

Literary Theory and Teaching of Literature in the 21st Century

AUTHOR DETAIL

Dr. Kuldeep Singh,

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Government Degree College, Nanauta, Saharanpur

ABSTRACT

The present paper evaluates both traditional approaches and poststructuralist literary theoretical approaches to the teaching and interpretation of literary texts in the light of research on twenty-first century education and teaching literature. The paper through this evaluation attempts to explore how poststructuralist critical theories for literary analysis support the pedagogies which are recommended for the effective and dynamic twenty-first century classrooms. Twenty first century is regarded as the age of globalization, transnationalism and telecommunication. Education today is focused to prepare people to be flexible, multi-skilled, dynamic problem solvers, and creative explorer of resources with the ability to interpret reality from multiple perspectives and bring harmony between knowledge and creativity. Therefore, the traditional approaches to teaching literature have been replaced with modern approaches. The modern approaches were introduced at the turn of twentieth century. Initial efforts were made by Formalists and the New Critics who assigning primary importance to the text set up the tradition of close reading. This structuralist approach was replaced by post-structural approaches in the second half of the twentieth century which brought the reader to spotlight and supported him/her to hold the center stage.

Keywords: Twenty-first century education, poststructuralist literary theory, teaching of literature, critical pedagogy, social cognitive learning.

MAIN BODY

1. Introduction The current study is concerned with evaluating the value of use of literary theory as a pedagogical tool to achieve the aims and objectives of twenty-first century education. It will argue that various schools of poststructuralist literary theory such as Feminism, Marxism, New historicism, and Postcolonialism, etc., are reader -centered approaches of literary interpretation which actively involve the readers in meaning making. In this way poststructuralist literary theories have great potential for making learners critical readers and creative explorers which is the fundamental aim of 21st century pedagogies such as critical pedagogy, cognitive learning, social cognitive learning etc. In this regard the current study will give a critical evaluation of existing pedagogical strategies of literature and their shortcomings. Finally it will be highlighted how contemporary poststructuralist theories support and advocate the learnercentered approach recommended by 21st century pedagogy.

2. Twenty-First Century Education and Teaching of Literature

2.1. Twenty-First Century Education Twenty first century is the age of globalization, multiculturalism, telecommunication and digital technology. Education today is considered as an important mechanism and effective means to develop creative and effective human resource (Gould 1993: 148; Rao 1996: 2). Research on educational theory and practice today supports developing higher-order thinking skills of students. Emphasis is laid on preparing students to take decisions, create opportunities, evaluate available resources, work out multiple solutions for effective problem solving and be flexible to manage the globalized multicultural world of today (Geertsen 2003; Ruggiero 1988; Feden & Vogel 2003; Halpern 2003). Accordingly teaching methodologies and pedagogies which are supported and recommended in this regard, include critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, experiential learning, task-based learning, cognitive learning and social cognitive learning. These pedagogies prepare students to see the world from multiple perspectives and critically evaluate conventional practices and assumptions and work to bring social change. Students are enabled to develop insight and see how knowledge is constructed and social reality is interpreted and represented. Literature is an important segment and component of educational institutions and curriculums. Therefore, scholars and theorists such as Wagner (2005), Knapp (2004), Rosslyn (2005), Showalter (2004), and Dresang and McClelland (1999), all agree that the teaching of literature which makes the most sense in the context of twenty first century needs to be student-centered and guided by the research on education in the twenty first century. They discard traditional approaches to teaching and studying literature and recommend approaches which are guided by the contemporary research. Dresang and McClelland's article (1999) emphasizes the need to incorporate the characteristics of today's digital world in the teaching of literature in order to enable the students to learn information processing skills. Rosslyn (2005) accepts that English as a university subject has undergone a change with the advent of the twenty first century. Hence it is the need of the time to accept that "the student does think" (p.321) and to redesign syllabuses according to the needs of the students. Wagner (2005) taking the changing social values and structures into consideration suggests that literature should be taught as a tool to teach inquiry and investigation skills and not merely as a source of knowledge. Similarly Knapp (2004) thinks that in the present age the focus needs to be shifted from what texts mean to what students think about them and how they learn. A growing volume of research is also available which recommends reader response approaches and introduces cognitive teaching strategies, techniques, and activities that promote creative, active, collaborative learning in literature classroom in order to make literary study life-relevant and personally meaningful to students. In this regard Showalter (2004), Egan (2005) and Moore (2002) recommend activities such as mental imagery, gossip, play, mystery, maintaining reading journals and writing response essays.

