

FROM PDF TO PEDAGOGY: LITERARY THEORY AS PRAXIS

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This paper focuses on the complexity of literary theory, its existential disciplinary crisis, in pedagogical and social contexts, and also in the socioeconomic context of India as a developing country. In view of the pursuit of science and technology, the present low corporate visibility of literary studies in academic institutions is alarming. Literary theory, readable but unalterable in pedagogical discourse, not unlike PDF (Portable Document Format), needs to shape itself to pedagogical discourse, as the teaching material is supposed to be constructed by the subject, to regain social visibility. Literary theory, with its problematic status and interdisciplinary extensions, poses serious issues in academic and socioeconomic contexts, more so in a developing country like India. It appears that theory as “praxis” (practice informed by theory) in Raymond Williams’ sense, learning from the model of a theory of natural science, localization/ contextualization of literary theory could be some of the possible directions for the viability of literary theory in the present academic and socioeconomic contexts.

A strong critique of liberal humanism significantly constitutes literary theory. In the second half of the twentieth century, literary theory negotiates new ways of perceiving language, truth, meaning and human nature, and thus offers a critique of traditional criticism or liberal humanism. Peter Barry traces the historiography of the term “liberal humanism.”

The term “liberal humanism” became current in the 1970s, as a shorthand (and mainly hostile) way of referring to the kind of criticism which held sway before theory. The word “liberal” in this formulation roughly means not politically radical, and hence generally evasive and non-committal on political issues. “Humanism” implies something similar; it suggests a range of negative attributes, such as “non-Marxist” and “non-feminist,” and “non-theoretical.” There is also the implication that liberal humanists believe in “human nature” as something fixed and constant which great literature expresses.

(Barry 2002: 3)

Historically, traditional criticism, along with T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, William Empson and F. R. Leavis in the first half of the twentieth century present liberal humanist literary criticism. The famous debate in the 1930s between the liberal humanist F. R. Leavis, advocating literary criticism, and the critical theorist René Wellek, asking for Leavis’s theoretical assumptions in his book *Revaluations*, points out the later rise of literary theory against criticism. Though F.

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R. Leavis resists offering theory of literary criticism, he hardly succeeds in avoiding theory. William Righter comments:

In following the vocabulary in which Leavis has attempted to establish the identity of 'one comprehensive essence' I have focused primarily on three areas of difficulty, where it has seemed as if the realisation of such a project became impossible: first the impossibility of formulating and describing the nature of the critical enterprise in terms which are proper and exclusive to it. Second, the impossibility of isolating the critical activity from the historical, social, psychological, indeed, alas philosophical and for Leavis, especially, moral vocabularies with which they are so deeply enmeshed. And finally, most pervasively and importantly, the impossibility of using the language of the particular case, the specific concrete language of critical comparison, without the use of general concepts and categories which relate concrete observations to a larger sphere of intelligibility.

(Righter 2014: 16-17)

Further, literary theory emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, with varied forms attacking liberal humanist positions: Marxist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, linguistic criticism and feminist criticism in the 1960s; structuralism and post structuralism in the late 1970s and the early 1980s; the new historicism and cultural materialism in the early 1980s; post colonialism, post modernism and black feminist criticism in the 1990s; followed by other theoretical forms.

In conceptual terms, the object of literary theory is, in Paul de Man's words, "no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment" (de Man 1988: 359). The conceptual subtlety and operative rigour of literary theory enables it to identify and expose the network of power. Paul de Man explains the reasons for the resistance to literary theory: "It upsets rooted ideologies by revealing the mechanics of their workings; it goes against a powerful philosophical tradition of which aesthetics is a prominent part; it upsets the established canon of literary works and blurs the borderlines between literary and non-literary discourse" (de Man 1988: 363). Further, this radical function of literary theory aims at itself also, as Paul de Man remarks: "Resistance may be a built-in constituent of its discourse, in a manner that would be inconceivable in the natural sciences and unmentionable in the social sciences" (de Man 1988: 363). This radical potential of literary theory problematizes the status of its discourse. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes in this context:

Whereas in other kinds of discourses there is a move toward the final truth of a situation, literature, even within this argument, displays that the truth of a human situation is the itinerary of not being able to find it. In the general discourse of the humanities, there is a sort of search for solutions, whereas in literary discourse there is a playing out of the problem as the solution, if you like.

