

Literary Theory as the Backbone of the Contemporary Research in English Literature

Abhinav Divyal¹, Dr. Rakesh Kumar²

¹PhD (English) Scholar, Arni School of Arts and Humanities, Arni University, Indora Distt. Kangra, Tanda, Himachal Pradesh-176401, India, Phone no: 9805276886

²Professor of English, Arni School of Arts and Humanities, Arni University, Indora Distt. Kangra, Tanda, Himachal Pradesh-176401, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15378806>

Published Date: 10-May-2025

Abstract: Literary theory serves as the foundational framework for contemporary research in English literature, offering and exploring perspectives to interrogate, interpret, and analyse texts. Theories such as Formalism, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Feminism, New Historicism, Post-colonialism, Eco-criticism and Marxism enable contemporary researchers to explore the relationship between literature, culture, identity society. Formalism relates to the structure of a literary text; Feminism emphasises the representation of women in literature; Marxism seeks to find and analyse class struggle and the exploitation of workers at the hands of the capitalists; Post – Structuralism deconstructs traditional ideas of meaning and truth. Post – Colonial studies analyse literary works in the context of colonial dominance and the experiences of the colonized. The study underscores how literary theory fosters interdisciplinary dialogues, enabling scholars to address issues such as power dynamics, gender issues, environmental crises and cultural hybridity through literary analysis. The notions associated with literary writings as being divinely inspired have been challenged and deconstructed. A literary text is just like any other text in social sciences and makes sense only in its cultural matrix. This paper argues that literary theory enriches the understanding of a text by pointing to its origin and the inter-play of power equations and the cultural context. Moreover, Literary theories have in a way refined research. Earlier, researchers had to depend entirely on tracing influences, relating the works to the biographies of the authors and wrote impressionistic critiques. With literary theories on the scene, researchers enjoy greater freedom in choosing authors, to select texts that reflect and co-relate with the tenets of a specific theoretical configuration. The research fits into a spectrum and becomes part of a body of research in a particular field. Earlier, research, however brilliant the Critique might have been, remained an isolated piece of criticism.

Keywords: Structuralism, Post-structural Feminism, New Historicism, Deconstruction, Post-Colonial studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary theory refers to the systematic study of the nature of literature and its underlying structures, conventions, and ideologies. It involves analyzing the ways in which texts are constructed, interpreted and received by readers, as well as the ways in which texts reflect and shape cultural, social and historical contexts including Marxist, feminist, post-colonial, and poststructuralist approaches, each of which offers a unique lens through which to analyze and understand literary texts. Literary theory is of paramount importance in research in English literature. Its ability to provide critical frameworks for analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating texts is indispensable in contemporary research. It connects literature to philosophy, history, sociology, and psychology being inter-related disciplines. By promoting systematic and objective analysis, literary theory ensures that research is grounded in established intellectual traditions, moving beyond purely subjective readings. Furthermore, it challenges normative interpretations and traditional literary canons, encouraging the study of marginalized

voices and unconventional narratives. Theoretical approaches also inspire innovation, allowing researchers to re-interpret established texts or explore new themes, such as environmental concerns through eco-criticism and hydro-literature. By shaping research questions and methodologies, literary theory ensures that scholarly inquiries are both rigorous and meaningful. Ultimately, it broadens perspectives, fosters critical thinking and enhances the depth and relevance of literary research for the researcher in relating the text to theories in contemporary world. Hence, literary theories are essential to the study of literature in the twenty-first century, these theories have an impact on all of us, regardless of whether we are reading, studying, or conducting research in the field of literature. We are all influenced by (human) notions because we are human. Before theories allow us to evaluate fictional occurrences, they first shape our worldview. These theories shape our perspective on the world. Literary theories provide assistance for contemporary research. These approaches, in turn, influence how readers and scholars react to fictional events in literature. Theories help them think out of the box and logically by providing new perspective. Barry aptly remarks that *"Theory produces effects that change people and the way they perceive the world."* As Gloria Anzaldua (2012) puts it. (Barry 43).

A brief account of the prevalent theories follows:

Structuralism

An intellectual movement known as structuralism looks for underlying structures, especially in language and social systems, to explain human culture and meaning. It highlights that elements don't exist in isolation but rather get meaning via their interactions within a broader system. This is demonstrated, for instance, by Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of the linguistic sign, rather than evoking a direct representation, the word "tree" (signifier) recalls the concept of a tree (signified) through their relational context. Saussure fostered that the meanings that we provide to the words are arbitrary which means that there is no inherent connection or relationship between a word and its meaning. The meaning of any word depends upon its correlation with other juxtaposed words. For example – word 'hut' depends upon its relation and the position in a chain of words. It can also be replaced by the words such as; Hovel, shed, mansion, palace, hut, house. If one of these words were taken out of the chain, the meaning of the others would change. Therefore, a "hut" and a "shed" are both modest, simple constructions, but they are not the same. A watchman's hut, for example, is used primarily for shelter, but a shed is used mostly for storage. Similarly, a mansion is a residence that is larger and more opulent than a simple house but not as large and opulent as a palace. We, therefore, define "mansion" by illustrating the kinship between its meaning and the meanings of the two terms that come before and after it.

