POETRY AS A LINGUISTIC ACT : THOUGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES

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Poetry is a linguistic act, i.e. to say it is an activity or composition in language. Although this seems an obvious point, it needs to be stated rather strongly in the context of stylistic study. No literary critic nor any scholar would dispute this point. However, a dispute does arises when the function and status of the language in poetry is taken into account. It would be helpful to briefly discussour points of view in this regard. We maintain that language being the base of poetry, has to be looked at as such. That is to say all the poetry contains is built upon and through its basic linguistic component. Undoubtedly, poetry contains within itself emotions, feelings and other aspects of human life and society, but what we want to assert is the fact that all these aspects manifested through poetry are channelised through language. It is language that reveals intense or trivial emotions. It is language that shows the depth of understanding or the shallowness of the poet. Undeniably, poetry is the product of the creative genius of a poet. It is also true that the creative genius is all pervading and all embracing, but this nature of creativity and of course its degree can have only one manifestation - that is language. A reader's response to a poet's emotion is through the language of the poem, however indirect this may be, there is no other means. It is maintained by some scholars not without justification, that a poet's emotions when distilled through language gets diluted to a certain extent. For this reason, perhaps, it is maintained by some people that the greatest poetry remains unwritten. It would not be necessary to go into a detailed discussion of this aspect of poetry. Suffice it to say here that whatever the poet communicates, he does through language and the reader having possession of the same system, gets everything through language and language alone. While maintaining this point of view it should not be construed that any attempt is being made here so degrade or minimise the importance of literary critics' contribution towards the understanding of

literature and interpretation of poetry. All that is being said here is that the linguistic component in poetry deserves the attention not usually given by literary critics.

It is also maintained there that poetry is understood not in one dimension, but in its totality. For this reason, various dimensions that go into the making of poetry need to be investigated fully. Any attempt to ignore this fundamental position will lead to a partial or lopsided understanding of poetry. Many critics have in varying degrees emphasized the role of language in poetry. 'New Criticism' is a case in point. But in all such cases the study of the language of poetry has been mostly adhoc and has not been given the importance that it deserves. We believe that if we have to study language, we must do so intensively and comprehensively. This can be possible if a model of linguistics is used for this purpose. A new model of linguistics provides the basis for the study of the language of literature. At the same time, some dimensions have to be added to this model keeping in view the needs and requirement of poetry. Poetry is also a text and this aspect of poetry can not be ignored. Keeping in view all these factors, our choice has fallen on the Systemic Model a model originating with the text, but going beyond the test and providing the necessary dimension for the language of poetry.

Dimensions of Study

Linguistics has usually been defined with reference to the criterion that it is the scientific study of language. Linguistics relies on scientific procedures in its study. It makes use of scientific methods. The empirical methods of science are employed as much as possible in order to bring the precision and control of scientific investigation to the study of language. The application of the methods of science to this field has its accomplishments and advantages. The principal task of a linguist is to describe and explain about languages in a scientific manner. For any enterprise to qualify as scientific, in the usual sense, it should display at least three major characteristics - explicitness, systematicness and objectivity. When one approaches a subject scientifically, it is necessary for him to be clear about the assumptions on which the study is based. Often, one gets the impression that 'explicitness' obviates the need for thinking and in particular the need for a unifying hypothesis explain what has been observed. It should be remembered however that hypothesis cannot substitute for observation. The second main characteristics of a scientific study of language is its systematicness.

A haphazard study, partial coverage, impressionistic commentary, inconsistent use of terms or procedures these are not the features one expects to see in a scientific approach. A linguist as far as possible should try and avoid these failings and adopt a systematic approach

in his investigation of language. A system should be developed and made explicit which is the distinctive feature of scientific systamaticness. In the case of language, the structures examined are so complex, that it becomes impossible to reach any conclusions unless they are studied in a highly organized way. Different linguists may choose and analyze and begin their analysis from different starting points and relate subsequent aspects in a multitude of different ways. For example, one can start with the phonology (Sound system) first and then move on to morphology (structure of words) and then study syntax (the way words pattern in sequences to form sentences) and then relate it to semantics (the various meanings which these words and word-sequences convey). Some linguists even reverse the entire procedure. The point here is not the method used but the necessity of such system without which any analysis or study of language liable to degenerate into utter chaos. Thus there sis a need to study the phenomena of language using a procedure which is methodical and also derived from the principles of scientific study. In other words when approaching the analysis of a piece of language, a linguist has some idea about what he is looking for, what he will find there-he has in mind a more or less precise working hypothesis, or descriptive framework within which he is able to fit his observations about the language patterning. This framework itself is a systematic construction, which may be incomplete in many respects but which, nonetheless provides a conceptual apparatus to make progress.

