

# Literature, Theory and the History of Ideas



# Literature, Theory and the History of Ideas:

*An Updated Compendium*

Edited by

Arshad Ahammad A. and Nada Rajan

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**- Editors**

# INTRODUCTION

Arshad Ahammad A and Nada Rajan

The history of ideas has an immediate affiliation with the humanities and social sciences, which have the magnitude to encompass the perspectives and techniques of narratives in these disciplines. This pivotal relationship facilitates an unremitting line of enhancement by way of the espousal and transformation of strategies. Popular genres and literary texts arbitrate modifications in ideas and ideologies over a period of time, and vice versa. This negotiation consecutively stimulates these works and genres to act as testing grounds for ideas and their creative and critical embodiments. Accordingly, the acquired readings of the narratives of the past are refurbished and new meanings are derived. This evolution of sorts incorporates the interpretations of the semiotics of quotidian literary and cultural practices and manners, thereby thrusting the vital issue of systematisation of these texts into the realm of discourse. Rather than appear as a bit of plain written or printed content, literature stands as experience rooted in texts. The diverse writings and forms thus stem from a public structure of knowledge, interact and bring forth new cultural and philosophical contexts.

Cultural studies is a field of theoretically, politically, and empirically engaged cultural analysis that contemplates on the political dynamics of culture, its historical foundations, defining traits, conflicts, and contingencies. Cultural studies researchers generally investigate the manner in which cultural practices relate to wider systems of power associated with or operating through social phenomena, such as ideology, class structure, nation formation, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender and generation. The discipline envisages cultures not as fixed, bounded, stable, and discrete entities, but as persistently interacting and shifting sets of practices and processes.

This collection of essays brings together various theoretical, socio-political, gendered and historical structures within which standard and philosophical viewpoints come to function as crucial components of human activity, while framing culture as the dynamics of contention over meaning. The myriad themes explored in this anthology—history, globalisation, colonialism, domestication, individual and collective

trauma, ecology, cinema, science, post-humanism, feminism, masculinity and alternative sexualities—bring in the remarkably political function that the theoretical ground of cultural criticism can carry out in the current environment of multidisciplinary studies and research.

Meena T. Pillai's interaction with Jonathan Dollimore, the pioneering figure in cultural materialism, draws attention to the shapeless character of desire, the fluid relations between desire and identity, as well as the import of a politics of sexual dissidence. She avers that Dollimore's critical investment in sexuality and queer studies since the 1990s has radically politicised and pluralised the received notions of desire. Dollimore questions the convoluted and genealogically fashioned discursive formations that consign certain methods of longing to the category of the perverse.

Joseph Dorairaj's article titled "What is Literary Hermeneutics?" attempts to define the term 'hermeneutics' as a key concept in theology, philosophy and literary theory. Hermeneutics was originally romanticist and philological in character and that the objective was to retrieve the author's intention. Dorairaj holds that the distinct imaginative and aesthetic character of literary hermeneutics distinguishes it from other branches of hermeneutics.

Saji Mathew tries to problematise the adoption of domestication strategy interpolations in translation in a cultural critique of the Malayalam translation of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* by Hermann Gundert, the nineteenth century German missionary and scholar. In the process, the freedom that a colonial translator assumes while domesticating a text has serious cultural implications for the construction of the 'domestic subject'. Saji Mathew's arguments consider the translation as a case in point to substantiate that concepts such as domestication, translator's agency and freedom of the translator cannot be discussed outside the political and social contexts of text production and power relations.

Aswathy G. Babu, in "The Politics of Hair: Cultural Artefact and Symbolic Appropriation", purports to explore hair as a powerful and substantial cultural artefact and to explicate the manner in which hairstyles are often employed as a potent tool that reflects a person's beliefs, lifestyles, ideologies, morality, sexual orientation, political persuasion, religious sentiments and, in some cultures, even socioeconomic status. Historically, hair has always been a vital mode of self-expression and a strong symbol of one's identity, used as a conspicuous weapon of resistance and to orchestrate radical changes in social norms.

Najila T. Y. explores the implications of globalisation for national or cultural identity and contemporary literature. Her article, “Paradigms to Literature in a Globalised World”, considers the way national identities are reasserted in new forms and contexts in spite of the homogenising forces of globalisation. The cosmopolitan novel demands renewed ethical bases and an attention to narrative structures; it looks at original critical paradigms to observe the negotiation between the national and the global in literary representations in a commoditised existence.

The issues of resistance, gender justice and marginalised sexualities set against varying mindscapes are explored in some essays. Arshad Ahammad A. attempts to explore the themes of shame, honour and sin—both personal and collective—in Qaisra Shahraz’s novel *Typhoon*. He argues that shame and honour, two contradictory emotions, are simultaneously connected to the female psyche in the Pakistani society, and they are frequently employed as disciplinary tools by the patriarch over the female body and women’s sexuality for validating dominance and surveillance. *Typhoon* is regarded as a document of some of the dark and unsettling facets of the human psyche.

Abida Farooqui endeavours to trace the agency of the transgender in Arundhati Roy’s second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Her essay “Empowered to Act: Locating Agency in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*” argues that instead of presenting transgenders as passive recipients of an inhuman system, the novel depicts the life of Aftab-turned-Anjum as one of bold choices and seditious political acts.

