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SUBJECT AND SUBJECT-FORMATION IN LITERARY TEXTS: A CRITIQUE OF CATHERINE BELSEY'S ESSAY 'ADDRESSING THE SUBJECT'

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ABSTRACT

Catherine Belsey is the chair of the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory, a research forum established in Cardiff, Wales for discussion and debate on current views of the relation between human beings and culture. Her main area of work delves into the implications poststructural theory has on cultural history and criticism. In her essay, 'Addressing the Subject' taken from *Critical Practice*, Belsey attempts to delineate the process by which a literary text constructs the reader as its subject. She works from the general to the specific by introducing the concepts of Lacan's 'mirror stage', Saussure's idea of 'language as a system based on differences' and Althusser's 'ideology'. She traces the evolution of an individual from the stage of an infant when he comes to differentiate his own image in the mirror to that of an active participant in a social formation, when the acquisition of language initiates the shaping of his subjectivity, and displaces him across various subject positions according to the workings and re-workings of ideology. Belsey uses these introductory concepts as a framework for explaining how any reader of a literary text takes up a particular ideological stance, and wilfully submits to his own 'interpellation'.

INTRODUCTION

To begin with, Belsey draws on Althusser's concept of ideology to explain how a reader is fixed in a particular ideological position within a text; she then proceeds to how a reader is constituted as a subject by a text, followed by an analysis of Lacan's theory of mirror image as formative of the 'I', with additional insights into what discourse is; and finally the complimentary relationship between a reader and a text on the lines of ideology.

Ideology may be broadly defined as a set of ideas that determines one's goals, expectations and actions. More specifically, it can mean a set of ideas propounded by the dominant class of a society to its members to exact conformity. The word was coined by Destutt de Tracy in 1796 by fusing "idea" and "-logy" to mean "the science of ideas", but since then the word has assumed a wide range of connotations.

According to Althusser, ideology materializes itself in the behaviour of people acting according to their beliefs. It resides in everything that can be made sense of. In other words it is inherent in everything that is obvious. Every subject that comes for discussion has a potential to be ideological. But ideology is not simply a set of illusions. Nor does it appertain to the real relations in which people live as such. Rather, ideology concerns the imaginary relations of individuals to the real relations in which they exist. It functions at

two interlocking levels-that of the real and the imaginary. It is real in the sense that it concerns the relationships individuals establish with respect to the social relations in which they are embedded, and imaginary in that it denies a full understanding of the these relationships. For instance, the relationship between an employer and an employee is a manifestation of the master-slave relationship. While the real relations that they enter into is that of an employer and an employee, the ideological position implied in the behaviour of the employer is that of a master to which the employee reciprocates with an ideological position that hints at servility. But their imaginary relationship is not disclosed, and both continue in their respective roles.

As a set of ideas perpetuated by the ruling class, it indulges in half-truths for maintaining the social relations necessary for reproducing the existing modes of production. It is a series of omissions, rather than deliberate lies. In order to explain the nature of ideology, Althusser employed a special type of discourse: the lacunar discourse. Lacuna means 'gap' and lacunar discourse implies that if there is a set of propositions which always remains true, then there must be a set of other propositions that must be untrue. Thus lacunar discourse emphasises what is only suggested, but not stated explicitly. For example, the slogan "Men and women have equal rights" upheld by human rights organisations supposes that all men and women are created equal, and so there must be no inequality in the opportunities they are offered. But in reality, patriarchal forces in society restrain the freedom of women and prevent them from exercising their rights as much as men. Thus the lacuna in the power relations of men and women contradict the claim that they have equal rights.

Althusser is of the view that ideology has no history. While individual ideologies have histories, the general form of ideology lies outside the realm of history. He is also of the view that ideas are material. For Althusser, beliefs and ideas are the products of social practices, not the reverse. What Althusser considers important is not the subjective beliefs held in the minds of people, but rather the material institutions, rituals, and discourses that produce these beliefs.