2.2. Traditional Approaches to Teaching Literature Traditional approaches to the interpretation of literature are called historical, moral and biographical approaches (Guerin et al 2005). Carter and Long (1991: 2) divides these approaches into three models: 'cultural model', linguistic model' and 'personal growth model'. Methodology of these models and approaches serve to develop aesthetic and linguistic understanding of students and help them read history as discussed by the author and poets. Students are trained to "shut out the world from [their] classrooms and [their] minds." (Lindblom 2003: 97). Teaching methodology attempts to facilitate students to read about literature rather than learn to read literature. Hence, the essence of literature which can best work to help build up students' evaluative and creative abilities, is undervalued and neglected. Students are not trained to see how literary texts are contributing in constructing reality through ideological representations. All these approaches, it is observed, fail to enable students to generate their own meanings and evaluate the given information in the text and develop a critical understanding of the world outside their classroom. These approaches being teacher centered view literature as a species of knowledge. Teachers take it as their responsibility to impart information regarding literary genres, specific socio-cultural context of the text and interpretations of selected critics. As a result students become a storehouse of the information related to certain texts but not critical and creative thinkers and problem solvers. Students lack the necessary skills to use and process relevant information and analyze and appreciate literature independently. As discussions and colloquiums are rarely arranged in teacher centered classroom, students lack confidence and skills to develop a spirit of collaboration in the class.

2.3. Poststructuralist Literary Theory Poststructuralist literary theory being the outcome of Derrida's theory of deconstruction has brought the reader and interpreter onto the centre stage and made him co-creator of the text. For them as Zima (2002) explains, "meaning can never be present, since it is developed in a continually open context of reference and thus becomes subject to a change" (p.43). Thus poststructuralist literary theory assigns the responsibility of meaning making to the reader in a variety of contexts including cultural context, postcolonial context, postmodern context and feminist context. Feminist literary theory aims at developing a critical consciousness in the readers about the operation and functioning of oppressive structures of patriarchal ideology in the text. It enables the readers to actively engage with the text to unearth the ideological and political configurations of textual representation in order to understand the cultural processes in which gender roles are constructed. In the process the readers deconstruct the ideological binary opposition set up between male and female genders in male dominated patriarchal culture. Marxist literary theory also develops a critical attitude in the readers and enables them to recognize and question the authority of hegemonic groups which set exploitative structures for class in a society through literary texts. A Marxist interpretation of the text takes the reader beyond the façade of neutrality and draws their attention to class affiliation and ideology of the author and his representation of social and economic issues. Similarly postcolonial theory informs readers about racial issues through literary texts. Critical reading strategies such as that of colonial discourse analysis, Orientalism and contrapuntal reading encourage the learners to read canonical texts from a different lens which calls into question the universality of the text through a highlighting of the text's complicity with the ideology of imperialism. New historicism helps reader see silences and gaps in recorded histories and critically investigate the established discourses of history. These poststructuralist approaches are reader based as they focus on readers' active role in the process of reading and interpreting literature in social and political contexts. Drawing their theoretical concepts from a variety of disciplines, the above mentioned critical approaches instill an attitude of reflexivity which encourages the readers to call into question commonsense traditional notions of gender, race, history, class and culture. Instead theory enables the readers to recognize how these categories are in fact ideological and cultural constructs (Culler 1997). Lynn (1994: pp.5-7, 47-52), Davis and Womack (2002: pp. 51-53), and Eagleton (1996: pp.64-76) all support this opinion and agree that Reader-Response approaches of poststructuralist literary theory assign readers active role in making meaning of literary texts and make texts relevant to their life and society.

3. Literary Theory and Teaching of Literature The current study argues that poststructuralist literary theory through its emphasis on reader can help to achieve the aims of modern pedagogies stated above and can also help to overcome the limitations of the traditional approaches towards the teaching of literature. Literary theory as a pedagogical tool employs the principles of modern approaches to learning and, thus serves to nurture cognitive processing of students, helps them connect the classroom with the world outside the classroom and be active learners. Students are not encouraged to treat a text as sacred object and follow the traditional assumptions and interpretations introduced by teachers or other literary critics. Reader- based poststructuralist approaches provide an effective cognitive learning framework. According to the theories of cognitive learning, in-depth and meaningful learning occurs when learners are actively engaged in the learning process. This can be worked out by helping learners establish a connection between teaching contents and their personal life outside the classroom. Literary theory working on the principle of cognitive learning engages readers independently in the process of meaning making. Students reading literature with literary theory see literature as a part of larger society outside the text and classroom. They are trained to read a text in connection with the social and cultural realities and institutions. This helps them take reading of literature a meaningful activity. Literary theory making students active and independent readers destabilizes the unchallenged authority of teacher in the classroom. Discussion and dialogue replace lectures and teacher becomes facilitator to promote inquiry and investigation in the classroom. Students do not see text as a source to find the author's belief but a world to be reconstructed and interpreted in the light of their beliefs and experiences. They become co-creators of the text. Literary theory acknowledges the social function of literature. Reader- based approaches outlined above establish a meaningful link between literature and society. Feminist, Marxist, New historical and postcolonial literary theories are all interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary and they promote intertextual readings. Students are trained to cross the boundaries of

