

## Poststructuralist Criticism

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### Introduction:

Poststructuralist Criticism may be considered as an attempt to challenge some of the assumptions and methods followed by Structuralist Criticism. Therefore, according to the famous critic M. H. Abrams, Poststructuralism designates a broad variety of critical perspectives and procedures that in the 1970s displaced Structuralism from its prominence as the radically innovative way of dealing with language and other signifying systems. It is Jacques Derrida whose name is chiefly associated with Poststructuralist Criticism. Jacques Derrida delivered his paper on Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences to an International Colloquium at Johns Hopkins University in America in 1966; and it is caused the emergence of the poststructural theory. This paper is included in Derrida's famous book: Writing and Difference published in 1978. Derrida attacked the systematic, quasi-scientific pretensions of the strict form of structuralist criticism based on the Saussurean theory of the structure of language. Saussure and the cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss together carried out the extremely logical significance of structuralism.

According to Saussure, a systematic structure, whether linguistic or other, presupposes a regulating 'center'. In Saussure's theory of language, this center is assigned the function of controlling the endless differential plays of internal relationships without getting involved in the play. Derrida shows that this illogical and impractical notion of an ever-active, yet always absent, center is 'logocentric'; and it is typical of Western thinking. According to Abrams, contemporary thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes engaged themselves to decenter or subvert the traditional claims of the existence of a self-evident foundation or ground that assures the validity of knowledge and truth; and establish the possibility of determinate communication. This process of decentering of the self-evident foundation, or ground that assures the validity of knowledge and truth; and establishes the possibility of determinate communication. This process of decentering of the self-evident foundation is designated by the term 'Antifoundationalism'. According to Abrams, this Antifoundationalism in philosophy, attached to skepticism about the traditional conception of meaning, knowledge, truth, and the subject, is noticed to some extent in a few of the current modes of literary studies, including Marxism, New Historicism, and Reader-Response Criticism.

The features of Poststructural Criticism and thoughts are as follows:

### 1. The Primacy of Theory:

Abrams comments that Plato and Aristotle, discourse about poetry or literature has involved a 'theory' or set of principles, distinctions, and categories for identifying, classifying, analyzing, and evaluating works of literature. In poststructural criticism, the term 'theory' has a significant position and it refers to an account of the general conditions of signification that determine meaning and interpretation in all domains of human action, production, and intellection. The theory has come to be foregrounded in Poststructural Criticism so many critics have felt it mandatory to 'theorize' their position and practice.

Often the theory of signification is afforded primacy in the additional sense that, when common experience in the use or interpretation of language does not accord with what the theory entails, then such an experience is rejected as unjustified and illusory. A prominent aspect of poststructural theories is that they are posed in opposition to inherited ways of thinking in all spheres of knowledge. They specifically challenge and undertake to destabilize or undermine and subvert what they identify as the foundational assumptions, concepts, procedures, and feelings in traditional modes of discourse in Western thinking and civilization.



## 2) The decentering of the subject:

Poststructuralcriticism decenters the subject. Poststructural critics strongly oppose the traditional view in which the author is considered to be a rational and competent authority gifted with purpose and initiative; and whose designs and intentions affect the form and meaning of his or her literary product. This oppositional stance is demonstrated in sharp criticism of Humanism.

Jacques Derrida abolishes the possibility of a controlling agency in language by discarding the very existence of a structural linguistic center; and leaves the use of language to become an unregulated play of purely rational elements, the signifiers. Thus for Derrida the text becomes an uncontrolled and uncontrollable play of signifiers. According to many Deconstructive critics, the subject author or narrator of a text becomes itself a purely linguistic product. Abram mentions as Paul de Man has put it in his book *Allegories of Reading* (1979) that 'subject' is rightfully reduced to the status of a mere 'grammatical pronoun'.

Michael Foucault and Roland Barthes have specified the departure of the traditional idea of the author by announcing the 'disappearance of the author', that is, 'the death of the author'. In this connection, Roland Barthes published his famous essay *The Death of the Author* in 1968; whereas Michael Foucault offered his essay *What Is an Author?* In 1968. According to M.H.Abrams, what they intend to mean is that a human individual is an essential bond in the chain of events that result in the production of parole or a text; and what they denied is the validity of the function or the role assigned to a uniquely individual and purposive author in the Western thought (logocentrism), and who is conceived as the initiator and purposive planner; and who is conceived as the origin of all knowledge, as the initiator and purposive planner; and who, by his or her intensions, is the determiner of the form and meanings of a text.

