



RESEARCH ARTICLE

STRUCTURALISM AND ITS PLACE IN NEW LITERARY CRITICISM: A BRIEF NOTE

\*Dr. Chelliah, S.

School of English and Foreign Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature,  
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021, Tamil Nadu, India

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2018  
Received in revised form  
24<sup>th</sup> February, 2018  
Accepted 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2018  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2018

ABSTRACT

This paper throws light upon Structuralism and its place in New Literary Criticism. Structuralism provides innovative grounds for the analysis of literature. It represents an attempt to rethink everything in terms of linguistics. It aims to reveal the universal structure of language as a constructed system of rules. Structuralism is built on the founding stone of Saussurean linguistics. Bringing back home, Structuralism as sign a new role to the reader in the process of reading which makes a sense in the activity of reading.

Key words:

Structuralism, text, reader, language,  
Sign, criticism.

Copyright © 2018, Chelliah. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Dr. S. Chelliah, 2018. "Structuralism and its place in new literary criticism: A brief note", *International Journal of Current Research*, 10, (04), 68346-68348.

INTRODUCTION

Structuralism is nothing but a radio scoping probing beyond the apparently independent objects to its bone structure. It is not concerned with the meaning of individual texts but the system that makes that meaning possible. Hence, it provides a reversal of critical perspective. "In structuralism the criticising thought becomes the criticised thought, where it succeeds in re-feeling, re-thinking, re-imagining from the interior" (Genette 12). The contemporary criticism is marked by a staggering pluralism – in studying a literary work, taking clues from psychology, philosophy, social dialectics, linguistics etc. According to Grolier Academic Encyclopedia, "The variety of voices is so great that the situation has been compared to the Tower of Babel, with its mutually incompatible languages" (P-154). Structuralism that emerged in the 1950's as one such trend started dominating the whole scene in the recent decades. The unique feature of Contemporary criticism is that it derives its methodologies and strategies from disciplines that overlap and that it has more than one national frontier. The idea of structure is not something new to literary criticism. Terence Hawkes traces it back to Vico, who considers "the human mind as essentially structuring" (P13). The outer world is chaotic and formless. It is the human mind that imposes order on the outer reality and in the process it constitutes itself.

\*Corresponding author: Dr. Chelliah, S.,

School of English and Foreign Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021, Tamil Nadu, India.

The contemporary criticism lays high premium on this concept of structure, of course, with certain qualifications.

The Russian phonologist Trubetzky observes

"The age in which we live is characterised by the tendency in all scientific disciplines to replace atomism by structuralism and individualism by universalisation" (P4) Adam Schaff is said to have studied the functioning of this structuralist principle in varied disciplines and proposed the four distinct features that characterize the structuralist mode of thinking.

They are as follows

- It approaches the object of research as a specific whole that dominates all its elements
- It is based on the principle that every system has a specific structure and that the task of science is to find what that structure is
- Their interest is in the laws which most often are called co-existential or morphological or structural.
- It considers synchronic and diachronic studies as complementary and not mutually exclusive.

In the domain of literary criticism, two kinds of structural studies are available. The earlier school that was formalistic in nature attempted to study the given work of art as having a basic structure and all the unifying elements of the text that add to this wholeness are considered to be important.

Jean Piaget's definition of structure as "having the qualities of wholeness, transformation and self-regulation is more in this formalistic mode" (P 5). The second wave of the structuralist thinking has been evolved based on the foundations of linguistic model. The latter is the structuralism that requires proper study and evaluation. All through the history of literary criticism, literature was considered a message without code. In other words, much importance was given to the content of the work. But it became necessary for a moment to consider it as "code without a message" (Genette 4). Between these two extremes, Structuralism points a midway. That is to say, it is concerned with the process by which the meaning or message is made possible. So, in the preliminary understanding, language of literature and criticism itself are the twin concerns of Structuralism. Commenting on the distinguishing feature of Structuralism,

#### David Robey observes

"Structuralism may be the framework within which the interpretation occurs but it is separate from interpretation itself" (P 3) Structuralism finds a model in the Saussurean dichotomy between language (the system) and parole (the individual utterances) and a method in the linguistic concept of binary opposition which is the consequence of the phonological revolution. This phonological revolution has got two implications. The passage from phonetics to phonemics, as Gerard Genette points out, is from pure substance dear to the formalists to the organisation of the substance into a significant system. Moreover, it provides the binary opposition as a method of Structuralist investigation. Saussurean linguistics is the founding stone on which structuralism is built. His revolutionary contribution lies in his rejection of substantive view of language in favour of a relational one. The value of any linguistic item is defined by its total environment. This relational view of language is spelt out by John Lyons thus:

