



TRIANGULATION OF *THEORY*, *TEXT* AND *LITERARINESS*: A STUDY IN FEMINISM AND GENDER PERSPECTIVES

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The idea that theory, text and literariness have a triangular interrelationship or the thesis that the three have, or should have, autonomous existence – have been the subject of debate among philosophers and literary critics ever since the traditional liberal humanist approach to English studies was challenged by a plethora of theories and perspectives during the post war years, particularly 1970 onwards. It appears that theoretical positions about literature were never explicitly formulated by liberal humanists, at least in Britain, and that everything remained implicit, yet a widely current body of theoretical work existed from the beginning within literacy studies the world war. Aristotle's *Poetics*, which is perhaps the earliest work of theory, is about the nature of literature itself, in spite of its title. Aristotle developed for the first time a 'reader-centered' approach to literature since his concept of *tragedy* sought to describe how it affected the audience by arousing in them sympathy for and empathy with the plight of the protagonist, resulting into what he calls '*catharsis*'. Without going back to the history of literary theoretisation in detail, suffice it would be to say that Sir Philip Sidney's is the first prominent name in English writing about literature, who wrote his *Apology for Poetry* (1580). Expanding Ovid's credo of '*decere delictendo*' – to teach by delighting – Sidney espouses the Horatian dictum, that a poem is 'a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight'. This revolutionary idea of literature or literary text having as its primary aim the giving of pleasure to the reader, as advocated by Sidney was about literature in general, and not about individual works or writers. Critical theory, in fact, long pre-dates the literary criticism of individual works.

It was, however, Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and *Preface to Shakespeare* during the eighteenth century which may be said to have inaugurated practical criticism as a major critical theory. Johnson significantly advanced literary theory after Sidney. Johnson offered a focused critical evaluation of the work/text of individual authors, marking a shift forward in the development of secular humanism, because prior to him, *Bible* was the only text subjected to such intensive scrutiny. Next, in chronology, were the Romantic poet-critics-Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley – who, in their own diverse ways, anticipated issues of great interest to contemporary critical theory, such as the relationship between the poetic diction and 'ordinary' language, between *belles lettres* (literature) and other forms of writings, between fancy and imagination between 'text' and 'literariness', and between the 'author' (the person behind the text) and the 'writer' (the person inside the text). Coleridge, in his critical treatise *Biographia Literaria*, subjects the ideas contained in Wordsworth's *Preface* to close scrutiny and concludes that Wordsworth writes his best poetry when he is furthest away from adherence to his own theories of what

poetry should be – ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility’, couched in the idiom of the common laity.

Similarly, Shelley’s remarkable critical document *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) sees poetry (read literature) as essentially engaged in what the twentieth-century Russian Formalists later called ‘defamiliarisation’ or ‘*ostranenie*’. For him poetry ‘strips the veil of familiarity.. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know’. Shelley anticipates T.S. Eliot’s notion of impersonality whereby the author (the person behind the work) should stand apart from the writer (the person in the work), as much as possible. In Eliot’s view, the greater the separation between the two the better, since ‘the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates’ so that poetry is not simply the conscious rendering of personal experience into words. Shelley registers all this a century earlier in his characteristically magisterial prose:

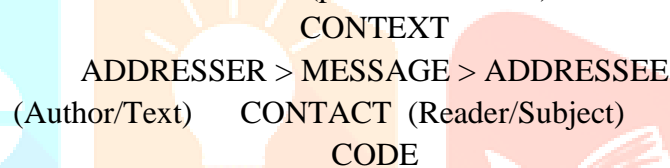
“...the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed...” (*A Defence of Poetry*, lines 999-1003)

After the Romantics, the mid and later Victorians like George Eliot, Mathew Arnold and Henry James developed the repertoire of literary and critical theories into two directions – one, the ‘ideas-led’ approach to Sidney, Wordsworth, Coleridge, George Eliot, and Henry James; the others the text-led stance of Johnson, Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) demonstrates the text-led extreme and his basic attitude towards language as its being a very slippery medium indeed, ending up as a void of linguistic indeterminacy. I.A. Richards, finally, is the pioneer of the decontextualised approach to literature which became the norm in Britain from 1930s to the 1970s as ‘practical criticism’ and in America during roughly the same period as the ‘New Criticism’.

