

Literature and the Contemporaneity of Multi-disciplinary Domain: A Critique

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Abstract

The ascent of the idea of discipline owes significantly to the turn of events – social, political and intellectual – that the 19th century brought in its train. These changes were only apparently sudden as they had a history of their own, that ripened by the time the 20th century dawned on the world. This wave of change initiated in the 14th Century with the decline of feudalism, modified into a colonial wave leading to the establishment of the mighty British Empire and finally raised its two-headed facet, of virtue and vice, towards the dawn of the 19th century, in the form of industrialization. The 20th century was the era that faced the repercussions of the excesses of industrialization and attempted to contain them. Life, in the fast-paced new avatar, became narrower and specialized, restricted to one's own life as an individual rather than as a social being.

The new order foregrounded a life that was steeped in rote and a fixed routine with little or no space for compromising the status quo. Consequently, the modern age was an age of blind pursuits of a mono-perspectivized life. Each knew theirs as a kaleidoscopic view of the world, but, given the order of the day. The defining characteristics of literature, in the contemporary times, amongst other things, have revolved around the notion of Multi-disciplinarity. While on the one hand, the theories have brought literature under the domain of multi-disciplinarity, there have been voices that have, vehemently or subtly, opposed the idea. This opposition, however, has not been along the 'expected' lines of literature not being multi-disciplinary, but has emphasized on multi-disciplinarity as being one of the salient qualities of literature, not in the contemporary times, but since times immemorial. The paper attempts an assessment of this 'budding' trend in Literature and the 'contemporariness' of the concept.

Keywords: Literature, Contemporaneity, Multi-disciplinary, Culture Studies, Trans-disciplinary

The word "Multi-disciplinary" is a compound of "Multi" and "Discipline". While "multi" refers to the simultaneous presence of more than one; "Discipline" derives itself from the Latin words *discipulus*, meaning "pupil", and *disciplina*, meaning teaching. "Discipline", then, is a field of teaching where specifically directed knowledge is imparted to the students. "Multi-disciplinary",

then, denotes an approach wherein various branches of knowledge come together and work in co-ordination and tandem to produce a desired result.

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One explicit implication and repercussion of this new *avatar* was the ascendancy of categorized and ‘chamberized’ academic professions that were designated the nomenclature of “Disciplines”. Consequently, the idea of education became sectorized into literary studies, management, psychology, commerce, etc., with one discipline claiming and priding in its uniqueness, distinction from others and often, a feeling of “self’s” superiority and the “other’s” inferiority. The pursuit of expertise in this highly specialized world, academically and professionally led to a life that grew barren of novelty and of long withstanding principles of morality.

Voices against this Disciplinary approach found little space in the era as it was obsessed with the idea of having specific research areas and requirements. Such voices were a minority and the disciplines gradually froze, thereby creating their own specialized worlds. Consequently, the 20th century saw an unprecedented rise of a ‘closed’ life and specialized professional and academic branches.

The implications were felt in literature as an obvious repercussion, given the fact that literature, traditionally, picks up from “what is”. These specializations found their way into literature through the first half of the 20th Century and narrowed the scope of literature in accordance with the principles of life that was devoid of any comprehensive outlook. The increasing impetus on ‘specialization’ saw a shift from Criticism to Theory in the appreciation of literature, thereby

standing herald to a trend in literature that promoted specialized interpretations of a text on the parameters of any one of the many ‘chamberized’ disciplines.

The domain of theory in the 20th century began with New Criticism which advocated “Closed Reading” of texts, cancelling out elements beyond the text as redundant to the appreciation of a text. Closely connected to it was Formalism that too advocated the quest for “literariness” within a text. Marxism, another theoretical approach, focussed on assessment of a literary text through the perspective of class and social exploitation emanating from class distinctions. Psychoanalysis, meanwhile, emphasized on viewing literature through the lens of id, ego and super ego. Structuralism, for once, attempted a shift to a more universal outlook towards literature but it was largely ‘specifically universal’ in that it sought to trace a text backwards to a universal trait rather than looking at the presence of life in a text. Post-structuralism stepped up foregrounding the idea of lack of meaning, thereby compromising any probability of representing life through literature.

