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Contemporary Criticism: Amalgam or Conjecture (A Quest for the Appropriate Prism)

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Abstract:

This article delves into the picturesque world of Salman Rushdie's 'Quichotte' seen through the prism of contemporary critic. It should not be treated as a book review or a critique of the book but the way a contemporary critic should approach a work of art taking cues from the very academic article of Shri C. N. Srinath ('The Literary Criterion') which came as a fresh whiff of air. The world literature being in a state of flux bears heavily on criticism as a way to approach literature. The author focuses on the 'how' of contemporary criticism of the novel by Salman Rushdie. The criticism or review of the said novel remains the subject matter of another paper and falls outside the interest of this article. Further scope of this article would be a research on the 'turn' theories which have recently made inroads in the world of criticism.

Keywords: Criticism, Contemporary, Theories, Conflict, Critique, Historical.

Role of a Contemporary Critic

Picking up the thread of thought from the article 'Literary Critical Tradition today: Plural and Multicultural' by Shri C N Srinath, this research article delves into myriad perspectives that shape the critic of the future. In a world where climate meets the challenge and artificial meets the intelligence, it is time for the critic to move beyond the boundaries; as the historical and biographical paved way for the formalist, the formalist gave the building blocks to the structuralist, who in turn churned out the cultural, Marxist and feminist and then the post modern theories where the binaries intertwined themselves. At the same time, the postcolonial theory came as a challenge to the 'centre' or the 'west'. It also envisaged that the relations

between different people from different cultures also undergo change. It came not only as a negation of the so called 'centre' but as a method to rediscover the meaning of what is worth being 'canonized'. It also focused on the inherent power structure of the society which tilted the scales in favour of the mighty at the same time being conscious of not tilting it in favour of the marginalized. There is a thin line of distinction as one tries to balance theory for not pushing the margins. Tilting any way is going to spell disaster.

"Postcolonialism is about a changing world, a world that has been changed by struggle and which its practitioners intend to change further." (Young 7)

This 'change' is the impetus for the new age critic who must intertwine and rejuvenate theory thereby not falling in the trap of flogging dead theories. Various theories become like the 'Birches' of the great American poet, Robert Frost, when they seem to 'bend to left and right'. (Tilak 23). Interestingly, the critic's role is to cling on to the birches, sway with them and keep his eyes towards the 'heaven' of evolved criticism.

It is time to go 'timeless' and critique texts in a way which suffices or at least endeavors to correspond to the level of creativity that the text in question exhibits. This synchronization is not only complex but also multi layered and the role of the critic becomes all the more crucial. The ambivalence can be challenged by a mind that is able to see beyond what is visible and hear what is inaudible; breaking open from the shackles or euphemistically the legacy of criticism. He is not merely to churn out the magical potion of analyzing a text based on the available matter, but should come up with a whole new 'compound' which assimilates the past knowledge and builds a new 'structure' that is enviably 'his'. This may be achieved by not keeping a benchmark theory against which any work is evaluated.

"It has become fashionable and prestigious to dwell on this corpse of theory to raise one's own personal phoenix." (Srinath 22)

In other words, a critic's task is to look at the text from a fresh perspective and then analyze it in the light of his 'learning' and 'unlearning' of criticism. For instance, when the order is toppled to bring in balance, many times it bring another imbalance where one voice again becomes the 'center' others being at periphery. When the colonial voice accommodates that of the colonized, the text may be at the fortuity of pushing the dominating voice to become

marginalized. However, a critic's role is not to ensure the balance, but he should strive to identify the jeopardy or conflict of interests, if any. Present political scenario is an apt example of shifting balances, toppling identities, legitimizing in the garb of 'left' or 'right'. Interestingly, both the sides have also lost touch with what they stood for, albeit, it is a matter of convenience. As the voters are left to distinguish between nationalism and jingoism, the critique has to be wary of being inconsequential or censorious. This can be explained by an interesting point in the evolution of literature. For a very long period of time, 'literature' was synonymous with 'British Literature'. As the world woke up to the literature from the American and African continent, criticism also underwent metamorphosis and crept out of the cocoon. The margins shifted and merged although it was not devoid of the ironical fact that the new margins further pushed some literature into oblivion. An interesting aspect of this evolution is that the 'consciousness' of being the 'other' precedes any action to counter the same.

