



Ideology, Meaning and Interpretation of Literary Texts

**Sri Mukunda
Upadhyaya**

Associate professor, Department of English, Chaiduar college, P.O : ,
Gohpur, Dist: Sonitpur(Assam)

KEYWORDS :

Ideology: What is ideology? The word has something of a bad name: the 'crude' Marxist notion of ideology is of 'false consciousness', 'the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group' (Althusser), as contrasted with the underlying reality of economic and class relations. The influential theorist Louis Althusser summarizes Marx's notion of ideology by contrasting it with 'the concrete history of concrete material individuals': ideology instead is a 'pure dream', it is 'empty and vain' and an 'imaginary assemblage'. Ideology, Althusser continues, 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'. In classical Marxism - which as we all see, Althusser radically develops - ideology is an imagined representation of reality: it is false, distorted by definition. Ideology is not, Terry Eagleton remarks, 'a set of doctrines', rather, it 'signifies the man live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them by their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole'.

For many traditional non Marxist critics, thinking about ideology is something that gets in the way of reading literature. It focuses on the political or ideological dimensions of a literary text resulting in a reductive simplification of its true value, a value that transcends local or contingent questions of class, race or gender.

Finally, from a post-structuralist perspective, the notion of ideology is fundamentally suspect, since it relies on a questionable opposition of true and false, of reality and false consciousness. By this view, ideology appears too easily as a master term for totalizing reading of literary texts.

In a famous essay entitled 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' Louis Althusser seeks to describe ways in which the state exerts its power outside such institutions as the army, the courts, the police etc. - that is to say, in culture and society generally. The central insight of this paper is that ideology is bound up with the constitution of the subject, the 'man is an ideological animal by nature' meaning that people constitute or define themselves as human through ideology. Althusser argues that the category of the constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time... the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology in so far as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals subjects.

Meaning: The all important fact for the study of literature - or any other mode of communication - is that there are several kinds of meaning. Whether we know and intend it or not, we are all jugglers when we converse, keeping the billiard-ball in the air while we balance the cue on our own nose. Whether we are active, as in speech or writing, or passive, as readers or listeners, the total meaning we are engaged with is, almost always, a blend, a combination of several contributory meanings of different types. Language - and pre-eminently language as it is used in poetry - has not one but several tasks to perform simultaneously, and we shall misconceive most of the difficulties of criticism unless we understand this point and take note of the differences between these functions. For our purposes here is a division into four types of function, four kinds of meaning.

It is plain that most human utterances nearly all articulate speech can be profitably regarded from our points of view. Four aspects can be easily distinguished. Let us call them sense, Feeling, Tone and intention.

- 1. Sense:** We speak to say something and when we listen we expect something to be said. We use words to direct our hearers' attention upon some state affairs, to present to them some items of consideration and to excite in them some thoughts about these items.
- 2. Feeling:** But, we also, as a rule, have some feelings about these items, about the state of affairs we are referring to. We have an attitude toward it, some special direction, bias, or accentuation of interest towards it, some personal flavor or colouring of feeling, and we use language to express these feelings, this nuance of interest.
- 3. Tone:** Furthermore, the speaker has ordinarily an attitude to his listener. He chooses or arranges his words differently as his audience varies, in automatic or deliberate recognition of his relation to them. This tone of his utterance reflects his awareness of this relation, his sense of how he stands towards those he is addressing.
- 4. Intention:** Finally, apart from what he says (sense), his attitude to what he is talking about (feeling), and his attitude to his listener (tone), there is the speaker's intention, his aim, conscious and unconscious, the effect - he is endeavoring to promote. Ordinarily he speaks for a purpose, and his purpose modifies his speech. This understanding of it is part of the whole business of apprehending his meaning.

Interpretation of literary text:

How can Consensus be reached with regard to a text's meaning when every known interpretation of every text has always been different in some respect from every other interpretation of the text? The standard answer to this question is that every interpretation is partial. No single interpretation can possibly exhaust the meaning of a text. Therefore to the extent that different interpretations bring into relief different aspects of textual meaning, the diversity of interpretations should be welcomed; they all contribute to understanding. The more interpretations one knows, the fuller will be one's understanding.