Althusser put forward the concept of the 'Ideological State Apparatus' to explain his theory of ideology. Althusser begins his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" by agreeing with Marx that a "social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produced" (127) the means of its survival was doomed to die. To be precise, if the existing social relations of production within each social formation (i.e. its class structure) are to be perpetuated, that social formation must seek to reproduce the means of production, i.e. what he calls the "material conditions of production" (128) (the raw material, the machines, etc.), by reinvesting profits in fresh capital outlays; and the forces of production, i.e. what he calls the "productive forces" (130) and "labour power" (130), by paying wages that not only ensure the worker's physical survival but also increase his productivity through skills-training and education. Althusser argues, however, that the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they too will provide for the domination of the ruling class. Ideological practices are sustained and reproduced by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).Unlike Repressive State Apparatuses, of which the police and the army are examples, ISAs work not by the application of force. They adopt a more tactical manoeuvre that works covertly by persuading people to conform to the rules they lay down. The educational system in a capitalist society is an example of this. It teaches children what is "correct" behaviour by inculcating in them history, social studies and literature, all with a view to perpetuating the existing social formation. In other words, the schooling system and other state institutions like the church do not only seek to pass on knowledge about the world but also to ensure "subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of

its 'practice'" (133). The subject is the "I" that speaks. It is the entity which by adhering to linguistic conventions creates meaning. Meaning or signification is in turn the product of the differences that exist in the system of linguistic conventions. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, states that language is a system of signs. A sign is composed of 'the signifier' and 'the signified'. The signifier is a linguistic entity which refers to some object that exists in the material world or in a world of ideas, called the signified. For example, a "pen" is not a "hen" not because of any inherent quality of "pen" or "hen" that establishes a one-to-one relationship with what they signify, but because of the system of linguistic distinctions, which in this case is the difference between the phonemes "p" and "h". As such, it is language that makes subjectivity feasible. Language allows an individual to refer to himself as 'I' and everyone except him as 'You'. According to Émile Benveniste, a French Jewish structural linguist, the 'I-You dichotomy' is the basis of identity and individuality. 'I' becomes unique only by contrasting it with 'You'; 'I' has a set of beliefs and practices which is at variance with that of 'You'; and 'I' subjects itself to being controlled by a particular ideology which becomes evident in whatever action 'I' performs. Thus it can be argued that language creates subjectivity which in turn reflects the dominance of a particular ideology.

Jacques Lacan, an eminent French psychoanalyst who followed up the work of Freud and left indelible marks of excellence on other fecund areas like aesthetics, literary criticism and film theory, argues that subjectivity is not acquired, but created. In his article "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I", Lacan observes that an infant acquires subjectivity between the ages of six and eighteen months. Initially, the infant is only an 'hommelette'- a portmanteau word which combines the French nouns "homme"(man) and "omelette"(a dish of fluffy texture made from beaten eggs) to mean the plasticity of the infant before the acquisition of subjectivity. At this stage the child has no sense of identity; it is not able to differentiate itself from others. But between the age of six and eighteen months, Lacan notes, children become capable of recognizing their mirror image. This recognition causes great confusion in the child as it comes to terms with its first identity crisis. After the first stage of recognition, the child enters the 'symbolic order' when it starts subjecting itself to the norms of culture. To be part of a social formation, a child must have recourse to language. The child is forced to describe his wants by referring to itself as "I". The child not only identifies itself as "I", but also as "he or she", "son or daughter", according to the subject positions it happens to be in. The subject is not static; it can never become a fixture satisfying a single criterion. Instead the subject has to occupy different and mutually conflicting subject-positions according to the context it is placed in. For example, a student fulfils the duties that are expected of him in a school, but his identity as a student is confined only to school-hours. As soon as he steps outside of the institution, he becomes a "son" if he is part of a family or a 'hosteller' if he is staying in a hostel.

