
UNIT 6 CURRENT CRITICAL APPROACHES TO *HAMLET*

Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will gain a knowledge of

- Critical approaches : Twentieth Century Scene upto the sixties
- New literary theory : major approaches and
- New Literary theory and *Hamlet*.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

As professional students of literature post-graduate students must realise that their obligations as students, and as future researchers and scholars, are not confined merely to reading literature, however diligently and meaningfully. The joy of immersing oneself into mankind's endless source of pleasure and instruction is in itself a great reward. But works of literature have to be studied for a fuller appreciation of their meaning and significance, also in the light of the organised body of thought that has developed in response to scholastic attempts to understand and appreciate literature.

Over a period of time an organised body of literature about literature—many schools of thought, approaches and view-points governing literary criticism—of myriad hues and shapes and forms has emerged. Some of the finest minds over the last many centuries have developed the discipline of literary studies and studied

works of literature in the light of intellectual methodologies specially created to make study of literature a rewarding exercise. Even when critics do not consciously belong to a specific school of thought and subscribe to a definite ideology, they certainly speak from a position of reasoned thought.

6.2 TWENTIETH CENTURY APPROACHES UPTO THE SIXTIES

In the twentieth century upto about the sixties literary criticism developed in many more complex ways. René Wellek's monumental study of the twentieth century criticism initiates his study with "symbolism" and goes on to devote a section to the academic critics who functioned within the universities and furthered the discipline of literary studies. He then devotes a chapter each to The Bloomsbury Group and another to The New Romantics. The focus then shifts to the early pioneering work done by T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis and the consolidation of the early work into a substantial body of admirable proportions by T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis and the contributors to *Scrutiny*, the widely influential literary journal that Leavis helped found and edited for twenty years, and critics such as F. W. Bateson and William Empson.

Some of these approaches particularly benefited students of Shakespeare. Some other schools of thought and critical approaches, in turn, received a fillip because of their attempts to engage the Shakespearean canon.

Upto the sixties, then, the islands of certainty included a number of notions: That there is an entity called literature as different from what is not literature. Journalistic writing is not literature, for example. Literature was considered an activity specially carried out by those who are competent to do so. The existence of an author was always taken for granted. When we did not know for sure who had created a particular work, a large body of scholarship developed to figure out the identity of the author. Also, scholarship, literary criticism and other related activities were subordinate to literature. An act of critical appreciation was secondary to, next to, even inferior to an act of creativity. Interpreting a work of art constituted the effort of lesser mortals.

Also, there was something ineffable--inexpressible, unutterable, transcendent--about the act of creation. Even Aristotle who gave us the view that art is an imitation of life ended up suggesting a great deal more about the creative faculty than his concept of literature as mimetic activity would otherwise suggest. In section iv of *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes between the world of poetry produced through mimetic activity and points out that "... the reason of delight ... is that one is at the same time ... gathering the meaning of things." Aristotle returns to this gathering the meaning of things through mimesis which produces poetry in section IX: "The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened but the kind of thing that might happen ... The distinction between the historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other writing verse ... it consists really in that one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is more philosophical and graver in import than history, since its statements are of the nature universals whereas those of history are singulars." Poetic imitation thus becomes creative imitation because it is something more than the actual. In section XVII Aristotle gives yet another dimension to the concept of mimesis by defining the nature of the faculty involved in the art: "Hence it is that poetry demands a man with a special gift for it or else with a touch of madness in him."

Again, the concept of mimesis has to be appreciated also in terms of what is said about the structural aspect of a work of art. To Aristotle unity is what gives a poem or a drama its wholeness. And this question is also a question of beauty. In Section VII he says: "... to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts but also be of certain definite magnitude." So, mimetic activity involves an act of ordering, an act of producing a new organism. Equally significant, in this context, is Aristotle's view that characters should be described as they ought to be, and his insistence that poets need not use language "such as men do use." No wonder the Greeks used the same word for poet [creator=maker=writer] as they used for God. Creativity was special for sure, and depended on the creative abilities of very special, divinely gifted individuals.

