

The Challenges of Hermeneutics

Interpretation of Texts: Text, Meaning and Interpretation

Ed. K.C. Baral

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"When we appeal to the text in support of an interpretation, we also invoke some general criterion such as, most commonly, coherence or, less frequently, complexity."

P.D. JHUL

With the impact of structuralism and post-structuralism on literary criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, which presented a serious challenge to conventional critical tradition, the "theory wars," to use Antony Easthope's term, started. There was a revival of interest in theory, revitalization of theoretical issues, and an intermingling of theory and practice. New forms of critical approaches such as feminism, deconstruction, reader-response theory, psychoanalytic criticism and Marxist criticism became important hermeneutic features. Theory provides normative criteria for understanding and evaluating a text, but mere theory cannot change the nature of interpretation. By its very nature, interpretation is a process of construing from the text something more than the text's physical presence. Conversely, the nature of text is to mean whatever the interpreter construes it to mean. Herein lies the significance of what K.C. Baral's book under review promises to give to the readers: an "open-ended scrutiny" of theory-oriented literary criticism.

Interpretation of Texts: Text, Meaning and Interpretation edited by K.C. Baral and published by Pencraft International, is a collection of papers

presented at a National Seminar held in October 2001 at Shillong. The volume contains fifteen critical essays on various critical concerns, plus an illuminating introduction by the editor. That it is an important step in the direction of understanding and appreciating critical pluralism, which makes criticism both 'exciting' and 'problematic', is borne out by the discourse generated by the critics writing for this volume. Of the fifteen papers two, namely, 'On Interpretation: A Necessary Evil' by Hiren Gohain and 'Criticism in India Now: Is Some Useful Work to be Done?' by John Oliver Perry, examine the seminal questions of interpretation, the problematic of various theoretical concerns and the contextualization of contemporary critical practices. Twelve papers take up the application of theoretical approaches to individual texts and interestingly, the last one intrudes into the field of anthropology to illustrate how 'ethnographic interpretation' of texts assumes significance in revealing the cultural phenomena prevalent in a particular society.

K.C. Baral's 'Introduction', short, crisp and to the point, sets the tone of the book. Critical theories, Baral maintains, provide a framework within which to pose questions and

seek answers from the text so that the text does not remain silent. The main aim of interrogation and interpretation is to search for meaning. Meaning is the determinate representation of a text for an interpreter. Here I may refer to Terry Eagleton who opines (in another context, though), that the 'text is a tissue of meaning, perceptions and responses.' Meaning is inescapable and is to be searched at three levels: 'at the level of a word, a sentence and a text' (p.12), thus ensuring a multiplicity of discourses.

The first essay by Hiren Gohain, "On Interpretation: A Necessary Evil" is an erudite attempt to analyse and make comprehensible the intricacies of interpretation contesting the confusion created by the paradoxical theories and approaches. Drawing from critics like Foucault, Barthes, I.A. Richards, Paul Ricoeur and others, Gohain gives a systematic account of the development/progress of various approaches. He juxtaposes the traditional and the contemporary theories to make a persuasive case for his discussion. Since it is his inaugural speech at the Seminar, the essay has conversational style; it succeeds in making the formidable theories look accessible and intelligible.

Another paper on literary discourse

is by John Oliver Parry, 'Criticism in India Now: Is Some Useful Work to be Done?' It covers a vast territory, intermingling Perry's personal experience of Indian academics with theoretical and critical discourses and favouring an Indian critical discourse that should take into consideration the traditional as well as the contemporary – social, cultural and political realities of India. Perry contends that the present scenario of criticism is not limited to verbal material but has extended its perspectives in the wider world, as such any "criticism in India is not *from* India or *for* India... not *about* India... but ... *of* India" [(p. 67), emphasis added]. Instead of blindly following the Western academicians and theorists it would be more practical if Indian critics try to re-work and re-think of indigenous traditions that best suit the Indian scenario. The scope of the paper is broad and Parry systematically puts across his points to take his critique to denouement.