Now, the moot points are – how are literary texts constructed/structured? How are theories related to such ‘texts’ and their ‘literariness’? How do these literary texts relate to the contemporary and to matters of politics and gender? What can be said about philosophical foregrounding of such texts? For us, the modern common readers, a ‘text’ does not, and should not, have *a priori* knowledge of theoretical postulates, if it is to have any iota of ‘literariness’ in it at all. Even so, a text may be grounded in some theory, and yet, it may foreground literariness. The term ‘theory’ refers more generally to abstract reasoning or hypothesizing. In the literary sphere, theory traditionally refers to a set of general principles and assumptions that can be used to classify or otherwise analyze literary works, and, in some case, to interpret or evaluate them. A given critical reading of a ‘text’ may not explicitly ground itself in a particular theory of literary interpretation, but some general theory or set of assumptions about literature is nonetheless implicit in most such interpretations or analyses. Theory seems to provide some kind of justification for the critic/author to arrive at certain conclusions and to raise certain questions. Otherwise, an author/critic may appear to be making arbitrary, idiosyncratic, or utterly impressionistic judgments of the quality of literariness, critical arguments or interpretative theories one examines. Numerous types of literary criticism, generally grounded in literary theories, have emerged over the centuries. For example, one may speak of theories ranging from Russian Formalism to discourse analysis to reception theory to feminist criticism to gender criticism.

The term ‘text’ traces its root to the Latin *texere*, meaning ‘to weave’, a term which may be interpreted in diverse ways. Some critics restrict its use to the written word – the words on a page – of a book or to a book itself. French Structuralist critics argued that literary compositions are texts rather than works, texts being the product of a social institution they called *écriture* (writing), and that any interpretation of the text should ideally come out of an impersonal *lecture* (reading). Most of them put premium on the author’s use of language, the conventions and ‘codes’ which influenced the production of the text. Roland Barthes, a poststructuralist, made a clear distinction between text and work, characterizing a text as open and a work as closed. Barthes further divided texts into two categories: *lisible* (readerly) and *scriptible* (writerly). Texts that are *lisible* depend more heavily on conventions and make for a relatively easier reading/interpretation than those which are *scriptible*, for these are more individualistic, experimental, flouting or drastically modifying the conventional modes or established theories.

Coming back to the third meeting point in the triangulation of theory, text and literariness, one may explicate the term 'literariness' as one used by the Russian Formalists and their followers in the Prague Literary Circle to refer to what makes a work essentially a literary text, or *belles lettres*, as contrasted with other kind of writings like scientific, technical or professional etc. Roman Jakobson, in 1921, wrote that "The object of study in literary science is not literature but 'literariness', that is what makes a given work a literary work". Jan Mukarovsky and Victor Shklovsky further argued that literariness requires the 'foregrounding' of language in such a way as to 'defamiliarize' the all too familiar world. This technique of 'defamiliarization' has been called by Shklovsky as *ostranenie* which makes the 'background' – historical, cultural, temporal, personal etc. – virtually disappear from the text. The effect of this foregrounding is the temporary 'estrangement' of the reader, not only from the language of everyday discourse but also from the humdrum world of ordinary perception. Thus, according to the formalist theory, by giving prominence to linguistic inventiveness, or 'palpability', in a literary work that would usually be accentuated in daily parlance, the author of a text characterized by literariness frees readers to experience language, meaning and the world in a uniquely fresh and original manner. Here, the Derridean deconstructionist approach to text comes as an idiosyncratically challenging notion rejecting the universality of any interpretation or analysis. Much came to depend on the co-creativity of the reader. Hence the emergence of the reader-response theory. Wolfgang Iser argues that literary texts contain 'blanks' or 'gaps which only the reader can fill. The human mind which, according to *Gestalt* psychology, perceives things holistically in organized synaesthesia and configurations of elements, theme or meanings, greatly affect a text and its literariness. Here, Jakobson's model of linguistic communication is illustrative (parentheses mine):



Since the meaning of the text is never self-formulated, the reader must act upon the textual stuff, either with his own interpretative strategies borne out of his grounding in theories and/or texts, or with the tools of broader and established critical canons. For instance, the proper appreciation of T.S. Eliot's celebrated modern poem *The Waste Land*, hinges on the reader's interpretative faculty and an active participatory observation on his or her part. The 'heaps of broken images' bestrewn in the poem needs sifting and organization into meaningful wholes, as per the fancy and imagination as well as historical/philosophical orientation of the readers. As in these opening lines of the poem:

"April is the cruelest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain." (Eliot, *The Wasteland*, 'The Burial of the Dead', lines 1-4)

Man no longer knows the answers raised by Ezekiel in *The Old Testament*; or indirectly by Eliot in the same section:

"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water." (Eliot, op.cit., lines 19-24)

