_____

A Brief Critical Study on Structuralist Criticism

_____

Dr. Bharat Arvind Tupere

Assistant Professor,Department of English,Snat Rawool maharaj Mahavidyalay, Kudal,
Dist. Sindhudurg

_____

Abstract:

Structuralism is one of the critical theories which stresses on the 'structure' of literature. Often, we did not accept the new ideas because it often baffled and we give anti-intellectual reaction to it.   It is true with the structuralism. It approaches toward literature and challenged some of the most cherished beliefs of the ordinary reader. We had long felt that literary work is the child of the author's creative life. It expresses the author's essential self. The text is spiritual or humanistic assumption with an author's thoughts and feelings. While reading it, we enter in that different world. We have another fundamental assumption that good books always tell the truth of human life. The novels and the plays try to 'tell things as they really are.'

Structuralism rejects all these above-mentioned assumptions and it tries to persuade us that the author is dead and that literary discourse has no truth function at all. Ronald Barthes argued that writers only have power to mix already existing writings, to reassemble or redeploy them; writers can not use writing to express themselves, but only to draw upon that immense dictionary of language and culture which is 'always already written.'

Linguistic Background:

Swiss Linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure published a single book, Course in General Linguistic (1915). He provides two key ideas in order to answer to the questions 'what is the object of linguistic investigation? And what is the relationship between words and things?' he makes distinction between langue and parole. Langue is the language and parole is the individual utterance. In other words, langue is the social aspect of language; it is the share system which we unconsciously draw upon as speakers. Parole is the individual's realization of the system in actual instances of language.

He rejected the idea that language is a word-heap gradually accumulated over time and that its primary function is to refer to things in the world. Words are not symbols, which correspond to referents but rather are 'signs' which are made up of two parts (like two sides

of a

_____

paper). Sign is a mark, either written or spoken, called a 'signifier', and a concept (thought after mark is made), called as 'signified'. He rejected the following diagram:

Symbol = things

And he replaced it with:

Signifier

Sign = ----------

Signified

The elements of the language acquire meaning not as a result of some connection between words and things, but only as parts of a system of relations.

For example, in traffic signals red light (signifier) indicates the concept or thought as stop (signified). Green signified as go and amber as prepare for red or green. According to Saussure the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary: there is no natural bond between red and stop. Language is one of the sign systems. The science of this system is called 'semiotics' or 'semiology'. The structuralists and semiologists belong to the same theoretical universe. Structuralism is often linked with the system which do not involve 'sings' as such (kinship relations) but which can be treated in the same way as sign-system. The American philosopher C.S. Peirce made a useful distinction between three types of sign: 1. Iconic (where the sign resembles its referents e.g. a picture of a ship or a road-sign for falling rocks.); 2. Indexical (where the sign is associated with its referents, e.g. smoke as a sign of fire); 3. Symbolic (where the sign has an arbitrary relation to its referents, e.g. language).

The first major development in structuralist studies were based upon advances in the study of phonemes, the lowest-level elements in the language system.

In short, structuralists try to uncover the 'grammar', 'syntax', or 'phonemic' pattern of a particular human systems of meaning, whether they be those of kinship, garments, narrative discourse, myths or totems.

Structuralist Narratology:

If we apply the linguistic model to literature, we appear to be in a methodological loop. It is a mistake to identify literature and language. It is truth that literature uses language as its medium. But the structure of literature is not identical with the structure of the language. The units of literary structure did not coincide with those of language. The structuralist narrative technology was developed from certain linguistic analogies. Syntax – the rules of sentences construction- is the basic model of narrative rules. Tzvetan Todorov and other talk of narrative syntax. The most elementary syntactic division of the sentence unit is between subject and predicate; 'the knight (subject) slew the dragan with his sword (predicate)'. If we substitute the word knight with any name or axe for sword, we will retain the same essential structure.

_____

Vladimir Propp developed his theory of Russian fairy tales. His approach we could understand if we compare the subject of a sentence with the typical actions in such stories. He made the thirty-one functions. A function is the basic unit of the narrative language and refer to the significant actions which from the narrative. The last group of functions is as follows:

25. A difficult task is proposed to the hero.
26. The task is resolved.
27. The hero is recognized.
28. The false hero or villain is exposed.
29. The false hero is given a new appearance.
30. The villain is punished.
31. The hero is married and ascends the throne.

These functions are present in any fairy tales or even in every story, novel or play. If we apply it to the Oedipus Rex then it requires more explanation. In the Oedipus myth, Oedipus is set the task of solving the riddle of the sphinx; the task is resolved; the hero is recognized; he is married and ascends the throne. However, Oedipus is also false hero and the villain; he is exposed (he murdered his father on the way to Thebes and married his mother, the queen), and punishes himself. Prop had added seven 'spheres of action' or role of the thirty-one functions: villain, donor (provider), helper, princess (sought-after person) and her father, dispatcher, hero (seeker or victim), false hero. The tragic myth of Oedipus requires the substitution of 'mother/queen and husband for 'princess and her father'. One character plays the several roles, or several characters can play the same role. Oedipus is both hero, provider (he averts Thebes' plague by solving the riddle), false hero, even villain. Claude Levi-Strauss, the structuralist anthropologist, analyses the Oedipus myth in truly structuralist manner. He calls the units of myth 'mythemes. They are organized in binary oppositions. He made simple generalization into two views. 1. That they are born from the earth; 2. That they are born from the coition. The mythemes are grouped on one side or the other of the anti-thesis between 1. The overvaluation of kinship ties (Oedipus marries his mother; Antigone buries her brother unlawfully); and 2. The undervaluation of kinship (Oedipus kills his father; Eteocles kills his brother).