(Chakravorty Spivak 2012: 104)

This exclusive disciplinary radicalism of literary theory isolates it from other disciplines like natural sciences and social sciences, with significant implications in academic and socioeconomic contexts.

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In addition to the problematic status of literary theory, it has also continuously absorbed elements from varied disciplines like psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy. And literary theory appears to allow a full play to the problematic status of an entrant order of thought which could have been restricted in its own provenance. William Righter comments on this provocative aspect of literary theory:

The critical institution has been formed of such diverse elements. For this omnivorous institution has a strange serendipity which leads one to ask why so many of the controversies that animate one's culture take place on critical ground more actively than in their place of origin, turning critics into amateur philosophers, psychoanalysts, sociologists, etc. Is it that criticism has accepted the influx that more rigorous disciplines would refuse? Yet we take this exogenous flow as natural to the operation of critical activity.

(Righter 2014: 204)

Literary theory, unlike other disciplines, on the one hand, is rather exclusive in deliberating on a problem, and not on its solution; and on the other hand, it is more inclusive, unlike other disciplines, in playing a host to mismatched fragments of other disciplines, kindling controversies. This poses serious issues in academic and socioeconomic contexts. The immense growth of science and technology, its ever widening scope and relevance, and its breathtaking rate of the production of refined versions has overshadowed, if not marginalized, literary studies. The relevance of literary theory, which is abstruse and problematic, struggles to be relevant to these present social contexts, facing an existential, disciplinary crisis. In an academic institution, a student, a representative of contemporary society, needs to find literary theory worth attending. Gerald Graff notes:

People need a sense of what an institution as a corporate body stands for in order to be able to enter—or to want to enter—into its issues, methods, and modes of talking and thinking. The low corporate visibility of literary studies prevents students from internalizing the institution's rituals or from seeing why it might be their interests to do so. To put it in the theoretical idiom, the legibility of the texts we teach depends on the legibility of the institutions in which we teach them. Illegibility in the “institutional text” reproduces itself in the illegibility of the written texts which are the object of study. If the institutional text is opaque, so are the texts mediated by the institution.

(Graff, Gerald 1989: 256)

The issue of the “low corporate visibility” of literary theory is associated also with its problematic status, which resists pedagogical process and an easy access to academic participation. And pedagogical discourse does require a subject's active contribution. Maria Eliza Mattosinho Bernardes comments:

Regarding the pedagogical activity, understood as the dialectical unity between teaching and learning (Bernardes, 2006), the relationship between the motive (the need for humanization through the access to human elaborations) and the activity objective (teaching and learning of culture elements elaborated by literate society) presupposes

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that tools should be produced by the subjects involved in the activities in order to enable its objectification in the concrete reality.

(Bernardes, Maria Eliza Mattosinho 2014: 735)

The uncertain and problematic status of literary theory resists a subject's effort to construct it in a meaningful way in a pedagogical activity. So, the issue of the "low corporate visibility" of literary studies, or literary theory, invites urgently its reviewing and redefining in view of its contemporary relevance and viability in pedagogical discourse. Literary theory, which is not unlike PDF (Portable Document Format), being readable but not alterable, needs to be available to pedagogical discourse. It also brings into focus the relations between theory and practice, and the potential of a theory of becoming practice to bring more corporate visibility.

Further, more conceptual complexity of a literary theory, requiring knowledge resources and exposure to negotiate it in a educational institution, will hardly be viable in a developing country where generally inadequate attention and allocation of funds is available to education in general, and still less of it is meant for higher education compared to primary and secondary education. The economists Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen observe in 2002 about the lack of priority given to education in India: "The remarkable neglect of elementary education in India is all the more striking given the widespread recognition, in the contemporary world, of the importance of basic education for economic development" (Drèze and Sen 2002:38) Further, even in recent times, compared to primary and secondary education, higher education is given still less allocation of funds in a developing country like India. In 2011-12 in India, expenditure incurred on primary and secondary education is about 80%. Further, 12.91% was the allocation to university and higher education, and 4.79% to technical education. So, about 18% of the combined funding of the central and the state government was allocated to the university, higher education and technical education (MHRD 2013:3) Further, an accepted criterion worldwide for international comparisons is expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP (Gross Domestic Product). Education has received the allocation of about 4% in India since 2006-07, evidencing the low priority given to education sector in India. About 0.76% of the GDP was allocated in 2011-12. The allocation to technical education and university and higher education has been about 1.34% of the GDP. Thus, the expenditure on higher education has been about 18% of the GDP in 2011-12. (MHRD 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, UGC 2013). Higher education should receive, as suggested by the National Knowledge Commission, 25% of the GDP (NKC 2009).

