Literary Theory: A Historical Survey

Part 4: The Cultural Turn

Lecture 10: Feminism and Gender Studies/

Postcolonial Theory

1) Feminism and Gender Studies

a) Background

b) Three Phases of Feminist Literary Criticism

c) The Historicity of Gender

2) Postcolonial Theory

a) Background

b) Hybridity?!

c) Postcolonial/Postmodern?

3) Coda: Theory vs. Discourse

1) Feminism and Gender Studies

a) Background

- Feminism is influenced by Marxism in its insistence on a critical analysis of social conditions and power relations
- not a literary theory in the narrower sense of the term, but a political approach subservient to the aims and goals of feminism as a broader social agenda (new consciousness and new social practice)
- methodological pluralism, critical reflection of own position
- 'experience' as a central category which is emphatically pitted against male-dominated discourse and critically discussed

b) Three Phases of Feminist Literary Criticism

(1) Images of Women-School

(Kate Millet, Josephine Donovan, Mary Ellman, etc.)

→ images of women in male-dominated literature
→ stereotypes, discrepancies between female roles and positions in literature and reality

Problems:

- naïve treatment of relationship between fiction and reality
- conflation of author and character attitudes
- disregard for internal contradictions of 'male' culture
- uneasy relationship between moral and emancipatory frames of evaluation and analytical impulse (the dangers of denunciation)
- focus remains on 'male' writing

(2) Gynocritics

(Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Gilbert/Gubar etc.)

→ influence of Marxism: the situation of the female writer, the effects of gender-specific programmes of socialisation (inclusion vs. exclusion)
→ the specifically female experience of reading and writing
→ the possibilities of specifically female modes of writing

Problems:

- Is there female writing beyond experience (*Betroffenheit*)?
- What are the formal characteristics of a specifically female aesthetics?
- Is there a neglected/repressed alternative canon of female writing in literary history?
- 'Women's writing' as a problematic term: by/for/about women?

Literary History according to Elaine Showalter:

1840-1880   feminine phase

1880-1920   feminist phase

after 1920   female phase

(3) French Poststructuralism and Psychoanalysis (Lacan)

(Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray etc.)

→ female sexuality is metaphorically pitted against male world:

openness	vs.	force
playfulness	vs.	power
plurality	vs.	normativity
lust	vs.	reality
etc.		etc.

→ the actual source of poetic writing is female
→ aesthetic practices in general are female
→ eroticization, ecstatic self-liberation
→ re-enactment of an assumed antecedent matriarchal Ur-culture/ Ur-communication free of regulation and repression etc.
→ dissolution of the boundaries between critical and literary discourse

c) The Historicity of Gender

Gender:

[…] [C]onventional meanings of 'masculine' and 'feminine' shape the sense of literary phenomena that have no intrinsic association with sex […] The insurgent view that gender is a cultural idea rather than a biological fact shares the ground that it has been gaining with parallel arguments about other identities – of class, of race, of national or religious association. De-naturalizing the character of women is part of a larger de-naturalization of all the categories of human character, which emerges as both a social and a linguistic construction […] [G]ender may be opposed to sex as culture is to nature so that its relation to sexual nature is unknown and probably unknowable: how, after all, do we speak of human beings outside of culture? From the perspective of gender, identity is a role, character traits are not autonomous qualities but functions and ways of relating. Actions define actors rather than vice versa. Connoting history and not nature, gender is *not* a category of human nature.

(Jehlen, 263-265)

The Historical Dimension:

pre-18th century: the one-sex-model
                          ('teleological masculinity' frames steps of human development:
                           child – adolescent – woman – man)

18th century: the enlightenment ideal of intellectual equality

post-18th century: the two-sex-model
                           (opposition/difference female vs. male;
                           hierarchy ↔ complementarity)

(Schabert, 21-65)

2) Postcolonial Theory

a) Background

- colonialism as a keynote of modern society and culture
- the British Empire as the largest colonial enterprise
- devolution in the second half of the 20th century
  - → Commonwealth literature
     postcolonial literature
     the new literatures written in English/
     the new English literatures/
     English literatures across the globe
- complicit vs. oppositional postcolonialism, the second marked by racism, a second language and political struggle
- key concept: identity

(cf. Rehberger/Stilz)

What postcolonial critics do:

- reject the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seek to show its limitations of outlook, especially its general inability to empathise across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference
- examine the representation of other cultures in literature
- show that literature is often evasively and crucially silent on matters concerned with colonialism and imperialism
- foreground questions of cultural difference and diversity
- celebrate hybridity and 'cultural polyvalency'
- develop a perspective whereby states of marginality, plurality and perceived 'otherness' are seen as sources of energy and potential change

(cf. Barry, 198)

b) Hybridity!?