Susy Antony deals with the issues of gender, sexuality and spirituality in Yasmina Khadra’s *The Swallows of Kabul* (2004). She identifies the spiritual infertility in the society that infiltrates the personal lives of the main characters and creates mayhem in their lives. The life of a widow was pathetic in medieval India and the degradation and sufferings of such unfortunate women appeared in many modern literary texts.

Bhagyalekshmi Mohan, in her article “Women Writers and the Question of Widows: A Reading”, examines the short stories of a few women writers of Kerala that resisted stereotyped notions of the ‘modern colonial widow’, and reconstructed widow figures as proactive women who became a part of the independent Indian economy.

Three chapters surgically analyse personal and collective trauma as depicted in three different novels. The article by Rubeena S. is an attempt to explore the autoethnographic aspects manifested in Sally Morgan’s novel *My Place* as well as to analyse the scope of the genre in articulating the unspeakable and documenting the untestified in history. It looks at the

way Morgan employs personal story as an instrument to explore the traumatic history of the indigenous people of Australia.

Jinju S. analyses the transnational and transgenerational trauma transfer in Jonathan Foer's post-9/11 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). She expounds the novelist's endeavour to link the catastrophe with other historical upheavals such as the Allied bombing of Dresden and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings during World War II. This connection has been analysed as a brilliant effort to unscramble the 9/11 trauma from underneath the cloak of American exceptionalism. The article, "The Unbearable Solitude of the Witness: Transnational and Transgenerational Trauma Transfer in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*", asserts that reading the novel as a subjective version of a child's distress, devoid of any political commitment, totally neglects the restrained, yet prevailing, nuances of politico-historical sensitivity in the narrative. Rape is an intense traumatic experience, with severe repercussions on the victim's health and life.

The article titled "Silence as Resistance and Communication as Therapy in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*" by B. Sajitha attempts to study the Rape Trauma Syndrome and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on a victim in Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak*. It also explores the stages through which Melinda, the protagonist, reconstructs herself towards empowerment and eventual recovery. Silence has positively helped Melinda to recuperate from rape trauma and the final resurgence happens slowly as she starts communicating her thoughts.

The interconnection between science and the humanities is deliberated in two chapters. Arya Mohan's "Garden as a Trope for Negotiation in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*" seeks to bridge the gap between the 'two cultures' of science and humanities by explicating the metaphor of a garden, a negotiation between the 'wild' and the 'civilised', and a meeting place of nature and culture.

Gigy J. Alex's article, "Post-human in the Post-Anthropocene Universe: Evolving from an Insouciant Frankenstein to an Alien Saviour", seeks to investigate the evolution of the post-human, in the context of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild" (1996). Science fiction discourse could be considered as a connecting link between science and humanities. From an age where a scientist was considered a demigod, we have moved to an era where he is only a link in the network of actors where each constituent agent is interlinked. Gigy argues that this liaison underscores the paradigmatic shift from the human to the post-human world.

The last four chapters critique a few Malayalam films. Aswathy V.N. explicates the psychoanalytical concepts of rejection and projection in the three movies of Lijo Jose Pellissery, which have won accolades on national and international platforms—*Angamali Diaries* (2017), *Ee.Ma.Yau.* (2018) and *Jallikattu* (2019). ‘Shadow’ is a term that Carl G. Jung used to describe the negative traits of a person that she or he tries to repress. The human mind either rejects or projects onto others its core undesirable characteristics of greed, lust, sexual urges and unhealthy desires. The aforesaid movies of Pellissery visualise a chaotic world where men reject the normalities of civilisation and project their inner promptings at will. Instead of repressing their elementary desires, Pellissery’s characters revel in animalistic, primordial behaviours and consequently meet a self-imposed destiny.

Rafseena S writes about the film *Paradesi* (2007), set against the backdrop of the Malabar region of South India, highlights the traumatic incidents in the lives of those who hold a Pakistani passport, who are hunted and harassed by the Indian authorities as non-natives. The solace of ‘home’ and its rationalisation for these people while the home space considers them as the ‘other’ are poignantly depicted in this film. Rejected as an ‘outsider’, the apodictic estrangement that a native goes through looms large in the structure of the narration.

Sarath S. analyses the unconscious and semiconscious patriarchal concepts of female bodies that surface in the movies of Jeethu Joseph. He takes up *Drishyam* (2013), *Detective* (2007), *Memories* (2013) and other contemporary South Indian thrillers to study the way the female body is incorporated into the plot to underpin stereotyped gendered roles and to cement the socially accepted notion of masculinity. The article titled “Fatal Female Bodies: Gender and Sexuality in the thriller Movies of Jeethu Joseph” looks at the three gazes purported by Laura Mulvey—the perspectives of the camera, the audience and the characters, respectively.

