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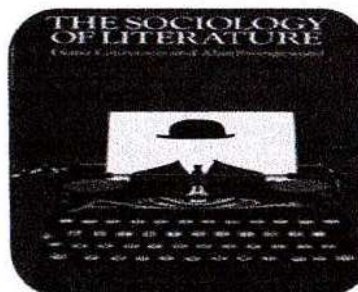
THE SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The sociology of literature, a specialized area of literary study, has a long and distinguished history and during this long period of history it has been developed into two broad approaches. The first approach studies literary works as social documents. The second approach deals with the relation of the individual authors to the socio-cultural circumstances of the era in which they live and write and the conditions of the creation, consumption and production of literature. The major gatekeepers of literary works discussed by modern social critics are: publishers, censors, critics, distributors, reading public and public libraries. These gatekeepers can uphold the writers and their works and influence the reading public by displaying the qualities of the text and to make it available to every reader. For instance the publisher can prevent manuscripts reaching the market, the critics can prejudice the reading public and the distributors can create the problems in reaching the text to the readers. The role of these gatekeepers in the creation and success of literary works is focused in this research article.



KEYWORDS : *sociology of literature , , reading public and public libraries.*

INTRODUCTION:

The sociology of literature is a specialized area of study which focuses its attention upon the sociology of the writer, social institutions and gatekeepers who determine the existence and success of a literary creation. It examines the relationship between the artist and society and the conditions of creation, production and distribution of literary works. According to M.H Abrams;

“The term, ‘Sociology of literature,’ however, is applied only to the writings of those historians and critics whose primary, and sometimes exclusive, interest is in the ways that the constitution and form of literary work are affected by such circumstances as its author’s class status, gender, and political and other interests; the ways of thinking and feeling characteristic of its era; the economic conditions of the writers profession and of the publication and distributions of books ; and the social class, conceptions and values of the audience to which an author addresses the literary product or to which it is made available. (2006: 288).

This view clearly shows the role of the social context, creators and gatekeepers in the existence and success of literary works.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE:

The sociology of literature has a long and distinguished history and during this long period of history the different critics and social thinkers developed several approaches of the sociology of literature. The early social thinker and literary critics such as J. C. Herder, Madame de Stale, H. A. Taine and others regarded that certain social, political, cultural and geographical conditions of the day are the major determinants of

literature. J. C. Herder believed in social structure where as Madame de Stale emphasized the climate and national character as the determinants of literature. Hippolyte Taine, on the other hand, provided a systematic formula of 'race, milieu, and moment' to interpret and analyze literary work. His *History of English Literature* (1886) is really the landmark in the history of the sociology of literature. All these critics regarded the study of literary works as social documents, as assumed picture of social reality. Their mirror image approach emphasized certain social, political, cultural and geographical conditions of the day as the major determinants of literature, but they ignored the sociology of the writer and the role of and gatekeepers comprising publishers, distributors, critics, reading public and circulating libraries in the creation and success of literary works. The Marxist approach that began with the rise of industrialism and capitalism also ignored these determinants of literary works. In fact, ignoring these determinants of literature is like denying their role in the creation and success of literature. So the modern social critics and thinkers such as Lucian Goldman, Leo Lowenthal, Robert Escarpit, Milton Albrecht, Terry Eagleton, and others laid emphasis on these determinants for the evaluation of literary works. For instance, in his essay 'The Sociological Model', George A. Huaco explains that the literary phenomena are influenced and affected by five specific social structures. They are: "author, readers, critics, patron, and publishers" (1970:551).

In fact, sociology of literature is very essential for understanding both literary works and society; however, it was not an established field or academic discipline till 1970. In his 'Preface' to *The Sociology of Literature* Alan Swingewood states that the sociological study of literature has not developed, either in terms of its theory or in its methods of analysis, but has remained in some kind of limbo, suspended between literature as literature and sociology as social science (1972). However, the several critics in the second half of the twentieth century devoted themselves to develop the theory and methods of the sociology of literature. For instance, Lucian Goldman presented his idiosyncratic approach towards the sociology of literature in *The Hidden God* (1956), *Towards a Sociology of Novel* (1964), *The Sociology of Literature: Status and Problems of Method* (1967), *Cultural Creation in Modern Society* (1976), and *Method in the Sociology of Literature* (1981), while Robert Escarpit laid emphasis on the sociology of production and consumption of literature through his *The Sociology of Literature* (1958) and *The Book Revolution* (1965). Besides these writers the Vol.14 of *Critical Inquiry* (1988) also devoted to give the institutional and intellectual base to the sociology of literature. In the editorial introduction of this issue Priscill Ferguson states, "we use the sociology of literature here to refer to the cluster of intellectual ventures that originate in overriding conviction: the conviction that literature and society necessarily explain each other" (Ferguson 1988:421).

