Language: A Mirror or a Mirage?

Dr. Nazia Hasan, NET (UGC) and Ph.D. (English)

==

Names of Problems

When Robert Young as the editor of *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* refers to Jacques Lacan, Derrida, and Michael Foucault in the Introduction of the book, he argues that these are the names of problems and not the authors of doctrines (1981: 02)! Very few can be so candidly revealing about the new canons of our present world when "firing the canon" makes the best intellectual indulgence! But this accusatory finger towards Derrida and his group does point to the suspicion of a particular group of people. People, who believe that language has been robbed of its crowning glory, the marvelous and splendid wealth of profundity- and beauty that it used to possess and boast of in the good old days... Today that fortified entity called language has been tarnished and demolished to an elusive, meaningless structure.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 March 2014**
Dr. Nazia Hasan, NET (UGC) and Ph.D. (English)
Language: A Mirror or a Mirage?   275

Euphemisms No Longer Entertained

The authors mentioned above (or theorists, because the word 'author' itself has been the butt of attack for quite some time, and is an obsolete term in the arena of literary theory) or theorists like Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault and Kristeva contributed extensively to this transition from a composed, universal, modernist world of liberty, equality and fraternity to a post-modernist phase where euphemisms are no longer entertained and the majority advocate the right to question.

This shift starting first at the level of Philosophy and Language, reached all the other facets of human knowledge, inaugurated a period of radical questioning of all the shibboleths and previously dominant categories of what defined modernity.

Focus of This Paper

This paper is an attempt to read into the dilemma of language and communication with the trustworthy landmarks pushed aside.

A Passive Medium?

It will not be an overestimate, if we say that language had been considered a natural phenomenon till a few decades ago; a passive medium for conveying ideas and expressions, taken to be at the disposal of man/woman, or the user. Man was confident that there's a particular word for everything on the face of the earth he observes or utilizes. "I am the monarch of all I survey..." sang the poet W. Cowper (1875:162). But the book *A Course in General Linguistics* (1916) by Ferdinand de Saussure came as a bolt from the blue which defied and distorted such authoritative claims, saying with a cogency undeterred that language is 'arbitrary and conventional' (Webster: 33). de Saussure doubted the very structure of language, and how words are 'unmotivated signs' (Barry: 41), in the sense that there's no inherent, inborn or natural connection between a word and what it designates or denotes. In Saussurean words, "the bond between the sound and the idea is radically arbitrary" (Barry: 41). So, language is in fact an agreed upon system for communication by a society in a cultural and historical convention.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 March 2014**
Dr. Nazia Hasan, NET (UGC) and Ph.D. (English)
Language: A Mirror or a Mirage?   276

Signs and Meanings

Therefore, no word or signifier could survive or blossom in isolation because meaning is relational and not substantial. Saussure explained this concept saying that a linguistic system is a 'series of differences' of sound combined with a series of ideas. There's a 'pairing' process which serves as "the effective link between the phonic and psychological elements within each sign…" (Barry: 41). So, meaning is not "mysteriously immanent in a sign" but is functional, as the result of its differences from other signs. "Meaning is neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurrence but a product of certain shared system of signification" (2000: 93), as says Terry Eagleton. In this way, here we can mark the first and foremost step of language towards it's decentring of meaning. The sacred body of literature is demystified.

Language in a State of Flux – A Dialogic

Another major contribution to the theory of undecidability of meaning can be associated to that of Michael Bakhtin's. He differed from Saussure by adding the historical dimension to the socially and culturally unified system of signs. Bakhtin found language to be in a state of flux rather than being fixed and stable. He comments that," ... meaning is never singular and uncontested but rather plural and contested…" (Eagleton: 40).

At the most fundamental level, any statement is potentially open to at least two interpretations: that of the speaker/writer and that of the listener / reader. Therefore, language can't be called 'arbitrary' or mutually shared but it rather constructs a 'site for struggle' (Barry: 40). Language is 'dialogic' and not monologic. So, the authority is gone.

Text *Is* a Power Contest

Line by line reading is equivalent to being deaf towards the multiplicity of voices, meanings and truths that one can get to know by reading between the lines. Every text is thus, a place of power contest, where some ideas or words win over the readers or listeners, rest strive for recognition. But we, in search of truth, so derided by the new sages like Nietzsche, make them get dissolved and disseminated in mere murmurings, unheard and unheeded. Their struggle continues to get attention by some other reader or listener.

Never a Clear-cut Meaning - Plurality

Dr. Nazia Hasan, NET (UGC) and Ph.D. (English)
Language: A Mirror or a Mirage? 277

There can never be a clear-cut meaning of a word. Meaning gets a further jolt away from its center in this wrestle for a foothold and a decisive position. A literary book becomes a dialogic text with plurality - it can't claim for a unified, single worldview or ideology. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1767), Henry James's *Figure in the Carpet* (1909), James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), *Ulysses* (1922) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1988) are some of the finest examples as they simply bask in this dialogic potential of language and meaning's un-decidability.

Jacques Derrida

Claude Levi Strauss' *Raw and the Cooked* (1978)**,** Roland Barthes '*Death of the Author* (1968), *From Work to Text* (1971), *The Pleasures of Text* (1973) , Michael Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) took this newly discovered aspect of language further ahead with their epoch making writings. But the final nail in the coffin came from Jacques Derrida who is taken almost as synonymous with Deconstruction today. His magical influence began with the lecture of 1966, *"Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"*. He took the world of knowledge by storm with the publication of his books like *Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference, Speech And Phenomenon* in 1967. His revolutionary writings were generated by his principal objection to the 'logocentric' tradition in Philosophy and all other disciplines.

