

Literary Study and Globalisation: Rethinking the Aesthetic Aspect of Literature

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Abstract

Literary scholars try to rescue literature from the de-aestheticizing jaws of globalisation as the position of literature in humanities comes under scrutiny. This paper aims to rethink literary study and methodology in the twenty-first century. It also tries to locate the autonomy and value of literary texts and the aesthetic purpose they serve in the context of globalisation in order to look at the position of literature in the discipline of humanities with a couple of textual examples from J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. While talking about the future of literary studies in globalisation, there is a need to alter and challenge the preoccupations of literary criticism that have nothing to do with historical and political anxieties. There is a need to re-engage and re-think methodologies which standardises contemporary literary studies.

Keywords: Aesthetic; Globalisation; Literature; Singularity; World literature.

Introduction

The value of literature before and after globalisation is significantly different. There is no denying that the wealth of literature from various countries in various forms constitutes what we know of as world literature today. Recent approaches in comparative and world literatures try to save literature from being standardised and homogenised. While the concept of a "detached humanist" is not suitable and applicable in a globalised world (Said 67), literature comes in danger of being standardised along neo-imperialist lines in the twenty-first century. Literary scholars try to rescue literature from the "de-aestheticizing" jaws of globalisation as the position of literature in humanities is being questioned now more than ever (Apter 1). This de-aestheticization is discussed at length in Emily

Apter's *Against World Literature*. While literature is a wealth which continues to blur boundaries and tap into hitherto unknown spaces, does current literary study do justice to literature as a form? Does literature as a field of study conform to not just an aesthetic but to current global paradigms? And in the process, does the study continue to boast of an aesthetic that it once did? At this juncture, when the very definition of literature is being rethought, it is important to discuss the methodologies in play which dictate literary studies and historiography in curriculum. This paper tries to locate the autonomy and value of literary texts and the aesthetic purpose they serve in the context of globalisation in order to look at the position of literature in the discipline of humanities. The idea of literature conforming to a singularity, of being an entity of its own is what strips literature of its national, authorial, temporal and textual boundaries and transcends the living and the dead.

Globalisation's Impact on Literary Studies

The effects of globalisation require the literary scholar to re-consider the frameworks with which literature has been studied previously. The past and history is understood through a national framework. As a result, literature also becomes nationalised. Until recently, literature has been, to some extent, seen as a stable object with a special language of its own. Edward Said also agrees that "an autonomous aesthetic realm exists" (64). Globalisation challenges this domain. According to Said, these frameworks of studying literature need revision in the context of globalisation. As the frameworks of aesthetics, boundaries of the text and the author and the nation become eroded, the paradigms of research become increasingly fragmented.

These fragmentations are partly responsible for discursive splits of many areas of research. Without proper revision of the methodologies of research and study, literary and cultural studies become even more fragmented, lop-sided and distant from one another. This is a reflection of what Edward Said has to say about the effects of globalisation on people, "Huge masses of people have been impoverished, not through scarcity or unavailability . . . but through distribution and notions of who is entitled to resources" (66). In an attempt to control and homogenise these discursive splits in literary fields, standardised methods take control, and margins become increasingly ignored.

Globalisation, an essentially economic endeavour, has become a neo-imperialist and capitalist project. Francis Fukuyama talks about capitalism

defeating every other world system in today's world in his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Standardisations are present in translation studies, world literature, and comparative methods etc, stripping literary study of its autonomy and diversity. Emily Apter accuses the system of world literature for tendencies of "endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded "differences" that have been niche-marketed as commercialized "identities"" (1). Just like huge masses of people are left impoverished, the homogenising methods of study have created marginality in literary studies with similar methods becoming assessments through which literary texts has to pass in order to prove their worth. Edward Said puts it this way: ". . . because English is a world language, several regional languages become marginal dialects; this further enables the homogenisation (globalisation) of cultural products, which are seen as dominating cultural "markets." Thus, what used to pass for "authentic" and "testimonial" literature a decade or two ago is now put to new tests . . ." (67).