"Indian Writing in English which drew a blank till about the mid-nineties made a gradual appearance. There is some irony in the fact that Shakespeare's loss is the gain of literature other than British."(Siddiqui 268)

The critic should consciously restrain himself from placing one point of criticism in opposition to the other. The works which stand the test of time are the ones which offer something universal. As the word 'canons' gains new lexical dimensions, criticism must and should also go through the process of not only adding new dimensions but also follow a multi layered approach. Some of the works that contemporary writers produce do not strictly fall under the purview of the post modern 'disjointedness'. Rather there is a strange unity in the disunity that they profess to have. Salman Rushdie, a British Indian novelist and essayist in his signature style juxtaposes historical fiction with magical realism and east and west in the same context.

Salman Rushdie's 'Quichotte'- Approaching it as a work of Art

To begin with, Salman Rushdie drops a casual hint as to how his novel should be approached. In 'A Quixotic Note on Pronunciation, he mentions the various ways in which the title may be pronounced.

‘For the purposes of this text, the recommended pronunciation is the elegant French ‘key-SHOT’, for reasons which the text itself will make clear; but, gentle reader, suit yourself.’(Rushdie 1)

The four words ‘gentle reader, suit yourself’ hold the key to a reader or a critic who approaches the text. By suiting to one’s self, the critic affords himself to be original and by being gentle, he ensures that he may also depend on the colossal knowledge of criticism that beckons him.

As one reads Salman Rushdie’s ‘Quichotte, one is bound to review it in reflection of Miguel de Cervantes’ ‘Don Quixote’. When the seventeenth century novel written in Spanish during the Spanish Golden age echoes in the twenty first century novel authored by a writer from who is a British Indian and who chooses to write a novel in English, the divisions of time, space, language, cultural identity merge. The divisions submerge into one another. The character *Don Quixote de la Manchawas* viewed with from multitude angles; as a comic character, as an epitome of all paradoxes that the world stood for, the challenges to society from a free spirited individual and a saga of a hero who fell to the insanity of the world. In terms of relativism, the protagonist Quichotte is epitome of such paradoxes in his own way. With the dilemma between the real and the unreal, the writer often touches upon the liminal space and the reader also travels back and forth in the Wasteland, that America is sought to become. Also, there is a dreamlike quality in the characters. They continue to recapitulate life and keep merging this subconscious with life itself (Bloom 57). The characters also keep overlapping one another in this trance like state and the reader has no choice but to flow with the scheme of things.

The critic is fraught with the magic, realism and a concerted humour from all sides. In the process, he is also expected to relish the work of art thereby encumbering him with the ‘task’ at hand.

‘The Golden Means’

Greek philosopher Aristotle promulgated the golden means and it is definitely a desired virtue in the critic of today. He has to choose his prism carefully avoiding any cultural or historical tendencies to creep in. He must move back and forth in countries, realms, myriad emotions and consciously build his view on the basis of the words which string themselves

effortlessly on the pages of this book. ‘Morality’ and ‘ethics’ also assume new proportions as one reads through the pages and travels with Quichotte.

