



ROLAND BARTHES'S ESSAY "THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR" – CRITICAL EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

The present research work deals with the critical analysis of Barthes's view that the text has several rather than limited meaning. We discuss the statement of Roland Barthes that, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author," and the following research paper deals with the examination of Barthes's contribution as a structuralist or post – structuralist in the field of criticism on the basis of the essay "The Death of the Author."

Roland Barthes (1915 – 80) was the most brilliant and influential of the generation of literary critics who came to prominence in France in the 1960s. After a slow start to his academic career (due mainly to illness), Barthes became a teacher at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, and at the time of his death was Professor of Literary Semiology (a title of his own choice) at the prestigious college of France. His first book, "Writing Degree Zero (1953)", English translation (1972), was a polemical essay on the history of France literary style in which the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre is perceptible.

Mythologies (1957), translated in 1973, is perhaps Barthes most accessible work. Barthes himself produced an austere treatise on "The Elements on Semiology in 1964" and an influential essay entitled "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" in 1966; included in "Image-Music-Text (1977)." At this period he seems to have shared the structuralist ambition to found a 'science' of literary criticism. Later, perhaps partly under the influence of Derrida and Lacan, his interest shifted from the general rules and constraints of narrative to the production of meaning in the process of reading. In a famous essay written in 1968, reprinted below, Barthes proclaimed that "the birth of the reader, must be at the cost of the death of the author" an assertion that struck at the very heart of traditional literary studies, and that has remained one of the most controversial tenets of post-structuralism. So, the present research work deals with the contribution of Roland Barthes as a structuralist or post-structuralist in the field of criticism

"The Death of the Author" is a 1968 essay by the French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes. In this, he argues against traditional literary criticism's practice of incorporating the intentions and biographical context of an author in an

interpretation of a text, and instead argues that writing and creator are unrelated.

In this particular essay Barthes argues against the method of reading and criticism that relies on aspects of the author's identity - their political views, historical context, religion, ethnicity,

psychology or other biographical or personal attributes – to distil meaning from the author’s work. In this type of criticism, the experiences and biases of the author serve as a definitive explanation” of the text. For Barthes, this method of reading may be apparently tidy and convenient but is actually sloppy and flawed: “To give a text an Author” and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it “is to impose a limit on that text.” Roland Barthes ideas explored a diverse range of fields and he influenced the development of schools of theory including structuralism and post-structuralism. As Barthes’s work with structuralism began to flourish around the time of his debates with Picard, his investigation of structure focused on revealing the importance of language in writing, which he felt was overlooked by old criticism. Barthes’s “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” is concerned with examining the correspondence between the structure of a sentence and that of a larger narrative, thus allowing narrative to be viewed along linguistic lines. Barthes split this work into three hierarchical levels: functions, actions and narratives. “Functions” are the elementary pieces of a work, such as a single descriptive word that can be used to identify a character. That ‘Character’ would be an action and consequently one of the elements that make up the narrative. Barthes was able to use these distinctions to evaluate how certain key ‘functions’ work in forming characters. For example key words like ‘dark’, ‘mysterious’ and ‘odd’, when integrated together, formulation a specific kind of character or ‘action’. By breaking down the work into such fundamental distinctions Barthes was able to judge the degree of realism given functions have in forming their actions and consequently with what authenticity a narrative can be said to reflect on reality. Thus, his structuralist theorizing became another exercise in his ongoing attempts to dissect and expose the misleading mechanisms of bourgeois culture. In the late 1960s, radical movements were taking place in literary criticism. The post-structuralist movement and the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida were testing the bounds of the structuralist theory that Barthes’ work exemplified. Derrida identified the flow of structuralism as its reliance on a transcendental signifier, a symbol of

constant, universal meaning would be essential as an orienting point in such a closed off system. This is to say that without some regular standard of measurement a system of criticism that references nothing outside of the actual work itself could never prove useful. But since there are no symbols of constant and universal significance, the entire premise of structuralism as a means of evaluating writing (or anything) is hollow. Ideas presented in “The Death of the Author” were anticipated to some extent by the New Criticism, a school of literary criticism important in the United States from the 1940s to the 1960s. New Criticism differs from Barthes’s theory of criticism reading because it attempts to arrive at more authoritative interpretations of texts.

So this essay deals with the critical analysis of Barthes view about literary text and the Author. The following part of the essay deals with Roland Barthes’s theory of literary criticism and theory of Structuralism and Post- Structuralism.

DISCUSSION

Ronald Barthes is generally regarded as pioneer of modern criticism. He gave fresh impetus (ideas) to the critical movement known as ‘Structuralism’. ‘The Death of the Author’ is one of the most well known and controversial essay by Ronald Barthes. The essay was written in 1968 and included in ‘Image-Music-Text’. The essay challenged the traditional literary studies when it was published. It can also be taken as the articulation of the post structuralist critical moment, though in a very provocative manner. Barthes wished to stress the fact that limited meanings and it is for the reader to reveal these meanings. Barthes declares, “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author”.

Ronald Barthes raises a very important point about the narrative voice and the identity of the narrator. He speaks of two different kinds of narration of fact. He believes that the facts can be narrated transitively or intransitively. The transitively narrated facts are the facts which are narrated with view acting directly on reality. On the other hand, the facts narrated intransitively may be without any real function. They are not motivated by any utilitarian end and in the presence of such facts the author loses hold over the meaning of the

words used. Barthes's comments, "The voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death in such situations." Barthes obviously has a particular situation in mind when he speaks of the death of the author.

