

Limits of Language: Post Structuralism and Ancient Indian Theories

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The advent of post-structuralism has been a turning point in the history of social sciences as it ushered a rapid growth of critical theories, providing researchers in humanities and social sciences numerous critical tools, and, at the same time, forging strong interdisciplinary links. Literary interpretations prior to the intervention of critical theories, for instance, were chiefly exercises in aesthetic appreciation of texts invoking Aristotle's rhetoric or Longinus' ideas on the sublime, or in poetry the stylistic differentiations in poetic lines associated with English Literary Movements. However, structuralism, followed by post-structuralism, enriched literary criticism by introducing linguistic elements into literary interpretations, and thus, the enquiry took an essentially interdisciplinary turn, drawing insights from social science disciplines, such as cognitive linguistics, political theory, anthropology, philosophy, history, and so on. In fact, after the "linguistic turn" (Richard Rorty's anthology *The Linguistic Turn* (1967) gave the idea a wide popularity), reading of creative literature no longer remained the individual reader's prerogative to seek aesthetic pleasure as it used to be, but became political communication. The foundations for such a turn were laid down in the post-positivist tenets of Critical Theory (the Frankfurt School), reinforced in semiotic studies, and strengthened further in the post-humanist thought propounded by poststructuralist thinkers. The ideas particularly affected the reception of creative literature, philosophy, and history in the academia. Pradeep Sharma's *Limits of Language* discusses such issues raised with regard to interpretation of creative literary texts, meaning in historical writing

and philosophical speculations, in detail, especially with reference to the reception of, and scholarly reactions to, post-structuralist thought in Indian academia. The book goes on to trace the genesis of poststructuralist thought in Saussure's concept of linguistic 'sign' and Nietzsche's 'nihilism' and 'irrational subject.'

However, not everyone is happy with the loss of aesthetic pleasure, or a well-rounded meaning in creative literature or history, or the death of the author/father/God. Numerous scholars resent the poststructuralist reduction of meaning to being an outcome of the play of the contraries, or to an arbitrary relationship of entities — signifier and signified. Moreover, a revisiting of ancient Indian linguistic/philosophical thought reveals that positivistic and anti-positivistic thought-lines were explored there and criticized from various perspectives in different schools of thought. *Limits of Language* also examines the nihilism involved in poststructuralist thinking, and in the process investigates the perspectives of ancient Indian thinkers from the vantage points of language, aesthetic pleasure, meaning in historical narratives, and philosophy, which they called *darshan*, that is, seeing. Pradeep Sharma, thus, presents a comparative view from Bhartrhari (*Vakyapadiya*), Bharat-Muni (*Rasa-Dhvani* theory), Mandana Mishra (critique of negation), Nagarjuna (*Madhyamaka* theory), and Jain philosophy (*Anekantavada*).

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter 'Language and Relativism' puts the primary thematic aspect of the book in perspective in simple language, explaining the nature of meaning, and goes on to critique Saussure's radical sign, the implications of the Saussurean model on the perception of meaning, Saussure's influence on Semiotics, and Derrida's coinage *Différance*. The second chapter 'Indian Philosophy of

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Language' takes off from Saussure's concept of the sign, and elaborates upon the concepts adopted for the fundamental units of language in a few Indian theories of language that display characteristics similar to that of Saussurean sign. However, the chapter delves deeper into Bhartṛhari's concept of *Śabda* and *Sphoṭavāda*. The chapter sets the tone for a comparative evaluation of the two systems of thought, i.e. Saussure's sign/Semiotics, Derrida's *Différance* and Bhartṛhari's *Sphoṭavāda*. It is at this juncture that the author presents his views on what the limitations of language, in philosophical terms, are. The author then moves on to stress upon the significance of aesthetic pleasure in creative literature and talks of *rasa*, *sahṛdaya* and Reader theories in the third chapter. He elaborates upon Rasa experience as a psychology of literary affect, and provides an extensive comparative analysis of Rasa theory and the Reader Theories prevalent in literary interpretations.

A serious fallout of post-structuralist intervention in theoretical outlook in social sciences is a strong advocacy for revisionist historiography, with the premise that historical events sequenced chronologically into a coherent story is an ideologically motivated strategy. Pradeep Sharma views that ancient Indian historiography can steer clear of the charges of ideological underpinnings since ancient Indian historiographical traditions did not

follow the style of history writing which, at present, is viewed as Eurocentric historiography style. Thus, ancient Indian history writing was mostly historical literature dominated by creative elements. It was history in verse. In the last chapter, the author has taken up a long comparative debate on the possibilities of representation (or the failure of it) of reality in linguistic terms since post-structuralism lays stress upon language and the inherent nature of language to make meaning as a play of signifier and signified, thus, rejecting the potentials of a pre-existing meaning to be apprehended. The author has brought in the perspectives on reality from *Advaitic* / Madhyamaka non-duality, Jain multi perspectivism, Maṇḍana Miśra's theory of negation, the Buddhist theory of *Madhyamaka Pratipāda*, *Śūnyatā* (Voidness), Two Truths, The Middle Way, and the Jain Theory of *Anekāntavāda*. Post-structuralist concepts, such as indeterminacy, *sous rature*, and *trace*, have been discussed with reference to *Syādvāda* in *Anekāntavāda*, *Mādhyamika*, Negation, and Nihilism, *Pratītya Samutpāda* and *Prajñā* and Pure Signifier.

The book is especially helpful for researchers in critical theory and its application to creative writing, political thought, history, and philosophy, with specific interest in comparative insights from poststructuralist thought and ancient Indian schools of thought.