other disciplines and see how different texts correspond with one another. This leads them to have an understanding of society, its structures and institutions. One of the important objectives of twenty-first century education is developing critical and creative thinking skills of students. Students engaged in transdisciplinary intertextual reading through literary theory are actually engaged in creative experimentation. They are set on a quest to explore new avenues and investigate how effectively meaning of a text can be drawn through exploring the world of other disciplines.

This experimentation opens up ways to creating new categories of knowledge. Thus students become creators of knowledge not the storehouse of information. For example, postcolonial theory enables students to reexamine and reevaluate literary masterpieces such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Forster's *A Passage to India* which were previously perceived as critiques of imperialism. Feminist literary theory and New-historicism have also generated new readings of Shakespeare showing how his theatrical masterpieces such as *Hamlet* and *Othello* were reinforcing misogynist and racist attitudes. Reader-based approaches to interpreting literature are actually an exercise in creative thinking. Students as they are encouraged to restructure plot, characters and events, and give innovative interpretations to the texts. This gives them practice in making attempts to exploit available resources for creating new structures and patterns. This practice fosters creativity in them and motivates them to work for change. This provides them training to become effective and creative work force as well as active agents to challenge established social hierarchies in order to bring change. Literary theory as a pedagogical tool also takes into consideration the principles of social learning and community learning. Students are engaged in dialogues and encouraged to interact and negotiate the meaning of text in the light of their varied experience of the world. Students read the text as part of some interpretative community which shares some common values and interests. Thus female students form a feminist interpretative community which focuses on the gender issues of the text. Likewise students of similar ethnicity or race also form an interpretative community which is united in their focus on racial and cultural discrimination. They tell personal narratives and share their interpretations based on their experiences with other students in the class. Thus they create a collaborative and cooperative learning environment where all are given intellectual freedom to speak and contribute.

4. Conclusion To conclude literary theory as a pedagogical tool works on the basic principles of critical education, experiential learning and social cognitive learning. These pedagogies suggest the learning strategies which promote discussion, telling personal narratives, sharing real life experiences, critically examining the established assumptions and structures, finding alternate solutions, generating creative ideas, and working in collaboration. Literary theory as discussed in this paper also encourages and train students to generate new and innovative meaning of the texts by utilizing their real world experiences and their beliefs. It being multidisciplinary prepares informed students who have ability to approach texts from multiple directions and become mature critical thinkers and problem solvers. As it provides central position to students, so teacher becomes a facilitator to promote dialogic inquiry and investigation in the class. Resultantly, it also gives autonomy to students and they take the control of their learning and meaning making. Thus teaching literature with literary theory can help to achieve the major objectives of twenty-first century education.

REFERENCE

References: 1. E.T. Dresang and K. McClelland. *Radical Change: Digital Age Literature and Learning. Theory into Practice*.1999,38: 160-167. Retrieved March 24, 2008, from <http://www.jstor.org/> 2. F. Rosslyn. *Literature for the Masses: The English Literature Degree in 2004. The Cambridge Quarterly*, 2005,34(1):313-322. Retrieved October 5, 2006, from <http://camqtly.oxfordjournals.org/> 3. H.R. Geersten. *Rethinking Thinking about Higher-Level Thinking. Teaching Sociology*. 2003,31(1):1-19. 4. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/> 5. J. Culler. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press,1997 6. J.N. Moore. *Practicing Poetry: Teaching to Learn and Learning to Teach. The English Journal*, 91 (3): 2002, 44-50. 7. K. Egan. *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005. 8. N. P. Rao). *Education and Human Resource Management*. New Delhi: APH,1996. 9. P.D. Feden and R.M. Vogel. *Methods of Teaching: Applying Cognitive Science to Promote Student Learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003. 10. P.V. Zima. *Deconstruction and Critical*

Theory. (R. Emig, Trans.). New York: Continuum, 2002. (Original work published 1994) 11. S. Lynn. Texts and Contexts: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. 12. T. Eagleton. Literary theory: An Introduction (2nd ed.). USA: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 13. T.F. Davis and K. Womack. Transitions: Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 14. V. R. Ruggiero. Teaching Thinking Across the Curriculum. New York: Harper and Row, 1988.