

AFRREV LALIGENS

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 1 (1) March, 2012:124-131

ISSN: 2225-8604

Structuralism as a Literary Theory: An Overview

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Abstract

The 20th century is characterized by the proliferation of ideas. The ideas so developed and harnessed permeated all fields of human endeavor from epistemology, metaphysics and logic. Every field has registered one form of breakthrough or another. In literature, many literary theories are developed and become the gateway to textual interpretation and analysis. One of such is the Theory of Structuralism. It is a plethora of theories with different analytical tools. Most of these subscribe to binary opposition as the ideal was of textual interpretation. Structuralism attempts a scientific way of arriving at the text unmindful of details. The theory announces the 'death of the author' while equally dismissing the reader as unimportant. This paper attempts an insight into the theory of structuralism with the aim of discussing it in simple terms.

Key words: Literary Theory, Structuralism, Text, Reader, Meaning

Introduction

Modern literary theories flourished in the 1960's. The 1960's witnessed the entry of structuralism, as a literary theory, into the literary-critical institution and the emergence of powerful critiques of structuralism (Bello-Kano 2002). Structuralism's major critiques include Pierre Macherey (1966; English translation, 1978) and Jacques Derrida's celebrated essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966). Other significant critiques of structuralism include Michel Foucault (1970) and his essay, "The Order of Discourse" (1970), reprinted in R. Young (ed.) *Untying the Text: a Post-Structuralist Reader* (1981; See also Harari 1979).

However, many scholars, according to Bello-Kano (2002), such as "Barthes (1967); Jameson (1972); Culler (1975); Hawkes (1977)"; and Eagleton (1999); have all argued that the foundations of modern structuralism lay in linguistics, "to be precise in the structuralism method of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)" (Bello-Kano 2002). Although, Saussure never consciously formulated a theory, it was his lecture notes which his students re-collected and published posthumously. Structuralism was born and bred in France and inaugurated by the cultural anthropologist, Claude Levi Strauss, who in turn owed debt to the real founding father of the movement, Ferdinand de Saussure.

Structuralism, as a literary theory, emerged at a time when criticism was in a sorry unscientific mess and needed to be smartly tidied up. It was a matter of subjective value judgment and idle gossip, and badly required the discipline of an objective system, not a random collection of writings strewn together throughout history: if examined closely it will be discovered to have worked by certain objective laws and criticism could itself become systematic by formulating them. These laws were the various modes, archetypes, myths and genres by which all literary works were structured (Eagleton 1999:91-92).

Much of structuralism's difficulty comes from the fact that its founding fathers have developed a fondness for inventing their own language and terms or definitions (Stephen 2000:359). Its language of discussion and writing is often very difficult and tangled the issues complex and sometimes confused. Internal squabbling at the University of Cambridge over structuralism did little to enhance the public image of criticism particularly during the short period the media interested itself in this hitherto unknown

phenomenon. It failed to find a single academic who could explain the theory satisfactorily to the ordinary reader (Stephen 2000:352).

Theoretical positions

Structuralism represents an attempt to rethink everything in terms of linguistics (Eagleton 1999:97). Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1974) argues that the underlying system of conventions should be the object of study for linguistics. Saussure further sees language as a system of signs; that the sign is the basic unit of meaning; and the sign comprises a signifier and signified (the ‘mental concept’). For Saussure, according to Bello-Kano (2002), the sign is arbitrary. Therefore, the relation between the signifier and the signified is only a matter of convention. This distinction, for Saussure, does not refer to a name or a thing but to that between word image and the concept, which can only be separable at the analytical level. To buttress his argument further, Saussure (1974:116) remarked, “if words stood for pre-existing entities they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next, but all this is not true”.

It is clear now that Saussure has succeeded in ‘bracketing the question of reference, the relation between word and concept’ (Bello-Kano 2002). Claude Levi Strauss (1958) and Greimas (1966) took up Saussure’s structural conception of language further and extended it to the study of social world. Levi Strauss sees meaning as only a question of the interrelations of words-as a system of signs. Furthermore, Eagleton (1999:97) posits that “the underlying set of laws by which these signs are combined into meanings, [involved] largely ignoring what the signs actually ‘say’ and concentrate instead on their internal relations to one another”.

