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Changing Concept of 'Author' from Renaissance to Post-Structuralism

Diptapratim Midya Chowdhury

Research Scholar

Department of English

Vidyasagar University

Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal

Abstract:

The concept of 'Author' is a very complex concept. It has been changing for a long time - from the Renaissance period to the Post-structuralism. In the Renaissance period, then in the Romantic period also, we will observe that the personality of the author is important. The author is like a God here and he influences his readers by his charming personality. But, then in the Marxism, we will find another idea of the 'Author'. He is here a 'producer' who has to "...produce a commodity to be consumed by an audience at a profit"(Eagleton 59). Then, in the Structuralism, the 'Author' or his 'work' is not important. But, the only important object is 'Text'. Again, in the Post-structuralism, the 'Author' remains only a "paper-author"(Barthes 1971). The 'reader' is important now than the 'Author'. The author remains only as the "function of discourse"(Foucault 124). In this present paper, we will find this gradual transition of the concept of 'Author'.

Keywords: Author, Renaissance, Romantic period, Marxism, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Reader, Work, Text, Aura.

It was a time from the Renaissance period (between 1400 and 1600) to the "Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and...the Reformation"(Barthes 1968:165) when "the prestige of the individual"(1968:165) was vital. Then, "the greatest importance" was attached to "the 'person' of the author"(165), his "declared intentions"(Barthes 1971) and his "manuscript"(Barthes 1971).

Again, "as a privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, and literature, or in the history of philosophy and science," as Michel Foucault has observed, "the question of the author demands a more direct response. Even now, when we study the history of a concept, a literary genre, or a branch of philosophy, these concerns assume a relatively weak and secondary position in relation to the solid and fundamental role of an author and his works"(Foucault 115).

Then, in the Marxism, we will find another idea of the 'Author'. In the chapter- 4, namely, "The author as producer", of his book, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Terry Eagleton observes the idea of 'Author' according to the point of view of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht. To Benjamin and Brecht, "...art is first of all a social practice rather than an object to be academically dissected"(Eagleton 60).

Now, if we take literature as a particular form of art, we may find that it is "...a product of social consciousness, a world vision; but it is also an industry...; it is a capitalist business which employs certain men(authors, directors, actors, stagehands) to produce a commodity to be consumed by an audience at a profit"(Eagleton 59).

So, to the Marxist critics, "...the author is primarily a producer,...maker of a social product"(Eagleton 68). Again, there must be "...a set of social relations between the artistic producer and his audience"(Eagleton 61). Here, the Marxist critics oppose "...the Romantic notion of the author as creator—as the God-like figure who mysteriously conjures his handiwork out of nothing"(Eagleton 68).

When William Wordsworth in his essay, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads"(1800) observes that poetry "...is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...", he actually suggests the feelings of the 'Author'. Here, the role of the 'Author'(i.e. "Poet") is crucial; he writes not for himself alone, but for "men". And, the "men"(i.e. "Reader") "...will be able clearly to perceive the object which I had in view", Wordsworth suggests. So, the Romantic critics like Wordsworth emphasize upon the 'authorial intention'¹ that is encoded in their work. And, the readers must be influenced by the "Author-God"(Barthes 1968:167). They must praise the author of a work putting a kind of "cult value"(Benjamin 7) upon the work. Obviously, here the work of art is not "hidden" as we find in Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"(1936), but a visible one with a kind of "aura"(Benjamin 7)—an appearance of magical force arising from its "uniqueness". And, this "uniqueness" makes a "God-like figure"(Eagleton 68) out of the author of a work. So, both the work and the writer are simultaneous. The "aura" of a work and the "aura" of a writer is equal; the "aura" of an anthology equates itself with the "aura" of the author of that anthology. And so the fear-turned-praise, or, praise-turned-fear among the readers—

"And all who heard should see them there,

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

Weave a circle round him thrice,

And close your eyes with holy dread,

For he on honey-dew hath fed,

And drunk the milk of Paradise."²

So, a kind of "mystification of art"(Eagleton 69) is observed in the Romantic period.

But, the Marxist critics like Pierre Macherey is "hostile" "...[to] the miracle-working power of the pen...[,] to the idea of the author as 'creator'. For him,...the author is essentially a producer who works up certain given materials into a new product. The author does not make the materials with which he works: forms, values, myths, symbols, ideologies come to him already worked-upon, as the worker in a car-assembly plant fashions his product from

already-processed materials”(Eagleton 69). So, to the Marxist critics, the work of art is a kind of “ ‘practice’[,...][a] process of transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means(of ‘production’)...The artist uses certain means of production—the specialized techniques of his art—to transform the materials of language and experience into a determinate product”(Eagleton 69). So, the author must produce something in a particular context where the “capitalist business”(Eagleton 59) employs him to do so for a particular purpose(here, economical purpose, that is for the “profit”). So, the context, or, the purpose, or, the “product” is important than the author for the Marxist critics.

