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## CRISIS IN NEW CRITICISM: AN OVERVIEW

**Dr. Dipti Ranjan Maharana**

Lect. in English

Udayanath College of Sc. And Technology

Cuttack, Odisha

**Dr. Ratnaprava Parija**

Asst. Professor, KISS (Deemed to be University)

### ABSTRACT:

The New Criticism is a type of formalist literary criticism that reached its height during the 1940s and 1950s and that received its name from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*. New Critics treat a work of literature as if it were a self-contained, self-referential object. Rather than basing their interpretations of a text on the reader's response, the author's stated intentions, or parallels between the text and historical contexts (such as author's life), New Critics perform a close reading, concentrating on the relationships within the text that give it its own distinctive character or form. New Critics emphasize that the structure of a work should not be divorced from meaning, viewing the two as constituting a quasi-organic unity. Special attention is paid to repetition, particularly of images or symbols, but also of sound effects and rhythms in poetry. New Critics especially appreciate the use of literary devices, such as irony, to achieve a balance or reconciliation between dissimilar, even conflicting, elements in a text.

**Key words:** criticism, interpretation, text, contexts, irony

### INTRODUCTION:

One of the most influential movements in modern critical scholarship, the New Criticism is a philosophy of literary interpretation that stresses the importance of studying literary texts as complete works of art in themselves. Although the term New Criticism was first coined in the nineteenth century, it was not until American critic and poet John Crow Ransom, founder of the *Kenyon Review* wrote a book titled *The New Criticism* (1941) that it became established in common academic and literary usage. In essence, the New Critics were reacting against established trends in American criticism, arguing for the primacy of the literary text instead of focusing on interpretations based on context. The New Criticism was a formalist movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century. It emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The movement derived its name from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*. The work of English scholar I. A. Richards, especially his *Practical Criticism* and *The Meaning of Meaning*, which offered what was claimed to be an empirical, scientific approach, were important to the development of New Critical methodology. Also very influential were the critical essays of T. S. Eliot, such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Hamlet and His Problems", in which Eliot developed his notion of the "objective correlative". Eliot's evaluative judgments, such as his condemnation of Milton and Shelley, his liking for the so-called metaphysical poets, and his insistence that poetry must be impersonal, greatly influenced the formation of the New Critical canon.

However, as René Wellek has noted in various essays detailing the principles of New Criticism, proponents of this theory had many differences among them, and beyond the importance the New Critics afforded the literary text itself, there were many differences in the way they approached critical study of literary texts. Wellek writes that among the growing number of New Critics in the 1930s, there were few that could be easily grouped together. For example, he puts Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren among the leaders of what he calls the —Southern Critics. Mostly, they are grouped together due to their reaction against previously established schools of criticism, such as impressionist criticism, the humanist movement, the naturalist movement, and the Marxists, and the fact that many of them taught at Southern universities at the time they created the theory of New Criticism. In addition to rallying

against traditional modes of literary interpretations, the most significant contribution made by the New Critics, according to Wellek, was the success with which they established criticism itself as a major academic discipline.

## CRISIS & CRITICISM:

The words 'crisis' and 'criticism' both having their ultimate roots in the Latin medical terminology, imply judgments and decisions about critical moment of change. 'Crisis' is defined by OED as 'the point in progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death.' The word is traced back to the Latin word that refers to 'discrimination' and 'decision'. The contemporary crisis in New Criticism occurs because of some sort of changes in the critical position of the critics of today which is, in a way, different from Brooksonian critical stance. This crisis begins with Myth Criticism and Geneva School of Critics and further it is derived from language-based theories such as Structuralism and Deconstruction. Finally, the crisis is at its Zenith with Reader - Response Criticism and crisis of theory. In such a way, the present paper outlines six phases of crises of New Criticism which are as follows:

From 1957, the year of publication of **Anatomy of Criticism**, the eclipse of the New Criticism began with movement of Northrop Frye. In this book he remained a formalist, and as a formalist he believed in a kind of total form which is myth. For him, each individual work is variation of larger myth or archetype. The first phase of crisis of New Criticism arises when Frye asserts that the individual work of art is a part of larger spectrum of archetype or myth and it is not a unique entity or a well wrought urn as Cleanth Brooks says. In other words, Frye and those who tried to create a school of Myth Criticism rejected the individual texts as micro-systems, the New Criticism's self-sufficient contexts. In Myth Criticism a work of art is conceived in terms of a myth which is used in such a broad manner that it operates on any theme or themes which the writer intends to deal with. It is a byproduct of the quest motif which is a crystallization of the oral as well as the written works depicting the universal dream of mankind. This dream which is grand collective unconscious is responsible for converting particular experiences into convenient categories. In this way, Myth Criticism allows a discussion of the content as well as form in terms of archetypal categories; hence it often becomes mere allegorizing. Every work of literature in Myth Criticism is a quest, or a version of death of God and rebirth, still one should recognize that Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* has not entirely discarded the achievements of the New Criticism. Though he rejects criticism as judgment in theory, he hardly does it in practice.

