

Post-modern Schools of Literary Criticism**Introduction:**

Since the early twentieth century, literary criticism and critical theories have witnessed several changes. A vast range of tendencies and movements have shaped the way we analyse and interpret literary texts. The term post modernism is often applied to the literature and art after the Second World War. Postmodern critics reject the elitism, formal experimentation, the traditional aesthetics of beauty and a release from the orthodoxies of high culture. The effort of the post-modernist writing is to subvert the foundations of accepted modes of thought and experience. Some of the post-modern schools of literary criticism are as follows:

Deconstruction:

Deconstruction is one of the most influential of all the post-modernist theories. Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, inaugurated the theory of deconstruction in the late 1960s. Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" started a new movement in the US, influencing literary study the world over. Deconstruction has been regarded as a way of reading, a mode of writing and a way of challenging interpretations of texts. For Derrida, language is not a reliable source of communication as we believe it is. It does not possess the stability or solidity we think it possesses. It is fluid and slippery. Language is full of contradictions and associations. It is through language we conceive and perceive the world. In this system of language a spoken word is much closer to the original thought than a written word. Giving more importance to speech than writing is 'phonocentrism'. However, in the Western philosophy, descriptions of speech often rely on examples and metaphors related to writing. In effect, these texts describe speech as a form of writing, even in cases where writing is explicitly claimed to be secondary to speech. Writing does not require writer's presence but speech implies an immediate presence of the speaker. This coupling of 'writing' and 'speech' is an example of what Derrida calls a 'violent hierarchy'.

Language is the basic principle on which systems of thought are built or made. This language is also part of the structure. It provides us with a framework that produces our experiences. Language is unstable, slippery, dynamic, always spreading likely meanings. Literature which is made of language is unstable and dynamic. Meaning does lie in the text, it is rather created by the reader in the act of reading and keeps on changing from one reader to another. Deconstruction helps us to get to know the unreliability of the text. It means that a text has multiple meanings. Normal traditional interpretations do not recognise the conflicting ideologies of the text. A deconstructionist reading looks for meanings in the text that stand in conflict with what is considered as the main theme.

New Historicism:

The dominance of deconstruction was challenged by a new literary theory in the late 1970s and 1980s. Deconstruction was sceptical about the function of the language to carry and convey meaning. The

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new theory that developed placed its faith on the ‘psychic and physical’ reality of language. The American theorist and critic Stephen Greenblatt gave a wider currency to the term ‘New Historicism’. In his essay “Towards a Poetics of Culture” Greenblatt developed his idea of the poetics of New Historicism. New Historicism is influenced by post-modernist ideas, particularly by those of Foucault and Derrida. Foucault’s analysis of cultural history, his discussion of social structures in terms of power and the discursive practices that circulate its ideology are implied in the critical readings of New Historicism.

Traditional historians believed that history is an objective record of events. The events of the past present to us the world view of the earlier times. New Historicists, however, believe that we interpret the past events from our point of view and create a history. New Historicism is interested in history as text as recorded and represented in different documents. It deconstructs the traditional distinction between history and literature. It tries to redefine the relation between history and literature. History is another text like literature and literature is a cultural record which can tell us about the social life and social systems of the times when they were written. Therefore, literary text is one social discourse. Literary texts shape and in turn are shaped by historical contexts.

New Historicism encourages a parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts which belong to the same historical period giving them both equal importance. It questions the grand or master narratives. It attempts a reinterpretation of history as well as literary texts, and thereby tries to ‘defamiliarise’ the canonical texts by detaching them from the weight of the past.

Postcolonial Criticism

Postcolonialism is concerned with the economic, cultural and psychological effects of imperialism and emancipation from colonial rule. Till the mid-twentieth century a quarter of the world was under the rule of the colonies established by many European nations like France, England, Portugal, Spain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands. Great Britain was the single largest imperial power ruling over a quarter of the world by the end of the 19th century. By the mid-twentieth century, however, domination by Europe began to end, as colonized countries began successful independence movements. By 1980, Britain had lost all but a few of its colonial holdings.

As a reaction against the colonisation, post colonialism is a recent development that emerged during the late 1980s and in the early 1990s. It was formerly known as Commonwealth Studies. It deals mainly with the literatures of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Its aim is to analyse the interactions between the culture, customs, and history of indigenous peoples and of the colonial power that governed them. The discipline of post colonialism has attained wide currency on account of the influence of such works as Frantz Fanon’s “The Wretched of the Earth”, Edward Said’s “Orientalism”, Helen Tiffin and Bill Ashcroft’s “The Empire Writes Back”. The term post colonialism is used to refer to all the cultures affected by the imperial process. The colonisers expressed their superiority over the natives by calling them uncivilised and undermining their culture and literature. They were the center, ‘the self’ and the colonised were the margins ‘the others’. This

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approach of establishing the European culture as the ultimate standard by which to measure other cultures is called “Eurocentrism”.

