



## INTERPRETATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT:

The present, highly technological, mechanical and anomic age offers little space for literature in the life of an average individual and prefers leaving it to academia and to those for whom literature is either a passion or a fashion. However, literature both in its traditional and post-modernist sense is not dead in spite of all the Jeremiahs the world has. On the contrary, literature especially contemporary literature, keeps on all the time growing like our sacred banyan tree (the emblem of Allahabad University), Quot Rami Tot Arborers style. Its practitioners today are quite large and its readers are even larger. And yet literature today is not what it was yesterday. With the theory of textuality gaining more and more ground as against canonicity, contemporary literature has come to occupy more and more grounds against canonicity, contemporary literature has come to occupy more and more space in our life. Its frontiers have been extended to include all kinds of text, philosophical, psychological, legal, cultural, scriptural, lyrical, and ethnographic and so on. Now literature can include bumper stickers, graffiti, music videos and even reports of various kinds, e.g. reports on Urea Scam, Lakhubhai Cheating case, J.M.M. payoff case, Fodder Scam of Bihar and so on. Literature in this sense becomes “the continuous substance of all human signifying activities” and covers all that seems to invite interpretation or all that “the interpreter sets up as an object for interpreting” (Marshall, 162). This kind of definition is not as radical as it appears to be. Dr. Johnson in his Dictionary defines literature as “the whole body of writings of a time or place”. Literature thus defined does not exclude either canon or literature in traditional sense. Like the condition government of fourteen parties headed by H.D. Devegowda, it may lead to confusion but seldom to anarchy.

### INTRODUCTION:

Contemporary literature which I would date from the seventies of the present century- I hope I am not being too arbitrary-certainly has some inner confusion, contradictions and self-negations but they attest to its vitality and in no way to its decadence. Its vibrancy can be seen in its multitudinous growth, in

its multiperspectivism and in the rich diversity of interpretation it lends itself to. Contemporary literature has traditional

writers like Graham Greene, Graham Swift, Vikram Seth, R.K. Naryan, Philip Larkin, Tom Gunn and Donald Hall. It also has post-modernist writers like Anthony Burgess, Salman Rushdie, Pynchon, Vonnegut, Upmanyu Chatterji, e.e. cummings and Samuel Beckett. Some of our contemporary writers are innovators in technique and language, others are explorers of the esoteric and the absurd and yet others are seekers after the very nature of poetry, drama, fiction and the language itself. Besides diverse kinds



of marginal writings like the feminist. Gender based as well as gender biased, gay, post-colonial, ethnic and cultural have also emerged on the scene and are heading towards the centre while the centre itself is retreating towards the margins.

### **Facts-**

In fact, the entire contemporary literature has long been considered to be marginal. The defenders of the canon like Harold Bloom (*The Western Canon*) and E.D. Hirsch (*Validity in Interpretation*) and even many of us consider the emergence of the new texts on the literary horizon as sheer trespass. We have, by and large an oedipal fixation with the past and do not want to be weaned away from it. However, we forget that progression and not regression is the law of nature, that closure of any kind is unwholesome and risky and that dynamism and not stasis is life. Contemporary literature leaning more on textuality than canonicity is vital and vivacious, open and pluralistic. What is more significant is the fact that it is aligned with the ongoing democratic, social, economic and political processes of the times. It has the capability of becoming an instrument of freedom from status quoism various hierarchical structures and dominant socio-cultural discourses anywhere, anytime. It is particularly relevant for a country like India which even after nearly fifty years of independence is still passing through a state of oppression, suppression and depression.

Literature is embedded in the time, space and mythology of a country: it is the very breath of its cultural being. All human experience is its province. It deals with all kinds of human relations, the commonest and most puzzling manifestations of human psyche and “the effects of material conditions, social organization and political power on individual and collective experience (Culler, 204)”. It is crucial for understanding baffling human condition and the state of both culture and society of the day. Even when contemporary literature is not dealing with contemporaneity, its discourse is contemporaneous. So if we wish we can ignore contemporary literature and risk our own mental and emotional well-being. Our writers of today must be given the same attention and importance as the writers of the past. We cannot ask them to wait in the wings till the posterity has pronounced its judgement on them.

There are people who are skeptical of the fate of contemporary literature as they are skeptical of the fate of reading and writing itself. I, however, refuse to share such skepticism. People will always read and write and they will do it much more than they do now. It is a different matter that they take or will take interest in different and sometimes strange texts. Geoffrey Hartman rightly asserts:

Reading and writing are forms of life, not just reflections of it. Their future is only as



strong as a past that continues to exist because of them (Hartman, 387)

### CONCLUSION:

Any discourse on contemporary literature will be incomplete if its relationship with theory is not taken into account. Theory, as Jonathan Culler points out, “is not theory of literature” but as literature covers everything that is associated with or is part of human life. “any compelling theoretical discourse will have some potential relation either to literature as institution and practice (the making or unmaking of meaning) or to matters treated in literature (Culler, 204)”. Besides, both literature and theory are all inclusive and can be as much separate from each other as the Siamese twins are.

There can be no simple definition of theory. We can, however, consider it as a “new kind of writing of within..... Which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all things mingled together into a new genre (Rorty 66)”.

There are people who ridicule literary theory. This kind of attitude is implicit in the following parody which I had the opportunity to hear from Lawrence Lipking at the 1989 SCT, Dartmouth.

#### **A slumber did my spirit seal**

To readerly response.

It seemed a poem that could not feel

The touch of deference.

No motion has it now, no feel.

It neither means nor hopes,  
Rolloed round the hermeneutic  
wheel with texts, and signs  
and torpes.

You may or you may not believe in they but  
you cannot laugh it

away. Even if you wish to reject it, even if you  
are anti-Theory, you will have to understand  
it. I personally feel that theory and literature  
especially contemporary literature, go  
together. Raman Selden and Peter  
Widdowson rightly assert that “no literary-  
critical activity is not underpinned by theory  
(Selden and Widdowson, 7)” and so in any  
consideration of contemporary literature,  
theory is bound to find an honourable place.

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