The dynamics of globalisation has spread the social structures of modernity across the world. The one which has most affected literature is rationalisation. The great rationalisation of globalisation threatens to strip literature of its value in humanities. The global situation has had many impacts, good and bad, in the field of literary studies. While globalisation has triggered new paradigms of studies based on postcolonial theory, ethnic cultures, identity etc in literature, the enormity of fragments and lack of proper regulation endangers the methodologies. Many scholars of world literature, comparative studies, and subaltern and gender studies alike have voiced concerns about standardising methods practised in these fields. Modern Language Association i.e., MLA, through its reputed journal *PMLA*, published a special issue called *Globalising Literary Studies* on this very topic with papers and research contributed by the likes of literary scholars such as Wai Chee Dimmock, Stephen Greenblatt, Edward Said etc. It is true that the rationalising sweep of globalisation affects literary studies. The global field and its developments in technologies, science and their increasing relations with corporations have placed the value of literary scholars only in academic circles. It can be argued that the value of literature is lessened by globalisation. Whether it is in aesthetic terms or in another sense is another matter.

The structure of globalisation demands practical skills from its citizens. This is probably why art and aesthetics although prominent, fail to find efficiency in the job market. In the twenty-first century, the dynamics of reading have drastically changed. The importance in this field that liter-

ature previously had, has been occupied by various discourses on the internet. Literary readership and practice are mostly confined in academic circles while the internet takes over the general media. Prominent on the internet are news, general knowledge, sexual content etc. from all over the world. This has resulted in decreased indulgence in literature and an increasing preference for fleeting, shortened and scrollable internet pieces. Literature and humanities as disciplines in the university become less valued in the economic market. That literature is being stripped of its value due to the advent of globalisation becomes true in this context. It is important to think about the decreasing value of literature in relation with how it pertains to its aesthetic aspect. The decline of literature's value in today's world can be seen in economic terms, readability and its position in mass media and popular culture. The aesthetic value of literature has always been another aspect of discussion from a long time now. One can recall how Kant stripped literature of its aesthetic value in his third *Critique*. This came in the face of standardised methods in the field of philology in the nineteenth century. Even in the twentieth century, the issue of aesthetics, which earlier had deep association with moral concerns for many writers and critics, in addition to its link with the idea of beauty and joy, took a backseat in literary theories and practices. This sparks the debate of how the aesthetic aspect of literature stands in the face of the greatly standardised, rationalised and capitalised practices of globalisation.

Globalisation and Literature

The word "aesthetics" relating to beauty and fine arts is of Greek origin; "Aisthetikos" means sensation (Aesthetic). What the modern scholar understands of aesthetics is largely related to what is beautiful. Aesthetics pertain to the kind of beauty which gives pleasure to the senses. It doesn't necessarily mean the basic value of art. In the most basic sense, the reader can identify the aesthetic aspects of a literary work with what makes it pleasurable to read. It is also important to note that the textual features and the aesthetic features of a particular text need not coincide. Monroe C. Beardsley gives an argument of the uselessness of such an interpretation of aesthetics in literature: ". . . even if literary works do have aesthetic value, it is inevitably so mixed with other values as to permit no clear discrimination and identification; therefore, it cannot be sensibly discussed or play any significant role in our systematic study or cultural treatment of those works" (238). Therefore, looking only for beauty in aesthetics is not a suitable option in the face of globalisation.

There has been a fundamental division between what is true and beautiful

in the discourse of sciences and humanities until now. This conception of aesthetics has led to the thought that aesthetics in literary studies constitute beauty and sensible paradigms of the human world; and as a result, the so-called humanist is detached from the society. This conception of an autonomous aesthetic realm is what Edward Said seeks to challenge when he tries to contemplate the future of globalised literary studies. He writes, "the more extreme the isolation of the aesthetic, the more it negatively reflects the antinomies of the social situation" (68).

In J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* published in 1999, David Lurie unsuccessfully tries to write an opera in an era when these forms have become non-existent. He has a passion for art and literature and yet remains detached from the world around him so much so that he fails to understand his world. The frameworks of studying the constituents of aesthetic aspects in literature should be revised in the face of globalisation. The aesthetic elements should constitute and include the truth and one should find beauty in truth. If not, then there is no purpose of looking at aesthetics even as globalisation threatens to de-aestheticize the world. Aesthetics cannot be detached from the society anymore. As Jacques Ranciere puts it, "Art can become life. Life can become art. Art and life can exchange their properties" (119). Ranciere himself has written extensively on aesthetics. In many of his books, he has maintained that his writings try to counter some historical conceptualisations of the definition of art and aesthetics. By rethinking the relationship between aesthetics and politics, Ranciere tries to rescue aesthetics from the narrow confines of framework it is usually limited to.