According to Terry Eagleton, "there are two main ways of in which an interest in the sociology of literature can be justified. The first form of justification is realist: literature is in fact deeply conditioned by its social context and any critical account of it, which omits this fact, is therefore automatically deficient. The second way is pragmatist: literature is in fact shaped by all kinds of factors and readable in all sorts of contexts, but highlighting its social determinants is useful and desirable from a particular standpoint" (1988:469). The sociology of literature, thus, combines both the ways and studies literature in its totality. John Hall's *The Sociology of Literature* (1979) focuses on the social contexts of literature, the sociology of the author, the gatekeepers of literature, the reading public and the effect of literary culture. In his "The Sociology of Literature" he points out that sociology of literature not possible without sociology of reading and of cultural consumption in general.

In his essay 'The Sociology of Literature: Some Stages in the History', Jacques Leenhardt explains the modern approach of the sociology literature. According to him 'the expression 'sociology of literature' covers two very different types of research, bearing respectively on literature as a consumer product and literature as an integral part of social reality, or, considered from another angle, bearing on society as the place of literary consumption and society as the subject of literary creation" (1967:517). Here we come to know that the major phase of the process of literary work is the consumption. It entails production with a view to consumption and distribution through the channels of distributors and libraries. In the very process the role of readers and critics is very important. In this regard *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1990) defines the term 'sociology of literature' as, "a branch of literary study that examines the relationship between literary works and their social context, including patterns of literacy, kinds of audience, modes of publications and dramatic presentation and social class positions of authors and readers" (Con. Ox. Dict. 1990).

As sociology of literature studies the cultural life, it is called as a subfield of cultural sociology. In fact a cultural study is not a unified movement but a group of tendencies, issues, and questions. In the words of Wilfred Guerin "arising amidst the turmoil of 1960, cultural studies is composed of elements of Marxism, new historicism, feminism, gender studies, anthropology,... those fields that focus on social and cultural forces that either create community or cause division and alienation". (Guérin 1992:240). The cultural studies, thus, transcends the confines of a particular discipline and analyses the means of production of literature and other arts. It also raises the several para literary questions such as: Who supports a given artists? Who publishes his or her works? How are these books distributed? Who buys these books and how are they marketed? Being a sub field of cultural sociology, sociology of literature also studies all these social implications. Of late the sociology of literature has taken a new direction due to the reconceptualization of readers as creative agents rather than passive recipients of what writes. The proponents of this theory argue that the reader never comes to a text as a blank slate but instead places against a horizon of expectations.

Dr. V. D. Gupta published the *Proceeding of the Seminar on Sociology of Literature* held at P.C Bagla College, Hathras, India, on March 16, 1980. In the 'Editorial...' of the proceeding, he points out that during the discussion in a seminar some of the participants raised the objections about the phrase 'the Sociology of Literature'. They were not satisfactory with title. Therefore, they suggest renaming it as 'Sociology through Literature' or 'Sociological Study of Literature'. However, majority of participants were not agree with those objections. After the arguments and counter arguments, the two parties have reached a consensus that the use of the phrase 'Sociology through Literature' neglects the totality of literature. While stating the result of the discussion, Dr. V. D. Gupta says, "The consensus in the seminar was that sociology of literature is the proper name because it implies the several questions such as; how the work comes into being? How it reaches the reader? How it is published? ... Who is the patron of the author? What are his interactions with different social groups and his public? Why is it accepted by the public? How certain literary waves exit in a particular period? ... How a literary taste develops? How a reader accepts or rejects certain themes?" (Gupta 1980: V). The main idea underlying this view is that the literary work is conditioned and shaped by the sociology of the writer, the dominant socio-cultural values of the age, the ideology of the publishers, critics, distributors and readers. As the major critical theories that are commonly used to analyze, classify, interpret and evaluate literary works have not touched these questions, the new generation of thinkers and social critics made a successful attempt to develop new theoretical perspectives of the Sociology of Literature on the basis of the sociology of the writer, social institutions and the ideologies of gatekeepers in the creation and success of a literary work. The major gatekeepers of literature are as follows.

SUM UP:

Sociology of literature is, thus, a specialized area of study which focuses its attention upon the sociology of the writer and gatekeepers comprising publishers and distributors, critics, reading public and public libraries which play a crucial role in determining role in the existence and success of literary works.

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