“The ethics of postmodernity is not an ethics of freedom: for Levinas, for postmodernists, we can never be free from obligations and from responsibility.” (Siddiqui 268)

How things, people, ideas and perspectives have been juxtaposed while remaining in contradiction and paradoxically remain in harmony is the dichotomy which needs to be addressed by the critic. As we venture into new horizons, the erstwhile range of vision should not blur, rather the theorist should blend and arrive at an analysis followed logically by a theory which is able to view the sun in a new light. At the same time, the theorist should remain grounded and not give in to the temptation thereby having an Icarus fall. He must pay heed to the fact that his wings are made of wax and flying too close to the sun might not be in the best interests. This balance is definitely not an easy task. He would have to consciously avoid falling into the quagmire of theories which riddle his path. As Mr. Smile travels around the world and undertakes a journey in pursuit of his beloved, albeit, subject of love from his viewpoint, he dives back and forth in various TV series, blurring the difference between popular culture and elite culture. The crossroads at which these lines merge in torpid stage signify the beginning of the task of a critic. This unique blend may be of the new and old, popular and elite or the ‘self’ and the ‘other’.

“Postmodernism is closely aligned with Cultural Studies in its rejection of the ‘high/low’ distinction between cultures, and its focus on the modes by which certain cultural artefacts come to occupy higher status.”(Nayar 59)

The popular and the elite culture seem to lose their identities in this book and the critic marvels and analyses this juxtaposition. He assumes the role of a critic who reads this character not as a product of postmodern literature or any literature thereafter. No single theory can explain the complex yet spontaneous persona of Mr. Smile.

The time that Mr. Smile ruminates back and forth, or arranges his things in each hotel room where he checks has a sort of a rhythm which can be heard by a critic who frees himself from the compartmental theories. The ‘Anything can happen’ behind many events that are beyond the purview of logic nudge the imaginative faculties of the readers. The novel is replete

with allusions and references to the events and incidents that take place in various cities of the world. The world of Mr. Smile extends beyond the shores of manmade boundaries from the USA to the UK and India. The persona oscillates between various cities and different mindsets without being congruous. However, the incongruity here is not totally unfounded or 'conscious'. The text just flows spontaneously like romantic poetry from the mind of the narrator. Another interesting aspect of the novel's approach is the way the women are portrayed, be it Ms. Salma R and her mother and grandmother or Mrs. Happy. The author, in a carefree manner, moves beyond post feminism. His women characters are not necessarily seen as women characters and wherever they assume any semblance of the stereotypes, there is no apology tendered for it. Barring the biological detailing, there is nothing that separates them from the male characters. However, the writer does not refer to them from the perspective of their sexual preferences and does not allow them to be apologetic about their entities. He just lets them be. The characters are implied as they are. The writer assumes the omniscient role and also addresses the active reader who is undertaking this journey of minds and cities. The casual reference made to real life characters and incidents and mingling them with the unreal is a task for a critic who has to go beyond the postmodern. The blend of thoughts, characters and places is so subtle and natural that the novel looks like a 'whole' rather than looking fragmented or like a pastiche. The thoughts and characters mingle and intertwine so beautifully that new hues are visible which soothe the inward eye of the critic who is all set to understand and analyze the magic sewn into the text, line after line by the magician writer. The tools in his hands are only words which structurally do not conform to any precedent but conjure up new forms and ideas. Even seen as an inspiration from Cervantes' 'Don Quixote', this novel though seems to be emanating from the source, the characters feel free to soar in the heights and explore the depths of their own. Also, since 'Quichotte' as a book is a newborn, whereas 'Don Quixote' has attained maturity and is also available with notes on the various allusions drawn, a critic has to carefully explore the numerous references that Salman Rushdie makes in the journey of the protagonist. Interestingly, the two writers born in different times (Miguel de Cervantes in 1547 and Salman Rushdie in 1947) weave the same magic realism (a term coined much later than 1547) in their own contexts and one may only marvel at the process of 'canonization' which transcends the boundaries of time. The difference is only in circumstances where Don Quixote feeds on books regarding knights and their adventures and Mr. Smile feeds on the endless outpour of screen images. And

once 'Quichotte' gets his own 'Sancho Panza' in the form of his future son Sancho whose existence depends on the condition of Smile's lady love accepting his love, the story just twirls in the postmodern world and finds or rather chalks its own course. Comparison of the two novels by a critic will further bind the thoughts of one book to the other rather than giving a free flow to the critic. The critic must also gear up to the challenge and find new ways to see the novel rather than falling into the trap of mundane or the time tested. The novel assumes forms ranging from the mimetic to subtle sermon on the failings of human kind and then delights the readers with the kaleidoscope of emotions.