Globalisation has brought about many debates in relation to aesthetics. The literary scholar should revise the idea of aesthetics, its meaning and relation with literature. In order to study the aesthetic aspects a literary work offers, there should be an assessment that deploys the features of that work which makes it distinct as an art form. The idea of aesthetics being exclusively confined to beauty cannot function in today's world. To talk about the beauty of the work alone when talking about the aesthetic elements of a literary work gives a sense of discussing only the pleasure that literature gives. In order to truly understand the meaning of literature and its importance as a discipline in a globalised world, the very idea which defines aesthetics needs to be revised. Aesthetic appeals and appraisals are considerably wider than the beauty and pleasure they offer.

The aesthetic aspect of literature can defend itself by finding a distinct and recurring place for a revised idea of aesthetic pleasure. The aesthetic value needs to avoid being defined and identified by standardised fronts.

It cannot be defined only by form, purely linguistic features, style or structure or hedonistic concepts of what art means or by just fine writing. The concept of art for art's sake cannot work in a globalised world. Aesthetics should frame a world comprised of truth and involvement. The revised aesthetic ideal of literature can rightly present the antinomies of the social situation and give good purpose to the cultural domain of literature.

Even if the readability and economic importance of literature becomes low in the context of globalisation, the aesthetic aspects of literature remain intact. The accountability of important texts or texts which are part of world literature is compromised by the methods with which they are selected. Literature is still an important curriculum in the university. However, the methods by which the curriculum is prepared has been improvised by the practical system of globalisation. Literary scholars find themselves restricted only in academic circles and cannot find a place elsewhere in the job market. Thomas L. McHaney laments about the future of literature students, "It is a cruel illusion that everyone who enters a graduate program truly needs to teach" (113). The shift from pursuing humanities as a long-term area of research suggests many effects of globalisation. There is a rush to make education with immediately applicable skills worth more. Humanities have also done a bad job in explaining why it matters as a discipline.

In *Disgrace*, David Lurie is a product of the management-driven humanities discipline in the university. He is a professor trained in literary studies but has to teach "Communications" to his students. His passion for the classics and the romantics like Wordsworth is not shared by his students. He is like the PhD holders in English Literature in the Indian University scenario whose qualifications makes him/her eligible to teach in IITs and NITs but are constrained to stick to syllabi which give importance to communication skills or project related areas that is far removed from literature. In the academic study of literature, there has been a change in the motives of students while pursuing their areas of research interests. Courses and dissertation topics are chosen according to their usefulness in their careers specially in the context of UGC funding projects, grants and research that is field-oriented. Research papers, articles and books are written with an eye at the marketplace. It has become usual for a post-graduate student of English Literature taking up English Language Teaching (ELT) related research topics for their further research due to the requirements of the job market. Theoretical approaches and aesthetic frameworks are not viewed with openness and challenge in order to develop new areas of thoughts. This contributes to the decreasing value of

literature in today's times.

The debate of the aesthetic effect of literature is not a new one. People like Kant and Hegel have tried to determine the relation between aesthetics and literature. In a globalised world, this debate becomes more important as globalisation essentially undermines non-practical forms of skill and studies. Derek Attridge talks about aesthetics affecting literature to evade rules, boundaries and definitions (1). It can be argued that this effect can be traced to a singular event created by readability – a moment when literature transcends temporal, authorial, textual, national and other boundaries. It is this singularity which becomes a common event of solidarity, empathy, unity among different paradigms and disciplines of study and opens itself to “reinterpretation, and recontextualization” (Attridge 63). This paper has emphasised the impossibility and uselessness of a detached humanist in the face of globalisation.

However, the autonomy presented by Attridge's singularity of literature is not an entity of its own; and allows the detached humanist to come to an understanding with a world he had previously misunderstood and remained aloof of. *Disgrace's* Lurie finds singularity and understanding later in the novel in art, his modifications and continued improvisations of his opera and in organic life. He sympathises with animals and forms a relationship with them, so much so that he tries to save even the dead ones from “disgrace”. It is only after his interactions with his new found interests and improvisations that he comes to an understanding with the people and world around him.