In 1958, Brooks reviews Northrop Frye sympathetically as an ingenious classifier and definer of new genres. But Brooks must disapprove of his dismissal of all value judgments and all judicial criticism as it would lead to a new historicism and relativism. He sees Frye's dilemma between a scheme which would make literature autonomous and, at the same time, fruitful for the human enterprise. Frye, like Arnold, is in danger of making literature a substitute for religion - a prophetic observation if we know Frye's later writings about a 'myth of concern'. Myth Criticism, Cleanth Brooks, concludes 'provides no way of circumventing the basic problems of traditional criticism' (1958:41).

Since the year 1957 there was continuing desire for newer and newer movements. The most common interest was to oppose the New Criticism. These critics wanted to recover romanticism by revitalizing the author. Therefore, the first phase of crisis of New Criticism was quickly succeeded by the influence of the so-called school of Geneva, "the critics of consciousness" of whom the most J. Hillis Miller and others in the act of showing sympathy towards the author and the reader. These critics are interested almost exclusively in the questions implicating the author and the reader.

The phenomenologists think that the New Critics have completely ignored the authorial intention. But, in reality, there is a rhapsodic union among the author, the world of his work, the characters he creates and reader. These four remain in our consciousness when we read a work of art. The critic can, however, distinguish the reader's experience from author's consciousness or he can distinguish any of the elements in the process of reading. But these elements are fused in the Readers' mind or consciousness. This fusion is also a characteristic of Romantic poetry which the New Critics neglected. In fact, Poulet being most articulate of this group declares that he does not want to analyse or dissect a single work of art. He is uninterested in form of specificity, for he is searching for the Author's cogito behind his total oeuvre.

It is said that the third phase of crisis in New Criticism started in the rise and wake of the structuralism. For new critics the language of poetry is distinct from other uses of language but the Structuralists don't believe in such distinction. For them, language is a sign system. The sign system is useful for referring things but it is not enough. Saussure introduced Parole and langue which damaged the referential system of New Critics. Simultaneously, the sign system limits the referentiality of language to a particular cultural context in which it works. On the other hand, for the New Critics, language is a super system, it is world of values, while for structuralists, it is value free like Frye. So the structuralists analyzed the text in terms of sign and this sign has nothing to do with the humanistic tradition of New Critics and Chicago School of Critics. In fact, structuralist ignored emotion spiritualism, moralism and other value-oriented aspects and it is here that one can visualize crisis of New Criticism. However, the structuralists rejected the priority of existence and essential consciousness with their commitment to the primacy of language. Instead of all verbal creation being traced to it.: origin in the author's cogito, as in Poulet, it is - as Ronald Barthes would say

language itself that writes, so that texts are created by other texts, this notion of intertextuality turns structuralism into post-structuralism quickly.

The study says that the fourth phase of crisis in New Criticism is envisaged by the Deconstructionists who also ignored the humanistic and emotional aspects of language. This crisis also compelled the postmodern critics to come up with a new theory and with a new method of analysis which, in fact, not only broadened the scope of New Criticism but also brought a change or revisionism in New Critics' views who supplemented some ideas of the postmodernists.

The crisis was deepened by the influence of Derridian Criticism. Nietzsche questioned the assumption of logocentrism i.e. the word has a transcendental reference and the meaning is present in the word, and the very presence IS the presence of God. He is the centre of the word and word is God. So Nietzsche questioned this philosophy and said that all systems of philosophy are armies of metaphor. This influence of Nietzsche through Derrida is responsible for skeptical thinking in contemporary criticism. So, we are skeptical of word, thought and meaning. In other words, ontological background has been questioned by critics like Eugene Goodheart and host of other critics. For example Eugene Goodheart in *The Skeptical Disposition* (1984), views structuralist and post-structuralist skepticism as a threat to the religious-based humanistic values he upholds. He sees these movements, with their subversion of the possibility of the truth, as an encroaching secularization. Cut off from religion, literature becomes a thing of the world like an object of scientific study. Yet, he continues, one has to have some kind of belief in values that inhere in literary experience, and those values have their source in religious thought. Goodheart argues that the "dissolution of the self" in post-structuralism is self-contradictory.