Before I deal with the papers examining individual texts, let me turn the readers' attention to the last essay of the volume, 'Following the Trail: Interpretation of Texts in Anthropology,' precisely because it appears to be the proverbial 'odd man' in a book concentrating primarily on literary criticism. What appears, at first glance, to be an incongruous appendage to the book, reveals its due value on close reading. Drawing from theorists from Clifford Geertz to James Clifford, the author, T.B. Subba astutely works his way through cultural and ethnographic interpretation to the modern and post-modern trends to show the possibility of interpretation of various texts within the interdisciplinary boundary of anthropology and history. Subba clarifies that since anthropology and linguistics, and anthropology and literature gained recognition in 1960s

and 1980s respectively, an anthropological approach to literature can uncover many facets of a literary text.

Interpretation of individual texts covers a broad range from Conrad to Golding to Raja Rao and Narayan in the genre of fiction; T.S. Eliot and Keats to Ramanujan and Vikram Seth in the area of poetry. Niranjana Mohanty re-reads Ramanujan's '*The Black Hen*.' It is a close textual analysis of a seemingly simple but difficult poem that remains central to the understanding of the creative process. Mohanty starts with the implication of interpretation of a literary text and voices his apprehension that if criticism ruptures the readers' understanding of a work, it impairs his enjoyment of the reading material as well. His closing paragraph, however, has didactic undertones on the significance of jargon-free and comprehensible interpretation. K. Narayana Chandran's piece on *The Wasteland* gives a fresh approach to the reading of Eliot as it is based on the critic's personal experience of interpreting the poem to College lecturers at a Refresher Course.

By far the best critical paper on poetry is on Vikram Seth by K.C. Baral entitled 'Protocols of Poetry: A Study of Vikram Seth's *All You Who Sleep Tonight*'. As a seasoned critic, Baral knows how to wield the power of criticism persuasively without being oppressively ambiguous. After ascertaining Seth's position vis-à-vis Indian English poetry, Baral proceeds on to give a brief resume of his poetical works. Then follows the discussion on *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, revealing Seth's linguistic skill, disparate experiences of life, his poetic technique and deep humanitarian concerns. To Seth, Baral observes, 'poetry should be valued

for its aesthetic delight not for its utilitarian import, for it reveals us to ourselves; and the artistry of the poet is called upon to make that happen (p. 109).' This is Seth's 'protocol' of poetry of the title.

Of the two papers on women writers, Chanchala K. Naik's piece on Mariama Bo, the Senegalese novelist, is a feminist reading of *Such a Long Letter*. Dhira Bhowmick's 'History Reconstructed' is on *Heat and Dust*. The paper is a well-presented historical analysis of the novel; but to call Jhabvala a 'Raj' novelist is to miss the direction. Again, can Olivia's retreat to the Himalayas really be interpreted as her 'autonomy of selfhood?' These questions tenaciously surfaced while reading the essay.

Pradipta Borgohain's essay 'Over-Interpreting Conrad' is thorough and critically challenging. The critic posits that *Heart of Darkness* is a complex, energetic and divided text that contains within itself conflicts and debates about knowledge and responsibility. The novel as such poses problems for the interpreter and it requires a discerning critic to read the narrative dexterously. Borgohain re-reads the novel situating it in the context of the theories of renowned critics such as Umberto Eco, Jonathan Culler and Richard Rorty to show how *Heart of Darkness* can be read at several levels.

An innovative approach to Raja Rao comes from Krishna Barua's paper 'From Black and White to Gray: The Fuzzy world in Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare*', using 'Fuzzy technology' to read the work. Though interesting, the reading becomes perplexing and cumbersome at times. Some other theoretical paradigms to examine works other than the ones discussed above are Bakhtin's dialogic to interpret R.K. Narayan, the

use of fantasy in Kurt Vonnegut, and a focus on narrative strategy in *Pincher Martin*.

A sophisticated, meticulous work, K.C. Baral's *Interpretation of Texts* brings together various theoretical approaches with the practice of criticism to study the artistic representation of the realities of life in an imaginary space. I have a quarrel, however, with the placing of Parry's essay. How, if it were

positioned after Gohain's? One cannot question an editor, though. He has his scheme.

I have no qualms in suggesting that *Interpretation of Texts* is a work that critics and scholars of literature would find valuable and would like to possess. As usual, Pencraft International has done a marvellous job in bringing out an error-free, neat and high quality book. The cover design, with the fragmented pieces

joined together and the whirlpool-like circles in the middle, looks attractive and symbolic; signifying that interpretation itself is problematic. The editor and the publisher deserve our thanks and appreciation.

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