Then, if we look at the Structuralism, we will find “ the relativization of the relations of writer, reader and observer(critic)”(Barthes 1971). Here, ‘author’ or his ‘work’ is not important. But, the only important object is ‘Text’(Barthes 1971). Again, we can not “separate out materially works from texts”(Barthes 1971). The text “can cut across the work, several works.” We can not interpret a text; we can only experiment with it. It “practices the infinite deferment of the signified”(Barthes 1971). As the “ text is held in language”, it is “structured bit off-centred” like language. It is open-ended. With its “irreducible” plurality, “stereographic plurality”, “tissue”-like nature, heterogeneity and intertextuality it plays with us(Barthes 1971). And we(the reader) practically collaborate with it either actively or passively. Actively—when we find something readable in the text and begin to play with “the Text as one plays a game”(Barthes 1971). Again, passively as a “(passive) amateur” when we find the text “(‘unreadable’)”(Barthes 1971).

Thus, the reader becomes prominent with his “cultured reading and casual reading”(Barthes 1971). He becomes the “interpreter” of the text, “the co-author of the score”, “the critic”, or, “(passive) amateur”(Barthes 1971). Mallarme/ wanted “the audience to produce the book”(Barthes 1971).

Then, what is the position of the author in the text? Barthes says that, “ The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work...[but] As for the Text, it reads without the inscription of the Father”(Barthes 1971). The author may return “in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a ‘guest’”(Barthes 1971).

Again, in the structuralism (rather post-structuralism) the ‘Author’ remains only “ a paper-author : his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work...”(Barthes 1971). Text is not now ‘monistic’(Holy Scripture), but pluralistic where “ the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death...”(Barthes 1968:165). Again, when the text is pluralistic, the “explanation of a work” is not “sought in the man or woman who produced it...”(Barthes 1968:165). Now, the text also “is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning(the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash”(1968:167). To Barthes, the author must be removed from the boundary of the text to make the text open-ended with the “infinite deferment of the signified”(Barthes 1971) to enable the reader-turned-critic to re-write the text : “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author”(Barthes 1968:168).

Now, the question is—Is the author missing? The post-structuralist critic Michel Foucault suggests a valuable answer to us—that is—the author remains ‘outside’ the text and ‘precedes it’(Foucault 115). He declares the work as “the murderer of its author”(Foucault 117). There is no ‘particular individuality’ of the author in his work, the author disappears leaving an “empty space”(Foucault 121) to “reexamine”(Foucault 121).

But, the real problem is with the ‘proper name’ of the author. Is it ‘significant’ for its ‘monistic’ nature, or, for its pluralistic nature? Foucault suggests that the proper name of the author “...points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture. The author’s name is not a function of a man’s civil status, nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourse and their singular mode of existence”(Foucault 123). So, ultimately “author” becomes a “function of discourse”(Foucault 124). An author is important because of his position within the discourse, not for the initiation of the discourse.

Thus, we may observe in this whole discussion the gradual transition of the ‘author’ from the ‘Author-God’ of the Renaissance period as well as the Romantic period to the ‘Producer’ in the Marxism; then, again we may observe the gradual transference of importance from ‘author’ as well as ‘work’ to ‘text’; then, from ‘text’ to the ‘reader’—to the ‘critic’. At last, the ‘author’ disappears from the ‘text’; then, again re-appears in his text as a ‘guest’(Barthes 1971), as the “author-function”(Foucault 125). Thus, the ‘author’ becomes both the ‘insider’ and the ‘outsider’ of the ‘text’³.

Notes :

1. We will find the phrase ‘authorial intention’ in Jerome J. McGann’s essay, “The textual condition”(1991).
2. The cited lines are taken from the poem, “Kubla Khan; or, A Vision in a Dream : A Fragment” written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, completed in 1797 and published in 1816. Only lines 48-54 are taken here to indicate the “God-like figure” of the ‘Author’.
3. In the ‘Preface’ part of the religious novel, *Samskara: A Rite For a Dead Man*(first published in 1965 and it was made into a film in 1970) written by U. R. Ananthamurthy, we will find a detail about ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. Here, it is said that it is the most privileged part of a writer of being both insider and outsider at the same time. Here, in this novel, these two words are used at the cultural perspective, in the cultural sense. But, in this paper, these two words are used in the textual perspective, in the textual sense.

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