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Structuralism et al: A Quest for a Systematic Grammar of Text

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to trace the origin and development of structuralism, a watershed in the development of modern literary criticism. It also tries to find the basic purpose of this school of literary criticism in striving to formulate general rules, similar to the grammatical rules of the Language, by means of which a work of literature could be analysed, interpreted and understood. Thus the language along with its grammar serves as the metaphor for the structural approach to the literary texts. The origin of Structuralism from Russian Formalism and Prague Linguistic Circle has been explored in detail. Similarly, the natural development of Structuralism into Post-Structuralism, including the common ground and the points of distinction have been dealt comprehensively. An effort has been made
to lineate the contributions of various stalwart figures in the form of their theoretical insights like Derrida, Foucault and Lacan. The essay is concluded with an overview of the fact that towards the last decades of 20th century, Post-Structuralism finds many similar positions with Post-Modernism and together they give rise to many new theoretical findings in the domain of literary criticism.

Keywords: Structuralism, grammar, text, inter-textual connections, difference and deconstruction.

Structuralism is an essentially a post- WWII intellectual phenomenon which began in 1950s in France inspired by Ferdinand Saussure's linguistic theories.It was imported in Britain in 1970s and instantly attained widespread influence and sustained the same through 1980s.It is still widely popular in the form of its numerous variants. It was first time observed in the works of anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss and literary critic Roland Barthes. Later various other theorists of different persuasions advanced the structuralist position, for example, Louis Althusser and Lucien Goldmann (Marxists), Gerard Genette (narratology), Michel Foucault (Historian) and Jacques Lacan (psychoanalyst) to name a few.

The literary critics of structuralist leanings mainly analyse the prose narratives. They interpret literature in terms of a range of underlying parallels with the structure of language.The fundamental assumption of structuralism is that things cannot be understood in isolation. They are always part of a larger context and can be seen only like that. Typically, structuralists move from particular to general placing the individual work within a wider structural context. The wider structure can be

- the whole corpus of an author's work
-the conventions of a particular literary genre
-a network of inter-textual connections
-a projected model of an underlying universal narrative structures
-or a notion of narrative as a complex of recurrent patterns or motifs.

Just like language a work of art is also a system of signs. No single sign in this system has a final,unambiguous relationship to reality. It is only through a relationship of contrast and difference that we construe meaning and reference from each sign in this system. Therefore all linguistic elements in a work of literature determine each other such that each component gets its meaning only in relation to other components of the same work, or all other works of the same author, or all other works of the same period, or all other works of the same genre and finally all other works preceding or following it. It is noteworthy that structural analysis of literary texts is not interpretive. It does not offer any method which when applied to literary works produces new and hitherto unexpected meanings. It just attempts to understand the conventions which make a literary text literary. In simple words, it seeks to develop a 'grammar of text'.

Before understanding structuralism in detail,it is necessary to make an assessment of the movements in vogue which served as precursor to Structuralism. The publication of Saussure's *Cours de LinguistiqueGenerale* in 1916, marks the beginning of Structural Linguistics. According to Saussure, language is an abstract system of arbitrary signs which constitute our reality. Sign is a two sided entity- a sound image and the concept which it refers to .These were given the terms *signifier*and *signified* respectively. There is a network of these signs such that one can be defined only in terms of its differences from others. There is no intrinsic and absolute meaning of any word. The important point is that these signs are arbitrary. This means that there is no inherent relation between a word andits designated meaning. It is just a matter of chance initially and later on out of sheer convention that a reality is named in one particular way.In a further generalization, language does not simply label the reality for us rather it constructs it. This position is called linguistic determinism and is supported by many linguists along with Saussure. Saussure is also famous for certain dichotomies. He studied language from two perspectives. One is the system of rules followed by all speakers of the language- the langue and another is the speech behaviour of the speakers of the language- the parole. The langue is trans-individual while the parole is specific to the individual. Another important dichotomy of Saussure is synchronic versus diachronic. These are two approaches to study language though both are relevant in their own rightful places. The diachronic approach studies a language as it evolves through the historical time and reaches its current form while the synchronic approach tries to capture the working and meaning of a language in a particular time and in a particular state. Saussure's reputation chiefly lies on this latter approach to language and he is considered the father of Structural Linguistics.