The entry into the "symbolic order" also initiates a further division: the distinction between the 'I' that speaks and the 'I' that is represented in its own speech. As 'I' has to conform its speech to social norms, 'I' has to gloss over its repository of repressed desires and communicate only that which is deemed acceptable. According to Lacan, the unconscious may be located in the gap formed by this dichotomy and "the child will spend its lifetime attempting to resolve as 'I' the difference between the inner world, the spectacular 'I' and the external world, the social 'I' (506).

A subject understands the world around him only through discourse. According to Lois Tyson, "discourse is a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience" (281). Discourse refers to very specific patterns of language that tell us something about the person speaking the language, the culture that that person is part of, the network of social relations that the person is caught up in, and even the most basic assumptions that the person holds. Discourse determines how a person expresses himself in a social formation. For example, the discourse employed by a teacher who finds fault with his student and the one employed by the

student to complain of certain loopholes in the teacher's methodology will be entirely different. While the teacher can use a more aggressive discourse to scold his student, the student can do the same only by resorting to a mild discourse.

Discourse is ineluctably interwoven with networks of power. Because certain types of discourse enable specific types of individuals to speak the truth, or at the very least to be believed when speaking on specific subjects, discourses also give these individuals certain degrees of social, cultural, and even possibly political power. Doctors are generally believed when they talk about physical or mental illnesses, and this gives them an authority to recommend courses of action or patterns of behaviour. In many societies, and for long stretches of Western history, religious authorities wielded tremendous social and political power because they had the power to speak about the divine. This power was caught up with their specific position, but was also based on the fact that religious discourse suffused all of life, shaping social organization and influencing how people interpreted the world.

Discourse spreads out, gathering together "the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written)" that follow certain rules "in their dispersion as events" (Foucault, 27). Literary novels can have bits of scientific or legal discourse embedded in them or films can include elements of religious discourse. Discourse transcends disciplinary boundaries, spilling on to areas on which it may seem to have no direct influence. The Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet* will suffice to elucidate the extent to which developments in psychoanalysis influenced a literary text. According to Foucault, discourse is more comprehensive than ideology as it creates the world, generates knowledge and communicates "truths" about the people who speak it. By analyzing the discourse a speaker uses, one can often tell things about the speaker's gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class position, and the speaker's relationship to the other people around him.

It is false to suppose that man is able to break the shackles of ideology in an all-encompassing sense. It is ideology that creates individuals as subjects and identifies them with an 'I'. As such it is impossible to evade the harness of ideology which is inherent in whatever position a person takes with respect to an issue. To indulge a joke, such an evasion too would only be possible with the help of another ideology- an 'escapist ideology'. Then the question arises as to how an individual can resist being treated as a subject, or in other words break free from the tyranny of ideology. What is of importance in this discussion is not ideology per se, which subsumes everything that is spoken, but 'the dominant ideology.' An individual can effect a change in the social relationships that he is part of only by protesting against the ruling ideology. The French revolution sought to reconstruct the social order by shattering the dominant ideology which buttressed the vices perpetrated by the nobility. It accomplished its goal by giving currency to an ideology that emphasised liberty and equality. Thus it is only by embracing a new ideology that individuals can suppress the reigning ideology. What is even more interesting is that the ideology that takes its place becomes the dominant ideology, and the cycle keeps repeating itself.

Once the child enters the symbolic order, it overcomes the helplessness it encounters in the pre-linguistic stage to vent its wants. The acquisition of linguistic ability means that the infant has now the power to phrase its desires. While language satisfies the child's urge to express its wishes, it also confines the child's wishes to those that can be expressed through the conventions of language. Language is indeterminate in that it can never relate our desires accurately to their manifestations in the material world. For instance, when a child says it wants a rose, the rose it has in mind may be white in colour, though what it gets may be red. And even if the child were to get a white rose, there may still be incongruencies as regards shape, size, etc. between the real rose and that the child had in mind.

Belsey argues in her essay that subject-formation is enforced through ideological praxis. It is nowhere more explicit than in literary discourses.