Edward Said’s “Orientalism” is a pioneering work in the field of post colonialism. In his work “Orientalism” Said defines Eurocentrism as a western style for dominating and exercising their authority over the orient. The colonial subjects, in turn, began to undermine their own culture, literature and language and accepted the superiority of their colonisers. By means of the discourse of orientalism, Western cultural institutes have created stereotypes and general ideology about the orient as ‘the other’. They have helped to produce myths about the laziness, deceit and irrationality of the Orientals. Said states: “Knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.”

Gayatri Spivak Chakraborty is another influential postcolonial feminist deconstructionist critic. Her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” addresses the issues of gender and race. Her use of the term ‘Subaltern’ is influenced by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci. She uses the term ‘Subaltern’ for women, blacks, the colonised and the working class. The violence inflicted by Western forms of thought upon the East, the creation of ‘the third world’ are some of her concerns. Her work confronts the issues of the way the ‘Subaltern’ woman is constructed as absent or silent or not listened to. She says that women are ‘doubly effaced’ in the scheme of things.

Homi K Bhabha is a postcolonial critic who has developed some key concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, difference and ambivalence. His work challenges the notions of identity, culture and nation as coherent and unified entities that exhibit a linear historical development. The tendency of the colonial subjects of imitating the West is called ‘mimicry’ by Homi Bhabha. The colonial subjects developed a double consciousness or double identity whereby they perceived the world through the consciousness of the coloniser as well as through their own vision provided by their own culture.

Western canonical texts like Shakespeare’s “The Tempest”, Charlotte Bronte’s “Jane Eyre”, Jane Austen’s “Mansfield Park”, Rudyard Kipling’s “Kim” and Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” have been targets of colonial discourse analysis.

Cultural Studies:

Cultural Studies as an academic discipline was initially introduced by British academics in 1964. The term was used by Richard Hoggart when he founded the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. He was succeeded by Stuart Hall. From the 1970s Hoggart’s pioneering work created an international intellectual movement. Many cultural theorists employed Marxist methods of analysis, exploring the relationship between cultural forms and that of the political economy.

Cultural Studies is not a unified theory. It encompasses different approaches, methods and academic perspectives. The focus of cultural studies is on the political dynamics of contemporary culture and its

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historical foundations, conflicts and defining traits. It combines feminist theory, social theory, political theory, history, philosophy, literary theory, media theory, film/video studies, communication studies, museum studies and art history to study cultural phenomena in various societies. It seeks to understand how meaning is generated, disseminated and produced from the social, political and economic spheres within given culture.

Cultural Studies tries to subvert the distinctions in traditional criticism between “high literature” and “high art” and what were considered the lower forms that appeal to the larger masses. Their focus is not on the established literary canon but on popular fiction, best-selling romances, journalism, advertising and other arts. In literature its aim is to pay attention to such works which have been marginalized or excluded by the aesthetic ideology of white European and American males. Politically radical exponents of cultural studies believe that existing power structures are dominated by privileged gender, race and class. They try to reform these power structures through their writings and teachings.

Gender Studies:

Gender Studies is based on the concept that while sex is determined by anatomy, gender is a social construct. Gender Studies, therefore, focus on “differing concepts of gender and their role in writing, reception, subject matter, and evaluation of literary works” says M. H. Abrams. Simone de Beauvoir made a profound statement in the context of gender: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” This is a very profound statement in the context of gender. Gender Studies is used to refer to the social and cultural construct of masculinity and femininity and not to the state of being male or female. It is concerned with the role of males and varying conceptions of masculinity in the course of social, political and artistic history. Most of the methodologies adopted in gender studies are inspired by feminist criticism.

Gender Studies is an umbrella term that includes feminist criticism, men’s studies, gay or queer studies and lesbian studies. It is an interdisciplinary study which encompasses various fields such as literature, language, geography, history, anthropology, cinema, public health, law, human development. The intersection of gender with other categories of identity like race, ethnicity, location, sexuality, class, nationality comes under its purview.

Conclusion:

Post-modern schools of literary criticism have revolutionised the way we read and consider literary texts. These theories have rejected the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of art and literature. These theories celebrate the possibility of multiple meanings or a complete lack of meaning within a literary work. Many theories overlap and are interdisciplinary in nature. They offer newer ways of thinking and evaluating literary works.