Post Colonialism

Post-Colonialism is a critical framework that examines the cultural, political and social impacts of colonialism and imperialism as well, particularly in formerly colonized regions of the world. Emerging in the latter half of the 20th century, Post-Colonial Studies critique the narratives and power structures imposed by colonial regimes, while reclaiming the voices and histories of marginalized communities. In Edward Said's *'Orientalism'* (1978), Said's seminal work highlights how the West constructed the "Orient" as an exotic, inferior "other" to justify domination. His critique of Eurocentric representations of the East laid the groundwork for postcolonial thought, emphasizing the power of discourse in shaping colonial ideologies. Fanon in his *'The Wretched of the Earth'* explores the psychological and cultural consequences of colonialism, emphasizing the necessity of violent resistance for decolonization. His psychoanalytic approach to colonial subjectivity and his advocacy for liberation movements have made him a central figure in postcolonial discourse. Homi K. Bhabha in his *'The Location of Culture'* (1994) introduces key concepts such as 'hybridity', 'mimicry', and the 'third space', exploring how cultural identity is negotiated in post-colonial contexts. His work challenges binary oppositions like the colonizer/colonized and highlights the fluidity of identity under colonial and post-colonial conditions. Chinua Achebe in his novel *'Things Fall Apart'* (1958), though fictional, is foundational to post-colonial literature. It provides a counter-narrative to colonial depictions of Africa, portraying the complexness of Igbo society before and after colonization. Achebe's work exemplifies the reclaiming of indigenous histories and perspectives. Present day issues like globalisation, neo-imperialism and the inter-connections of race, gender and class come under the ambit of the evolving Post-Colonial approach to literature. The said approach offers fresh insights of the working of Colonial power, issues of identity and non-discriminatory treatment for every individual in the post-colonial world. Even the Western literary canon that affords preference for White and European authors at the cost of Blacks and Non-European authors has been challenged and put into question. Such a literary perspective seeks to promote a more inclusive literary spectrum by

including texts from the Third World that give voice to the voiceless, the underprivileged and repressed sections of civilization. Moreover, the new approach advocates an impartial understanding of the cultural impact of colonialism on character and plot. Thinkers like Edward Said and Chinua Achebe have greatly influenced this approach.

Post Structuralism

Post-structuralism arose in the 1960s and 1970s, highlighting the subjectivity of meaning and the reader's participation in text interpretation. Post-structuralists contend that meaning is flexible and culturally conditioned, influenced by personal experiences and settings, in contrast to structuralists who looked for fixed meanings through underlying structures. By valuing different interpretations and challenging binary oppositions, this viewpoint undermines the author's authority. Roland Barthes, who popularized the idea of the *'death of the author'* and Jacques Derrida, who is renowned for *'deconstruction'*, are important thinkers that challenged conventional ideas of authorship and meaning which means 'text is dialogic'. Post-structuralism is engaged in the task of 'deconstructing' the text, often known as post-structuralism in practice. It emphasizes on 'read against the grain' or 'read against the text itself' as if 'text itself doesn't know about its meaning'.

J. A. Cuddon, in his Dictionary of Literary Terms, asserts that in deconstruction: *"a text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying ... it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single stable meaning". It means that a text may 'betray' itself.*" (from the entry on Deconstruction, 5th edn, p. 189) Jacques Derrida argues, "The writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system... his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely". This underscores that writers are influenced by the language they use, which shapes their expression. (Scholes)

New Historicism

Stephen Greenblatt is mostly credited with the literary theory known as New Historicism which first appeared in the 1980s. It makes the case that texts are products of their socio-political and cultural contexts, highlighting the interaction between literature and its historical setting. *"The literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes."* (Abrams and Harpham, 244). New Historicism asserts that literature actively engages in cultural conversation and represents the complexity of its time, in contrast to traditional historicism,

which sees history as merely the background. Additionally, it takes into account the critic's own historical background, recognizing that views are impacted by current social circumstances. Scholars engage in interdisciplinary studies, analyzing various cultural artifacts to create a *"thick description"*, as stated by Clifford Geertz thick description is more than just a description of a cultural piece or event. It illuminates the connections between cultural components and historical circumstances by integrating the context, power dynamics, and social behaviors around the subject of research. This approach frequently places literary works into the larger context of their time through a rich interaction of texts, anecdotes and historical documents of historical moments. This method critiques traditional literary analysis by rejecting close readings and highlighting the fluidity of meaning shaped by historical contexts. *"They directed their attention especially to literary forms such as the pastoral and masque, and above all drama: emphasized the role in shaping a text of social and economic condition such as literary patronage, censorship, and the control of access to printing, analysed texts as discursive 'sites which enacted and reproduced the interests and power of the Tudor monarchy'"* (Abrams and Harpham, 248).

Key examples of texts analyzed using New Historicism include

William Shakespeare's The Tempest:

This play reflects England's colonial ambitions and the socio-political climate of the early 17th century, exploring themes of power and identity in a transformative era.

Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist:

Dickens critiques Victorian society's treatment of the impoverished, highlighting social injustices and the harsh realities faced by orphans in London.