To address the survival of literary theory in different socioeconomic realities in developed and developing nations, its definition and application need to be experimented with and revised. Theory and practice could be viewed in a binary, oppositional way, but other ways of defining "theory" and "praxis" should be welcome to strike a balance between the necessity of theory as a radical critique, and its low corporate visibility, its pedagogical recalcitrance. Raymond Williams records various meanings of "theory" and "praxis," and a few of them appear to be quite promising and prospective to respond to the institutional and pedagogical contexts of literary theory. Williams note one sense of theory as "a scheme of ideas which explains practice" (Williams 1983: 316). Further, Raymond Williams comments on one of the meanings of "praxis": "The specialized modern sense comes from a development in German, c. 1840, in origin late Hegelian but now especially Marxist, where *praxis* is *practice* informed by theory and also, though less emphatically, theory informed by

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practice, as distinct both from *practice* uninformed by or unconcerned with theory and from theory which remains theory and is not put to the test of *practice*” (Williams 1983: 318, emphasis is Williams’). Theory in the sense of praxis, practice informed by theory, could be viable with theory’s potential for radical critique, pedagogical suitability and corporate visibility.

Literary theory can redefine itself as a more inclusive and participatory form which can use at the same time its rigour for formulating larger debates across the disciplines. Gerald Graff points out:

Here, it seems to me, is where theory can come in, “theory” conceived not as a specialized idiolect (though it will and should remain that at some level), but as the generalized language for staging conflicts in ways that increase rather than lessen institutional visibility. Theory is potentially the medium in which the literary, cultural, and educational conflicts which underlie professional differences can be worked through and made part of the informing context of literary education. Again, it is important to insist on the broad sense of “theory,” whereby a Matthew Arnold, an F. R. Leavis, a George Orwell, or an Edmund Wilson is just as much a theorist as any deconstructionist or post-structural feminist. The disparate vocabularies may prove incommensurable, but then something useful can always be learned from that.

(Graff, Gerald 1989: 263)

Literary theory, to address its existential crisis, needs to work as a language to locate and negotiate cultural conflicts in pedagogical context.

The ways of framing literary theory as visible, and so useful, and as useful, and so visible, could lead to its more contextualization and localization, making it more a praxis, “practice informed by theory,” in Raymond Williams’ sense. One way is to learn from the formative aspect, as far as possible, of a theory of natural science for its high degree of application and usefulness. In the case of natural science, scientists/ theorists often individuate a theory which may be true only for a few objects in the domain. Jody Azzouni remarks on the formulation of a theory in a natural science:

For purely illustrative purposes, let’s again treat scientific theories as collections of first-order sentences that scientific practitioners sometimes take to possess terms with fixed interpretations, and sometimes to possess terms open to varying interpretation (relative to a context of application).¹⁴ To begin with, the sentences of any scientific theory contain constants and predicate expressions. Let c_1, \dots, c_m be the constants, and P_1, \dots, P_q the various n -place predicates, $1 \leq m, q$, of a scientific theory L . An *interpretation* (O, M) of L is a model of the language of L , as in Sect. 1, except that—generally—not all of the objects in the domain O are real. Thus, *some*—but generally not all—of its constants $c_1, \dots, c_i, 0 \leq i \leq m$, are mapped by M to items in the world. The rest of the constants are *empty*.¹⁵ Similar remarks apply to the n -place predicates. I presuppose sentences with empty constants to nevertheless have truth values. The notion of “truth” in play, therefore, is deflationist, and not a “correspondence” one. More accurately, the presupposed notion of “truth” is compatible with correspondence, but only when all the constants in a sentence are nonempty. I refer the interested reader to other work for

further details and arguments.¹⁶ In any case, most of the theories scientists use are recognizably false of the domains they are applied to. That is, not *all* of the implications of such theories are true. Consider *TH*, the set of implications of some scientific theory *L*. What makes *L* valuable, with respect to an interpretation, are (some of) its *true* implications. These true implications are singled out by description, so that a scientist, when utilizing a scientific theory, commits herself *only* to the truth of the useful implications of *L* (and not to the rest of it). *A toy example.* Consider Ptolemaic astronomy (*Pt*). Imagine that the constants of *Pt* are interpreted as referring to the planets, the luminaries, various geometrical objects, etc. *Pt* also has predicates interpreted as characterizing positions of moving bodies, classes of mathematical functions, etc. The constants that refer to the various planets are nonempty; most of the other constants are empty. In addition, *Pt* is false: it doesn't describe the real locations of bodies. However, the *apparent-location consequences* of *Pt* (as projected onto a celestial sphere from the vantage point of the Earth) are true of those bodies, and it's those consequences that make *Pt* valuable.¹⁷

