

Language in Literature

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Abstract—This paper raises issues connected with the language of literature touching the views of one of the earliest philosophers, Plato, and coming up to the language that has been used by a novelist in the twenty-first century.

The language of literature is traditionally considered to be the opposite of the language of science. It is connotative as opposed to the denotative language of science. Literary language according to I. A. Richards is charged with emotions. But the contemporary theory, Deconstruction that has seemed to level philosophy with literature has wiped out the difference between literary and non-literary language. For Derrida all language is metaphorical. For Donald Davidson there is no such thing as metaphorical meaning.

This paper tries to make a difference between the language of realism and realist fiction as opposed to the language of fantasy, the fairy tale and magical realism. A text such as Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* uses a language which is far from traditional; it keeps shortening or changing words and syntactical structures to make them sound hybrid and colloquial. This is a realistic novel that chooses to use vulgar language, full of expletives because the desire of the novelist is to show a group of South Asian boys that he refers to as "rudeboys" realistically. The language of realism is often harsh and sordid.

The language of fantasy, on the other hand, is more idealistic and sweeter. It may use words from alien people, as one finds in *Gulliver's Travels*, that uses words such as "Houyhnhnm", "hekinah" "degul" etc. Such words are used to introduce strangeness, a going away from the real world. In a text of magical realism or fantasy words do not need to reflect harsh realities.

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The language in, or of, literature is a subject that has interested people from Plato down to the present and there are far too many views to be synthesized into a neat definition. Plato believed that it was different to non-literary language because the language of literature could affect the mind. He wasn't quite happy about it because literary language only bred lies and imitated an imitation and was twice removed from reality. Aristotle and Sir Philip Sidney came out against Plato's claims that the poet was a liar. A poet was not merely imitating something and trying to reproduce an exact copy; he was also creating. Furthermore, the poet did not claim that he was telling the truth or painting the reality through the use of a stylized language. Since Plato, the theory of Representation has been in currency in one form or another and literary language has been given the extra burden of how far it represents the truth or reality. Jacques Derrida, however has tended to believe that there is no difference between literary and non-literary language, for even non-literary language can have the same "play". Besides, the reflection of reality will always remain a distant dream for any language. He possibly erased the distinction between literature and philosophy by what has been discussed as "the leveling effect" in his theory of textuality.

Contemporary theories on metaphor are divided in that for Derrida, "all language and hence all meaning is metaphorical", whereas for Donald Davidson, "there is no such thing as metaphorical meaning." [Novitz, 101] Derrida could have partly written in opposition to Modernist theories, on the nature of literary language and on metaphor, like the ones provided by critics such as I. A. Richards, though his canvas was vaster. For both Richards and Derrida, metaphor was a significant literary device to deliberate on. Derrida had philosophers even from the time of Plato in mind when he wrote about language. Richards works on the principle, similar to Coleridge, placing literature in the category of an imaginative construct and looking upon it in opposition to science. For Coleridge, poetry is the opposite of science not prose; for Richards, literary language is the opposite of the

language of science. Science uses language denotatively and literature uses it connotatively. Whereas logic and reason provide the basis for the use of language in science and most other academic purposes, the language of literature grows out of emotions and is charged with them. Literary language can even effect and soothe the mind if Richards' theories are to have serious implications. Having studied psychology along with literary forms, Richards could say that poetry has a therapeutic function to perform by "coordinating a variety of human impulses into an aesthetic whole", helping both the writer and the reader maintain their psychological well-being. According to Richards poetry could overcome tension.

I propose to divide literary language into two categories: (a) the language of realist literature, and (b) the language of fantasies, fairy tales and magical realism. There could be some other categories of literary language but those are not under focus in this paper.

Realism is the ground that has bred some great fiction just as its opposite modes of narration have also done particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The realist would normally use language that is more transparent, understood by a community without much ambivalence; unless the desire is to express a hybrid culture makes the language different to that of a people of a single place and time. A good example of how language can express the purity and hybridity of culture can be found in Gautam Malkani's novel, *Londonstani*. Malkani has given to the reader a highly realistic picture of the lives lived by South Asian youngsters who have made West London their home. They are frustrated, underachieved young boys who are rebellious and who refuse to use chaste English. Their lives are rude and rough and they are termed, "rudeboys". They distort words and sentences and use expletives and swear words, both Hindi and English, with a freedom unheard of. But they are realistic in their expression. Malkani could be said to employ a principle initiated by Wordsworth who believed that a poet was a man talking to men. The language of rustics, according to Wordsworth, could best embody deeply felt emotions in contrast to more formal expression.