"Language such as men do use"—Ben Jonson used the phrase for his choice of diction for his highly mimetic poetic activity—right in the tradition of Aristotle. Also established, as another major concept of Anglo-American tradition of literary critical thought, was the fact that language is a transparent medium—a medium that remains non-interfering, totally objective, a kind of container, a paper-bag which receives from the giver what is given and remains available to yield its contents, totally untouched, unimpaired, or modified.

6.3 MODERN LITERARY THEORY STRUCTURALISM

In the sixties a new view of literary critical practice emerged and almost all these literary orthodoxies were subjected to intense scrutiny. The traditional view of the significance of literature, the role of criticism, the value of language, the very notion of an "author," the moral and aesthetic values of literature, and its cultural and political context, literary history, literary biography: all these notions underwent a sea-change. Modern literary theory changed the way we look at literature in more ways than one through, as Rice and Waugh put it, "its unprecedented attack on the grounding assumption of the Anglo-American critical tradition." Let us look at these major departures from the tradition one by one.

Structuralism. One of the most trenchant attacks on the literary orthodoxies came from the structuralists who chose as their primary concern "language" in its most general sense. Literature, the followers of structuralism believed, does not reflect reality or life through the medium of language: it is the product of language. In other words, literature is born out of language, not out of the rigours of life or living. The site for literary works to be born out of is not life but words. As I have remarked earlier, the view that language is a transparent medium—a medium that remains non-interfering, totally objective, a kind of container, a paper-bag which receives from the giver what is given and remains available to yield its contents, totally untouched, unimpaired, or modified—this view of language took a heavy beating. Ferdinand de Saussure [1857-1913] revolutionised thinking by maintaining that words signify objects—the word 'table' refers to an object called 'table' only arbitrarily and such denotation of any external reality has no connection with any inevitably absolute logic. All signs [=words] signify objects [=signifiers] which are arbitrarily so equated.

Saussure observed:

Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to

make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.

And:

... the absolutely final law of language is ... that there is nothing which can ever reside in *one* term, as a direct consequence of the fact that linguistic symbols are unrelated to what they should designate.

Also:

The arbitrary nature of sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up. . . .

Saussure also drew a distinction between a specific language (English, Hindi) and a particular sentence, text or speech in a particular language as individually employed by a user, as also between the language as a phenomenon to be identified (or studied) through its growth and development, historically speaking, and a body or system of language existing at any given point in time. Thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Noam Chomsky and Ronald Barthes contributed to structuralism by adding new dimensions to it. Lévi-Strauss, for instance believed that the way human beings interacted in society (the pattern of interaction or behaviour and other social structures (=institutions) depended on the modes of communication that they employed.

Based on his theory of language Saussure sought to develop a "general science of signs" (Semiology). While structuralism grew out of Saussure's attempts to develop semiotics, it spread its wings far and sought to examine a wide variety of cultural phenomena. More than the "meaning" that Saussure sought to investigate through the opposites in his "general science of signs," the structuralists were more interested in understanding the conventions that make it possible to arrive at "meaning," the conditions that make it possible for a language—and therefore meaning—to arise in the first place, the communicative function of language. They sought to define, describe and understand the system rather than its individual manifestations. The desire to achieve this led Todorov to propose a general grammar or poetics of literature. What the structuralists, then, aimed at was the general principles as embodied in individual works. Form rather than content was given pride of place in this system. And a science of literature was sought to be developed. While a unified system was sought to be developed, texts were treated as manifestation of the system in operation. Works of literature were, thus, divorced from their socio-historical contexts. Structuralism, on the one hand sought to analyse a literary text, and on the other, developed itself as method of understanding the conditions of existence of literature (as a system) and a text (as manifestation of the system in operation).