One of the best known critical encounters of the 1970's was that between M.H. Abrams and J. Hillis Miller, a leading exponent of Derridean deconstruction, on the question of the limits of literary interpretation. Abrams claimed that Jacques Derrida 'puts out of play, before the game even begins, every source of norms, controls, or indications which, in the ordinary use and experience of language, set a limit what we can mean and what we can be understood to mean', in favour of 'a free participation in the infinite free play of signification opened out by the signs in a text. He went on to attack Miller for excluding by his elected premises any control or limit of signification by reference to the uses of word or phrase that are current at the time an author writes, or to an author's intention or to the verbal or genetic context in which a words occurs'. In response, Miller seized on Abrams' use of the word 'parasite' in another essay in which Abrams had claimed that deconstructionist reading of a word 'is plainly and simply parasitical' on 'the obvious or univocal reading. Miller argued that these two types of reading were as inseparable as host and parasite, since the "obvious or univocal reading" always contains the 'deconstructive reading' as parasite encrypted within itself as part of itself.

It was generally through that Miller emerged the better from this ex-

change- in a period in which theory was very much in the ascendant – and his article ‘the critic as Host’ has been much cited, but Abrams returned to the attack in the 1980s in an essay entitled, ‘Construing an ‘Deconstructing’. He focused on an essay that Miller had written in 1979, in which he used Wordsworth’s ‘A slumber Aid My Spirit Seal’ to exemplify deconstructive critical practice. Making use of Wordsworth’s whole *oeuvre* and psychoanalytical theory, Miller claimed that ‘in the Lucy poems the possession of Lucy alive and seeming immortal is a replacement for the lost mother’, since “the poet wants to efface his mother’s death.” After a discussion of Derrida, Abrams claimed that Miller’s ‘interpretive moves’ are ‘designed to convert the text as construed into a pretext for a supervenient over reading that Miller calls “allegorical.” Miller dissolves the “unifying boundaries” of the poem as a linguistic entity so as to merge the eight line text into the textuality constituted by all Wordsworth’s writings taken together.’ Abrams contrasts Miller’s ‘over reading’ with his own ‘construing’ approach, in which a literacy text should be read “as human document,” in which meaning is determined and controlled through taking account of the author’s conscious intention and reconstructing the work’s historical and literacy context.

Slavoj Zizek, in a discussion of how Lacanian psychology can illuminate a wide variety of texts, writes: Richard III proves beyond doubt that Shakespeare had read Lacan for the basic problem of the drama is that of the hystericisation of a king, a process where by the king loses the second, sublime body that makes him a ‘king’, is confronted with the void of his subjectivity outside the symbolic mandate-title ‘king’ and is thus forced into a series of theatrical, hysterical outbursts, from self-pity to sarcastic and clownish madness. It could be argued that Zizek is merely explicit what critics who go beyond ‘construing’ normally refuse to admit. One might therefore reformulate Miller’s reading of Wordsworth’s poem in the following way: ‘A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal’ proves beyond any doubt that Wordsworth had not only read his whole *oeuvre* but had read it in the light of Derrida and Freud.

Other contemporary critical schools could be treated along similar lines, so that a New Historicist or Marxist or Feminist critic, committed to Zizek like frankness, could write of ‘Hamlet’ for example: ‘Hamlet’ proves beyond any doubt that Shakespeare had read Foucault/Marx/Irigary’. Critics committed to construing would no doubt argue that this shows the relativism and irresponsibility implicit in non construing interpretive practices, that they in effect allegorise texts along Augustinian lines, the text becoming a critical plaything devoid of stable meaning. For Abrams and traditional criticism in general, it follows that interpretation must restrict textual interplay if it is going to have any claim to objective validity or ‘truth’.