Along with many other common positions, structural literary theory is indebted to reading instead of an author-centred tradition. Russian Formalist School and its successor Prague Linguistic Circle for its emphasis on text-centred began in Moscow and flourished from 1915-1930s. The Formalists were concerned with the problems related to the language of literature and it sought to develop a science of literature. The two basic questions that the formalists tried to answer were: How does the language of poetry differ from ordinary language? And,How does the language of fiction differ from the ordinary language?The answer to the first question is that in poetry the ordinary language gets defamiliarized and

the defamiliarization is brought by the devices of parallelism and deviation. Similarly the language of fiction can be experimented by means of presentation. In this context they juxtaposed two concepts,*fabula* and *syuzhet* which can be translated as plot and story respectively. The plot is the bare essence of events told in a chronological sequence while story is a manipulation of that plot by the writer as an artist employing the devices of defamiliarization.

Similar and contemporary movements were Practical Criticism in Britain and New Criticism in America. Along with Formalism, they downplayed the social, historical and political issues and brought the form and other technical issues to the forefront. The formal aspects of the literary work was of fundamental importance to them too because they considered the meaning to be firmly bound up in the form. They believed that a close scrutiny of the formal aspects of a poem would reveal the complex of oppositions and tensions that constituted the real meaning.

In 1926, some members had to leave Moscow due to certain political reasons and they formed a new group at Prague. Roman Jacobson was the leader of the group and he furthered the cause of Formalism along with the other members of the group. The most significant contribution of the group is the Theory of functional style. According to them, all human activity is poly-functional and one function may dominate all others as per the goal of the activity. In art and literature, the aesthetic function overrides all other. Literature is not read for the sake of information. Its message is not verifiable as true or false. It is not paraphrasable. Its language is not cryptic like science rather it is Delphic i.e. Obscure, ambiguous and oracular (Steiner, George 1968). In other disciplines, the language directs the reader towards some other facts or information while the language of literature is self-referential and it calls attention of the reader towards its own self. Thus the function of expression overtakes the function of reference in a literary text. The aesthetic function was viewed by Prague Linguists as "counteracting of routine and automatization" by means of foregrounding of certain elements. Borrowing from psychological studies that tried to understand the way our mind processes the infinite data that our senses present to it and filters up what seems most relevant. Foregrounding is the device that marks literariness in language. Thus the concept of Foregrounding replaced that of the Defamiliarization.

In ordinary usage of language, we always make selections from a number of alternatives of same grammatical category and similar meaning as per the appropriateness and purpose of our use. Thus the equivalence is established on the axis of selection, for example, female,woman, lady ,lass ,hussy , damsel are words of same grammatical category and similar meanings but at the same time they have different semantic connotations and we choose them as per the purpose and context. In poetic language the equivalence is transferred from the axis of selection to the axis of combination. Thus in a sentence, which is a combination of words of different grammatical categories with different meanings, an equivalence is sought and brought. The devices of repetition like alliteration, rhyme and meter are endeavours to establish this similarity among the heterogeneous elements. Thus Roman Jacobson, postulates that "in poetry the principle of equivalence is projected from the axis of selection to the axis of combination."

Structuralism proper originated in 1940s with French anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss 's ideas about language and his study of culture. He transposed the finding of Saussure to the study of culture. He also adopted from the ideas of Vladimir Propp'sstudy of Russian Folk tales and used them to study cultural myths. He showed that the most diverse myths

recorded in cultures, which seemingly have no connection with each other, can be seen as variations upon the same basic pattern. For Levi-Straus any custom which has a cultural origin and not a biological one can be equated to a Sign, for example, eating customs,taboos related to menstruation,hunting rites and so on. Just like Saussure's signifier and the signified, the specific cultural phenomenon and its meaning have an arbitrary relationship which is sustained by convention. The development of various cultural phenomena is in accordance with the differential principle employed in concept formation of language. According to Levi-Strauss, with the rudiments of language our most primitive ancestors started thinking in terms of binary oppositions i.e. presence and absence of a feature, like presence of sun is day and absence of sun is night. Thereafter by means of difference and contrast, more and more phenomena were added only to build an infinite and complex corpus of cultural signs. Cultural Structuralists trace these complex and innumerable cultural phenomena from diverse cultures to some basic patterns and their study is known as Semiotics.

In 1960 , Levi-Strauss proposed a search for the basic pattern underlying the structures of all narratives, a universal grammar of all narratives not only the fiction but other forms like biography, travelogue, reportage etc. most of the theorists who took up the challenge were deeply influenced by linguistics. In 1966, Claude Bremond published his article on the logic of possible narratives. A.J. Greimas' book Structural Semantics also came out in the same year. He developed his 'Actantial Model' to describe any narrative. It is a basic structure that allows meaning to emerge and quite similar to Propp's study. Another line of development akin to Propp was Narratology- a type of literary structuralism that focussed not only on the underlying structure of the content but also on the structure of the narration- the way stories are told. Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) and Gerard Genette's*Narrative Discourse* (1972) are one of the most important contributions to Narratology.