The moral and spiritual barrenness of the post-War world in general, and the West in particular, seems to have a symbolical bonding with the literariness of the 'heap of broken images' – something which awaits the reader's sympathetic and empathetic response to the text, filling in the gaps between 'broken images'. But what is this 'stony rubbish'? And what knowledge is beyond human comprehension? What is implied and intended as verities in the authentic voice of the poet? Are the 'dry stones' none else than the modern men and women? The answers to such questions cannot simply be derived from the text; much

depends on how the reader receives the 'text', the 'inter-text' and the 'context'. Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader* (1979), argues that some texts are 'open' such as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which invite the reader's collaboration in the production of meaning, while others are 'closed', such as comics or detective fiction, which predetermine reader's response. Hans Robert Jauss, an important German exponent of the 'reception' theory (*Rezeption-ästhetik*), gave a historical dimension to reader-oriented criticism, thereby trying to bring about a compromise between Russian formalism which belittles history and social theories which neglect the text. According to Jauss, the readers use the 'horizon of expectations' as a criteria to judge the literariness of a text in a given period. David Bleich, in his *Subjective Criticism* (1978) regards reading as a process which depends upon the subjective psychology of the readers. Riffaterre presupposes a reader who possesses a specifically literary competence, while Stanley Fish believes that readers respond to the sequence of words in sentences whether or not the sentences are literary.

The triangulation of theory, text and literariness, therefore, subtly underscores a kind of mutual and proportional relationship among the three elements – each having a force and significance of their own in literary and critical studies. Viewed from this standpoint, the various theoretical perspectives such as Marxist criticism, Psychoanalytical criticism, formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, post colonialism, feminism and gender studies, new historicism, cultural studies – may be seen in literary texts belonging to different genres. The present paper, in its limited scope and constraints, proposes to vindicate the organic connexion of 'text' and its aestheticism, artistry and literariness on the one hand, and the theoretical trammels of feminism and gender criticism in writers like Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, Simon de Beauvoir, Kate Millet as well as in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kamala Das's *My Story*.

Feminism in general, of course, has a long political history, developing as a substantial force, in America and Britain at least, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Women's Rights and Women's Suffrage movements were the crucial determinants in shaping the first-wave feminism, with their emphasis on social, political and economic reform. Virginia Woolf, 'the founding mother of the contemporary debate', to use Mary Eagleton's epithet for her, greatly contributed to the first phase development of the feminist theory through her works like *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). Woolf is mainly concerned with women's material disadvantages vis-à-vis men-her first text highlights the historical and social context of women's literary writings, while the second focuses on the relations between male power and the professions like law, education, medicine, etc. In *A Room of One's Own* she, argues quite convincingly that *l'écriture féminine* should explore female experience in its own right and not a perspective of comparison with men. Woolf's general contribution to feminism, then, is her recognition that gender identity, far from being a biological fixity, is rather socially constructed and can, therefore, be challenged and transformed. She advocated a balance between a 'male' self-realization and 'female' self-annihilation. Rejecting the 'feminist' label, as she does in *Three Guineas*, she wanted her femininity to be unconscious so that she might "escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness", as she acknowledges in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf displays this dual awareness when she describes female writing as shaped primarily by its subject and less by the "shadow across the page" (*A Room*, 1929, p. 12) characteristics of male discourse. Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) criticized patriarchal culture and analysed the marginal position of woman in society and the arts. More intently than Woolf, de Beauvoir described a male dominated social discourse within which patriarchal misogynist practices occur. Woolf and de Beauvoir, thus, mark out the terrain of feminist literary aesthetics from social critique to feminist aesthetic and discourse. They were followed by a host of feminist critics such as Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Helen Cixous, Shulamith Firestone, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Sandra M. Gilbert, S.M. Gubar, Adrienne Rich and others.

Feminist aesthetics contained in theories of feminist and gender studies principally aim at 'deconstructing' the ways women have been defined by patriarchal social structure. Because of the conventional centrality of man, woman has always been seen as 'Other' in the patriarchal social structure. As Simon de Bauvoir points out:

“Thus, humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with reference to her; she is the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – She is the Other.” (*The Second Sex*, 1949, p. 16)

This ‘Otherness’ of woman has not only downgraded her but has also pushed her to the margin. Myth about female instability, unpredictability, mysterious evil nature is the basic expression, the most familiar idiom in the universal cultural text. Feminism and post-feminism provide a new angle of viewing the ‘women aliens’ with a view to countering the masculinist view of the world. It is relevant to state at this stage that feminist aesthetics is not concerned with examining the oppressive effects of patriarchy which operates in the form of direct coercion, but it is concerned with the indirect forms of coercion that operates through ‘ideology’ and myths. The important issues, which have become increasingly significant, are, to what extent voices and experiences of women are reflected in literature? Can a male writer adequately represent women’s experience and articulate the genuine female consciousness? What is the relation between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’? Whether ‘gender’ is a ‘social construct’ or a ‘natural given’?