Aravind S. G.’s article, titled “Reel ‘Others’: Alternative Masculinities in Malayalam Cinema (1980–2000)”, focuses on the exploration of marginalised and reconfigured masculinities in commercial Malayalam films of this era. He looks at the manner in which ‘alternative’ performances of masculinity offer spaces to challenge their hegemonic counterparts and re-read conventional masculine practices and societal roles. In interpreting the narratives, the mise-en-scene, and the semiotic strategies employed in a significant selection of movies, the study endeavours to ascertain the methods by which alternative cinematic masculinities deconstruct and accentuate the celebration of overriding masculinities in popular Malayalam cinema.

The essays in this anthology deliberate on the structures of power that cause and contour the prevailing, stereotypical and hegemonic notions of identity, gender and culture. The intersections of theory, history, science, literature, and film are quite germane as these crossroads become momentous for mankind in the contemporary spatio-temporal premises. The authors manifest the ways through which literature, in its theoretical and cultural facets, seeks to incorporate multidisciplinary perspectives under its all-encompassing canopy. The focal point of these interactions is the perpetual dissemination of ideas with its roots spread across diverse scholarly explorations. This volume proposes to engage in dynamic discussions on the social, political, cultural and philosophical dimensions of literature, theory and the history of ideas, which, we hope, will fascinate the curious student and the informed reader alike.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE POLITICS OF DESIRE: IN CONVERSATION WITH JONATHAN DOLLIMORE

Meena T. Pillai

Known for heralding the critical practice of cultural materialism in the 1980s, Jonathan Dollimore is one among the most renowned intellectuals of his times. His critical investment in sexualities and queer studies since the 1990s has radically politicised and pluralised the received notions of desire. He interrogates the complex and genealogically shaped discursive structures that relegate certain modes of desire to the category of the perverse. In this interview, given during his visit to Kerala in October 2018 as a guest of the Kerala State Higher Education Council, Dollimore talks in a lucid style about the fluid nature of desire, the rather slippery and contingent links between desire and identity, and the complexities inherent in adopting an essentialist politics of sexual identity. His thoughts become relevant in a society like contemporary India, where homophobia remains entrenched in the cultural fabric of the land even after the legal revoking of Section 377\*, and the institution of marriage continues to be embedded within patriarchal structures in many ways.

Q: Meena T. Pillai

A: Jonathan Dollimore

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**Q:** Much of your critical investments since the 1990s were on the politics of sexuality. You have often said that your sexuality is interesting at those moments when it throws you into confusion, when the experience of love makes you question who you are and not confirm it. We in India, have a history where gay people have been murdered and mutilated, and they continue to be oppressed. Recently, the apex court in India ruled in favour of the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Even as there are many attempts to recover lost histories of gay cultures, there are also tendencies

to romanticise them. How would you respond to gay identity politics and these new discourses of liberation that seem to be coming out of the very terms of oppression?

**A:** Sexuality as a comfortable extension of one's identity appears to me as being profoundly untrue to the nature of desire. I would like to respond with a personal story. When I was in my twenties, I thought I was straight. Then I ended up falling in love with a man and it was an incredible, amazing relationship. It was a gay relationship across race. This relationship profoundly influenced everything I wrote. At this point, my newfound gay friends said, "At last you came out to be the person you always were." But in reality what happened was that I became a profoundly different person. Overnight as it were, literally overnight if you take my point, I had become another person. It had thrown everything up in the air. It had torn me apart. It made me rethink who I am and what I am, as though someone had pulled the ground from underneath my feet. I can be wrecked by desire. The experience of love makes me question who I am, not confirm who I am. For me, what is interesting in my sexuality are such moments which throw me into confusion. So I don't agree when my friends say, "affirm yourself as gay and embrace the identity of newly queer," with the implication that it was always there. Traditions of writings about love never consolidate identity. Lovers don't just proclaim: 'at last I know who I am'. They are wrecked by desire, their identity is wrecked. That form of ecstasy, in which they don't know how to live, sleep or eat, is profoundly undermining.

Identity politics for me has more to do with consumerism than it does with desire. And anyone who thinks their identity is comfortably coextensive with their desire is living in dreamland, because one day you might wake up falling in love with someone you never thought you would. Identity politics, as it is being practiced on the campuses in the US and the UK, is profoundly detrimental because only certain people are allowed to speak. If you are a member of the minority, you are permitted to speak. However, if you happen to be white, male or cisgender, you are silenced. When I started teaching gay courses in the 1980s, people assumed that only gay people would want to do them. And this was partly or largely true. However, I wanted straight people in there as well. They could bring in a different perspective and could learn things that only that course could give. But unfortunately, identity politics was already active and most of the straight people were excluded. I regret that to this day.

**Q:** Even as you talk about this, could it be that your own location in a first world country colours your perceptions in a certain sense? Is there not a continued need for a strategic kind of an essentialism in places like India?