DISCUSSION

W. H Auden in "In Memory of W.B Yeats" wrote, "The words of a dead man/Are transformed in the guts of the living". From the above lines in

which Auden gives us a startling realization of the role of a reader in rendering the black marks on a page into words impregnated with meaning, it is evident that a text becomes non-existent without a reader to interpret it. A reader is in a way an author also. By interpreting the signs in a text in a personal fashion, every reader creates his own version of the same literary text. It won't be hyperbolical to say that there are as many texts of the same work as there as readers. Every reader brings into play his own preoccupations, aspirations, anxieties and convictions in the reading of a text. And under the stimulus and guidance of the text, the reader evinces relevant responses. Out of the particular sensations, images, feelings, and ideas which have become linked for him with the verbal symbols, he creates a new organization. That becomes for him the poem or play or story for which the author had designs of his own. Thus he enters into communion with the author. Only through a recasting of his own experiences can he share the writer's mood, his vision of man or society or nature. For in reading a poem or novel, we are preoccupied with the experience we are living through in the actual reading. We are alert to the very sound and rhythm of the words conjured up in our inner ear. We are intimately involved in what we are recreating under the guidance of the text. *Hamlet* is for each of us what we see in imagination as we read, what we think and feel during our actual imaginative participation in the personalities, the situations, the sequence of events, the moments, called up in us by Shakespeare's words. We live through the suspense, the foreboding, the ultimate resolution. The structure of the work for us is the structure of our experience while under its spell. Aristotle, after all, recognized this inwardness of literary experience when he made the nature of the spectator's response a test of tragedy; it is the reader who feels the pity and terror that are the marks of tragedy. Hence, the quality of our literary experience depends not only on the text, on what the author offers, but also on the relevance of past experiences and present interests that the reader brings to it. We all know that there will be no active evocation of the literary work, no such experience lived through, if the text offers little or no linkage with the past experiences and present interests, anxieties, and hopes of the reader.

The work will not, we say, "come alive" for that reader, but, of course, we should phrase this actively, and say that he is not ready to bring it to life. Having discussed the importance of a reader in literary interpretation, let us now turn our attention to 'interpellation'. **'**Interpellation' is a concept used in Marxist theory to explain how individuals are constructed as subjects by major social and political institutions. It was propounded by Louis Althusser in his "Essays on Ideology". When applied to literature, it means the process by which a literary text invites a reader to subscribe to the ideology it upholds, thereby constructing the reader as subject from where the meaning of a text becomes intelligible. No text creates a determinate meaning; it has to rely on the reader to construct the meaning which is inevitably the product of the interplay between the reader, text and the social formation. A reader cannot understand a text without assuming an ideological position from which the events represented in it become meaningful. Realist literature, the dominant trend in nineteenth century, provides us with sufficient insights into the process of interpellation. It can be observed that classic realism invests the reader with an autonomous subjectivity. At the same time the author withdraws to the background of the text as a shadowy authority whose presence is only superficially felt.

There is a complex interaction of meaning between the author, narrator and reader in realist texts. The text may either unfold as a history or a discourse to the reader. According to Émile Benveniste, a text becomes a history when the author presents the events presented in the plot without the intervention of a speaker, i.e., with the help of an omniscient narrator. An omniscient narrator sees everything, and knows what course individual destinies may take even before the characters themselves witness how their fates unravel. On the other hand, a text becomes a discourse when it contains a 'voice'. The voice is the speaker who addresses himself as 'I' and the others as 'You'. Discourse uses a hierarchy of voices, or in other words, a number of speakers in an

arrangement of increasing importance. The author deliberately chooses some characters as possessing more 'authority' than others.

