

Literature: Product of Power Relations

Abstract

Literature is called mirror of society. Some define it as 'imaginative piece of writing' whose ultimate aim is to teach and to preach. But it is not as innocent as it seems to be. It is one of the most powerful tools for naturalizing the difference existing in society since time immemorial. Literature is itself power oriented. It can be defined as a systematic discipline for dominating, restructuring and having authority over powerless. It hence, constructs and legitimizes unequal power relations.

Keywords: Hegemony, Ideology, Discourse, Carnival, Subversion, Heteroglossia, Hierarchic binaries, Aporia.

Introduction

Generally, literature refers to an art which has artistic or intellectual value and has literariness or poetic inclination that makes its language different from ordinary one. The aim of literature is to reveal all the aspects of human nature, to show the complexities of human behaviour, to empathize with reader, to develop critical views, to analyse language and its effects.

Beside these objectives, we have another aspect of literature which makes powerful sections of society stronger and powerless weaker through recurring images. This domain brings into the light the relationship between literature and power. Both are intertwined to create power hegemony in the society through consent. It is one of the means to create differences between two sections of society. As Terry Eagleton defines, "Literature can be under so much invisible schemes and it may have a very crucial impact on the reproduction of social inequalities and power relations. That's why literature has come to be the slave of social groups in power."

Aim of the Study

This paper shows how-

1. The sections of society have been subjugated through particular discourses
2. Specific institutional forms of control were created to ensure that these sections remained subjugated
3. This subjugation naturalized the difference and helps in domination of particular sections
4. Literature plays a vital role in maintaining these differences
5. One should deconstruct the literature in order to understand the underlying structures of power

Research Method

My research method is to collect and analyze the critical views of different critics like Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Antonio Gramsci in order to develop an understanding how literature constructs and legitimizes power relations.

Structuring and Restructuring Hegemonic Relationship through Literature

Literature, in some or other way is the product of power relations. Reinforcement of power relations to create dominant and dominated classes is termed as Hegemony. This is a term popularized by Italian thinker, Antonio Gramsci. 'This domination of particular sections of society is not supported through threats of violence or law but by winning their consent to be dominated and governed.' It works like ideology. It enables less through coercion than through consent. Ideology is the system of beliefs that naturalizes the unequal power relations and leads the oppressed to accept it as natural, a given and as self evident and therefore beyond questioning. These ideologies are inbuilt in making of literature hence assuring the manifestation of these powerful relationships.

Hegemony describes how ruling class establishes and maintains its control. Violence, political and economical coercion are not only the factors but also through ideology these hegemonic structures are



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propagated. Literature plays a vital role in maintaining these ideological stances. It convinces dominated ones that their subordination is meant for their welfare. These power structures are erected on the basis of hegemony. Such kind of persuasion leads to the willing consent of dominated ones for subordination. It implicitly makes them dependent, slave and they lose their agency and autonomy thinking that they are meant for subordination. These recurring images in literature make the difference as eternal fact.

Edward Said in *Orientalism* defines that orientals may be the imagination of the occident. He meant that Orient is quite different from how they are placed in European Western experience. This imagination has been supported by institution, vocabulary, doctrine, imagery, scholarship and bureaucracy to give sophisticated position to occident against orient. These doctrines and thesis have actually form Orient as occident wanted to frame them. Hegemony is nothing but a strategy to gain consent in order to befool orientals and setting a clear cut idea what is done for them is actually their need and occident feels that their duty is to transform orientals claiming their superior position. This position is assigned to the ruling class naturally and this fact is formed and circulated. Canons are established in order to persuade for their instrumental position. A strategic formation of occident has taken place through political ideologies, cultural subordination and social domination.

Review of Literature

The relationship between literature and power can be seen in the system of thought brought into existence by Michel Foucault.

The hierarchy existing in society is analysed well through his discourses. Mikhail Bakhtin through his work *Dialogism* which was later named, showed that the dominant groups present along with dominated ones. Even in literature, the voices of subordinated groups coexist with the dominant one. It cannot resist subordination but still it is clear that dominated voice cannot be regarded as unchallenged too.

This paper researches Foucaultian insights and analyses the power play in all cultural and literary forms. Moreover it also acknowledges the contribution of Mikhail Bakhtin depicting how literature is the site of struggle, carnival and subversion.

Analysing Literature through Foucaultian Concepts

Michel Foucault who was the Professor of the History of the System of Thought developed an understanding 'how knowledge is collected, archived and disseminated.' He focused on unpacking the underlying structures of power in the various fields of knowledge. He explicitly showed how these structures are conditioned and constructed through different means. One of the powerful tools to administer these differences is Literature too.