**A:** From the moment that I started writing my book, *Sexual Dissidence*, I have realised that it was profoundly about identity, even as I was personally attracted to the anti-essentialist views. Later, when I read the works of essentialist thinkers like Andre Gide, I realised that the affirmation of identity is a crucial aspect of the history of sexual dissidence. So I framed the book around a contrast between Andre Gide and Oscar Wilde. And fortunately there was an amazing moment when these two writers met in Algiers. Oscar Wilde got Gide to acknowledge his own homosexuality for the very first time, and this was life changing for Gide. Thus, the whole book is about double narratives—on the one hand the way all liberation movements must embrace identity at some level to move forward and how, on another level, the very ascription of identity, while liberating can also be the basis on which people are persecuted, demonised and separated. And we live in a very complicated world where you know our identities are contradictory. On the one hand, yes, politically we often tend to be anti-essentialist, and for very good reasons. Yet, at the same time we might be members of the emerging minorities which have to be essentialist. There is no way around that. If you come at this philosophically, you will realise that this has always been the case. It occurred to me that the Western philosophical trajectory has been an attempt to achieve objectivity, but always haunted by the impossibility of that task. So you get repetitions of periods where a great philosopher thinks that he has proved the objective nature of reality and then someone comes along and undermines it. And really it is the same with identity. Identities are always being made and unmade. And I am afraid that desire is on the side of unmaking.

**Q:** At a time when we talk about the performance of gender and the fluidity of identities, how would you respond to India's attempts at legitimising same-sex marriages—a move that could in turn institutionalise marriage?

**A:** There was an article written about me about two months ago which really annoyed me and I made them put in a correction. The article was primarily on bisexuality as something that doesn't threaten identity. However, in the course of the article it said that I had been married, and I was absolutely furious about this. I had never been married. I have always

remained opposed to the institution of marriage for obvious reasons including patriarchy. But when my gay friends said that they wanted to get married I held that it is their choice, and a part of liberation is to have that choice. The remark in the article felt offensive to me because twenty years ago, had I got married, it would have been regarded as a deep betrayal of my homosexuality simply because of what was and wasn't permitted at that time for gay people. It was very offensive to me that someone would think that I would just leave a gay relationship and go and marry a woman. Today, it is all different because everyone can marry. I still distrust the institution of marriage. I think it is conservative and a lot of gay people are deeply conservative these days. I have never been married. Maybe that's why I stayed friends with all my former partners!

**Q:** When we look at the trajectory of the politics of sexual dissidence in India and elsewhere, 'queer' has emerged as a radically political way of talking about a diversity of themes ranging from gender and sexuality to desire. How would you respond to this particular direction taken by the lesbian-and-gay liberation movement?

**A:** It seems to me that in the UK now it is easier to be queer than being a good old fashioned lesbian or gay person. While it seems trendy today, it wasn't so when we started to use that term. But as time moves on, you have to constantly re-examine your own perspectives. Sometimes when things gain a purchase, you have to jump in and challenge the new orthodoxies which surround them. When a vital movement emerges, it may attract a lot of people all too eager to jump on the bandwagon and try to take it in directions which aren't always productive. Gay marriage is a choice for many, but let us not pretend that somehow marriage is in anyway consistent with the wonderful utopian visions of the early days of gay liberation. Gay liberation, like other vital liberation movements around sexuality and race, have taken concepts from the dominant culture which have lost their vitality and have revitalised these concepts to be more inclusive. And often, like in the early days of the women's movement, gay liberation is not just about saying "we want the rights to behave as badly as you" which is in a sense what some demands for equality are about today. But the wonderful thing about the early liberation movement is that they have this wonderful utopian vision that was all inclusive. They saw the world as a radically transformed place. While it was idealistic and unrealistic, it was so much more energising than some of the demands that we have today. So I miss those utopian moments.

**Q:** This is where I would like to bring the recent work of yours—*Desire: A Memoir*—which I think ought to get much more attention than what it has got in the Indian context. What I liked about the book was the very notion of an academic writing a memoir that is both intensely personal and philosophical. Would you like to talk about that a little bit?

**A:** It is a difficult book to talk about. The autobiography came out last year, and it came about because I was remembering some dead friends. I realised that the whole pain of losing them have been so great that I had suppressed it. I realised I had to go back and relive it in a way. Once I started writing that book, the most incredible things happened. I had these great surges of remorse, regret and desire—reawakening of old desires for people who are now dead and lost. And well, I just thought I better write it as it comes out and that's what I did. It was a lonely and painful book to write. But it was also the most meaningful thing I have ever written.

**Q:** I was particularly struck by your remark that 'I am not attracted to the confessional for its own sake?'

**A:** We can terribly bore each other by our own personal lives, but it always seemed to me that my life is interesting when the personal intersected with larger things. It drags you out of your self as it were; you start to look down on your self from a distance; and see your self it in a context. However, as I remark in my book, to be worth writing about, the personal needs to have a meaning beyond me. There are things which I felt it important to confess to, because certain dominant narratives were being untruthful about them. One of these was about a relationship that I had when I was a boy with an older man. Certainly in the West, now anything that suggests a relationship between an adult and a young person is completely demonised. And I felt there is an interesting history here where older men and younger men really do have potentially important relationships which aren't necessarily supposed to end the way so many can. So it was also political. I wanted to step outside the personal.

**Q:** If as you say depression is a sickness of desire, it's a malady I see gripping many in the academia today. At a time when the state continues to withdraw, not so discreetly now, from education, amidst various kinds of moves to liberalise and privatise education and tune it to market imperatives, in the process often breaking the backbones of our public universities, and also in the context of cultures of sycophancy and cultures

of silence that seem to be on the rise, how do you look at the sickness of desire that makes many discerning intellectuals depressed?