On the other hand, with similar evidence, Douglas Atkin maintains in *Reading Deconstruction* (1983) that post-structuralism fits well with a modern theology. While much theology is based on "Hellenistic rationality" - within which God is knowable, the universe is founded on logos, truth is revealed, and man is purposeful - modern theologians, such as the existentialists, acknowledge a universe that cannot be totally reduced to logical understanding, to the order of words. Post-structuralism, especially in the notion of "free play", is compatible with the dehellenization of theology. The result is similar: freedom, notably the freedom to make.

For Atkins a dehellenized theology is close to the biblical outlook, an outlook he finds in Hartman and Miller. Robert Scharlemann, going even further, declares that deconstruction opens thought to deity existing not as a transtemporal or metaphysical entity but as an actuality in life and history. It is remarkable here that the traditional scholar considered the meaning of a poem as definite and determinate while Cleanth Brooks and other New Critics conceived the language of poetry and its meaning having twofold emotions: joy and sorrow. But when we come to Deconstructionists, poem is still verbal structure, yet it has indeterminate meaning because all sign system is indeterminate. They say tension can be balanced but beyond this we have to look forward for multiple meanings, while Cleanth Brooks says beyond this, meaning is unjustifiable.

New Critics like Cleanth Brooks are in favour of multiple meanings called polysemy, Brooks still believes in a total form containing differential and disparate things insisting on coherence and unity. In fact, it is in 1979 in a personal article published on "New Criticism", he departed from unilateral meaning towards multiple meaning. Still he has strong belief on unity, coherence, and he says that tensions are to be pacified into an organic coherent whole. On the other hand, Deconstructionists like J. Hillis Miller ignored the soul (i.e. text) discussing multiple- indeterminate meaning and cutting the organic form created by the New Critics.

The history of New criticism states that the fifth phase of crisis arises with the emergence of Reader Response critics who contributed to the development of reader-oriented criticism. These critics are David Bleich, Jonathan Culler, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, Gerald Prince, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Michael Riffaterre and others. This new movement opposed to New Critical text-dominated and context-dominated criticism concentrating on self-consciously reader and reading and this attempt of elevation of reader and reading in a way, challenged the Supremacy of the New Critical text which is a cause of crisis.

Stanley Fish can be viewed as the representative Reader-response critic who focused single-mindedly on reader's experience of literature. In contrast to the long-standing formalist idea that literary text was an autonomous object like a well wrought urn, Fish insisted that a work of literature entered for the critic through the act of reading - the process of reception. Because reading occurred through time, the experience of literature involved a continuous readjustment of perceptions, ideas and evaluations. The meaning of a work, therefore, was to be encountered in the experience of it, not in the detritus left after the experience. Literature was a process, not a product. "Criticism required the micro processing of phrases and sentences in a slow sequence of decisions, revisions anticipations, reversals and recoveries" (Leitch: 214). Here the phenomenology of reading replaced both the traditional formalist project of spatial unity and the old hermeneutical project of recollective interpretation.



Stanley Fish's concept of meaning entailed an unorthodox conception of literary form. He was unabashed about this matter. He argued that the meaning of the poem is located in the reader's experience of it and the form of poem is the form of that experience. In such a way, Fish dismissed the traditional dualistic notion of the art work as constructed object composed of form and content replacing it with monism ( reader's experience = meaning = form ), which earlier the New Critics had labeled a fallacy - the so called "affective fallacy". Methodically, Fish asserted a temporal basis for literary form as well as meaning. Spatial forms - poetic patterns objectified retrospectively - were illusory. Meaning and form were co-extensive with the reader's experience; they are not produced after the reading activity. The phenomenology of time determined both the meaning and form of a work.

