed, and male-dominated. Rhetorically 'phallogocentric' as a term, proposed by Lacan, i.e, it is centered and catalogued throughout certainly to the phallus (used in a symbolic sense) both as a 'logo' or ground and as a prime signifier and power source. Thus, the equation in man-woman relationship is controlled by phallogocentrism.

The fair sex is enclosed by the male-monopoly all around. Even a child after birth acquires the male-centric verbal language. Whether be it in a familial, political, social, or other cultural domains, the male-dominating culture can be viewed everywhere to subordinate women to men. The patriarchal view of male capabilities, character traits are presumed and achieved the most important scientific and technical inventions and the major

works of civilization and culture, where the phallogocentric ideology pervades, the woman is passive, timid and emotional about revealing her ovarial truth and hence identified as powerless.

Michel Foucault gives an argument, 'knowledge is power and power is knowledge'. He meant if knowledge is not power-propelled then it is useless. Like Deconstruction, similar theory is beamed through Feminism, i.e, just like in a circle, the centre is occupied with the (hes'), and the (shes') pushed away to the margin and hence become 'others'. Males take pleasure in occupying the best position of a family, society and further civilization. Boasting of masculinity or phallus-centrism in every path of life assumes form of their pride. On the other side, women fail to negotiate the ovarial truth to the dominant forces.

'Gynocriticism', a term carved by Elaine Showalter, the feminist, in her essay, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1979). During the second stage, 'gynotexts' (books by women) were the texts investigated as the object being described and analysed the special qualities of feminine ecriture, the ways that women feel the world. Women writers as Jane Austen, George Eliot, the Brontes regarded as the part of the phallogocratic (male-dominated) culture of the central literary tradition. Literary works that highly heeded its focus on the male protagonists- Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Tom Jones, Leopold Bloom; embodied of masculine attributes, while female roled as auxiliary and represented in opposition to the desires and actions of man. Hence, women were bound to imitate the male subject assuming male values and perceiving the ways of feeling and acting. Literature seemed as a celebration of malic forces and thus, gender-biased.

The family turmoil faced by women also fired up the gynotexts. The anxiety and rage found expression in her penned words. The 'patriarchal society', dominated by men, fettered women from realizing their fertile and inventive potentialities. Unnecessary social norms and institutions camouflaged the dominance of men, indirectly subordinating women. Perhaps the autonomous malic forces compelled a woman, to shape up her despair and vigor as, "I do not have the liberty in being myself for what I Am!"

Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist, set a much more radical and critical approach; sometimes called as 'second-wave feminism', through her work (The Second Sex, 1949). In this wave, women labored to reach to the stature of equality accompanied by men and wrestled for the control over their body and armor from physical abuse. Anatomy arbitrates

one's sex as a man and a woman. But mostly, it's the social constructs, created by the patriarchal biases of our civilization that construct the traits, and what is masculine and what is feminine in attitude and behavior. As Simone de Beauvoir, pegs the statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman...It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine."

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