Golden Means by Aristotle

Therefore, the golden means in this case is the means which is neither achievable nor fathomable. The criticism in this case should simply read into the actions and behavior of the characters. This would sometimes require the presence of the author, Salman Rushdie as we know him and sometimes, his identity will have to go into oblivion to bring Mr. Smile to life. This requires going back to the historical and biographical criticism and then unconsciously stroking the canvas with strains of formalist theories. Pushing Rushdie into obscurity is a pre requisite to bring Mr. Smile to the forefront while not remaining conscious of the fact the author is missing. Criticism has to flow like a river unobstructed by the qualms of theories, while at the same time remaining conscious of the undercurrents or the tides which decide its flow. That is the dichotomy of theories which is going to accompany a critic in his journey.

Another interesting aspect of this novel is the way globalization has reflected itself as another concept known as 'Glocalization'. This term was defined by Roland Robertson. He suggests that the global reality is incorporated into a small world thereby compressing the reality of the world on a smaller scale (Nayar 99). Many people opined that globalization was mainly homogenization of western culture in other parts of the world and not so much as moving of culture of 'other' parts of the world to the west barring a few anomalies. Although this was challenged by people who predicted that there would finally be hybrids which would occupy the world space. This book has strands of glocalization as one sees numerous allusions and references in the world of Mr. Smile where Television is used as a tool to promulgate glocalization. Another way of looking at it is that his existence derives its meaning in relation to

the culture around; he seems to be a passive voice in the scheme of things. The structuralists will have to decipher or identify the power struggle which goes on in this context.

Conclusion

This novel also points to a dichotomy in the literary criticism. The postmodern and the writers thereafter have a sense of 'disjointedness'. However, when a critic becomes conscious of this 'disjointedness', he no longer remains 'disjointed' and the essence of this postmodern alienation vanishes. Therefore, when any critic reviews a work of art, he has to keep in mind the awareness that there are works after postmodern but one should not do not draw a line of finality. The task of a critic is dynamic. To compartmentalize it only these types is fraught with risks. A novel published by a world famous writer in 2019 does in no way signify any finality. Therefore, to assume that anything after modern criticism should be clubbed under the convenient heads of post modernism or post postmodernism would be a matter of convenience only. The contemporary critic goes forward and backward to critique a novel as in this case. This may be an amalgam or a theory which defines its own trajectory in the light of the era gone by. Harping on the same things will lead of predicted results. However, a word of caution is to keep the responsibility of the critic in mind. He should not refute for the sake of it, but for the sake of criticism to evolve; for criticism should move one step forward to accommodate the innovative literature that is visible on the horizon of the world. With the plethora of technological advancement, the distances have also merged. In one or the other forms, the absurdities have existed, and 'Quichotte' certainly spells the 'evolution' of these absurdities.

'Although absurdities have always played

Their havoc on your poor disordered mind,

There's nobody, Don Quixote, who'll upbraid

You, sir, for being abject or unkind.' (Cervantes 24)

As Don Quixote comes back home, the critic also needs to culminate his wanderings once the task has been endeavored. This is so because the work of the critic starts where the work of the writer ends.

‘They looked after him with every possible care, thankful that the knight errant, Don Quixote of La Mancha, had finished his wanderings and had finally come back home to rest.’
(Calvert 100)

It is a melting point both literally and symbolically; of cultures, characters and criticisms. Such literature is the raw material in the hands of the critic who is set for his quest of the right kind of theory which may already be coined, or is in the process of evolution or is in the womb of the future criticism.

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