A text, however, can hardly be delimited to these parameters of interpreting them, as it is practically untenable to produce a text keeping in mind only a particular parameter. To place it differently, a text, howsoever hard a writer may attempt, if at all, shall go beyond these theoretical paradigms and cover areas larger than the stronghold of specific theories. Moreover, there prevailed a line of thought that championed the cause of synthesis of specialized theories to reach a “genuine” and comprehensive analysis of a text and, in turn, understanding of man. This line of thought evinced that a text needs to be multifariously interpreted, applying more than one line of theory simultaneously, to have a proper understanding of it because literature’s inherent nature is to reflect life as a whole. Lawrence, in “Why the Novel Matters” opines, “Nothing is important but life. And for myself, I can absolutely see life nowhere but in the living” (Lawrence). Being alive, living, is a metaphorical reference to the idea of creating organic intellectuals and this, according to Lawrence, is explicitly found in the Novel, symbolic of literature. He says, “The novel is the one bright book of life” and that is what only a conglomeration of theories can achieve.

This theoretical specialization, however, led to the creation of a false consciousness amongst the readers and the society in general. Surrounded, as they were, by highly impenetrable walls of meta-discourses, as Stuart Hall calls them, the individual was overawed by a limited view of the world. Eliot says:

Religious thought and practice, philosophy and art, all tend to become isolated areas cultivated by groups in no communication with each other. The artistic sensibility is impoverished...and the vestige of manners may be left to a few survivors of a vanishing class who, their sensibility untrained by either religion or art and their minds unfurnished with the material for witty conversation, will have no context in their lives to give value to their behaviour. And deterioration on the higher levels is a matter of concern, not only to the group, which is visibly affected, but to the whole people (“The Three Senses...” 98-99).

However, after having exhausted all the aspects of specialization, and witnessing its effects in the form of a highly volatile world devoid of any universality and universal values, a comprehensive approach to life was sought. A new world order, that increasingly overlapped, culturally and economically, made it pertinent to establish an order where various aspects of life were connected to each other. This comprehensive approach was given the nomenclature “multi-disciplinarity” and it seeped into the social order of events with the advent of post-colonialism and the increasing influence of a rapidly shrinking world.

A trend that emerged in this phase of Multi-disciplinarity was Culture Studies, an approach that emphasized on an idea of culture being a concept that encompassed all the aspects of human life, erstwhile categorized as isolated “disciplines”. Culture, as expostulated by Culture Studies, was defined as the sum total of all the components of human life that, may or may not, be found in one individual, but are central to a civilization. Eliot, in “The Three Senses of Culture” opines, “it is the culture of the society that is fundamental, and it is the meaning of the term "culture" in relation to the whole society that should be examined first” (93).

The new notion of culture, then, emerged as what T. S. Eliot defines in “The Three Senses of Culture: “...culture is the one thing that we cannot deliberately aim at. It is the product of a variety of more or less harmonious activities, each pursued for its own sake: the artist must concentrate upon his canvas, the poet upon his typewriter, the civil servant upon the just settlement of particular problems as they present themselves upon his desk, each according to the situation in which he finds himself” (92). The implications of this concept were manifold and re-defined the parameters and paradigms of the social order. The foremost and most significant repercussion was the paradigmatic shift from a specialized approach to a more general and all-absorbing approach to understanding life.

Culture Studies seeped into literature and was welcomed as a new literary trend that was multi-disciplinary in nature. Much like it did with “disciplines”, it marked a significant shift in the interpretation of literature. Culture Studies, with its salient principle of the cultural context, became a critical approach to evaluate a literary text. The induction of the cultural context, then, apparently, led to the advent of Multi-disciplinarity in literature. It advocated an approach to literature where literature was to be a reflection of culture prevailing in the society at a particular time. In consonance with the definition of culture, literature emerged as a conglomeration of disparate elements prevailing in an order.

