Text and Reading Exercises in Hermeneutics -

Applying Hermeneutics Models for an Analysis and Interpretation of Malayalam Novels

P. M. Girish, Ph.D.

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Introduction

M. Leelavathy, well known Malayalam critic, states that she studies a creative work, neither considering its possible impact on the writer nor how other critics have evaluated it (2006:32). She implies that the subjective responses of the creator and the critic of a literary work need not coincide, thereby indicating the significance and relevance of new interpretations in literature. This stance does provide a workable solution to the question whether the creator or the critic has the legitimate right in deciding the importance of a literary work.

Hans Geaorge Gadamar, an eminent philosopher, widely considered as the most prominent scholar in classical hermeneutics, argues that, since an interpreter is able to extricate the intrinsic quality of a work, he is not merely an inactive observer but, a creator also. But Heideggar, Gadamar's teacher, has claimed that any artistic creation is self-revealing and self-interpretative and hence, a critic or interpreter has no role to play in determining the quality of an aesthetic creation*(1)

Susan Sontag, literary critic and novelist, has strongly opposed the relevance of 'interpretation' in literary studies. She says that, in art, interpretation means plucking a set of elements from the product, which is, more or less, a type of translation. According to her, an interpreter shows that 'X' means 'A' or that 'Y' is really 'B' and so on (Sotang, 1978:654) and insists that hermeneutics has no future.

Relevance and Scope of Hermeneutics

Let us briefly examine the relevance, scope, propriety and utility of the application of the hermeneutic approach to the understanding of literary values. Hermeneutics is the art of interpreting. Its early emergence was in the areas of legal and theological studies, application of civil and canon laws and scriptures. It developed into a general theory of human understanding through the works of Frederic Scheleiermacher, Whilehelm Dilthey, Martain Heideggar, Hans George Gadamar, Palu Ricoeru, and Jaceques Derrida*(2)

The esence of hermeneutic approach is related to the hypothesis that the concealed import of a text cannot be understood without uncovering the historical contact and the socio-cultural milieu of the community on which it is based. As such, a thorough knowledge of the origin of the text along with its background is essential for analyzing it. Consequently, text-analysis through this method involves an integrated investigation based on several disciplines.

Conservative Approaches

The main proponents of the conservative approaches in hermeneutics are Betaly, E.D. Hirsh and Scheleiermacher. According to them, the following principles and presumptions are the characteristic features of the approach:

i. Truth of the text reflects the author's intentions.
ii. Truth is understood to mean the correspondence between the interpreter's idea and the textual meaning.
iii. Understanding the historical, cultural and autobiographical background of the author helps us to identify the meaning of the text.
iv. Truth also is related to the genre and language of the text and what it meant to the original readers.
v. The interpreters should leave aside their biases to understand the text's relevance at the period of its creation.
vi. The interpreter should be able to distinguish between the text's objectivity and his subjective perspectives*(3)

This approach does not question the authority of the author. Its contention is that the creator of literary works cannot visualize or anticipate the multiplicity of responses in the minds of readers to his creations. Therefore, interpreters assume the role of sensitive readers and attempt to unravel the internal puzzles of literary products by dissecting the whole into parts in order to reveal the inter relationships implied in them. Furthermore, the conservative approach of interpretation envisages that every text carries with it the imprints of the persona of the author along with the historical, socio-cultural and autobiographical settings of the work.

A Brief Examination of Three Widely-Acclaimed Malayalam Novels

The significance of autobiographical, historical and socio-cultural features of a work in understanding the inherent truths underlying the surface structure can be illustrated by briefly examining the three widely-acclaimed novels of Vaikom Mohammed Basheer, namely, Baalyakaalasaskhi (1944), Pathumayude Aatu (1959) and Mathilukal(1965).