Toni Morrison's Beloved:

This novel contextualizes the legacy of slavery in America, examining its psychological and social impacts during the 1980s. **Power play in New Historicism** New Historicism stresses that power dominates society and affects writers and consequently their writings. Practitioners of New Historicism examine literary works with regard to the prevailing Socio-Political and Economic conditions of the epoch. The manner these work represent, question and support these power structures are examined. Literary theory affects English literary studies in multifarious ways. Different theories like Feminism, Queer theory, Structuralism, Post Structuralism and Post-Colonialism help interpret texts thereby creating fresh possibilities for investigation and criticism.

The new approach endeavours to peep into the Social, Cultural and Historical milieu in which the work is produced. Not only the way the cultural milieu affects the creations is looked into, how the creation itself influences the milieu is also investigated. Literary theory offers structured methodologies for analyzing texts, enabling scholars to interpret literature beyond surface-level meanings.

Structuralism analyzes narrative structures, while psychoanalysis examines subconscious motivations. Theories also broaden perspectives. Theories encourage the examination of texts through diverse lenses, such as gender, race, class, and Post-Colonialism, making research more inclusive and interdisciplinary. Feminist theory addresses gender dynamics: postcolonial theory critiques imperialist ideologies. Literary theories shape the kinds of questions scholars ask, guiding them to explore themes like identity, power, representation, and cultural context by using eco- criticism to ask how literature engages with environmental concerns. Theories critique the dominance of Western, patriarchal, and elitist literary traditions, paving the way for the study of marginalized voices and non-canonical texts. Queer theory interrogates heteronormative assumptions, while Marxism critiques class privilege. Literary Theories encourage Inter-disciplinarity, theories connect literature to fields like philosophy, sociology, history, and science, enabling comprehensive and multifaceted research. Cultural studies integrate media, film, and literature to analyze societal trends. Theories also promote critical thinking. Literary theory trains researchers to question assumptions, deconstruct texts, and uncover hidden ideologies or contradictions, like Deconstruction examines the instability of language and meaning in texts. Theories evolve to address modern issues like digital humanities, environmental crises, globalization, and technology's impact on literature.

Post- humanism explores AI in fiction, while eco-criticism studies representations of climate change. Theories like Marxism, Feminism, and Post-Colonialism expose how literature reflects and resists social, political, and economic hierarchies, analyzing Colonial oppression in Joseph Conrad's '*Heart of Darkness*' is analysed using Post- Colonial approach. Literary theory allows for the study of non-traditional genres such as graphic novels, fan fiction, and digital story telling. Theories guide researchers in addressing the ethical implications of literature, including representation, identity politics, and cultural sensitivity. In essence, literary theory underpins contemporary research by enriching analytical depth, fostering innovation, and ensuring relevance to societal and global challenges.

2. CONCLUSION

In contemporary research, literary theory provides scholars with a strong framework for analysis, interpretation, and critique, making it an essential foundation for current English literature research. Literary scholars can refine their interpretations of texts and establish connections between literature and wider social, cultural, and political discourses by adopting diverse theoretical stances including Structuralism, Post- Structuralism, Feminism, Marxism and Post-Colonialism. Scholars may examine the changing dynamics of identity, power, language and representation thanks to literary theory's ability to transcend conventional boundaries. Additionally, it encourages interdisciplinary methods, using ideas from sociology, psychology, philosophy, and cultural studies to enhance literary interpretation. Literary theory provide scholars the critical perspective they need to understand complicated tales and unearth hidden meanings in a world affected by globalization, new technology, and changing ideologies. In a way, the ideas of Literary texts being divinely inspired and conveying universal truths stands punctured and ruptured. A literary text is like any other text embedded in tis Socio-Political background and prone to the pulls and pressures of the discourse of the Dominant political set up of the times which it reflects and seeks to negotiate.

REFERENCES

- [1] "Literary Theory and the Study of English Literature" by Chris Baldick (Chapter 24, pp. 441- 454)
- [2] Jeyaraj, John Sekar. "APPLYING' THEORIES IN LITERARY RESEARCH."
- [3] LangLit, by LangLit, vol. 8–8, no. 2, LangLit, Nov. 2021, pp. 18–19. www.langlit.org.
- [4] Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 4th ed., Manchester University Press, 2020.
- [5] Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11th ed., Cengage Learning, 2015. Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- [6] Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle. *Literature, Criticism, and Theory*. 3rd ed., Pearson Education Limited, 2016.
- [7] Bressler CE. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Pearson Education Limited; 2011. <https://iep.utm.edu/literary/>
- [8] Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness* (Fifth International Student Edition) (Norton Critical Editions). W. W. Norton and Company, 2016.
- [9] Scholes, Robert J., editor. *Literacy and Language Analysis*. 1st ed., Routledge, 1993. Castle, Gregory, editor.
- [10] *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Colonialism and Neocolonialism."
- [11] Routledge eBooks, 2005, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203991848>.
- [12] Uppal, Ananta Geetey, et al. *Bhasha Sahitya Sandarbha*. By Centre For Language Studies et al., 2023. <http://www.ppsu.ac.in>