A: I understand your question very well. About ten years ago, when all that you are speaking about was happening in my own country, I had a wonderful job in the University, but I was being asked to betray everything I believed in. Every day, I was being asked to betray what I taught and what I lived by. And I began suffering from clinical depression. One day I just got up and walked out of my office. I never came back. I now think of that moment as a failure. Had I been stronger, I could have coped better. But it is when we function as isolated individuals that such oppressions become terrifying, and therefore we need to find ways of connecting with people, we got to make alliances. Global capital is so powerful today that I continue to despair at some level. But then, resistance is always crushed, will be crushed. The price of resistance is suffering.

## Notes

\* Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code is an act that criminalises homosexuality by banding it under 'unnatural offences' against the order of nature. It traces its roots to the British imperial administration, and was originally drafted in 1861, modelled on the 'Buggery Act' of 1533.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WHAT IS LITERARY HERMENEUTICS?

#### A. Joseph Dorairaj

Hermeneutics is crucial not only to theology and philosophy but also to literary studies. A quick look at the history of hermeneutics shows that it was originally philological and romanticist in character and that the objective was to retrieve the author's intention. The hermeneutical theories of Schleiermacher, Humboldt, Boeckh, Dilthey, Betti and Hirsch attest to this fact. Hermeneutics became ontological with the publication of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962), which expounded the study of being by employing the methodology of hermeneutical phenomenology. With Gadamer and his *Truth and Method* (1975) and *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (1977), it received a philosophical thrust and orientation. In contrast to romanticist hermeneutics, the Gadamerian brand of hermeneutics is dialectical or dialogical, and results in a 'fusion of horizons'.

Before we examine the features of literary hermeneutics, it would be methodologically better to clarify the broad differences between literary and non-literary texts. A text could be defined as a stretch of language, predominantly, though not exclusively, in the written mode, thereby expressing the author's thoughts, ideas or emotions. From a broader perspective, texts could be classified as those that lend themselves to interpretation and those that do not. All scientific texts belong to the latter group, while literary, philosophical, theological and juridical texts qualify for the former. While scientific texts are referential by nature and denotational in character, non-scientific texts are connotational, with varying degrees of emphasis. Among non-scientific texts, literary texts belong to a special category, for they are significant in terms of content as well as form. The Russian Formalists would go to the extent of defining literature, especially poetry, as a "specialized use of language" and Jakobson would call poetic language "organized violence" (qtd. in Rivkin

4) against the language of daily use. In the final analysis, that which distinguishes literary hermeneutics from other branches of hermeneutics is its distinct imaginative and aesthetic character.

Literary hermeneutics has successfully bridged the gap between theology, philosophy and literature, for it has put to use the theories and insights borrowed from its parent disciplines. In *Theological Hermeneutics*, Jeanrond comes up with a fine distinction between ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ hermeneutics (8). While the former is the province of philosophical hermeneutics, the latter is the realm of literary, theological and juridical hermeneutics. Jeanrond asserts: “While the study of literature and art, and the theological and legal interpretation of texts are primarily concerned with the interpretation of a specific body of works, philosophy is more interested in hermeneutic principles as such” (40). In contrast to philosophical hermeneutics, which has a transcendental dimension, literary hermeneutics has a practical orientation in that it deals with the explication and interpretation of literary texts. Hence, Szondi, in his “Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics”, points out that “literary hermeneutics is the theory of the interpretation, *interpretation* of literary works” (17). Although literary hermeneutics focuses on literary works, it does not shy away from discussing fundamental hermeneutical issues such as *mensauctoris* (authorial intention), presuppositions, hermeneutic circle, linguisticity and fusion of horizons, for micro-hermeneutics is subsumed under macro-hermeneutics. Even while partaking of some of the key issues in philosophical hermeneutics, literary hermeneutics operates in a province of its own. Mueller-Vollmer writes:

Literary hermeneutics . . . is not a special school of criticism or a trend in literary scholarship, but the theory and study of the art of interpretation; it provides both a theoretical foundation for that art and a necessary critique for its various historical and contemporary manifestations. Regardless of school or approach, interpretation remains at the heart of literary studies because of the very nature of its subject matter. Besides, focusing on epistemological and phenomenological critique and description, literary hermeneutics will have to assume the additional task of studying the ‘art of interpretation’ in its discursive contexts. (60)

### **Features of Literary Hermeneutics**

Szondi and Jauss highlight the distinguishing features of literary hermeneutics: “We understand by ‘literary hermeneutics’ a theory of interpretation which is not, to be sure, unphilological, but which reconciles philology with aesthetics” (Szondi 27). Taking the cue from Szondi, Jauss,

a former student of Gadamer, throws into relief the aesthetic dimension of literary hermeneutics. Laying emphasis on the distinctive character of literary hermeneutics, he writes that “it would have to differ from the traditional hermeneutics of classical philology” (94) because of its aesthetic nature. Szondi spells out the fundamental differences that distinguish literary hermeneutics from philological hermeneutics even while the latter reconciles philology with aesthetics. He points out that literary hermeneutics “will make the aesthetic character a premise of the interpretation itself” and adds that “contemporary literary hermeneutics will not want to renounce the consciousness of its own historicity” (20).