"Linguistic units derive both their existence and their essence from their inter-relations. Every distinct language in a unique relational structure, and the units which we identify in describing a particular language – sounds, words, meanings, etc., are but points in the structure, or net work, of relations" (Lyons 6) Apart from this relational concept, Saussurean dichotomies bear a remarkable influence on literary criticism. Saussure makes a clear distinction between synchronic and diachronic studies of language; between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. The traditional literary criticism has been historic in nature and hence a diachronic study. But the synchronic analysis considers the total system of language to be complete at every moment. Structuralism is a decisive turn towards the synchronic studies. Saussure views every attempt in communication as a system of signs. A sign is constituted by a *Significant* (signifier) and *Signifie* (signified). Let us consider the example of a tree. The structural relationship between the concept of a tree (i.e. the signified) and the sound-image made by the word tree (i.e. signifier) thus makes a linguistic sign (Hawkes 25). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. It is arbitrary in the sense that it neither has any tree-like qualities nor does it refer to any outer reality beyond the structure of the language. Hence, this relationship is not in referential mode as the traditional criticism argues but is self-referential. Structuralism that follows this Saussurean principle is a decisive move away from the *mimetic* theory of Aristotle that studies literature as the reflection of the reality outside and passes a value judgement on the basis of this

referentiality. More than all these things, the primal Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole* is the most vital for structuralist thinking.

#### Jonathan Culler explains the distinction between these two in simple terms

"The *langue* is a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms; whereas *Parole* is the actual individual manifestation of the former in speech and writing" (Culler 8). In the formulation of poetics, Roland Barthes and Jonathan Culler are two important personages. The structuralist poetics aims at explaining not the meanings of individual texts, but the mechanism by which the texts become intelligible. As Linguistics is to language, the poetics is to grammar literature. Barthes calls it the *science of literature* and Culler names it the *literary competence*. For the work to be intelligible, Culler argues that both the author and the reader must work under the concept of *literary competence*. In writing a poem, the poet must arrange the words in a particular order which he can read according to the convention of poetry. He cannot ascribe a meaning to the poem at random but make that production of meaning possible, both for himself and for others. With the same token, the reader must justify his reading by locating it within the conventions of plausibility defined by a generalized knowledge of it. This idea of *literary competence* in relation to the activity of reading, in a way, is an attack on the spontaneous, creative and affective features of literature. The poetics that Barthes and Culler attempt to construct assigns a new status to the readers. A reader in structuralism is no more a passive seeker in search of the *truth* in the work but an active participant in the process of *making sense* of that work.

#### In the capacity of a reader, George Poulet says:

"The work lives its own life within me; In a certain sense, it thinks itself, and it even gives itself a meaning within me" (P 149). Saussure proposes or envisages semiotics as a general science of signs of which structuralism will form a part. Cesare Segre considers semiotics as complementary to structuralism in the field of literary criticism. Semiotics re-establishes the solidarity of the expression – meaning relationship practiced by structuralists. For the mode of structuralist and post-structuralist criticism, semiotics will prove to be a useful vehicle. Segre writes: "Semiotic criticism is naturally closer to the second point of view than to the first. It gives little weight to the vicissitudes and sentiments of the writer except in so far as they may have had some influence on traits of his semiotic structural to which as a result they now belong" (P 74). The very idea of signification in semiotics is quite relevant to structuralism, which is founded on the Saussurean linguistic distinction of the *significant* and the *signifie*. 'Structuralism' finds its origin "in the Geneva School of the 1900s, precisely in the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. Thereafter, its development goes through the Russian formalism of the 1920's, to the Prague Linguistic Circle of the 1930's, to the New York Linguistic Circle of 1940's, to the anthropology of Levi-Straus of the 1950's, and finally to the structural literary critics of the last two decades" (DeGeorge 21). If Saussure is the seminal figure of the movement, Jakobson is the principal pollinator, the main link in the chain. Roman Jakobson was influenced by Saussurean doctrines of structural linguistics through his Russian colleagues Kercevesky, who came to Moscow in 1917 from Geneva. Then, he founded the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the critics who associated with this