Claude Levi Strauss ushered in modern structural analysis of narrative with his pioneering work on myth. Myths were a kind of language: they could be broken down into individual units ‘mythemes’ which is the equivalent of phonemes. In language, they acquire meaning only when combined together in particular ways. The rules governing combinations represent grammar, a set of relations beneath the surface of the narrative which constitutes the myth’s true meaning. These relations are inherent in the human mind itself. These mental operations making of binary opposition are what myths are about- devices to think with, ways of classifying, and organizing reality (Eagleton 1999:104).



Therefore, Levi Strauss's impulse of isolating all universal structures in cultural phenomena, the production of a rigorous, scientific, and objective method in the study of sign-system, is therefore the 'main trade' of structuralism (Balamires 1991:360-362). Literature, here, should be treated as science of signs, as a system of codes and the possible conditions of the functions of that system (Bello-Kano 2002). This agrees with Barthes (1972:209) where he sees the goal of all structuralists as nothing but "reconstructing 'an object' in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of its functioning ("the functions") of this object".

Structuralism aims to reveal the universal structure of language as a constructed system of rules. Saussure was not interested in what people actually say but in the structure which allowed them to say it. In the linguistic system there are differences: meaning is not mysteriously immanent in a sign but is functional, the result of its difference from other signs (Eagleton 1999:97). Structuralism as the term suggests, is concerned with structures and more particularly with examining the general laws by which they work. Each system is broken into its several elements using the principle of an infinite set. Each system together with its elements can be shown not as complete in itself but as an inclusive part of a larger and still incomplete system. In other words, one set is considered as part of another set, and the second set considered as part of a third set etc, so that any structural modifications within one of the minor sets inevitably will affect the nature of the whole. A poem, for example, can be examined as a structure while still treating each of its items as more or less meaningful in itself.

According to Barthes (1972:201) "meaning offered by use of language not only structurally shifts but can (and be) shifted". Meaning then, is not stable, predetermined entity which passes, untrammelled, from reader to receiver. To him, structuralism, itself developed from a linguistic model, finds in literature, which is the work of language and, an object that has more than an affinity with it. The approach which combines close concern for the individual work with a larger awareness of machinery of its poetics is what is termed as reading. It sees the individual work as an autonomous system, but "eschews the sticking to the text aspects which limits more explication because it is permanently aware of the text's status as a system and its relation to a larger system" (David 1993:104-105).

The reader will not look for hidden meanings and give them preference as in activity of interpretation; such a reader will be concerned with the



relationship between the various levels of meaning, with the multiplicity which the text as a system enjoys. The reader, according to these theorists, performs operations –‘super position’ and ‘figuration’ which interprets the text or a group of texts as obedient to the nature of a certain ‘figure’ or structure which can be discerned in various modes and at various levels, so that a novel may in its plot and characterization enact the dominant shape of a particular figure of speech, or a pattern of syntax. According to Eagleton (1999:119) this method can be applied to reading of short stories.

Barthes shares Russian concern with ‘literariness’ meaning “those elements, such as the self-consciousness use of literary devices that signal that we are in the presence of literariness as opposed to other forms of discourse” (Appignanesi 2001:54). Formalist ideas resurfaced in the west to inspire new generation of theorists in the structuralist movement with interest concentrated on literary form and language. This is also the argument advanced by Lee (1998:189) that “structuralism which was dormant for half a century, bloomed in European intellectual circles in the 1960’s”. Barthes was of the opinion that structuralism helped to promote the notion of the death of the man (or the object), meaning that our traditional enlightenment of ‘man’ as the center of cultural process- a creature able to exert domination over its environment through the exercise of reason is a delusion; in real terms we are controlled by systems (Appignanesi 2001:75).

Therefore, each literary text contains a potentiality for transforming the whole system that it embodies and that has produced it: the literary text is able to subvert the linguistic system it inherits; it does not merely exhibit the characteristics form of the language which contains it, it also extends and modifies that language. Literature is inside language; what destroys the metaphysics inherent in every language. The essence of literary discourse is to go beyond language: literature is like a deadly weapon with which language commits suicide. Accordingly, literary theory is totally significant and signifying and cannot be ‘reduced’ to our articulation of its ‘content’. Writing communicates in ways which language does not in its ordering of events through linear progression and this need to be taken into account. This position is fully taken up by Barthes, whose analysis of the special nature of writing and reading has proved central to the development of structuralist literary criticism (David 1993: 106).