Yet another salient feature of literary hermeneutics is what Mueller-Vollmer calls “hermeneutic competence” (58) on the analogy of linguistic, literary and communicative competence, and its dialectical counterpart, performance. Commenting on literary competence in the context of Structuralist Poetics, Jackson writes:

A person’s linguistic competence is his tacit knowledge of the rules of construction and vocabulary of a language. His literary competence would therefore be his tacit knowledge of the synchronic literary conventions that enable him to recognize and to produce, if he produces, works of literature. (67)

Mueller-Vollmer, in “Understanding and Interpretation: Towards a Definition of Literary Hermeneutics”, explicates the term ‘hermeneutic competence’. He writes: “Literary understanding . . . manifests a specific competence of a complex nature. It is made up of linguistic-semiotic, generic, psychological, and other classes of components . . .” (58). He adds:

An individual may acquire hermeneutic competence in two possible ways: as a member of a given culture or cultural group, he gains understanding of the language, customs, literary codes, and conventions of that culture; as a literary student and critic, however, he must enlarge and modify his competence consciously and ‘artificially’ in order to conform with the requirements of his discipline. (58)

According to him, literary hermeneutics is “the theory and study of the art of interpretation” (60), which includes both tacit interpretation (i.e. hermeneutic competence) and explicit interpretation, which constitutes, among other processes, “deliberate reflexive (non-verbalized) interpretive efforts” and “verbal articulations and formalizations of these efforts” (59).

Literary hermeneutics concerns itself with key issues such as the death of the author, presuppositions and their role in the reading process, the hermeneutic circle, the three *subtilitates* and the fusion of horizons. The

thesis of the death of the author has gained considerable hermeneutical ground and is a major issue to reckon with in literary interpretation. Wellek and Warren's incisive comment from a formalist-intentionalist standpoint serves as a preamble to the following discussion: "The whole idea that the 'intention' of the author is the proper subject of literary history seems, however, quite mistaken. The meaning of a work of art is not exhausted by or even equivalent to its intention" (42).

The stand-off between the intentionalists and the anti-intentionalists was brought into sharp focus with the publication of Wimsatt and Beardsley's landmark article "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), and decades later, with Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967). In "The Intentional Fallacy," the authors shed light on the crucial distinction between intention as the 'cause' on the one hand and 'standard' on the other. They declare that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of art" (333). In "Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited," Wimsatt refines the argument expounded in "The Intentional Fallacy." He remarks that the statement in the earlier work "should certainly read: 'The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging either the meaning or the value of a work of literary art'" (53). Among other philosopher-critics, T.S. Eliot and Foucault have spoken against the stand of the intentionalists. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920), Eliot remarks: "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (53). Foucault, in "What is an Author?" (1988), argues that instead of raising questions regarding the genesis of the literary work in the author's intention, the reader should instead examine it as a discourse. He writes:

What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking? (120)

Against the backdrop of hermeneutical distancing, Ricoeur points out that the text "produces a double eclipse of the reader and the writer", i.e. "the reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading" ("What is a Text?" 107). He adds: "Sometimes I like to say that to read a book is to consider its author as already dead and the book as posthumous. It is when the author is dead that the relation to the book becomes complete . . ." (107). The semantic autonomy of the text is

upheld today for it is quite rightly argued that meaning is not 'behind' the text but is in 'front' of the text, i.e. it is woven into the codes of the text. In other words, "once a text is in circulation," argues Webster, "the umbilical cord, so to speak, between author and text, is cut and the text leads an independent existence" (19).

Barthes contests the theory of the genesis of the literary work in the author's intention from a post-structuralist perspective. In "The Death of the Author", he demolishes the traditional notion of the author as the genesis and sustenance of the text: "The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child" (145). Celebrating the sharp break from traditional poetics, he argues that "in complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing . . ." (145). In yet another piece, "From Work to Text," he pursues the idea with reference to 'text', which has a clear edge over the traditional concept of 'work'. He notes that the text is read without the "inscription of the Father" and adds: "It is not that the Author may not 'come back' in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a 'guest'" (161). Now that the text is liberated from the author and his/her intention, it becomes plural calling attention to the "*stereographic plurality*" (161) of its signifiers. This paradigm shift from the author as the sole source of meaning to the text as the ensemble and reservoir of meaning actualised by a reader in a given spatio-temporal context is fraught with wide ramifications. The logical upshot of this shift is semantic autonomy and polysemy. In other words, the text is decontextualised and is subsequently recontextualised in new contexts and horizons. Ricoeur explains:

The essence of . . . a literary work, or a work in general, is to transcend its psycho-sociological conditions of production and be open to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated within different socio-cultural contexts. In short, it belongs to a text to decontextualize itself as much from a sociological point of view as from a psychological one, and to be able to recontextualize itself in new contexts. ("The Hermeneutical Function" 133)

The three *subtilitates* (*subtilitas intelligendi, explicandi* and *applicandi*), i.e. understanding, explication and application, are crucial to literary hermeneutics, though not in the same measure as in theological and juridical hermeneutics. Gadamer asserts that "understanding . . . is always application" (*Truth and Method* 275), for the application of the *theoria* to a given situation (*praxis*) completes the hermeneutical process.

