

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SUBALTERNITY: A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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1. INTRODUCTION

A logical discussion of subalternity of any kind needs to be based on its epistemological premises. Epistemology, with its traditional roots set in philosophy, upholds strong limitations in its entry into the multi-disciplinary domain of information science that remoulds the very character of human communication today. Though the dynamics of representation is influenced by fast changes encompassing the new means and methods of communication, we tend to believe that they have not much to do with the familiar semiotics and critical theory in the literature and the arts. Increasing application of information and communication technology (ICT) in the arts and literature is obvious but, there is hesitation to explore the avenues of information science to facilitate better interpretation of the post modern world and its shifting paradigms. A cursory glance over the critical theories corroborates this view and suggests for further theoretical perspectives fitting to the cultural contexts under transformation. This would probably help a better definition of the concept of subalternity and related issues in representation and reading in creative realms.

2. LITERARY THEORIES AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

We have profusely used literary theories over the years to analyse, describe, interpret, compare, and evaluate the representational exposition in the arts and literature. Theories of modernism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism have heavily loaded our recent discourses with a theoretical mystique. The protagonists of these theories seem to have drawn interdisciplinary resources from philosophy, sociology, language, anthropology, history, politics, and psychology, but less from information science. Along the process, a fresh array of social themes and

their aesthetic implications to our sensibilities and cultural dynamics has come to focus. Colonialism, post-colonialism, communism, Marxism, communalism, spiritualism, environmentalism, nationalism, regionalism, internationalism, globalism and terrorism are some of them. The problem of subalternity becomes so evident in them that the springboard of literary criticism is electrified by the dialectics of class conflicts characterised by increasing diversity of interests in postmodernism. This is an essential feature of a world that is abundant in information and hence vibrant in its behaviour. It is manifested well in its literary products too.

Some theoreticians of postmodernism interpret it in socio-economic terms and hold the view that it signifies a decentralised phase of the development of the market place. To some, it is a cultural change most favourable for eclectic choices. It undermines the value-based sensibilities of modernism and marks the end of meta-narratives. There is an unfolding of pluralism where we feel short of an adequate 'objective' account of reality. The digital divisions in the new forms of representations add to the intensity of this experience. The freedom in individualist choices and the agony of the fragmented inevitable go hand in hand providing a dualistic experience. It is emancipative for the mind from the existing structural weight of knowledge, but gradually reveals the disharmony germinating from the power conflicts embedded in multiple hierarchies.

The linguistic explorations of Chomsky and Derrida, the epistemological analysis of power structures by Foucault and the psycho-analytical studies of Lacan have been heavily utilised in critical theory. Derrida's deconstruction strikes an extremely different note on the concepts of 'text' and 'reading'. Here, the creative writing and reading are both cultural activities. The strategy of deconstruction interrogates the oppositional structures of meaning and thereby questions the hierarchically organised conceptual orders. This has found a pivotal place in critical theory today and bears implications to the study of subalternity.

Foucault's approach has closer links with information for its epistemological foundations. Chomsky's research is on the complementary function of language and the mind and he hints at the significance of micro level biological and linguistic explanations for which the modern natural sciences are not yet willing, to reduce the mental to the physical. Lacan's psycho-analytic plane concentrates on the study of the unconscious as a linguistic structure and proceeds to explain the real, imaginative and symbolic representations. This is also an area marked by oppositional structures and hence the hegemonic forces and the question of subalternity. Feminism finds a more comfortable position within Lacanian thoughts.

All these theories pursue the dynamics of representations in diverse

dimensions. All of them deal explicitly or implicitly with supra and/or infrastructures within the individual, the society, the larger universe and the media. Though the semiotic principles underlying different representational media vary, there is need for some logic of representation that cuts across the semiotic media. Since all representations are signs but not the other way round, logic of representation that involves the intentionality becomes essential. Probably, it indicates the relevance of applying a sound theory of information for possible explorations.

Information Science is a meta-discipline that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, consequent to the quantum leaps in science and technology information and publications. It holds a strong social and human dimension beyond that of information technology with which we have equated it. It is also centred on the representation and organization of information and plays a central role in the evolution of information society.

Information society is generally understood as an inevitable change of phase in the cultural history of humanity. There is a new form of power that immerses people in a virtual reality of images and simulations. When the real and the unreal cannot be made out, the public is easily manipulated through intentional representations created by unscrupulous power. Emergence of new cultural icons and practices are part of that. It is a postmodern society where information is the chief economic, social and cultural motor. Information thus assumes the status of a master resource with the potential to harness all other resources, cognitive as well as physical. Information society places excessive emphasis on the generation, processing, storage, dissemination, distribution, utilization and evaluation of information. Information, for convenience, is equated with knowledge and hence knowledge industries are assigned extreme importance in planning and developmental processes. Information technology has been instrumental to the evolution of information society, but information science has a wider social dimension with its theoretical basis. There is need for more holistic and deeper explorations in the study of representational dynamics in this context.

3. INFORMATION

Hundreds of definitions exist on 'information' with no consensus on the underlying concept. To the philosophers, it is a category and they provide the most abstract and comprehensive range of definitions. In psychology, it is a variable dealing with sensory perception, comprehension and other psychological processes. In communication theory information is

embedded in the message that is represented by signals, symbols, and signs. Language takes up the representational function while providing the structure and serving as the most powerful medium for communication.