- mixed racial or cultural origins
- hybridity in language and discourse
- Bakhtin: Discourse in the Novel
- problem or potential?
- Homi Bhabha: 'third space' opening up a sphere for cultural negotiations, translation, re-articulation
  → 'radical heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of forms'

Hybridity and the Novels of Salman Rushdie:

Grimus (1975)

Midnight's Children (1981)

Shame (1983)

The Satanic Verses (1988)

Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990)

The Moor's Last Sigh (1995)

The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999)

Fury (2001)

Shalimar the Clown (2005)

The Enchantress of Florence (2008)

Luka and the Fire of Life (2010)

Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights (2015)

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose-being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I'm everything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I' […] contains a similar multitude […] to understand me, you'll have to swallow the world. (*Midnight's Children* 383)

Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! [...] *Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?*
I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories? Can only the dead speak? I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe myself when I say this. It is part of the world to which, whether I like it or not, I am still joined, if only by elastic bands. [...] The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. [...] My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centring to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. [...] I [...] am a translated man. I have been *borne across.* It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion [...] that something can also be gained. (*Shame* 28/29, original emphasis)

How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made? (*The Satanic Verses* 8)

What's the use of stories that aren't even true? (*Haroun* 20/22/27)

Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and mélange which had been, for most of her creative life, the closest things she had found to a notion of the Good, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light. (*The Moor's Last Sigh* 303)

See: here is my flask. I'll drink some wine; and then, like a latter day Van Winkle, I'll lay me down upon this graven stone, lay my head beneath these letters R I P, and close my eyes, according to our family's old practice of falling asleep in times of trouble, and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time. (*The Moor's Last Sigh* 433f., original emphasis)

But what about *outsideness*? What about all that which is beyond the pale, above the fray, beneath notice? [...] The only people who see the whole picture [...] are the ones who step out of the frame. (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 42f.)

What if the whole deal – orientation, knowing where you are, and so on – what if it's all a scam? What if all of it [...] is just the biggest, most truly global, and centuries-oldest piece of brainwashing? Suppose that it's only when you dare to let go that your real life begins? [...] But just imagine you did it. You stepped off the edge of the earth [...] and there it was: the magic valley [...] It feels better than "belonging" [...] (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 176f.)

c) Postcolonial/Postmodern

- border-crossing, plurality, discontinuity as postmodern and postmodern features, but: play/autoreferentality vs. politics!
- the danger of 'academic imperialism'
- 'Taking a Stand while Lacking a Centre'
- Cosmopolitan postcolonial literature and the 'third space' of 'in-betweenness', or: Is it possible to adopt postmodern strategies for postcolonial purposes?
- the materiality of writing and the question of access to distribution (printing and other media)
- the widening of the epistemological and aesthetic concerns of postmodernism (poststructuralism, deconstruction) to embrace history as writ in a 'post-colonial' world

3) Coda: Theory vs. Discourse

Although the boundaries [between theory and discourse] are somewhat contingent, and thus changeable, discourse nevertheless features a definite view of the world we live in, irrespective of whether it is meant to describe this world or is identified with it. Thus discourse is deterministic, whereas theory is explorative. Determination versus exploration marks the essential difference between the two, and it may well be that humans need these contrasting ways of dealing with reality. Discourse draws boundaries, and theory lifts them, thereby opening up new territories of anthropological significance. It is important to register this distinction because the two are sometimes bracketed together as if they were the same thing.

> (Iser 2006, 12 and on the veering of postcolonial theory into a deterministic discourse 172–86)

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