As with the class system, gender differences are socially and politically constructed though usually presented as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’. Most feminists see ‘sex’ as a biological category and ‘gender’ as the “cultural meaning attached to sexual identity” (Ruthven, 1984, p.8). Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) quotes Stoller saying:

“Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotation. If the proper terms for sex are *male* and *female*, the corresponding terms for gender are *masculine* and *feminine*; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex.” (Millet, 1970, p. 52). “The purpose of making this distinction has been to free women (inevitably men too) from sexist stereotyping based on limiting conceptions of their ‘nature’; and the upshot has been discrediting of essentialist theories of human behaviour which designates certain characteristics as male-specific and others as female-specific.” (Ruthven, p. 6)

The ‘sexism’, according to feminists, is nowhere more evident than in language and literature. Mounting a blatant attack on the phallogocentric monopoly of literary and linguistic power, Gilbert and Gubar write:

“In patriarchal Western culture the text’s author is a father, a protagonist, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his...” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p.3)

The phallogocentric discourse manipulates language in the same way that its practitioners ‘manipulate’ female physique. Robin Lakoff who coined the term ‘woman’s language’ says, “the marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in the ways women are expected to speak” (Quoted in Ruthven, p. 95). Dale Spender’s *Man Made Language* (1980), as the title suggests, considers that women have been fundamentally oppressed by a male-dominated language or by what Derrida calls ‘phallogocentrism’ (his term for the domination exercised by patriarchal discourse). If we accept Michel Foucault’s argument that what is ‘true’ depends on who controls the discourse, then, it is apparent that men’s domination of discourse has

trapped women inside a male ‘truth’. Woolf’s distinction between ‘male’ and ‘female’ sentence anticipated ideological role of language (read ‘text’) developed and theorized by Dale Spender in *Man Made Language*:

“The semantic rule which has been responsible for the manifestation of sexism in the language can be simply stated : there are two fundamental categories : ‘male’ and ‘minus male’. To be linked with ‘male’ is to be linked to a range of meanings which are positive and good; to be linked to ‘minus male’ is to be linked to the ‘absence’ of those qualities... The semantic structure of the English language reveals a great deal about what it means to be female in a patriarchal order.” (Spender, 1980, p. 23)

In her *A Literature of their Own* (1977), Elaine Showalter has tried to define a feminine discourse and has christened the term ‘*gynocritics*’ (concerned with women writers). Thus, ‘*gynocriticism*’ refers to a type of feminist criticism that focuses on literary works written by women, rather than critiquing male-authored works or studying women as readers who must resist the predominantly patriarchal ideology that

traditional texts reinforce. Gynocritics explore female-authored texts, their context, meaning and literariness as belonging to “a world of their own” (in Showalter’s phrase for the feminine world-view). For Showalter, Rebecca West, Katherine Mansfield and Dorothy Richardson were its most important early ‘female’ novelists. For instance, Richardson’s long novel *Pilgrimage* took as its subject *female* consciousness, Her views on writing anticipate recent feminist theories, in that she preferred a ‘multiple receptivity’ to definite views and opinions or what she calls ‘masculine things’ before castigating these. She consciously tried to produce elliptical and fragmented sentences in order to convey what she considered the shape and texture of the female mind. *The Laugh of Medusa* (1976) by Helen Cixous is a celebrated manifesto of women’s writing that gives a call for recovering ‘her goods, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal’; it calls for feminist writing that will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it advocates the free play of meanings in the form of feminine practice of writing that no authority can ever subjugate. Cixous, alongwith Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray formed the trio of French feminists who contributed in a big way to the second-wave feminism. While Woolf ceased to speak in terms of the female body, Cixous writes ecstatically of the teeming female unconscious: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.”

It is by writing their bodies, their sexuality that women can oppose the exploitative, hierarchical and authoritarian male discourse. Therefore, Cixous exhorts her fellow sisters:

“And why don’t you write? Write. Writing is for you, you are for you, your body is yours, take it... Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you : not man; not the imbecile capitalist machinery, in which the publishing houses are crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs, and not yourself.” (Quoted in Showalter, 1985, p. 227).