Structuralism more or less put an end to the notion that literary studies had to exist in some kind of isolated vacuum even within the humanities. Literary studies were now for sure interdisciplinary in nature. Now there was a larger context to put a literary text in. But its supposed antihumanistic, overtly "scientific" attitude to the study of literature and an attempt to create a "science" of literary studies drew great hostility.

While structuralists looked for conditions that created meaning, and moved towards an understanding of phenomena to which they sought to impart coherence and order, (what Michel Foucault calls a "principle of unity"), the deconstructive discourse

wished to point to, not the source of completer, comprehensive meaningful pictures, but to the limits of the ability of discourse and understanding to impose such coherent patterns upon what apparently appeared as chaotic and formless. Deconstruction aims at examining and questioning self-evident truths, and registers its distrust of appropriating all new inexplicable phenomenon into structuralist models of meaningful order.

6.4 FEMINISM

There were, in fact, other pockets of dissatisfaction which led the questioning of the long accepted principles on which the citadel of literature and literary studies rested. Feminism was in the forefront of the demolition squad that sought to change the very texture of literature and literary studies. Endless expressions of the repressed and agonised clarion call for arms included Simone de Beauvoir's who wrote in her highly influential *The Second Sex* (1949):

... humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as autonomous being. . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. . . . Woman lack concrete means for organising themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat. . . . The proletariat can propose to massacre the ruling class, and a sufficiently fanatic Jew or Negro might dream of getting sole possession of the atomic bomb and making humanity wholly Jewish or black; but women cannot even dream of exterminating the males. The bond that unites her to her oppressor is not comparable to any other. The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. . . .

Simone de Beauvoir sought to analyse the social construction of the gender and drew attention to the distinction between gender and sex. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* focused on the oppression of women under the patriarchal social system and the stereotyping of women's rôle in it. The early feminists in the seventies for example sought to analyse the image of women in cultural representations such as literature. While the development of the feminist view-point developed in many directions, some of its manifestations were the result of uncritical hostility to the rising domination of women in various walks of society.

Let us look at the two widely familiar Indian novels and see how the principles of feminist discourse have been understood by their authors and what kind of application and treatment these principles receive in these two books. Feminism finds itself treated in them rather overtly and deliberately and in many ways rather simply. In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, the protagonist young Rukmani's reactions to the world around her are motivated by a recognition that life is for living and when the going gets tough the human mind must draw its strength from an unambiguous acceptance of the inescapable, and that the desire to escape is anathema. Not to break-up or destroy, but to persist and rebuild is what life is about. Not self-pity but self-esteem is what human existence must derive its sustenance from. Rukmani is endowed with an awareness of the possibilities of life. She sees value in living. For her the act of living is important; life is important. And therefore the question of woman's search for identity, meaning, alienation, or fulfilment in marriage within and without, must be part of the larger question of life and living.

Markandaya's strength lies in the fact that the female protagonist of her novel emerges as a character whose engagement with the inevitable conflicts of life and living do not take the form of vulgar dog-bite-dog situations so familiar from some of the more recent feminist fiction. One can illustrate this point from the other novels.

Shashi Deshpande's feminist heroine in her otherwise admirable and delightful novel, *That Long Silence*, experiences, as the blurb goes, "[d]ifferences with her husband, frustrations in their seventeen year old marriage, disappointment in her two teenage children, claustrophobia [sic] of her childhood." One of the episodes in which the female protagonist seeks to correct the imbalance of her marital life is as follows:

"The keys," he says, holding out his hand.

But the woman, ignoring that importunate hand—it becomes that as he continues to hold it out—takes some keys out of her bag and unlocks the door. Still ignoring him she enters the flat. He continues to stand there for a moment, the hand held out, it now looks like a supplicatory gesture, and then he abruptly follows her in, closing the door firmly behind him.

She goes on to justify her action:

We all do it is part of family life. Rahul refusing to have his bath before meals, Rati refusing to tell us who it was she was talking to on the phone, Appa crushing a raw onion and eating it with relish. . . .