A. J. Greimas, in his *Semantique Structurale* (1966) offers an elegant streaming of Propp's theory. While Propp focused on a single genre, Greimas aims to arrive at the universal "grammar' of narrative by applying semantic analysis of sentence structure. He added three pairs of binary oppositions which include all six roles:
Subject/ Object
Sender/ Receiver
Helper/ Opponent

_____

The pairs describe three basic patterns which perhaps recur in all narrative:

1. Desire, search, or aim (subject/object).
2. Communication+ (sender/receiver).
3. Auxiliary support or hindrance (helper/opponent).

If we apply these to Sophocles 'Oedipus the King, we arrive at a more penetrating analysis than when using Propp's categories:

1. O searches for the murder of Laius. Ironically, he searches for himself (he is both subject and object)
2. Apollo's oracle predicts O's sins. Teiresias, Jocasta, the messenger and the herdsman all, knowingly or not, confirm its truth. The play is about O's misunderstanding of the message.
3. Teiresias, Jocasta try to prevent O from discovering the murderer. The messenger and the herdsman unwittingly assist him in the search. O himself obstruct the correct interpretation of the message.

He reduced Propp's thirty-one functions to twenty, and group then into three structures (syntagms): 'contractual;', 'performative' and 'disjunctive'.

Contract (or prohibition)> violation > punishment

Lack of contract (disorder) > establishment of contract (order)

The Oedipus narrative has the first structure: he violates the prohibition against patricide and incest, and punishes himself.

The work of Tzvetan Todorov is a summation of Propp, Greimas and others. All the syntactic rules of language are rested in their narrative guise- rules of agency, predication, adjectival and verbal functions, mood and aspect, and so on. The minimal unit of narrative is the 'preposition', which can be either an 'agent' (e.g. person) or a 'predicate (e.g. an action). By his method we get following structure:

X is king   X marries Y

Y is X's mother   X kills Z

Z is X's father

X is Oedipus, Y is Jocasta and Z is Laius. The basic sequence can be made up of five propositions forms a sequence.

Equilibrium^1 (e.g. Peace)

Force^1 (Enemy invades)

Disequilibrium (War)

Force^2 (Enemy is defeated)

Equilibrium^2 (Peace on new terms)

3. **Metaphor and Metonymy:**

Roman Jacobson has worked on Ronald Barth's line of binary oppositions. Actually he was working with aphasia children. He found that these children are suffering from language

_____

difficulty like they do not know the similar words and do not have any idea about content or reference of meaning. For him, language works two fold- that is metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor means when one select one word from a group of similar words and metonymy means when one substitute one word for another word. Metonymy is based upon contiguity or association of words and their meanings. He explains that poetry uses symbolic writing by using both metaphor and metonymy because they rely on resemblance and imaginative substitution.

Application to literature:

This type of criticism is very useful to apply on literary work of art. Like new criticism, it does not focus on background – historical, economical biographical etc., rather it focuses on what grammar- units, structure the text is having and how it construct the meaning of that text. If we take an example of John Donne's The Flea, we can effectively apply this criticism. There are binary oppositions in this poem, the units or structures used in the poem are like – innocence/ experience, physical love/ spiritual love and sin/purity. These contrasts made the effective meaning of the poem. In reality, the flea is itself sign, which act as signifier and signified is union of lovers or physical love. The flea is symbolic unit which represent intimacy marriage and love. If we look at narrative pattern of the poem then we can find that- 1. The fleas has bitten both lover and his beloved. 2. Their blood mingled inside the belly of the flea which represent both marriage temple and honeymoon bed, 3. Thus, represent that before marriage if they physically come together and having intercourse does not mean a sin. Therefore, the poem is actually an argument by the speaker of the poem who tried to convince his beloved to yield herself physically to him. Moreover, the poem's meaning is not in individual lines but in the relationship between ideas. The flea is marriage bed and killing it means breaking the sacred union. Thus, structuralism helps to discover units, structure or grammar of the text from its internal systems.

To conclude, structuralism is one of the scientific approach of criticism which systematically discover the structures or grammar of the literary texts. It began with Ferdinand de Saussure, it focuses on the units or structures' importance in construction of its meaning. Although it has some limitations, but it has remained one of the fundamental theory of literary criticism that assist to comprehend the texts that how it produces meanings through patterns and grammar.

_____

References:

Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker. A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory. 5th ed., Pearson, 2005.

Nayar, Pramod K. Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism. Pearson, 2010.

Barry, Peter. Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory. 3rd ed., Manchester University Press, 2009.

Donne, John. "The Flea." The Norton Anthology of English Literature, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 9th ed., W. W. Norton, 2012.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. Course in General Linguistics. Translated by Wade Baskin, McGraw-Hill, 1966.