Realism can portray the ugly as well as the pleasant realities of people's lives. But realities are ugly generally, particularly if they need to be voiced in literature. Literary realism, in contrast to idealism, endeavours to represent familiar things as they are. Realist authors depict routine banal activities and experiences through a use of language that has a rational basis, instead of using a romanticized or similarly stylized presentation. Malkani's realism makes no effort to romanticize the lot of the South Asian rudeboys dwelling in Hounslow, West London. Instead, he projects the ugliest realities of their lives, along with those that they seem to enjoy, through a narrative mode and an invented language-distortion which is very original. In the originality of this realistic mode of narration lies the literary content of the novel. Though the language of the novel seems too

undignified to be considered literary fiction, it is definitely a literary use of language. The language of these rudeboys can seem vulgar and unpalatable to a number of readers. However, this language can also be seen as a marvel, of what F. R. Leavis referred to as an "exploratory creative use of language". [Bilan, 103] F. R. Leavis has not only referred to the genre of the novel as a "dramatic poem", (Lodge, he has more importantly stated that the moral responsibility of literature is to be "on the side of life." [Lodge 69] Gautam Malkani is absolutely on the side of life when he gives to these youngsters the language that so realistically and convincingly portrays their morbid existence. These youngsters from India and thereabouts have settled in England, become a part of the hybrid culture which is neither here nor there, and created a most negative image of themselves. They are a tragic lot in the end. Malkani narrates a great deal through dialogues. There is a narrator, Jas, who has joined the group of semi-criminals referred to as "rudeboys" and is the most central character in the novel. It is his plight that the novel foregrounds more than anyone else's. The pathetic condition of these youngsters living in an alien culture is shown through realism. Pam Morris points out, undeniably realism as a literary form has been associated with an insistence that art cannot turn away from the more sordid and harsh aspects of human existence. The stuff of realism is not chosen for its dignity and nobility.

There is one distinction between realist writing and actual everyday reality beyond the text that must be quite categorically insisted upon: realist novels never give us life or a slice of life nor do they reflect reality.[3-4]

Then again:

Language does not serve as a neutral or translucent means of communication. All human beings are born into an already existing system of meaning and they can only ever "know" reality by means of the conceptual categories their language system allows them. As an illustrative example, think of the ways in which we order our understanding of and response the furry, four-footed creatures with which we share geography: pets, wild life, game, vermin, pests, meat. Yet these categorizing words are cultural meanings and values by which we classify the creatures, not intrinsic qualities that they bear with them straight from the hand of god or nature. The conceptual and classifying structure of language is the bearer of values as well as meanings and we cannot operate the meaning system without at the same time activating the values. The grand narratives of Enlightenment thought, with their ideas of human progress and a just community dependent upon the sovereign power of rational knowledge and moral judgment, can themselves be seen as a fiction or illusion produced by language; they are a cultural and linguistic construct. [27]

In contrast, to this the language in fantasy cannot employ the words used for formal purposes, particularly by aristocrats and intellectuals. It uses words alien to the native speaker of a language like English. In *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance, uses

words not quite familiar to the English world. Here are examples: “Houyhnhnm”, “hekinah” “degul”. Such words are used to introduce strangeness, a going away from the real world. In a text of magical realism or fantasy words do not need to reflect harsh realities just as a fairy tale does not need to spell out the time and space in which it is set, because it does not strive to be realistic. A fairy tale can begin thus: “Long long ago, in a land not far from here, there lived a girl named Cinderella.” In these words no effort is being made to capture the exact period or place where Cinderella lived because it is not a real tale. Here we may be taken to very good or very bad situations rather than real situations that are true to life. Swift’s choice of words is aimed at taking the reader away from the real world:

Swift’s invention is, by modern standards, slipshod and unimaginative; his words contain no sounds that do not occur in English, and most of his quoted phrases are untranslated. There is little to indicate anything resembling a consistent morphology or grammar in the Lilliputian language, almost every word being a random, independent invention unrelated to all other words. But despite Swift’s naivety of language construction we can perceive in his work an understanding that endowing a fictional nation with its own language is the quickest way to invest it with a plausible foreignness.

The language, of course, need not be a real one, or even have any resemblance to any real-world language (though such resemblances are almost impossible to avoid). [Salo]

Though Derrida’s views on language and literature are great for polemical purposes, it remains important to realize that literary language is quite different from Non-literary language and literary scholarship must never lose sight of that. Theories that took origin between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been central in indicating the nature of language in literature.

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