The third characteristic of a scientific approach is objectivity. Objectivity is the cardinal feature of scientificness. The questions asked, the conclusions reached, the evidence cited must be capable of being observed and tested. The results should be, in other words, verifiable. An objective study can be understood as contrasting with one that is subjective. A non-scientific approach can be called subjective because it requires two observers to take the same mental attitude towards a subject, while the objective approach of science merely requires them to see the conformity of the subject in question to some sort of standard measure.

Stylistics is a discipline of study which draws freely, methods of study from linguistics. It is no new thing for the academic linguist to turn his attention to literature. From the discussions in the previous chapter it is obvious that by now there is a range of very exact techniques for linguistic analysis available. It is a presupposition among linguists that literature, among other things is language, and hence is analyzable. This is a presupposition of not only linguistic criticism but of all modern criticism. Linguistics is a natural companion to criticism. Professor Jeffers asks-"How much more, in fact, does (the linguist) offer beyond a new vocabulary, a jargon which gives him that sense of exclusiveness often believed by

new groups in academic society, a new system of analysis, a new set of categories, to set against those of his rival colleagues?" (1) The linguist offers a set of attitudes which are reinforcement of descriptive criticism. He is practiced in that essential of modern criticism-close reading, in the recognition of what is language and what is not, in spotting patterns and meanings. The linguist focuses automatically on "what is there in the poem?"(2)

There are two methods in which the language of literary textscan be studied. The first method could be called an ad hoc study (3). Here the literary text is not studied within the frame work of any linguistic theory. The critic gives his statements, whether linguistic or not, based on literary insights and intuitions. Such a study does, till some stage give an analysis of the Structure of the language of any literary text, but by doing so one fails to notice relationships of importance between features of language. Such a kind of study has its advantages too. Since the critic is working on a smaller surface, he need not undertake the process, of selection of features. So this makes the study complete, but only in one respect. A large number of studies, which are called ad hoc, have been done. The text is isolated and then studied. In order to throw light on the language of the text, a few poems or works of any poet or author are separated and a study or analysis is done. One such study was undertaken by Irene R.Fairley (4). Fairley analyses five poems of E.E. Cummings in an attempt to show that cummings uses syntactic deviation as a structuring device. At the same time she shows how this syntactic deviation functions as meaning in Cummings' poetry. She treats three short poems- 'a like a', 'Tumbling hair' and 'Me up at does' and shows how Cummings uses deviant syntax to create the structure of a whole poem. Fairley's discussion of: 'All in green went my love riding' and 'when god lets my body be' demonstrates Cummings' use of syntactic deviation to effect coherence in longer poems. J. Mc. H. Sinclair has written two essays in; Taking a poem to pieces'. He demonstrates an almost complete and very technical analysis of a poem : in 'When is a poem like Sunset(5) His analysis is rational and controlled, though it is not done within the background of any linguistic theory. Such ad hoc studies have also been conducted by G.N. Leech, (6) who analyses in detail the language aspects of a poem 'This bread I break' by Dylan Thomas and M.A.K. Halliday,(7) who analysed a poem, 'Leda and the Swan' by W.B. Yeats. (8)

A second mode of analysis is when the literary text is placed in a theoretical perspect. The phenomenon of the language of any literary text is analysed within the framework of any theory of language. Many such tools have been assembled by linguists for this kind of analysis. The beginning of this modern formulation can be traced back to Trager and Smith. Trager and Smith developed Bloomfield's theory of language and assembled for the critic

some necessary linguistic tools. As discussed in the preceding chapter theories of language and language analysis have been propounded bylinguists like, Pike, Lamb, Saussure, Chomsky and Halliday. Today two chief modes of analysis are available the transformative generative mode, propounded by Noam Chomsky and the 'systemic model', based on the thought of J.R. Firth and developed by M.A.K. Halliday. The transformational-generative mode has already produced some very interesting discussions in poetry. Transformationlists, who have interested themselves in poetry have focussed their attention on the border line of poetry and nonsense, grammir and non-grammar. There has been a conscientious effort to make the grammar of English adequate to explain the place of any utterance within the corpus of possible English sentence to state not just that an utterance is grammatical or ungrammatical, but has a place on the scale of grammaticalness. A pioneering attempt at using transformational mode of language in the analysis of style and that of Richard Ohmann. Ohmann analysed the styles of Faulkner, Hemingway, Henry James and D.H. Lawrence. After Ohmann, there have been several other applications of trans- formational grammar to the description of styles, for example-Hayes. M.A.K. Hallidays' model of language has wide applications which have already been discussed in the second Chapter in detail. What is being emphasized here is that a linguistic description of any text within the framework of a consistent and well formulated theory of language is, ideally absolutely revealing. Such an analysis can lay bare the formal structure of language in more detail than any critic would want. One can find out about all aspects of grammatical structure from that of words to that of sentence; about lexical distribution, history, etymology and about phonological or graph logical shape. The description will thus be meaningful and formal and of course systematic. So Halliday says-