In a narrower sense, information is considered in terms of signals and messages for decisions involving no cognitive processing. Communication engineering, mathematical physics and cybernetics have defined information in this view. In the Mathematical Theory of Communication 'information is that which adds to a representation', that 'logically justifies alteration of, or reinforcement of a representation'. In Information Theory, it is considered negative entropy because information is ordered data and entropy is a measure of disorder. In the extreme mechanistic view, information does not have meaning to exist. Human beings are just epiphenomena without having a component role in its creation/generation.

The trends in defining information in the narrower sense have strong association with the developments in information and communication technology. Perhaps, the imaginative poetic mind of T.S.Eliot could sense the flutter of the postmodern information society earlier to Norbert Wiener's conception of cybernetics as expressed in his poem, 'Chorus from the rock' in 1947:

Where is wisdom, we have lost in knowledge,
Where is knowledge, we have lost in information?'

Probably, it made a note on the possible technological developments that would ignore the substrate of the mind which provided the micro-space for signalling patterns of myriad complexities involving various levels of integration (or disintegration?) leading to changing phases in culture. It took more than one decade again for J.C.R.Licklider to describe the man-computer symbiosis which envisaged cooperative interaction between human mind and electronic computer to perform beyond calculations and to enter into the formulative phases of thinking.

4. CLASSIFICATION AND COMMUNICATION

Communication is essentially understood as a process of making up one's own personality through perception and symbolization. In communication, classification is concerned not only with the cognitive processing of records but their contexts too. The motivation or intentionality of the text is linked to the wider social context of cultures or problem at hand. Here,

information is defined in simpler terms as that which is communicated. Communication by itself is a sharing process. Foucault says, 'it is necessary also to distinguish power relations from relationships of communication which transmit information by means of a language, a system of signs or any other symbolic medium. . . Power relations, relationships of communication and objective capacities should not therefore be confused.'

Information being a kind of energy brings changes in the state of knowledge of the recipient. In short, information is shared knowledge. The study of the signs, signals and symbols and their ontological and relational structures has its relevance in information science. But the metaphorical language of literary and artistic communication cuts across complex dimensions that are strange to the transparent methods of science communication. However, the need for structure in articulation and the key role of classification is very basic to every form of human communication.

The concept of class and the process of classification have been applied in the history of human discourses in several ways. Information science attributes to classification a central position as a cognitive resource. It is a neural necessity for communication. Classification is an intellectual resource that enables man for choices and development of structures in articulation. Every artefact manifests as structures conceived by man as individuals and institutions.

Classification derives this ability from its right for definitions. A perfect definition, if there is one possible, leaves no statements in the effective projection of the major characteristics of the class. A definition for an entity cannot remain stable for long as its boundaries are determined by the experiences of the authority who defined it.

Even the most objective knowledge of the sciences is subject to this limitation, in spite of the availability of sharp methodological and technological tools for exploring the material structures. As the representation in the arts and literature tends to be mimetic rather than factual, the subjectivity is greater and so more intense, transitional, transcendental and poly-dimensional in character. It leaves infinite and infinitesimal openings for the widening spectrum of imaginative interpretations and meanings. This increases the scope for redefinitions and continues to enrich the critical theory in turn.

The definitions, on the other hand, are influenced by the interests of the authorities behind them. The characteristics of the class, once identified, selected and established by the author/artist, introduce rigidity into the underlying structure and seek its affirmation and sustenance through

consensus. Consensus is achieved through the appeal it carries to the senses and interests of others. Power structures have a greater role in this regard.

In this sense classification can be interpreted as the basic inbuilt tool in the human system of neural communication that wields and moulds the cultural processes forming part of every creative work. In short, representational dynamics is inherently linked to the classificatory infrastructure of human mind and its neural communications process.

5. POWER HIERARCHIES AND SUBALTERNITY

Classification, placed at the heart of communication, determines the structures of the discourses in the form of hierarchies. Each structure is an order in itself. Classification determines the underlying authority in the text and art work. The term 'subaltern' denotes a status below in rank and it implies resistance to order. At the same time, subalternity is an inevitable characteristic of classified order (hierarchies). Thus, subalternity in general is not a question. It has relevance to the context of specific classes and the why and how of classification in historical and cultural contexts. The concept of 'class' in this respect needs a redefinition to suit the classificatory process of communicating information. It agrees with Derrida that reading is a cultural process through which we deconstruct the order and content of the text.

The withering of modernism in the new perspective can be viewed as the result of information overload and the consequent challenges in structuring holistic systems. As a natural course, the fragmentation of meta structures has taken place. The postmodern structure provided space for many subaltern classes like feminist and dalit groups. Instead of switching nostalgically back to modernism, new conglomerations of empowering subaltern cultures on a regional basis may prove more fruitful. But the challenges ahead are many when new configurations are attempted through contemporary writings. The foremost question to be answered is 'whose writings- the subaltern or upper class?' For those who consider this a question absurd, remains a further set of questions to be answered- 'Can we revive the renaissance spirit of self-renewal for a fresh and healthy interaction for the coexistence and development of eclectic cultures? If so, how can we deconstruct the representational structures in the arts and literature in an expanding global information society which is committed to material development alone?'

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