In this way, Barthes and Foucault discarded the notion that an author is the origin of all knowledge and final determiner of the form and meaning of the text. It can noticed that a number of current forms of Marxist, Feminist, psychoanalytic and New Historicist criticism clearly exhibit the similar tendency of 'decentering', and sometimes deleting the so called 'agency' of the author. Roland Barthes feels that the death of the author emancipates the reader by providing him an opportunity to enter the text in whatever way he or she chooses.

## 3. Reading, Texts, and Writing:

The decentering or deletion of the author leaves the reader, or the interpreter, as the vital figure in poststructural criticism. However the interpreter is too stripped of the human attributes like that of the author and is transformed into an impersonal process called 'reading'. This reading that engages the interpreter is no more called as a 'literary work', instead, it is just termed as a 'text'- that is, a structure consisting of signifiers made available merely for the reading. Texts, in this way, in the process of poststructural criticism, lose their identity; and are often represented as manifestations of 'écriture' or writing-in-general. A 'text' for a Deconstructive critic is a chain of signifiers whose seeming determinacy of meaning and reference to an extra-textual world are nothing but 'effects' produced by the differential play of conflicting internal forces. Therefore, in poststructural criticism, a reader is left with a text which is nothing but an ericure (that is, writing-in-general) for the sake of carrying out an impersonal process of reading.

### a) The Concept of Discourse:

In poststructural criticism 'discourse' has a very prominent term, supplementing and in some cases displacing the term 'text'. It applies not only to conversational passages but also to all verbal constructions. It implies the superficiality of the boundaries between literary and non-literary modes of signification. Literary critics have indeed made casual use of the term 'discourse', especially in application to passages representing conversations between characters in a literary work. A critical practice called discourse-analysis which focuses on such conversational exchange developed in the 1970s. This type of criticism, and the dialogic criticism that was inaugurated by Mikhail Bakhtin, deals with literary discourse as



conducted by human characters whose voices engage in a dynamic interchange of beliefs, attitudes, sentiments, and other expressions of states of consciousness.

Abram remarks that discourse has become the focal term among the critics who oppose the deconstructive concept of a 'general text'. Instead, they conceive of discourse as social dialect or language-in-use; and consider it to be both the product and manifestation of particular social conditions, class structure, and power relationships that modify in the course of history. As such, discourse, according to Foucault, is the central subject of criticism that is to be analysed anonymously, just on the level of 'it-is-said'.

**b)** According to poststructural criticism, no term can mean what it seems to say, or what its writer intends to say. But the Deconstructive critics accredit the subversion of the superficial meaning to the unstable and self-conflicting nature of language itself; whereas the social analyst as well as psychoanalytic critics consider the apparent meaning of the text as a disguise or substitution for underlying meanings that cannot be expressed frankly because they are suppressed by psychic and are sometimes unutterable. Therefore, according to Abrams, both the social and psychoanalytic critics of the discourse interpreted the apparent meanings of a text as a distortion, displacement, or total 'occlusion' of its real meanings; whereas these real meanings turn out to be either the writer's psychic and psycho-linguistic compulsions, or the material realities of the history, or the social power-structures of domination, subordination, and marginalization that took place when the text was penned by the writer.

Poststructuralists feel the surface meaning of a literary or other text serves as a disguise or mask of its real meaning, and it is called a 'hermeneutics of suspicious', a phrase taken from the French philosopher of language Paul Ricoeur. There have been counterattacks on some of the basic principles of poststructural criticism, especially on the 'Primacy of Theory'. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels challenged it most prominently in their essay *Against Theory* published in 1982. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels together assert that accounts of interpretation in general require no consequences for the actual practice of interpretation, and conclude by emphasizing that all theories should therefore come to an end. Such a conclusion is supported by several writers, including Stanley Fish and the influential philosophical pragmatist Richard Rorty. Abrams mentions the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard who has also mounted a powerful attack against 'theory' which he regards as an attempt to impose a vocabulary and set of principles to control and constrain illegitimately the various independent 'language games' that constitute discourse. Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (1997) is an enlightening analysis of the recurrent issues and debates that cut across the boundaries of diverse current theories.

#### **Conclusion:**

Jacques Derrida made no distinction between philosophy and literature because he thinks that all disciplines employ language, and language shares the quality of being indeterminate. Derrida holds that there is no reliable or intimate relationship between words and reality or between words and knowledge. As per his view, a word has a variety of meanings; and each meaning becomes a signifier ultimately pointing towards many signified. Derrida stresses that there is no transcendental signifier or reality principle behind any text or word; hence our quest for determinate or final meanings is only a wild goose chase.

1. David Lodge, ed., *Modern Criticism and Theory* (1988).
2. K. M. Newton, ed, *20-century Literary Theory* (1988).
3. Richard Herland, *Super Structuralism: The Philosophy of Structuralism and Poststructuralism* (1987).
4. Anthony Easthope, *British Poststructuralism since 1968* (1988).