“To understand, in the sense of knowing and explaining,” notes Palmer in *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory*, “already involves within it something like an application or relation of the text to the present” (187). He declares:

The ‘meaning’ of Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, Sophocles, or Homer is not solely in terms of the worlds erected in each great work; reading a work is an event, a happening that takes place in time, and the meaning of the work for us is a product of the integration of our own present horizon and that of the work. Something like demythologizing occurs in every authentic understanding of a literary work. An application to the present occurs in every act of understanding. (190)

In short, it could be argued that the knowledge and understanding a reader gains is “a result both of a questioning of the text, and also an application of the work to . . . [his/her] own situation” (Skilleas 99). Jauss remarks that *subtilitas applicandi* has been glossed over in literary hermeneutics and points out that “scholars limited their work to exegesis, left their concept of comprehension inarticulate, and neglected the problem of application” (96). He asserts that “the realization of this union [of the three *subtilitates*] has been and should again become the common goal of all hermeneutical practice, notwithstanding the variety of subjects” (96) and advocates that taking the cue from theological and juridical hermeneutics, “literary hermeneutics has to pass . . . from comprehension through interpretation to application” (117).

Although the question of application and relevance are of paramount importance to theological and juridical hermeneutics, they play a significant role in literary hermeneutics too. The issues of relevance and contemporaneity—which are at once historical, cultural and personal—are indispensable to text-interpretation as well, wherein the interpreter tests his/her presuppositions in the light of the horizon of the text paving the way for the fusion of horizons and the eventual existential appropriation of the text. The three *subtilitates* are conditioned by spatio-temporal factors. In other words, the triad of understanding, explication and application is always horizontal or positional. Lundin asserts:

Modern hermeneutical theory speaks of the historically situated nature of all interpreters and their interpretations. There is no such thing as an isolated, presuppositionless reading of a text. . . . All readings take place within communities and start from presuppositions which inform, but do not determine the course of each reading. (15)

In any interpretive activity, the reader brings his/her horizon to bear on the text but simultaneously places himself/herself in the tradition and

horizon of the text. It is this double movement between the horizon of the reader and that of the text that constitutes the crucial issue in text-interpretation.

Ultimately, any interpretive activity culminates in the fusion of horizons: the horizon of the reader and that of the text (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Webster notes that literature is subject to “two contexts: that in which it is written, produced or created, and that in which it is subsequently circulated, read, consumed” (16). The hermeneutical tension between the two horizons can be overcome through a double movement, “a centripetal movement of transporting the literary work into my language, into my epoch and mentality; and a centrifugal movement of transporting myself into the language, epoch and mentality of the writer” (Schökel 381). Writing from a literary standpoint, Jauss points out that “the particular achievement of . . . discovering the horizons of faraway worlds, in transcending and blending them with present horizons, forms the premise of literary hermeneutics as well as its privilege” (109). Ignoring one of the two horizons results in a skewed interpretation, for any interpretive activity necessarily involves the co-implication of the text and the reader. Leitch remarks that “the tendency to bracket the horizon of the reader and to focus on the horizon of the text produced antiquarian criticism” and points out that “to reconstruct or restore an artefact—to seek to understand an art object in terms of itself and its time (even if possible)—was to exclude the world of the interpreter and her present interests” (190).

Palmer advocates a phenomenological literary hermeneutics fashioned by Heidegger and Gadamer in sharp contrast to the traditional schools of interpretation that stem from a realist and idealist metaphysics. Traditional literary theories, especially Anglo-American and Russian Formalisms, were heavily influenced by Cartesian dualism and called upon the critic to assume a neutral and disinterested position, and treat the literary work as an object. These approaches, which were underscored by philosophical realism, “posited the fundamental separation of subject and object (reader and text), rendering the literary work separate from its historical context as well as its reader. Such ‘realism’ made tragically irrelevant to interpretation reader’s response and historical milieu” (Leitch 189).

In contrast to such approaches that looked upon the literary work as a “manipulable object” (*Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory* 7), Palmer calls for a radical shift “from the horizon of the natural attitude (within which both realism and idealism operate) to the phenomenological focus on the event of understanding” and argues that this shift will usher in “a whole new horizon of interpretation” (“Phenomenology” 211). In contrast

to the traditional schools of interpretation, which take into account “only the end product as something in itself” that is “hermetically sealed” (207), he argues for “a philosophy of interpretation which takes the event of understanding as the starting point for all thinking and theory about literary interpretation” (212). In short, he makes out a case for a “phenomenology of the event of understanding” (212), which will be characterised by the dialectical encounter between the text and the interpreter.