school are called the formalists. This Russian formalism is a reaction against the over-emphasis on the content of a literary work. True to the structuralist thinking, Roland Barthes questions the New critical concept of *innocent* reader (free from all bias) and *objective* text. He dismisses the New critical supposition that the work criticized exists in some objective concrete way even before the critical act as dishonest criticism. He denies the possibility of an innocent reader for a world of mediating presuppositions of an economic, social, aesthetic, and political order intervenes between a page in the text and its reader. Further, denying the existence of any *objective* text, he classifies all the texts into two types: "*readerly text* and *writerly text*" (Hawkes 112). The *readerly texts* are about other things and transitory in mode, they lead to something else. But the *writerly* texts are the writings proper. Barthes appreciates the latter by saying that in the *readerly texts*, the signifiers march whereas in the *writerly texts* they dance. Moreover, structuralism is not concerned with the individual texts. By emphasizing that language functions within the established conventions structuralism disavowed any relationship of language to reality. Yet, the pre-established nature of the *sign* is not challenged. Deconstructionism doubts the very nature of sign and its authority as a pre-established code. While structuralism stops with banishing the author from the text (Barthes's *Death of the Author*), deconstructionism carries the task further and situates the text in the Zero Zone where the *free play* (infinite range of possible meanings) is possible (Raina 19). If Jakobson is the bridge between formalism and structuralism, the transition from structuralism to deconstruction could be seen in the critique of Barthes. The following quote from Barthes 'The Death of the Author' points out this development: "... the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to finish it with a final signified, to close the writing... in the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, run (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath; the space of writing is to be ranged over, not perceived; writing ceaselessly posits meaning, ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning" (Barthes 154) Precisely in this way, literature refuses to assign a *secret*, an ultimate meaning to the text. Against this onslaught of deconstructionism, Culler defends Structuralism. While Structuralism cannot escape from ideology and provide its foundation, any attack on this literary theory would lead only to untenable positions and fail to offer an alternative. Structuralism, in a way, could be defined in relation to other literary theories as Aristotelian concept of *mimesis*, traditional criticism, romanticism, realism, formalism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, Marxism, New criticism and deconstructionism. By asserting that the relationship between the signifier and the signified to be arbitrary, structuralism denies any referential

mode to literature. It abandons the theory of *mimesis* in favour of self-referentiality. Moreover, it opposes the historic perspective advocated in the traditional literary criticism and emphasizes the synchronic studies. It refutes the romantic ideology of spontaneity because the author, according to structuralism, is working under established conventions. "Between pure formalism which reduces the literary form to only an articulated material and the classical realism which accords to each form an autonomous and substantial expressive value, the structural analysis", Genette observes "will enable us to see properly the liaison that exists between a system of forms and a system of significance" (P 5). Gerard Genette does juxtapose structuralism and Marxism and concludes: "Structural criticism is free from all transcendental reductions of psycho-analysis or Marxist explication, but it exercises, in its turn, an internal reduction of psychoanalysis or Marxist exploitation, traversing the substance of the work to reach its structure" (P 10). In a word, Structuralism is an off-shoot of New criticism pointing to deconstructionism and it opposes all the theories that have recourse to the human subject, such as historicism, functionalism etc. Finally, in studying specific literary texts, structuralism can only make the readers aware of the texts' communicative aspects and it will not read the text for him" (Scholes, 40). This is both an assertion and limitation in this critical mode. In a nutshell, it may be said that structuralism assigns a new role to the reader by describing the activity of reading as a process of *making sense*.

## REFERENCES

- Barthes and Roland, 1988. "The Death of the Author". *Twentieth Century Literary Theory* (ed.), K.M. Newton. London: Macmillan Ltd.
- DeGeorge and Fernande, 1977. "From Russian Formalism to French Structuralism." *Comparative Literature Studies*. 14, P.21.
- Genette and Gerard, 1979. "Structuralism and Literary Criticism". *Structuralism and Literary Criticism*. (ed.) Harje et Singh Gill. tr. New Delhi: Bahri Publications.
- Hawkes and Terence, 1978. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Methuen & Co.
- Lyons and John, 1968. "Structuralism and Linguistics". *Structuralism: An Introduction* (ed.) David Robey. Piaget, Jean. *Structuralism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Raina, M.L. 1984. "Contemporary American Criticism: Some Notes towards an irreverent view". *Indian Journal of American Studies*, 14 July
- Robey, 1973. David. *Structuralism: An Introduction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.
- Schaff and Adam, 1978. *Structuralism and Marxism*. Oxford: Pergamon Press,
- Scholes and Robert, 1974. *Structuralism in Literature*. New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press,

\*\*\*\*\*