The aesthetic element in literature can always re-invent and innovate itself accordingly to the times because “history of art”, Attridge says “is a history of innovation” (2). There is no logical explanation of aesthetics for its being. It has been under constant unpredictability and innovation. This aspect of aesthetics has not been given the attention it deserves. In order to pursue literary studies in a globalised world and to ensure the durability of the worth of literature, the aesthetic dimensions and frameworks need to be pursued with innovative ways. The notion of truth was earlier a privilege preserved for science and even the non-aesthetic (since aesthetics has been linked with beauty and pleasure, its tradition has made a distinction between truth and beauty thus considering truth in the non-aesthetic aspect), thereby resulting in a definite split in science and what constitute aesthetics. Thinkers like Adorno, Derrida and more recently, Ranciere have tried to challenge this domain produced by the split. These challenges bring back in literature, the importance of participation

in telling the truth, earlier believed to be hogged only by science. The aesthetic domain cannot be limited to only the experience of beauty which has been associated directly with aesthetic tradition. Globalising literary studies need to include objectives, aims and frameworks with which the aesthetic realm can include and correctly portray its understandings of the world. Reference may also be made to what Jonathan Culler talks about: "world of new digital media, hypertext, and computer games" which "poses new aesthetic questions: is the move from a print-based to an electronic-based culture one that will have repercussions for the concept of literature and hence for literary theory?" (131). Another issue he brings up is the firm belief embedded in every literature lover that a great literary work always has something new to reveal that makes it always new and universal transcending time and space. This tradition may be exposed to threats specially through the rising use of electronic texts: "... the text always has surprises in store, so that readers always find something new in it. Electronic texts can literalize (and perhaps trivialize) this condition. More significantly, they can lead to a reimagining of the literary work as an instrument or game to be played" (Culler 132). The discourses surrounding this may pave way for new ideas in the process of rethinking the aesthetic aspect of literature.

Culler also sums up the arguments put by Sianne Ngai's 'On Aesthetic Categories' which addresses various problems regarding aesthetics that literary criticism must address: "the problem of the similarity between the work of art and the commodity in consumer culture, and the relation between the literary or artistic work and theory..." (131). Consumer culture is one major facet of globalisation which cuts across various borders and boundaries of art forms - paintings, films, other media representations like anime, animated games, edited videos etc. All these new and emerging trends in areas related to literature, whether classic or popular, and culture need to be taken into consideration while forming any theory or practice in relation to aesthetics.

Conclusion: Summing up the Way Forward

Globalisation has brought about a unipolar world functioning with one superpower with the potential and ability to exert military, political, economic and sovereign power. Literature and knowledge production can challenge this sovereignty. The idea of what constitutes literature and "literariness" has been a debated topic. But the singularity created by literature transcends all forms of power and basks in the truth that it produces. This realm needs a heterogeneity which is achieved by an inclu-

sive rethinking of the idea of the aesthetic. Only then, it can challenge its previous so-called detachment. Literary critics have been the guardian of culture and its chronicles, and should take important part in debates about globalisation and modernisation of the world. While talking about the future of literary studies in globalisation, there is a need to alter and challenge the preoccupations of literary criticism which have nothing to do with historical and political anxieties. Recent methodologies of criticism like New Historicism have challenged and re-fined history with its innovative ways of looking at literature. Literary studies should be re-organised in a way that it can move beyond the paradigm of the nation towards a better understanding of humanity at large. In a special issue which discussed the globalisation of literary studies, Paul Jay has this to say about the future of literary studies:

With the understanding that globalization is a long historical process, we can usefully complicate our nation based approach to the study of English, not by dropping the nation-state paradigm but by foregrounding its history and its function for the nation-state, insisting that our students come to understand the instrumental role literature has played in the complicated world of transnational political and cultural relations. (42)

Literature surpasses time and space and the very dislocation of the national framework unifies literature as a whole globally; but there is a need to look at literary studies in a way that employs systems and methods of reading world literature which defies the homogenising capitalist sweep of globalisation. There seems to be a lack of canonical frame of reference in the production of literature recently but it is also this lack of canon that allows comparative literature and world literature to defy a previously Eurocentric paradigm of literary canon. The role of literature in globalisation is unique as it opens up the entire planet as a unit of analysis and is not just confined to an autonomous aesthetic realm. The discomfort for literary scholars for such a vast project may vary but it opens up various areas of paradigm and exploration which is essential to the growth of literature. By employing methodologies which challenge the overpowering standardisation of globalisation and its effects, literature can go a long way to help employ a cordial picture of globalisation with fair and tolerant competition and transnational services which will execute better methods than what is being done now.

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