Logocentrism

Logocentrism takes for granted the founding authority of reason (logos/mind), as the center. As Derrida said in his historical lectures, "The function of this center was not only to orient, balance and organize the structure ... but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure" (2004: 339).

Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (2004:339) interpret that this logos speaks not only truth but authority as it is always a command. And it is so, Derrida claims, because it is founded on an 'instability and a deficiency' that it must control and conceal at all costs. By this, he suggests that meaning is never in fact singular or fixed. Meaning is never complete as a full term, it constantly proliferates, slips and shifts. Derrida terms this flickering, spilling, diffusing and

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **14:3 March 2014**
Dr. Nazia Hasan, NET (UGC) and Ph.D. (English)
Language: A Mirror or a Mirage?   278

scattering of meaning as Dissemination. He also propounded the concept of Assemblage in his article called *Difference* (1966). He believed *Assemblage* to be suggesting that "the kind of bringing together proposed has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving or a web which would allow the different threads and different lines of sense or force to separate again as well as being ready to bind others together" (2004: 340).

Radical Reading

Jacques Derrida read Ferdinand de Saussure radically; he transposed 'differance' to 'difference' as he believed that meaning is a matter of both difference and deferring. There's always an element of 'un-decidability' or play in the unstable sign because if meaning could be self-present in the sign then a signifier would simply be the reference for the signified. In that case, "The substitution of the sign for the thing itself is both secondary and provisional: it is secondary in order after an original and lost presence, a presence from which the sign would be derived. It is provisional with respect to this final and missing presence, in view- of which the sign would serve as a movement of mediation", (2004: 340) as explains Derrida.

Plural and Multivalent

In this way 'differance' refers to the whole complex of its meanings at once, because it is immediately and irreducibly plural and multivalent. This makes any language, code or system of references just a 'fabric of differences', without a center, a spine or the logos in formal terminology.

Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh construe that this un-decidability of the unstable sign "leads to an emphasis on the signifier and meaning, since there's no point at which the slippage of signifiers can be stopped, no final resting point where the signifier yields up the truth of the signified, for that signifier is just another signifier in a moment in difference" (2001:35).

All language is thus, reduced to a web of signifiers bound up in an endless play of textuality, and in the end, our mirror like language is a strategy without finality; leading to the mirages and deceptions in our experience of what we call life! Language appears as a process of substitute differentiation, repetition, illusion of the real meaning. It is, thus a sprawling, limitless

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **14:3 March 2014**
Dr. Nazia Hasan, NET (UGC) and Ph.D. (English)
Language: A Mirror or a Mirage? 279

web with a constant interchange and circulation of elements where nothing is absolutely definable. When we seem to find truth, it is simply holding one over the other, and made by our decision to go forward with that idea and understanding only.

Obsessive Imaginary

Peter Barry comments on this 'obsessive imaginary' of liquid for language, its being un-decisive about its meaning and says that signifiers float free of what they designate, meanings are fluid and subject to constant slippage and spillage. "This linguistic liquid slopping about and swilling over unpredictably, defines our attempts to carry signification carefully from giver to receiver in the containers we call words" (1995: 64). Because we don't have full control over the medium of language we use.

This imagery instantaneously brings to mind of another simile used by Edward H. Carr while discussing history. He starts with this assumption that history consists of a corpus of ascertained facts and the facts are available to the historian in documents, in inscriptions and so on, "like fish on the fish monger's slab" (1962: 03). The historian collects those informations, takes them home and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him. But towards the end of the lecture, Carr starts showing the Deconstructive characteristics in his discussion. He concludes that the facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean. What the historian catches will depend partly on chance but the rest on the choices he makes and tricks he employs.

Carr further elucidates how history means interpretation. But if we come back to our present concern for language, we are also all the time trying to catch hold of proper words for a proper expression and communication. Meanings can't be found at set places. We are not really in control of the linguistic system we depend on. We can never be sure of being successful in conveying what we mean to say because language does not reflect our world, it constitutes a world of its own. Nietzsche's words sound prophetic today as he said about this 'de-centred' world of our language that there are "no guaranteed facts, only interpretations" (Barry: 67). We can never be certain about the original or the final meaning of what we hear or read. Language is polysemic and polyphonic by nature, meaning is never about either /or, but and, and and yet

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **14:3 March 2014**
Dr. Nazia Hasan, NET (UGC) and Ph.D. (English)
Language: A Mirror or a Mirage? 280

another and..! Our language remains elusive and un-decidable as ever. John Berger puts it beautifully that never again a story will be told as though it is the only one (1990). Do you really get what I mean to say? The full stop is an imposition and an obligation, my dear!

==

References

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory,* UK: Manchester University Press, 1995.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*, New York: Penguin, 1990.

Carr, Edward H. *What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures 1961*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1962.

Cowper, William. **'**The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk'**,** *The Golden Treasury*, (ed) Francis T. Palgrave, 1875.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Delhi: Maya Blackwell Publications, 2000.

Rice, Philip and Waugh, Patricia. (eds.) *Modern Literary Theory*, London: Arnold, 2001.

Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004.

Webster, Roger. *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction*, London: Arnold, 1996.

Young, Robert. (ed) *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.

Dr. Nazia Hasan, NET (UGC) and Ph.D. (English)
Assistant Professor
Women's College
Aligarh Muslim University
Aligarh Uttar Pradesh-202002
India
naziahasanagha@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 March 2014**
Dr. Nazia Hasan, NET (UGC) and Ph.D. (English)
Language: A Mirror or a Mirage?   281