Construing as an interpretive method:

I shall argue initially that there is a radical instability at the heart of ‘construing’ as an interpretive method, which traditional criticism shows little sign of acknowledging. As suggested above, all forms of interpretation involve interplay among texts. Abrams’ interpretive approach is different in kind from Miller’s, in that it places strict limits on the texts that can take part in such interplay. In his view, textual interplay should be strictly controlled by limiting such interplay to texts obviously associated with the literary work one is concerned with, such diaries, letters, books that the author has read, comments by contemporaries, records of events that have a clear relation to the literary work and so on. Yet this apparently common sense position is fraught with difficulties. Historical critics such as Abrams seldom if even acknowledge the fact that the texts which survive historically and which provide the interplay that operates in the interpretation of literary works have survived haphazardly. Some writers’ letters have been preserved, other writers’ have not; some writers destroyed journals and dairies and other material relating to their lives, others did not. We know that books certain writers read, but with other writers we do not. These contingent considerations have had a determining influence on traditional literary interpretation. If one imagined a reversal in which the letters and other materials of those writers which have survived did not exist, while those materials became available for writers about whom we know little apart from their literary works, then in both cases literary interpretation would be significantly affected.

Literary interpretation as performance:

Patricia Waugh argue that ‘construing’ as a form of literary interpreta-

tion has no higher claim to validity as an ‘interpretive’ than the ‘allegorizing’ methods of critics such as Miller. The stability and apparent objectivity that ‘construing’ provides are not necessarily any more secure than what emerges in ‘allegorizing’ approaches. ‘construing’ is not fundamentally different from the ‘free play’ of signification that Abrams deplored in Derridian deconstruction, but is only another type of performance. If ‘construing’ as a mode of interpretation could actually succeed in arriving at ‘truth’ of validity – that is, stabilizing literary meaning – it would collaborate in its own demise, as there would be no further need for interpretation. The irony encompasses all interpretive discourses that aim at ‘truth’ or stability of meaning. As long as there is a desire to interpret, interpretation will continue indefinitely. The desire to interpret itself undermines the goal of interpretive ‘truth’ since the revelation of truth will be perpetually deferred. What marks literary interpretation off from interpretation in other fields is that, explicitly or implicitly, the desire interpret – in other words, interpretation as performance – is given priority over interpretive ‘truth’ or ‘objectivity’, and by embracing interpretation as performance, literary criticism avoids being caught up in the contradictions of interpretation as a search for truth. If ‘truth’ has any place in literary interpretation of text, it is merely as a kind of fiction like Hegelian absolute : namely, the belief that some end to the dialectical process will finally be achieved, even if that is perpetually deferred.

The ethics of performing literary interpretation:

Patricia Waugh previously mentioned that traditional criticism could either limit literary interpretation to interplay with those texts which happen to have survived, or ‘invent’ interplay with possible texts which are beyond access. The latter approach is the equivalent of reading Shakespeare in Zizek like fashion through the texts of Lacan. This raises the ethical question as to whether critics have the right to use the imagination in this way to generate innovatory interpretations. Since Literature is fictive, arguably the performance of literary interpretation is also fictive, and therefore any ethical objection to inventive interplay lacks force. Few would claim today that Shakespeare’s representation of Richard III was unethical, as those who read or see the play now are interested in it as pure performance and care little about questions of historical fairness or documentary accuracy. However Salman Rushdie is still suffering the consequences of many Muslim refusing to accept that his novel ‘The Satanic Verses’ ‘performs’ history and in the Elizabethan period many may have refused to accept – ‘Richard III’ as ‘performing’ history. It may take time for texts to be seen as belonging in the category of the fictive and thus as open without constraint to interpretation as performance.

Conclusion: One might tend to assume that if it were permissible to create interpretive interplay by bringing literary texts into relation with ‘invented’ historical material – as for example, in connecting Shakespeare to some movement or activity not previously associated with him – in order to destabilization and total relativism. But such a fear has little foundation. The onus would be on the critic to convince those in positions of power within the literary institution that interpretations based on speculative premises were more interesting, persuasive, or illuminating than competing interpretation based on conventional sources.

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