Around 1960s and 1970s,a watershed occurred in English and American Criticism. The idea that we can know the essence of things was revoked. This new thought continued the structuralist notions and rejected their inherent contradictions both at the same time. It originated in France and spontaneously got subsumed under Structuralism as its advanced and evolved variant. This came to be known as Post-Structuralism. It continued Structuralism's anti-humanist stance and wholeheartedly adopts the Structuralist affirmation that language as a system is the key to understand ourselves and our world. All the systems which have a cultural origin are modelled upon language.

The English speaking world became familiar with this new thought through Jacques Derrida's philosophical position called Deconstruction. Though structuralism's preoccupation with the language continues in his system also,his view is completely different from that of the structuralists. The structuralists were in constant search of an underlying structure in all phenomena akin to that of language and considered the law of differentiality to be capable of sustaining this structure. Derrida considers trust in language and Presence the basic illusion. He calls this trust *logocentrism*. He claims that language is inherently unreliable. The arbitrary relationship, between our language and the reality and the law of differences discovered by Saussure, provesthat there are no absolute anchors of reality in our language. The reality constructed by language is fluidic, constantly subject to deferral. He names this as *differance*. In his book *De la Grammatologie* (1967), he asserts that presence is marked by its absence. As he puts it "iln'yadehorstexte" i.e. there is nothing that is outside the text. Everything is mediated by language.

Deconstruction takes its name from Derrida's practice of analysing and dismantling texts inorder to reveal their inherent inconsistencies and inner contradictions. In Barbara Johnson's words, Deconstruction is "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text." The texts always have surplus meaning beyond the intentions of the author. Infact, a text inorder to survive against its own instability, creates artificial centres giving semblance of stable meaning. When a centre is created, a margin also develops. These structures are just temporary arrangements employed by the reader to temporarily stop the infinite flow of meanings that a text generates. They start the binary oppositions in the text. These oppositions may be explicit or implicit, forexample, hidden in the metaphors. The central terms are always privileged, like truth, masculinity, whiteness etc. Since these centres are set up tentatively they can be dismantled by techniques of Deconstruction and hence a work of literature never achieves a finality or closure. There is always a scope of new meanings.

Michel Foucault,further, generalizes Derrida's ideas by his insights into Power and its working in the Western culture. He seeks to expose the way Power was at work in the seemingly 'objective vocabularies' developed by the various branches of human sciences in the 19th century. These branches of knowledge have created norms and standards that fail to recognise the experiences of individuals. Foucault compares the modern world to a *Panopticon* i.e. a type of prison invigilated from all sides. He asserts that we are bearers of our own figurative, mental imprisonment and that is due to the Power under which we police and repress ourselves as it gives us a sense of identity. He locates power firmly in language. Thus we all are mere extensions of discourses that we internalize. The paradox is that these discourses of power are not exploitative. In fact, the state machinery believes in them as much as the others do. This is similar to Gramsci's Hegemony and Althusser's Ideology.

This reason for susceptibility to power has been comprehensively dealt with another Poststructuralist, Jacques Lacan. According to Lacan, infants live in an Imaginary world. During their transition from infancy to childhood they develop language and enter the realm of Symbolic. The real world is symbolized by language and similar other systems which operate like language. The identity of the child is formed as a reflection of its interaction with the outside world. It is relational- a notion that introduces the principle of difference into the process of identity construction. The identity is not fixed or absolute. Rather it is subject to the social and cultural configuration in which we find ourselves. Identity must change. Thus a feeling of wholeness and undifferentiation is lost for ever and is characterized by a lack and a desire. This is followed by a deep-felt longing that can never be fulfilled but can only be satisfied with symbolic substitutes, literature being one of them.During reading of a literary text, we enter into complex relationship with the text and look forward to fill our lack, even if temporarily and illusionarily. The challenges to Lacan's theoretical postulates along with other poststructuralists come from French Feminists. Thus, Structuralism is developed furthermore and the intrinsic matrix of relationships of meanings in the texts are revealed still further.

The theoretical formulation of Post-structuralism leads into Post-Modernism. Modernism attempted to describe the world in rational, empirical and objective terms. Post-modernism loses the confidence to explore the world by means of underlying reason. Reason itself is now seen as a particular historical form,as parochial in its own way as the ancient explanations of the universe in terms of gods. The post-modern subject has no rational way to evaluate a preference in relation to judgements of truth, morality, aesthetic experience or

objectivity. As the old hierarchies of thought are torn down, a new clearing is formed on the frontiers of understanding: quite what hybrids of thought will metamorphose, interbreed and grow is this clearing is for the future to decide.

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