Deshpande's female—therefore discontented, suffering, and oppressed—protagonist does not appear to struggle to find meaning, identity, or even escape from a context that she finds antagonistic. She only has contempt for human relationship. Her contempt for her husband who had "reconciled to failure" in life is motivated by her lack of understanding that to cushion an individual's failure is what a family is all about. She is too narcissistically self-centred to appreciate her contribution to a deteriorating relationship.

Thus even though the universe of *Nectar in a Sieve* is dominated by a protagonist who is a woman and in which the authorial focus is on a woman's interaction—even confrontation—with the world around her, that universe is not artificially narrow, not sequestered, nor an insular world inhabited by insular characters. In their anger to destroy the wrong that the world has done to woman, some of the feminists have tended to ignore the fact that women are and have to be, and inescapably so, part of the same universe. I have quoted Simone de Beauvoir's allusion to this point earlier.

A world-view conditioned by the necessity of its having to be a feminist world view distorts the nature of its objective. Rukmani, in Markandaya's novel, looks at the world around her through the eyes of a human being: for her—and for her creator—her being a woman remains incidental to her being a human being.

In *That Long Silence* woman's search for self, identity, and meaning so easily takes the form of low comedy that genuine, finer issues of life and living are soon forgotten. What distinguishes Rukmani's character in her encounters with the facts of life is that Markandaya proposes to project not the crude encounters of a life of which one gets an inkling from Deshpande's award winning novel. Markandaya's heroine responds to the drama of life in its entirety. She treats life as one, as a whole in which man-woman relationship is only one aspect. Failure to appreciate that life is larger than love, even sex, even man-woman relationship, leads to an inadequate appreciation of the very nature and significance of human predicament.

Shashi Deshpande misjudges the import and significance of the feminist movement and thought. Elaine Showalter, one of the most influential feminist writer, thinker and intellectual, even as she drew attention to the heavy sexist bias in the male dominated liberal tradition, believed that ultimately there is one human nature; human nature encompassing both male and female human nature. There is, thus, a universal human nature. She treated literary tradition as a continuous, unbroken chain despite the feminist interruption of this tradition that the radical feminists sought to achieve. It is interesting that despite Showalter's attempt to chart the course of an alternative female literary tradition, and her belief that the female experience of life had something unique to offer, she was treated by more radical feminists as affirming the orthodox beliefs.

Showalter pointed out how feminist criticism can be divided into two categories: first type is concerned with women as reader: "consumer of male produced literature It probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Its subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history." The second kind of feminist criticism is concerned with women as writer: "Its subjects include psychodynamics of female creativity, linguistics and the problem of female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history and, of course, studies of particular writers or works. .

Along with Simone de Beauvoir another influential name was that of Virginia Woolf who in *A Room of One's Own* focused on the problems of the woman writer. She concluded that lack of "a room of one's own"—implying a lack of a certain kind of economic and social independence—meant that a woman's ambition in the area of literature remained constrained. The literary forms had developed—"hardened"—in such a manner that they were not suitable for women to deal with or work through.

What feminism does not do, therefore, is to hit back—do unto men what women have been done to: feminism as a movement is not an extended historical revenge play that Shashi Deshpande makes this ideology out to be.

Like the Marxists, the feminists were concerned with the wider social and cultural issues before turning to imaginative literature, and found much to be dissatisfied about. As we can thus see, feminism developed not merely as a movement in literature but developed in many directions. And one thing that they all had, and have, in common for sure was, and is, intensity.

Briefly, feminist literary critics were concerned with women's experience as presented in literature. They questioned the age-old dominant male phallogentric ideologies and male evaluation of literature to the latter's advantage to perpetuate the status quo. They questioned male notions of how women feel and think and act—and by implication are supposed to feel and think and act. In short male prejudice about women and the later stereotyping were attacked and questioned. Women had been politically exploited and suppressed and the balance could be righted by examining the socio-political issues and the political machinations behind these issues.