But it is not right to suppose that the third-person narrative is a monolithic structure functioning solely as a history. More often than not, a third-person narrative mixes history with discourse. Henry James's *The Liar* is narrated in the third person. The main character of this story is Oliver Lyon, who is referred to as "he." Lyon is the reflector of this story, in other words, every event in this story is told through his perspective. But, of course, as is often the case with the third-person narrative, it does not mean that every part of the narrative comes from Lyon's perspective. In the second chapter, after he saw a woman he had once proposed to, he parted with her with a promise to meet again. Here the narrator makes his own comments on Lyon's thoughts:

> If she liked him why had she not married him or at any rate why was she not sorry she had not? If she was sorry she concealed it too well. Lyon's curiosity on this point may strike the reader as fatuous, but something must be allowed to a disappointed man(414).

Although most of the narrative discourse in this story is focused on Lyon's thoughts and feelings, there are some occasions where the narrator intrudes upon the discourse. A character also dons the role of a narrator when some aspect of the plot is revealed through his perspective. Thus a text may possess a plethora of narrators as in Boccaccio's *Decamerone* or in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The complexity that confronts the reader who is faced with a number of speakers is which one to trust so as to arrive at the 'truth'. Wayne C. Booth defines the "unreliable narrator" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* as follows:

> I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not (158-9).

A classic realist text progresses through disruption of order to 'closure' where a harmony like that existed before énoncé (enunciation) is restored. The disorder is usually portrayed by means of love, war or journey, the conclusion of which forms the closure when the text becomes intelligible to the reader. An important feature of classical realist works is the emphasis it places upon character. If in pre-realist works, a character's destiny was the result of circumstances and accidental choices, in classical realism the differences in character contribute to the development of the plot. For instance in Shakespeare's 'As You Like It', the difference between the destinies of Rosalind and her cousin Celia is the result of circumstances, while in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the destinies of the protagonist Dorothea, an idealist young woman, and her sister Celia differ on account of their distinctive character traits as revealed in the latter's decision to marry Sir James Chettam whose plea Dorothea had declined.

As mentioned, a classic realist text may address itself directly to the reader as in 'Jane Eyre' where the protagonist speaks of herself as 'I', and implicitly hails the reader as 'You'. This technique restricts the scope of the reader as it provides him only one subjectposition to view the events of the plot from. In a third person narrative also the reader's subject-position is delimited by the omniscient narrator, who engages in a reflection on past events. Third-person narration aligns the reader's position with that of the narrator as both possess the same 'truth'. Thus, in a third-person narration, the author ends the story none the better for the developments the characters undergo. Neither he nor the reader was ignorant of the destinies of characters, the only 'revelation of destiny' that occurs in the plot being confined to the characters' knowledge of it.

But in a text with multiple points of view as in Emile Bronte's *Wuthering Height* or in Dickens's *Bleak House*, the reader has to slot himself into a series of contrasting subject positions. Every narrator is interested in proclaiming his own point of view, and the 'truth' emerges when the narratives converge in giving back the reader his unified subjectivity.

The object of a classical realist text is to resolve the disruption of order that develops in the beginning, as it moves towards its closure. The

closure restores a new order which the epilogue usually reflects on; the power relations between characters change; and the reader receives a wholesome approbation of his autonomous subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be said that while Belsey in some ways seems to be stretching towards an explicitly philosophical approach to literary theory, she does not make the complete plunge into philosophy and its traditions. By stepping only halfway towards the philosophical domain, she thereby cuts herself off from such tools and insights as would otherwise have made her output more coherent. Though she appears to break new ground as she works towards a pluralistic theory of interpretation - one which runs between the assumption of a single, transcendent, fixed, universal Truth and sheer relativism, her work is by no means uniquely "post-modern" in the philosophical domain. On the contrary, much of the work of the major Western philosophers - Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and their contemporary representatives is precisely the project of overcoming dualistic modes of thinking and establishing pluralistic middle grounds between dogmatic assertions of single universal truths and relativistic assertions. However, she yokes together linguistic theories, psychoanalysis and Marxist philosophy in driving home the interplay between a text, reader and the social formation. Though it is doubtful how much of what Belsey proclaims is her own in the sense of a new literary theory, she has at least succeeded in uniting various discipline in analysing literary texts.

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