Another key issue in literary hermeneutics is the part played by presuppositions or preunderstanding in any interpretive endeavour. The concept of preunderstanding and its role in text-interpretation has been remarkably expounded by Bultmann. He asserts that “every interpreter brings with him certain conceptions . . . as pre-suppositions of his exegesis, in most cases unconsciously” (*Selected Writings* 307) and argues that these pre-suppositions shape his preunderstanding of the given text. He notes that “any interpretation is necessarily sustained by a certain preunderstanding of the subject matter that is expressed or asked about” (*New Testament and Mythology* 82). He claims that understanding is well-nigh impossible without pre-understanding. He makes it abundantly clear that preunderstanding is the cornerstone of the edifice of understanding:

It is easy to see that you cannot understand any text of which the theme is music unless you are musical. You cannot understand a paper or a book on mathematics unless you think mathematically, or a book on philosophy unless you think philosophically. . . . You cannot understand a novel unless you know from your own life what love or friendship, hate or jealousy, etc., are. (*Selected Writings* 308)

Ultimately, this preunderstanding, which serves as an entry point in the encounter with the text, is “enlarged, modified, and if need be, corrected” (Macquarrie 149) as the interpreter gains a progressively better understanding of the text. Thus, there exists a reciprocal relationship between the horizon of the text and the interpreter’s preunderstanding, which is furthered and deepened by his/her sustained dialogue with the text. Consequently, the text is seen in a more comprehensible light. Heidegger too rejects the notion of a presuppositionless understanding. He avers that “an interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless apprehending of something presented to us” (191-92). In his opinion, any interpretive endeavour is based on a fore-having, a fore-sight and a fore-conception (191): “Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having [‘something we have in advance’

i.e. *Vorhabe*], fore-sight [‘something we see in advance’ i.e. *Vorsicht*], and fore-conception [‘something we grasp in advance’ i.e. *Vorgriff*]” (191).

Gadamerian prejudices are closely related to the Heideggerian fore-structures of understanding. Linking interpretation to understanding, Heidegger remarks that “all interpretation is grounded in understanding” (195). In a move to flesh out this pithy statement, Ormiston and Schrift note that “interpretation (*Auslegung*), as a possibility of understanding, is the working out, the laying out . . . of possibilities projected by understanding” and add that “interpretation is the articulation of what is projected in the understanding; it discloses what is already understood” (16). The fore-structures of understanding could roughly be equated with the “pre-reflective intimacy of text and reader” (Leitch 188). Commenting on the pre-reflective character of understanding, Clarke writes:

In almost every aspect of life we do understand what we are doing very well—reading a text, walking, conducting a conversation, listening to language we know or to a piece of music—but without our being able to analyse fully or provide some encompassing theory of that understanding. In other words, most understanding is not the self-conscious and logically consistent deployment of clear systematic concepts of things or actions. We literally do not ‘know’ what we are doing in that sense, but this is not to say that we are ignorant or have no understanding; it is, rather, that our understanding is pre-reflective. (60)

Understanding is a dialogical process and the concept of the hermeneutical circle throws light on the process of understanding itself. In the literary realm, the hermeneutical circle implies that there is an organic and dialectical relationship between the literary text and its constituent parts such as the stanza, chapter, act and scene. It has to be underlined that the reciprocal relationship between the text and its parts is not a static but a progressive and dynamic one. This realisation prompted Coreth to remark that the reciprocal relationship that exists between the ‘whole’ and its constitutive elements is “strictly speaking, not a closed circle, but rather an ongoing spiral process in which the particular content and its total content mediate and reveal each other” (251). Clarifying that the hermeneutical circle is not a vicious one, Thiselton points out that the spiral would have been a better metaphor to convey the “ongoing movement and progressive understanding” (92) between the text and its constituent elements.

On account of the fact that understanding, interpretation and application are predominantly from the interpreter’s horizons and his/her times, texts are understood differently by readers anchored in diverse ages and cultures. “Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own

way” (*Truth and Method* 263), asserts the Heidelberg philosopher, as “the real meaning of a text . . . is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history” (263). Gadamer further posits that a reader or critic must accept the hermeneutical fact that “future generations will understand differently what he has read in the text” (304), which suggests that “there . . . cannot be any one interpretation that is correct ‘in itself’ because every interpretation is concerned with the text itself” (358). Interpretation and application are, therefore, on-going processes, for new contexts and horizons call for fresh interpretations and applications. Against this backdrop, Gadamer declares that “the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished” (265). Shedding light on this argument, Bontekoe points out that the text’s “*future* possibilities are determined rather by the contexts which its future readers will impose upon it in their efforts to come to grips with the text” (5). From a literary perspective, the subversions and conscious re-readings of canonical works bear witness to this assertion. A strong case in point is the post-colonial readings of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1612), which approach Caliban’s and Prospero’s stories from radically divergent perspectives.

## Conclusion

Jeanronnd rightly pointed out that ‘micro’ hermeneutics partakes of the distinctive features or characteristics of ‘macro’ hermeneutics. In that sense, literary hermeneutics is seen to share the features of philological, ontological and philosophical hermeneutics as well as theological and juridical hermeneutics. At the same time, it is quite distinctive, for its aesthetic or artistic character marks it off from other branches and schools of hermeneutics. It is a fact that literary hermeneutics rubs shoulders with various schools of literary criticism but what sets it apart are its philosophical leanings and its self-reflexive and meta-critical characteristics.

## Works Cited

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