"In talking of 'the linguistic study' of literary text, we mean, of course, not 'the study of language' but 'the study (of the language) by the theories and the methods of linguistics. 'There is a crucial difference between the ad hoc, personal and arbitrarily selective statements offered frequently in support of a preformulated literary thesis, as 'textual' or 'linguistic' statements about literature, and an analysis founded on general linguistic theory and descriptive linguistics. It is the latter that may reasonably be called 'linguistic stylistics'.

Within the framework of a scientific study, any theory can be made to justify itself on three levels –

(1) Level of observational study.
(2) Level of descriptive study.
(3) Level of explanatory study.

A study made on these three levels appears complete and justified. These three levels are called the levels of adequacy. The evaluation of any phenomenon can be done on these three levels. Chomsky, discussed the aims of linguistic theories and established a criteria by which grammars can be evaluated. Chomsky proposes that there are several levels of adequacy to which a grammar can attain, depending on the aims it sets out to fulfill. A linguistic theory is judged according to the adequacy of the grammar it provides for natural languages.

LEVEL OF OBSERVATIONAL STUDY :

A study on this level is a product of our observation. If for example, one is conducting an observation of any phenomenon, and he lists out the basic features observed by him, it is on the level of observation. According to Chomsky, a grammar must in the first place be able to distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, spot out unfinished utterances, unheard utterances etc.-in other words to collect an empirical data of the language under examination. A grammar must thus provide rules-precisely formulated rules that will generate the infinite set of possible sentences in a language and no non-sentences.

LEVEL OF DESCRIPTIVE STUDY:

A study on this level is when one tries to find out some kind of pattern or organisation among the existing facts. A study on the descriptive level is .the description ef facts and the underlying system. This is based on the first level but is on a higher Plane of study. Chomsky's view, is that it is only at this level of adequacy, which he calls, descriptive adequacy, that a grammatical theory can begin to be taken seriously. The point Chomsky emphasizes here is that there may be several sets of grammatical rules that would succeed in generating all the correct sentences of a language and non-sentences. But a grammar must also provide rules that assign correct structural descriptions to the sentences it generates. By structural description, Chomsky means that the grammar must assign to each sentence an indication of the structure of the sentence. This involves showing how sentences can be divided into units and sub-units, and how these units are related to each other.

LEVEL OF EXPLANATORY STUDY :

This is the highest level of study. In the first level we are concerned with the observation of facts. In the second level, to detect an underlying pattern in these facts. The third level, which is the level of explanatory study, provides an explanation to the second level. Reasons are accounted for the particular pattern. Chomsky goes on to consider a third and higher level of adequacy, that of explanatory adequacy. He argues that it is theoretically

possible to have variety of descriptively adequate grammars having capacity of producing correct structural descriptions for the sentences of a language. The concept underlying explanatory adequacy is that there is in fact one best type of gram- mar which can be selected out of all possible descriptively adequate grammars. Chomsky calls this as linguistic universals. Alternatively, a theory can aim at explanatory adequacy. It can attempt to provde a systematic account of language in general which would allow it, to pick out the one best type of descriptively adequate grammar for any language on the basis of universal features of language.

Within the domain of stylistics, a study of any literary text, on the three levels of adequacy, within the frame-work of any linguistic theory can give the best and complete results. On the first level of observation facts observed in a literary text are stated. On the second level of description, a pattern among these observed facts is noted. On the third and highest level of explanation, reasons are accounted for. By reasons, is meant-why the poet or artist, chose to arrange these facts in a particular pattern. On the first level, we have answer to 'what?' What is in the poem? On the second level an answer is provided to 'How?' How are these facts arranged? The third level answers the question – 'Why?'- Why are these facts arranged in this particular manner?

Summarizing

1. Level - Observation - Facts - What ?
2. Level – Description - Pattern - How ? e
3. Level - Explanation - Reason - Why ?