The concept of polarities in language derived from Saussure’s insights concerning the syntagmatic and associative planes of linguistic performance,



and it confirms the notion of the ‘sparkling’ force of binary opposition (David1993:106). In his writing on aphasia David (1993) observed that the two major disorders identified- similarity disorder and contiguity disorder are binarily opposed. Related to the two are strikingly the two basic rhetorical figures of metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor, to apply Saussure’s concept, is generally ‘associative’ in character and exploits language’s horizontal relations. For instance, in the sentence, ‘the Aso Rock considers a policy,’ a specific super structural enclave is proposed as equivalent to the president of Federal Republic of Nigeria. Metaphor and metonymy are therefore characteristic modes of binarily opposed polarities which between them underpin the two fold process of selection and combination by which linguistic signs are formed: the given utterance (message) is a combination of constituent parts (sentences, words, phonemes, etc) selected from the repository of all constituent parts (the code). Messages are constructed by a combination of horizontal movement, which combines words together, and a vertical movement; which selects the particular words from the available inventory or inner storehouse of the language (Hawkes 1977:77).

At its heart, structuralism proposes that there is no such thing as objective reality in literature. Its basic elements, phonemes or elementary speech sounds of a language do not have a permanent or obvious meaning. Meaning is created by internal relationships, stresses and patterns which they set amongst themselves. Key definitions in the theory are the signifiers of meaning created by the signifier. Structuralism therefore, ‘perceives a number of differing levels of meaning and interpretation: each level up organizes the lower level into complex combinations and functions’ (Stephen 2000:360). Language is a signifying system, signals of meaning which reach their potential through bouncing off each other, and not from any relationship to the author or sociological background factors. Structuralists present the view from one of its founders, Roland Bathes, that ‘the author is dead’. The reader is similarly dismissed because interest shifts on the text (Stephen 2000:360). Structuralism, further argued Stephen, looks at many of the concepts and words generated by criticism, over the years and see these as merely conventions acquired from earlier reading or the prevailing culture. It beats an old drum when it states that by frustrating or altering accepted standard of language it reveals the tacit conventions and codes that govern language and our integration of it, thus shocking, stirring and stimulating us into a new awareness of those codes.



Structuralism is a way of thinking about the world which is predominantly concerned with the perceptions and description of structures. At its simplest, structuralism claims that the nature of every element in any given situation has no significance by itself, and in fact is determined by all the other elements involved in that situation. The full significance of any entity cannot be perceived unless and until it forms a part. Structuralists believe that all human activity is constructed, not natural or 'essential'. Consequently, it is the systems of organization that are important (what we do is always a matter of selection within a given construct). Therefore, any activity takes place within a system of differences and has meaning only in its relation to other possible activities within that system, not to some meaning that emanates from nature or the divine.

Conclusion

The structuralists' basic approaches to the interpretation of texts differ. Most structuralists consider the binary opposition as the ideal way of interpretation and textual analysis. Others like the genetic structuralists advance the argument that the text be patterned according to its own internal laws of organic growth. Claude Levi Strauss has actually applied the 'binary' or 'useful opposition' in his seminal analysis of myths. Eagleton has also used it in analyzing stories, meaning that structuralism can be applied to the interpretation of all kinds of cultural production. DiYanni (2000) even went further to present checklist for the structuralist interpretation of texts. He has also applied binary opposition in his interpretation of a short story.

It is very clear from the various opinions, views and positions of its leading theorists and the numerous critical perspectives that there is certainly no single structuralism as a theory of literature. What obtains is a range of theoretical positions and arguments, all in support of the idea that the literary text which is a product of language remains the final arbiter rather than the author or the social circumstances surrounding the production of the cultural product. The positions are as many as the analysis and interpretation of the text. Some even go contrary to one another. Some positioned that the author is dead and the reader should be dismissed. Saussure and his closest disciples are of the view that the text shall be analyzed and interpreted as part of a larger structure and which determines its worth as literary work. There are others who slightly differ because they are of the view that the literary text can be analyzed and interpreted in itself as an autonomous structure- different items of a given text, poetry, short story can be considered as structures.

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