6.5 MARXISM

It is common knowledge that Marx and Engels chiefly concerned themselves with an appreciation of capitalist theory and means of production and their primary interests

were political, economical and philosophical. An aesthetic of art, literature or culture was far from their minds, even though Marx always managed to say just the right thing about classical, traditional literatures. But the followers of Marxist thought who were concerned with literature, for instance, adapted "socialist" thought to put together a theory of literature. The Marxist critic therefore responds to a work of literature from the stand-point of Marx's political, economic and philosophical ideas. Class-struggle is uppermost in his mind and socio-historical and socio-economical factors shape the thought that is applied to a work of literature. As J. A. Cuddon points out: "... Socialist realism required a writer ... to be committed to the working class cause of the Party. And it required that literature should be 'progressive' and should display a progressive outlook on society. This necessitated forms of optimism and realism. Moreover, literature should be accessible to masses. ..." And: "Modernism in Western literature was deemed to be decadent ... because it was, among other things, subjective, introverted and introspective and displayed a fragmented vision of the world." The focus of a Marxist critic, therefore, was on the content, rather than form and literary ingenuity was not valued.

6.6 PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Ever since the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud has, so to say, dominated the minds of literary critics in more ways than one. The gains from the study and development of psychology as discipline were readily applied to literature. Literature was psychoanalysed for a variety of reasons. It allows for disconnected, syncopated structures and disparate apparently unconnected details in a narrative to be appreciated as part of pattern. Psychological criticism also allows us to read multiple interpretations of a work of art simultaneously. Recent reinvigorated interest in Psychological criticism emerges from its appropriation by feminists and deconstructionists, for example, to reach, and connect literary texts, with political power, female sexuality and the current complex attitudes to language.

6.7 NEW LITERARY THEORY AND HAMLET

How have these developments changed our response to Shakespeare?

Let us start with how the use of feminist political ideology and the resultant literary critical apparatus has influenced our reading of Shakespeare.

We must realize that when a literary ideology is the result of its having been borne out of a political or socio-political ferment, literary-critical responses are naturally conditioned by our appreciation of that ideology. The political agenda and the goal of the feminist ideology was — one has to unfortunately simplify such matters to be able to go any further at all — to fore-ground, to lay bare, what always lay hidden, the suppression of the female self. If the repression, the silence, and the denial of identity to a living human being by virtue of her gender has been the fate of women, the political ideology of the feminist movement was and is to expose, question and then compensate for the wrongs done to women. The literary splinter group of this movement seeks to examine literary texts with a view to performing a similar task: the exposition of the repression, the silence, and the denial of the identity to a living human being by virtue of her gender, as found in literary texts. Women want to be redefined and given true identities, not the identities men have chosen for them. Men make women their points of reference. Women should have the freedom to define themselves as individuals rather than as symbols to suit men's preconceived

notions of what women should stand for, become and contribute to a society that is determined thus, by the needs and desires defined by men. Literary texts in this context were treated as instruments of perpetuating the patriarchal ideologies.

We have had a brief look at how the feminist ideology as part of the literary critical movement as it developed and where it drew its sustenance from. Now we can turn to see how a text like *Hamlet* gains or suffers at the hands of a feminist ideologically committed critic.

One would not think Shakespeare would earn high marks at the hands of feminist ideologues considering how totally conventional – patriarchal – his depiction of, and the resultant inherent attitude to women are. A number of major feminist scholar critics have sought to examine women characters in *Hamlet* and have insisted on drawing inferences that have frequently been at variance with what can be called commonly accepted readings of those characters. There are a number of questions that the feminist critics have focussed on to create a variant, politically correct reading of Gertrude, for example. Rebecca Smith points out that the two major accusations against Gertrude, that she is involved in the murder of her husband, and that she had an adulterous relationship with her present husband even as her first husband was alive can be easily examined in her favour. And yet, Gertrude has always suffered at the hands of a tradition in which men wielded the pen that wrote their fate. Smith points out how the old kind *Hamlet's* Ghost makes no mention of Gertrude's involvement in his murder. He accuses Claudius of taking his life but not Gertrude. One could argue that the Ghost wants his son to avenge his murder but at the same time leave his one-time beloved wife to her conscience and her ill-conceived actions to the judgement of the fate. Again, Gertrude never admits to her guilt on account of her involvement in her husband's murder.