This particular kind of knowledge is constructed, organised, shared and used through particular form of speech, writing language or through literature. This is called 'discourse'. Every field has its

own discourse. Every discourse has an object, a language and an authority who uses the language to represent oneself superior to others. Discourse tells the context. It focuses on representation. A particular section is represented superior to other. This image is naturalized by repeating those hegemonic structures in literature or culture. This generated knowledge is disseminated and the understanding is developed between dominated and dominant class that latter have superior features and therefore they are justified to dominate the former one. In this way discourse is a terrain of thought on which struggle is carried out. The person or institution that controls the discourse also controls the subject in those discourses. Foucault's major contribution has been to show how these discourses condition people's lives and inform their thinking.

Later on feminists on Foucault's argument show how the discourses of patriarchy justify their presence over women. Men acquire subject position. They have agency, autonomy and ability to think. To define themselves as logical, rational and intellectual, they define themselves as superior. They need a contrasting personality to impose their superiority. They produce 'other' as a contrasting image. This other was women and they were represented as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational. Consequently hierarchic binaries are produced and it helps in forming a powerful section of the society who has a licence to subordinate the other half of the society. This subordination has become the part of literature giving the justification that patriarchy should be powerful. These structures are effective means of reinforcing male domination because they do not appear oppressive. With their ability to persuade, the structures convince women that she is destined to be subordinated.

Such kind of discourses is the heavily loaded representations which generates a particular kind of knowledge that assigns some superior position and others inferior ones. In this way, literature constructs and legitimizes power relations.

Literature: A Site of Struggle, Carnival and Subversion

Mikhail Bakhtin gave a few terms which is later known as dialogism. Bakhtin proposes that there are many levels of dialogue in language and literature. Many voices are present in any piece of literature and therefore it should be seen as a site of struggle, carnival and subversion.

Mikhail Bakhtin paid attention how dominant voices are explicit and their presence is known and visible. But along with it, women's language, working class discourses and language of ethnic minorities are present side by side. The dominant voice has acquired subject position in this respect but the presence of other voices too cannot be ignored in a literary work. The presence of different voices in a literary work is known as 'heteroglossia'. It is heteroglossia which reflects that different voices are present in the text. It gives space to many voices.

Carnival is the ultimate other according to Bakhtin because he finds that there is need to subvert and interrogate established or institutional authority.

Carnival inverts the traditional stereotypes. It can be in the form of laughter, parody, grotesque, clowning etc. It breaks down or tries to break the base on which hegemonic structures are laid down. It has capacity to reverse the hierarchy. Bakhtin tried to acknowledge the presence of those factors which are the part of a literary work but are never heed. These factors remained on margins but they have potential to come at centre and tumble down the structure maintained since ages. Through the term 'carnival', Bakhtin tries to show that the text has binaries in which one is privileged at the expense of other. Carnival actually empowers the other. If this empowerment is given in right proportion, the hierarchy will be reversed. It's not the aim to construct reversed hierarchic binaries. One step ahead is the condition of aporia where neither of the terms are privileged.

Conclusion

These power discourses has been figured out by deconstructionist and therefore deconstruction is interested in the hierarchic binaries setup within texts. This could be men or women, black or white, light or dark, similarity or difference. In each of these binaries, one term is placed over the other. These binary opposites are used in Literature producing a contrasting image, idea and personality to maintain power relations.

Deconstruction shows how the less privileged term is central to the dominant theme. By showing this centrality, deconstruction reverses the hierarchy. It destabilises power relations. It shows subject can exist only if there is an object. Subject always defines itself in opposition to the other. It depicts how colonialism or patriarchy attains the subject position and shape the other, that is, women or natives in these cases. It not only reverses the condition but also destabilises this reversed hierarchy too. The text remains unresolvable where neither term is privileged or both terms are privileged. This state is called 'Aporia'.

Through deconstructive reading of texts one analyses the literal meaning of the text and how hierarchic binaries are set up in it. The deconstructive reading brings the margin to the centre hence reverses hierarchy. Ultimately, it displaces even the reversed hierarchy, leaving the text open where neither can be privileged.

It can be argued that literature does not really exist. Instead we need to study literary phenomena within social reality. Literature empowers differences. One should read literature with critical point of view in order to unpack the underlying ideas present in the literary work because literature gives us insights and our thought process is determined by it either consciously or unconsciously.

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