A literary text placed under such an analysis has many 'advantages. It brings out not only the uniqueness of the text but also the uniqueness of the theory. Most of the critics of literature go up to the first 'level. They simply observe and state the features of a text. A few go up to the second level and find a pattern and write about the pattern or the manner in which these features are organized in the text. An analysis is complete only when the analyst goes up to the third level and points out how these features which are organised in a particular way in a text contribute to the meaning and effect. A study at this level not only makes the understanding clear but also throws light on the devices used by the poet to achieve the desired effect. One who comprehends literary texts in this manner can say "I know what I Tike," know why I like it because I know how it works". Putting a text in this light will make it glow. A stylistic an engaged in such an act of analysis can not only say, "I know why this text makes an impact on me" but also "I can make this understanding clear to you if you are prepared to follow and check out my reasoning".

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a study of the poetry of Dylan Thomas and also to some extent the language of poetry. The study is based on the model of language as developed by M.A.K. Halliday within the framework of the levels of adequacy. Dylan Thomas uses many techniques and devices to achieve the effect which he desires. An answer to 'what?', 'How?' and 'Why?' of Dylan Thomas' techniques will be provided in this study.

In the poetry of Cummings, at places he has totally flouted the rules of grammar. He has completely changed the order of the sentences for his own use. Some critics have chosen to call such a kind of thing as deviation. Instead, it can be said that Cummings has departed to another plane from the norm of language. J.P. Thorne, in 'Stylistics and Generative Grammar', has pointed out that, Cummings in each poem has created a new gram-mar of which the poem in question is the only text. This however, is true only to a certain extent. Creation of a new grammar means, the poet does not share with the reader this knowledge of language which he uses in every poem. The very fact that a speaker of the English language claims to have understood a poem by Cummings, even though partially shows that the reader shares with Cummings the same linguistic competence. Thus if a text is deviant, then given that the deviation is meaningful only with respect to some norm shared by the reader and the writer alike, it will certainly be of interest to record and explain it. Almost all literary texts depend, for their impact, on a departure from the norms of the language in which they are composed. The extent to which they depart varies. Cummings, no doubt departs from the normal plane to a great extent, but the basic texture out of which he cuts out his poetry remains the same English language. So an explanation of the devices used by him relative to the normal usage of language will not only prove fruitful and interesting but also give a better understanding of his techniques and poetry. There are many kinds of deformities which occur in the poetry of cummings apart from "grammatical deformities". A method of analysis would be to point out these grammatical deformations and other deformations of lexis, diction, graphology etc. But then the study would be top-sided. To avoid this kind of deficiency, a study is made on several dimensions.

(1) Graphologival Dimension.
(2) Grammatical Dimension.
(3) Semantic Dimension.

Before explaining each of these dimensions in detail, a brief survey of Halliday's model of "systemic linguistics" would be appropriate. M.A.K. Halliday developed a theory of language which is widely known as "systemic linguistics". According to this theory language is said to operate with four basic categories-unit, structure, class, and system. Units are

arranged into structures which are descriptions of syntagmatic strings. The category of system is an inventory of those limited possibilities of choice that a speaker/writer has at a given place of the structure of language, the whole of language being thus conceived as a network of systems. Halliday's model contains a number of other vital concepts of scale, cline and delicacy. It is also strong on choice. In Chomsky's transformation model, all choices are usually built into a single system, which is split up into very few components. In Halliday's systemic grammar, related choices are built into limited subsystems of their own. In practical application, this makes it easier to extract the sub-systems one happens to need out of a systems model than out of a transformational model: One can use the relevant subsystem as an entity without having to involve oneself in more expensive and tenuous considerations. In systemic linguistics factors that create meaning are grouped into three "levels". The first is the level of "Phonology / graphology" the organization of physical substances as noises or marks which we use to transmit language. The second is the level of "form" the conventions of lexical meaning and grammatical patterning. The third is the level of "context" the relationship of certain kinds of language to certain kinds of situation. Graphology is the study of meaningful marks, the substantial method of providing symbols with which to build up codes. Visual space can be organized in Many different ways. Each language uses a part of this potential. The formal level is divided into the study of lexis and grammar. Recurring words with same meaning regardless of grammar form the patterns of lexis. Lexical items can sometimes contain more than one word. Lexis can have both denotative meaning (the dictionary definition) and connotative meaning (associations and nuances). Grammar is the study of recurring patterns in the sequence of language, and of formal relationship between bits of code. Grammar is an abstraction of a general idea from many individual events. Despite the relatively fixed nature of lexical and grammatical form, the conventional meaning of a piece of language can change depending on it surroundings. The fixed elements of formal meaning actually refers to a normal context and beyond that to a normal situation. Putting an item of grammar of lexis into an unusual context can alter its meaning radically. All these levels are completely inter related. The intermediate formal level depends on the substance-related level to carry its symbols and on the contextual level to control their meaning.

References

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