Writing about sexuality is thus a “revisionist act” for female writers. It is by writing about their sexuality that women writers can “begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us” (Fetterley, 1978, p. xxvi).

This is what Kamala Das, the Indian Helen Cixous, if we may call her so, appears to have been doing in her poetry and other writings. In a sharp and bitter tone she criticizes the heartless attitude of her partner(s) for whom she is invariably a mere pleasurable plaything – ‘non-living’ object of lust sans any feeling and desire, a non-entity, almost a decrepit ‘feminine’ thing, as it were. Hence, she blatantly yet forcefully in artistic terms, protests against the enslaving tendency and ‘colonial’ attitude of the male vis-à-vis the female in her poem *The Old Playhouse*:

“You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.” (Das, *The Old Playhouse*, lines 12-16).

Again, in her poem *Substitute*, Das takes a dig at the chauvinistic male-world which has reduced a woman into a mere shadow of her own self enduring neglect, suppression and oppression at its hand:

“I am the type that endures...”

Her fictional autobiography *My Story* (1976) deserves to be seen as a form of fictional confession of a woman wherein the narrator invents an autonomous self in order to assert her feminine identity in a male-dominated world. Das confides:

“Like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love which only sought for its receptacle. At the hour of worship even a stone becomes an idol... I may have gone astray but not did I forget my destination.” (*My Story*, 1975, p.1 18).

Her feminine sensibility craves for true love and affection inside and outside the conjugal confines, but in vain : “I was a victim of a youngman’s carnal hunger and perhaps out of our union, there would be born a few children.” (*My Story*, p. 90)

As another instance of literary ‘foregrounding’ in feminist writings in Indian English literature, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) comes to my mind. The major concern of the novel is to show how Roy’s exemplary female protagonist, Ammu, combats the ‘Love Laws’ based on the four pillars of patriarchy – religion, God, scriptures, and unjust social order :

“Love Laws that actually began, thousand of years ago... the days when Love Laws were made. The Laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much”. (*The God of Small Things*, p. 33). The thorough perusal of the text shows, as Mary Roy, Arundhati’s mother, commented upon the central thesis of the novel her daughter has written :

“It is really difficult to strike a balance between norms imposed by a society and the freedom which I think is the birthright of every child... I would say the way Arundhati grew up is reflected in the freedom that she has in her writings.” (*Frontline*, August 8, 1997, p. 111).

Roy is one of the few writers in the feminist tradition of forging aesthetic vocabulary for the special nuances of female sensation, an aesthetic that champions female consciousness as superior to the public, rationalist male world. It is not the Lawrencian ‘phallic consciousness’ but the intimacy surging from the heart that overpowers Ammu and Velutha. Roy describes their union in the most intimate words:

“Clouded eyes held clouded eyes in a steady gaze and a luminous woman opened herself to a luminous man. She was as wide as a river in a spate. He railed on her waters. She could feel him moving deeper and deeper into her. Frantic. Frenzied. Asking to be let in further. Further. Stopped only by the shape of her. The shape of him. And when he was refused, when he had touched the deepest depths of her, with a sobbing, shuddering sigh, he drowned.” (*The God of Small Things*, pp. 336-7).

Roy’s feminist concerns is very much obvious both at social and aesthetic levels. This marks the beginning of the making public of women’s intimate experiences, using the novel / the text “as a vehicle to show us how we live.” Here, again, Roy bears a verisimilitude with Cixous who extolled womanhood, by claiming a close link between female bodily drives (pulsing) and the act of writing:

“Bodily drives are our strength, and among them is gestation drive – just like the desire to write : a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood.” (Cixous, 1976, p. 260).

Thus, in a triangularly organic relationship, ‘theory’, broadly speaking, is the context, either a *priori* or an afterthought, which acts in and reacts with the ‘text’ consequently producing some tangential force like ‘literariness’ as the emotive effects on the readers. The readers, in their own turn, are free to infer and interpret the text, by constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing it as per their own critical and creative receptivity. Just as feminist and gender theories recognize that ‘woman’ is not only a physical being but also a ‘writing effect’, that *l’écriture féminine*, in Mary Jacobus’s phrase, which ‘asserts not the sexuality of the text but the textuality of sex’. These don’t view writings as specifically ‘gendered’ but seek to disrupt fixed meaning; these encourage textual free-play beyond authorial or critical or theoretical constraints. But this prospective itself is rather post-theory than anti-theory because the current trend to vigorous political, cultural, literary and critical ‘deconstruction’ quintessentially entails what can best be called a reorientation of the past theories and literary practices.

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