When she reacts to *Hamlet's* aggression—

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of innocent love
And sets the blister there, makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oath – O such a deed
(III.IV.40-45)

--her reaction—

Ay me, what act
That roars so loud and thunders in the sex?

--underscores her innocence rather than anything else – certainly not any admission of guilt.

Rebecca Smith goes on to examine the second question, the one regarding Gertrude's adulterous behaviour. The Old King Hamlet's ghost describes her as "...so lust.../will sate itself in a celestial bed/And prey on garbage" (I.V.55-7) it would seem to imply that at least the Ghost considers her guilty of an extra-marital relationship. Even Bradley agrees with the ghost: "She did not merely marry a second time with indecent haste: she was false to her husband while he lived." Bradley also goes on to argue: "This is surely the most natural interpretation of the words of the ghost .. coming as they do before his account of the murder."
(Shakespearean Tragedy)

Yet Smith would consider Gertrude totally innocent. All such reference to Gertrude's behaviour could refer to her over-hasty marriage rather than her having had an

adulterous relationship with her present husband. All the biting innendoes could be taken to mean that all those morally culpable actions took place after her second marriage. There is a sharp and pointed comparison made between her first and second marriage by the ghost. Also, seen through the eyes of Hamlet, whose father it is who is wronged, at least in the eyes of the son, she would be considered guilty even if she merely rejected her first husband by not mourning long enough for him .. *Hamlet* has numerous references to inadequate mourning: Not enough tears are shed for Ophelia, for Polonius, certainly not for old king *Hamlet*: "...a beast that wants discourse of reason/Would have mourned much longer," (I.II.150-1) *Hamlet* regrets.

Smith insists that *Hamlet's* pain is at the speed with which she married his uncle, disowning his father's name and memory and rejecting the life and time that she spent as his wife and queen

Lisa Jardine in her analysis of Gertrude's character maintains that *Hamlet's* anger stems from not the immoral haste with which she marries, but the fact that the haste implies lust and it is this that led Gertrude to hastily embrace a man who then became an obstacle between *Hamlet* and his ambition. After *Hamlet*--if he were to remain childless it is now the first-born of Claudius and Gertrude who will inherit the crown. Gertrude then should be viewed in the light of a theme of the play--certainly not one of the central themes of the play but rather on the relative periphery--in which she is portrayed as the target of much anger and aggression, much of which is made to sound moral, self-righteous, and 'well-deserved.'

As you would notice, an attempt to view Gertrude as a victim rather than a guilt-ridden, lustful, murderous woman can present itself as an alternative reading of the play in fully convincing and cogent terms.

6.8 LET US SUM UP

Similarly one can apply other critical approaches that we have briefly discussed above to the play to arrive at conclusions that are totally different from the ones we have studied so far. The post-colonial discourse, for instance, views *Hamlet* as a symbol of the colonial-imperial hegemony and how in a climate marked by new awareness, different cultures such as South Africa, for example, interpret *Hamlet* to suit their new aspirations, as we have discussed in Unit V. The Marxists, the structuralists, the deconstruction devotees, admirers of Freud and Lacan and many more in-between, have give myriad ways of looking at *Hamlet*. And there are other approaches that open up new vistas of thought and emotions leading to versions of *Hamlet* that are so different from each other as *Hamlet* is from *Waiting for Godot*. But does that matter, indeed? After all there is a sense in which *Hamlet* is no different from *Waiting for Godot*

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