(Azzouni, Jody 2014: 2998-2999)

The way a scientific theory could be false of its domain to be applied to, and could be used in view of its true implications, mentioned in its description, ignoring other false implications, a literary theory could restrict itself to limited implications in its domain, and thus could be less formidable in rigour and complexity.

Further, theory could be developed in a specific context or region, as in the case of postcolonial theory, Indian literary theory and African literary theory. But, at the same time, the temptation to universalize it should be resisted, as Bill Ashcroft and others point out:

Post-colonial writing and literary theory intersect in several ways with recent European movements, such as postmodernism and poststructuralism, and with both contemporary Marxist ideological criticism and feminist criticism. . . . Despite the recognition of this relationship, the appropriation of recent European theories involves a number of dangers, the most threatening of which is the tendency to reincorporate post-colonial culture into a new internationalist and universalist paradigm. This incorporative practice is shared by both the apparently apolitical and ahistorical theories of poststructuralism and the socio-cultural and determinist theories based in contemporary Marxist thought.

(Ashcroft, Bill 2005: 153-54)

Literary theory needs to address the local, the contingent, with more local relevance and directness. This would also allow it a more social and corporate relevance and the consequent visibility.

Exploring the strategies for securing the survival and visibility of literary theory need not be commensurate with compromising its potential for radical critique. The issue is to address a contingent crisis, to appreciate history, and to theorize practice in those terms. It would not be wrong to say that the more the visibility of literary theory is endangered in a culture, the more literary theory requires to critique that culture.

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(I am grateful to Prof. Kishor Joshi and Ms. Kinjal Ahir for these five kinds of economic data.)

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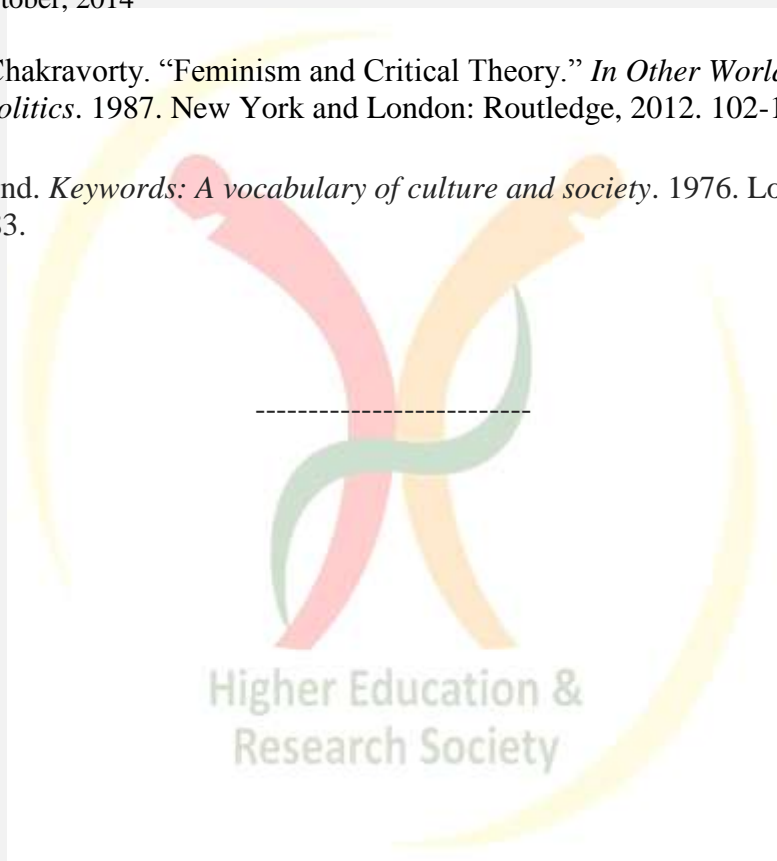
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