Basheer himself has stated that all his writings are parts of his life and contain his experiences (1973). In Baalyakaalasakhi, Basheer recounts the early days of two childhood friends, Majid and Suhra, depicting their intimate relationships developing into the realm of adolescent infatuation against the backdrop of a lower middle- class rural Muslim community. The anecdotes describing their pranks are vivacious, poignant and innocently irrational. Later, Majid had to leave his native village in search of livelihood and had to undergo series of miseries and privations. Finally, returning to his village, he confronts Suhara leading a miserable life along with her butcher husband and undernourished children. No doubt, the novelist has transferred some of his own experiences into Majid's life, though not overtly. A prominent critic, in his preface to the novel, qualified it as a 'Flesh-piece torn out form life, with blood oozing from the edges'

(Paul, 1944:8). In Mathilukal, though the broad frame is autobiographical, the details seem to contain sprinkles of fantasy.

Among the three novels, mentioned above, the second and third are first person narrations.

Basheer's unconventional bold attempt in creating fiction-like works relying on his reminiscences of his family and jail experiences in *Paathummayute Aatu* and *Matilukal* deserve them to be termed as 'ante-novels'.

While surveying the history of Malayalam novels, a critic has observed that Basheer exhibits the ingenuity of creating exquisite images from ordinary situations which others may feel as trivial (Venugopan Nair, 2003 : 107). This remark is substantiated by the hilarious incidents presented in *Paathummayute Aatu*. Acknowledging the vast variety of Basheer's experiences M. N. Vijayan says, "Basheer's experiences transcend the readers' imagination" (1998). The possibility of autography-based interpretations may not be applicable to a vast number of texts; yet its relevance in text-analysis cannot be out rightly rejected

Dialogical Approach

The guiding principles of this approach is that the 'truth' underlying a text is not generated automatically from the interaction between the intention of the author and the interpreter's feelings. Heideggar reports:

i. "'Truth' is a self–realization from insightful contemplation."
ii. Interpretation is not entirely subjective; the text can impose restrictions in the process.
iii. The historical context of a text may help us to understand it, but such understandings need not be complete.
iv. A text can produce incorrect interpretations; further, it may produce more than one 'good' interpretation.'
v. Historical and linguistic investigations may not eliminate the interpreter's prejudices and pre-suppositions.
vi. The reason for a literary work having different interpretations in different periods is due to its uniqueness and importance; the basic semantic substance of a work may remain the same but successive interpretations may change its connotations. *(4)

This requires elucidation. O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889/1998) is regarded as the first well-formed novel in Malayalam. Its plot was also hailed as trendsetter, heralding future experiments in novels based on family and social issues. Majority of Malayalam critics qualified this novel as 'a creation of renaissance in Kerala', as a 'novel of social reformation and as work, which brought a fresh narrative style in fiction' (Narendran, 2001:37-47). Another later critic asserted that the central message in novel is that a single woman's efforts cannot emancipate her gender-mates oppression as long as they accept

the existing regulations which demand the submission of depressed classes in the society (Geetha, 2001: 67). This shows that the ideological content of a text does not remain static; it allows different interpretation' at different period according to the perspectives of the interpreters.

Freidrich Scheleirmacher brings forth a notable hypothesis in textanalysis. Whilhem Delthy has given the term 'hermeneutical circle' to this concept. **Hermeneutic circle** means that interpretations introduce new meanings into the text, which neither confirms nor disclaims the text's primary meaning. All new meaning assigned by an interpreter are conditioned by his or her background and biases. Sometimes, the stances taken by the interpreter may not be in conformity with the apparent historical and cultural horizons revealed in the text.

In dialogical approach, interpreters seem to get more importance that the text, though the author's intentions are not pushed aside.

As hinted above, dialogical approach focuses on the role of historical context in text analysis and its relevance in contemporary literary studies. In one sense, this approach may be taken as an expedition of the interpreter into the deep levels of the text. The validity of such an enquiry is exemplified by Kuttikrisha Marar's *Bhaarataparyatanam* (Travel through Bhaarat) in which the critic engages himself in an intellectual dialogue with the events and characters of the epic, *Mahaabharatha*. Without moving away from Vyaasaa's vision, Marar, in his scintillating study, exposes the under currents of the incidents and the exact roles of the participants in them.