Like culture, as proponents of Culture Studies assert, defies any finalizing discourses, so does literature of the post-modern times defy any attempt at the creation of transcendental and foundational narratives. Stuart Hall, in “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies” asserts that culture “refuses to be a master discourse or a meta-discourse of any kind” (278) and advocates a “dialogic approach to theory” (278). Hall, in the same essay also highlights the significance of “positionality” in the principle of culture, a term which finds an equivalent in literature as “points-of-view” or “perspectives”, different ways of looking at a text, all different, but relevant to the comprehensive understanding of the text.

However, this ‘new’ trend, the “multi-disciplinarity”, as it is called, when assessed closely, seems to have predecessors. Literature has always been a representation of life and the traditional, pre-modern approaches to literature, focussed on literature being a reflection of the society, comprising individuals in its entirety. Plato, in his *Republic*, even in his repudiation of literature and its virtue asserted this interconnectedness inherent in literature. He **opines** in “Book X”, “And so, when we hear persons saying that the tragedians, and Homer, who is at their head, know all the arts and all things human, virtue as well as vice, and divine things too, for that the good poet cannot compose well unless he knows his subject...”. The subject of a poet, says Plato, is “all things human” implying an inherent quality of literature of representing and reflecting, glorifying or degrading what Lawrence calls “being alive” in his essay “Why the Novel Matters”. Aristotle in his *Poetics* asserts, “Tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a serious magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions”. He, in his assertion of literature, moves beyond the author and through the reader highlighted the emotional aspect of human nature as also being central to literature.

Longinus, in “On the Sublime”, elaborates that one root factor to sublimity is “...the collocation of members, a single one of which if severed from another possesses in itself nothing remarkable, but all united together make a full and perfect organism.” The idea of a comprehensive “organism” is central to Longinus’ argument towards the sublime in literature. “Whoever knows what he owes his country and friends, What love is due to a parent, brother, or guest, What’s required of a senator or a judge in office, What’s the role of a general in war, he’ll certainly Know how to represent each character fittingly. I’d advise one taught by imitation to take life, and real behaviour, for his examples, and extract living speech”, says Horace in *Ars Poetica*. His treatise, too, focuses on the idea of literature ideally being a product of imitating life and extracting living speech.

Philosophy has borrowed from literature, hinting at multi-disciplinarity, as the latter deals with life. Sidney asserts in *The Defense of Poetry*, “... Mistress Philosophy very often borrow the masking raiment of Poesy”, hinting at a multi-disciplinary approach in literature. Dryden forwards this comprehensive approach in literature when he opines, “We draw not therefore after their lines, but those of Nature; and having the life before us,” Romantic Criticism always focussed on the life of the common man. In *A Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth opines that, “The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life,...”. The history of Critical Approach to literature, then, has relentlessly argued towards literature being an art that reflects life as a whole.

Life, being alive, then, is the central ingredient to both traditional approaches to literature and contemporaneity. Traditional literature emphasized on the idea of capturing the essence of life, in all its hues and colours beyond the individual, as an organism, as the primary principle. The perspective of cultural context that Culture Studies offered to literature, then, merely re-foregrounded what literature always stood for: a comprehensive view of life that includes man alive, a part of the larger order of things around him. It is evident that the apparent new domain of Multi-disciplinarity only

revitalized the very universal values that literature always cherished and practised: To educate and entertain, as Horace puts it in *Ars Poetica*.

Moreover, analysing the dominant critical trends in traditional literature and the ‘new’ domain of Multi-disciplinarity, it emerges that even multi-disciplinarity is not the exact term that defines Literature. It has, precisely, catered to life as a whole, taking into account all the disparate experiences and aspects of life essential to defining life. It has freely borrowed from and provided material to other disciplines leading to enrichment on either side. In other words, it has always sought and prided in a synthesis of all the intellectual disciplines through its salient quality of subsuming everything. Hence, to put it in terminologies, literature is more of a “trans-disciplinary” domain. This idea of trans-disciplinarity of literature, while being as old as literature, also opens up the prospect of a world that is essentially open-ended, engaging in a fruitful dialogue to produce a better living place – a place that offers space and voices to all and learns from them as well. It is essential for the survival of the human race, because, as Bakhtin says:

Two Voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence (252).

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