Barthes says that in traditional literary and critical theory, excessive importance has been given to the author. He is highly critical of the personalisation of the act of writing in traditional societies. He says that the author is a modern figure, the product of our society. The capitalist ideology attached a great deal of importance to individualism. It related the meaning of a work to the author's beliefs. The author was seen as a medium or a means through whom the work got articulated. He was obviously seen as a mediator. The author centred ideology was anxious to unite the man with his work. The failure of the work was attributed to the failure of the man because the literary work was supposed to reflect his person, his life, his tastes and his passions. The text was considered to be the voice of the author. The presence of no other voice was felt in the text and the whole of the critical analysis was centred on the author. Barthes challenged this view and gave his personal ideas concerning the author and the text. Ronald Barthes surveys the attempt in French literary and critical circles to depersonalize art. Though, the sway (impact) of the author remains powerful, some writers have long attempted to counter it. Stephane Mallarme, a French symbolist poet, did a lot in this direction. He was the first to realise the necessity of substituting language for the author. He tries to stress the view point that it is language which speaks, not the author. Paul Valery also challenged the question of the primacy of the author. He stressed the written nature of all linguistic and philosophical projects. Finally, surrealism also played the role in weakening the hold of the author of a work's meaning. It was another literary moment which worked to demolish the myth of the author. The moment also propagated the notion of automatic writing, the view that several people can be writing together. Thus the revised theory of language decisively killed the author. Barthes shows that the act of stating of something is an empty process, which does not require the support of the speaker. The meaning of

a sentence does not depend on the existence of the speaker. The signs or words themselves are enough to make the meaning of work clear. This idea obviously declined the supremacy of the author. The author disappears from behind the work, He is now understood as the past of his own book. The book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. Barthes refuses to allow the author an authoritative role because to give an author to text is to finish it with one absolute meaning. Writing has multiplicity of meanings which are to be discovered and analysed. The structure of the writing can be followed at every point. The concept according to Barthes has no fixed meaning and thus literature can never assign an ultimate (find) meaning.

A text, says Barthes, is made of multiple writings. It is the reader who deals with the multiplicity of meanings. Barthes seems to be saying that every element read in a text evokes a chain of associations in terms of which the reader interprets the meaning of that element. Thus, in order to give writing its future, it is necessary to ensure the birth of the reader which can be at the cost of the death of the author. The death of the author makes the birth of the reader in a new and more important role. The unlimited power of language can be understood in the multiplicity of meanings of a literary text. This is possible only by giving the rightful place to the reader.

Structuralism is a new way of looking at literature as well as other disciplines. It identifies structures, systems of relationships which endow words identities and meanings and show us the way in which we think. Structuralists develop analytical and systematic approaches to literary text and avoid traditional categories like plot, character, setting, theme, tone etc. Even, more significantly, structuralists tend to deny the text any inherent meaning or authority. Ronald Barthes took on theoretical structuralism and added new dimensions to it. He was interested in the study of meaning contained in sign systems. Earlier, structuralists had ignored that in their study. The application of the structuralist concept of sign system by Barthes advanced the scope of the subject in certain directions.

Ronald Barthes raises a very important point about the narratives voice and the identity of the narrator. He speaks of two different kinds of narrations of a fact. He believes that the facts can be narrated transitively or intransitively. The transitively narrated facts are the facts which are narrated with view acting directly on reality. On the other hand, the fact narrated intransitively may be without any real function. They are not motivated by any utilitarian end and in the presence of such facts the author loses hold over the meaning of the words used. Barthes's comments, "The voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death in such situations". Barthes obviously has a particular situation in mind when he speaks of the death of the author.

Barthes traces the history of the evolution of critical thought from a focus on the author to that on the text. Barthes says that in traditional literary and critical theory, excessive importance has been given to the author. The author was seen as a medium or a means through which the work got articulated. He was seen as a mediator. Therefore, the meaning was to be sought in the personality of the author. Barthes gives a high place to French thinkers who played an important role to depersonalise art. Stephen Mallarme, a French symbolist poet did a lot in this direction. He was the first to realise the necessity of substituting language for the author. He stressed the written nature of all linguistic and philosophical projects. Barthes quotes Proust to prove that literature has an essentially verbal character. It cannot be linked to the inferiority of the writer's psyche.

Another important feature of structuralism concerns the structuring of signification in a work of art. The meaning of a sentence does not depend on the existence of the speaker. The signs or words themselves are enough to make the meaning clear. This idea obviously declined the supremacy of the author. He disappears from behind the text. The concepts according to Barthes have no fixed meaning and thus literature can never assign an ultimate meaning. Ronald Barthes brings to light another significant contention of post-structuralist thought when he makes the language more important than author. He believes that the unlimited power of language can be understood in

the multiplicity of the meanings of a literary text. A text, says Barthes, is made up of multiple writings. It is the reader who deals with the multiplicity of meanings. Barthes seems to be saying that every element read in a text evokes a chain of association in terms which the reader interprets the meaning of that element.

CONCLUSION

Thus, in order to give writing its future, it is necessary to ensure the birth of the reader which can be at the cost of the death of the author. Barthes leads to the conclusion that a text can be seen properly only when the author dies. He says, "To give that text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with final signified, to close the writing." So, we can say that Barthes gave a great contribution towards literary theory and criticism. His theory of structuralism and post-structuralism is having a great importance in English literary theory and literary criticism.

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