Critical Approach

This approach has emerged from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and the chief protagonist is Jurge Habermas. According to him, hermeneutics is not merely a tool for explicating the textual semantics. Its objectives are, struggling for the liberation of humanity and untying the strings that restrict the freedom of communication. Adhering to the conventions proposed in a theory and following its stringent methodology do not result in objectivity. All the latent realities inherent in the text - social, economic, moral, etc. – should be brought to light in order to achieve the desired result. The core of critical approach is, therefore, an ardent desire for striving to reach at a universal and unconstrained consensus.

A distinguishing feature of this approach is the importance given to language in text-interpretation. Hebermas's concept of language in interpretative communication subsumes three basic notions:

i.   The reliability of linguistic competence.
ii. Language use contains biases and pre-suppositions; and
iii. Language use is based on psychology (Habermas,1990).

It is not difficult to perceive the similarity between the Habermasian tenets and the Chomskyian (1965) axioms on the fundamentals of linguistic behavior. Since Habermas believes that truth, justice and freedom are inherent in language, his view closely resembles the concept of 'communicative competence' proposed by Dell Hymes (1970:14). Communicative competence is the ability to use language appropriately in social situations. Habermas' emphasis on psychological processes that relate to the 'purification of communication in terms of both the basic meaning and comprehension of distorted meaning for which a deconstruction mechanism is essential on the basis of universal truth'.

Habermas' strategy about the communicative function of language is pertinent to the analysis of literary work. Language can be used for arriving at a 'Public sphere,' which is a common forum where issues of public interests are debated and mutually acceptable solutions are suggested. We can once again examine *Indulekha* for an elucidation of the above claim. The eighteenth chapter of this novel contains a lengthy intellectual debate between the hero, Madhavan, his father and a family friend. M. P. Paul observes that this chapter is 'a stumbling stone,' which obstructs the flow of the plot, and K. P. Appan describes the contents of this chapter as 'an aesthetic device to overcome the emotional frivolity by intellectual exhibitionism' (2002). According to another critic, this chapter is 'a deviation from the natural development of the plot wherein the novelist reveals his personality also' (Rajasekharan, 2002: 150).

The debate in the eighteenth chapter revolves around such varied topics as Hindu religious worship, the relationship between religion and science, the British rule, the stands taken by the Congress Party on the Indian Independence struggle, Darwin's theory of evolution, Bradley's view on aesthetics, etc. The discussions reflect the novelist's loud thinking expressed through the mouths of the characters and they make use of what Habermas termed as 'instrumental reasoning,' which is a type of argumentation that takes one to specific and practical goals using predetermined procedures. This debate, however, does not satisfy the requirements of what Hebarmas called a 'public sphere' as the participants are members of an educated upper-class and hence do not represent the society at large.

Radical approach

This approach may be considered as the new face of hermeneutics. Basically, radical approach is a critical re-evaluation of hermeneutics, as it examines the authenticity and validity of interpretations of situations, attitudes of characters, causes and effects of events portrayed in the test. It gives more importance to the technique of reconstruction than theory-based interpretations and is closely affiliated to the views of the post-structuralists, Derrida and Foucault. The qualifying term' radical indicates that this method relies more on logic than intuition.

V.C. Sreejan's (1999) attempt to re-define the concept of 'dhvani' in Sanskrit poetics may be cited as an example for radical approach. His premise is that the concept of dhvani is basically a feature of lower strata communication rather than a highly refined

poetic feature: Aananadavardhana, the exponent of dhvani theory, never quotes from Vedas or any other sophisticated works as examples of dhvani. He cites verses from the language of women and socially discriminated classes, which are in Prakrit and not in Sanskrit. Sreejan further states that, since the upper class has the freedom to express freely and openly, they need not resort to suggestive utterances, but the lower class is destined to use language suggestively, thereby , giving it the status of a 'secret language,' which was also prevalent among them, Thus. Sreejan's observation, in one sense, is deconstruction of 'arthaantanranyaasam'.

Conclusion

The Western theory of Interpretation is developing a text-reading methodology, considering the changing attitudes of readers and incorporating the techniques practiced by post-structuralists and cognitive psychologists. In contrast to the conventional literary criticism, this new enquiry extends its horizons to areas like Dalitism, eco-criticism, feminism and sub-cultures. In essence, hermeneutics is an intellectual dialogue between the written and the reader-critic.

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