The New Critics treat the reader similarly as Wimsatt and Beardsley do in "The Affective Fallacy", where they reject deriving a standard of criticism from psychological effects of the poem which ends in impressionism and relativism. Brooks is still answering the charge that the New Criticism gave insufficient attention to the reader. Brooks asserts that "no one in his right mind could forget the reader. Nevertheless, it is important not to reduce the study of literature to reader's psychology." (1979 : 87 )

The Rhetoric of crisis in contemporary criticism is the child of theory. This theory is result of the impact of continental philosophy and critical theory on the study of literature which turned the New Criticism bringing an important development or change in postmodern era. If theory threatens criticism with recovery or death, it is because theory has emerged as a challenge on two broad points. "It has raised serious questions about what constitutes the practice of criticism and it has pushed the language of criticism beyond the bounds of what used to be considered its appropriate style" (Jay 1988 : 345) . The mode of analysis and the interdisciplinary range of inquiry in the work of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan and others has exploded conventional conceptions about what constitutes analysis in literary studies and what its subjects should be. Their work has also had the effect of undermining traditional conceptions of what constitutes criticism as a genre or kind of writing. The style of writing employed by each of these critics, and the instrumental role style has in their critical practices has had the effect of aggressively blurring conventional distinctions between criticism and literature.

This kind of crisis is about position of critical theories in critical writing. The central issue today is Gregory Ulmer in his *Applied Grammatology* rightly suggests, "representation" the issue of how literary texts are to be represented in criticism. The change we have witnessed in contemporary criticism is a change in relation of critical text to its object in the sense that there has been a sliding of literary language and aesthetic from in criticism, therefore the conventional differences have begun to blur. Such a sliding represents the collapse of what used to be called critical distance. Indeed, if there is anything "postmodern" about poststructuralist criticism including Derrida it is in its recognition that there is no space outside the text from which to discuss it. This is another form of crisis. The textuality of poststructuralist criticism is in part a function of its realization that the space it works in is the space of the text it is discussing. (Ibidem)

The sixth phase of crisis in New Criticism arises from the shift which reflects our recent transfer of interest from literary theory to critical theory. To put the matter simply for our purpose, the traditional view of criticism is that it helps to understand literature. This tradition was also continued by the New Critics. For them literature is literature and criticism is secondary to understand it. It was in 1960s the structuralists and deconstructionists went beyond and gave much importance to criticism. It is a matter of regret that critics are no longer concerned with literature, but with other critics' texts, for the critic yearning for attention has displaced the writer and has conceived himself as the center. The crisis is that the critical theories and reading taking precedence over literature as literature. In other words, the postmodern critics elevated reading and devalued literature. This Brooks does not approve of. In his later work, he reacted against post modern critical theories and such elevation of theories in particular. For him, Literature is a wonderful art, a humanistic approach. For example, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is a poem about the relation of man to art and nature and the critic's obligation is to show the value of literature; and the primacy of the writer's work over that of the critic. The work itself should be impersonal devoid of "intentional" and 'affective' fallacies.

## CONCLUSION:

New Critics believed the structure and meaning of the text were intimately connected and should not be analyzed separately. In order to bring the focus of literary studies back to analysis of the texts, they aimed to exclude the reader's response, the author's intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from their analysis. These goals were articulated in Ransom's "Criticism, Inc." and Allen Tate's "Miss Emily and the Bibliographers." Close reading (or explication de texte) was a staple of French literary studies, but in the United States, aesthetic concerns, and the study of modern poets was the province of non-academic essayists and book reviewers rather than serious scholars. But the New Criticism changed this. Though their interest in textual study initially met with resistance from older scholars, the methods of the New Critics rapidly predominated in American universities until challenged by Feminism and structuralism in the 1970s. It is quite clear that the New Critics defined literary work through value which it is expected to Yield. Literary theory has never been able to come to terms with this. If, with deconstruction and other postmodernist criticism, literary theory has entered into a crisis from which it does not recover, this may not be a bad thing. In fact, the New Critic's aesthetics of practicality should be maintained as it discusses literary value in poetry.

“Literary theory is thus not only impossible but also unnecessary.” (Olson:211) “The critic exists because the author first existed and if books failed to appear, the critic must disappear” (Howells:165). This concept has been belied by poststructuralist while Brooks and other New Critics followed this principle maintaining the primacy of the text. Thus the contemporary crisis in New Criticism tells a tale of the rise and fall of many empires; some ruled over the literary realm for long, some for short, some are outlived and some will be revived. But it is an optimistic view to mention that the empire built by the New Critics like Cleanth Brooks will never be demolished as long as we like to talk about the nature of poetry and constituent parts which go into making a poem as an organic whole.

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