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**Interdisciplinarity and Literature: Exploring Intersections of English literature and other Disciplines**

**Dr. Smriti Chowdhuri**

Assistant Professor

Department of English, M. M. Mahila College

VKSU, Arrah

**Abstract**

Interdisciplinarity is a mode of research or education that involves amalgamation of two or more different academic disciplines into one field of study in order to generate new perspective or solutions. This integration of disciplines not only integrates knowledge from numerous academic arenas but also brings transformations in the existing ones. Interdisciplinary is not a novel approach but it came in vogue as a general critique of academic specialization. Literature is more amenable to interdisciplinary approach than other disciplines. Whether it is about close reading or contextualization of literary texts, knowledge and method of multiple academic fields like history, psychology, sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, gender studies, environment studies are implemented. Especially with the proliferation of literary theories in the last century, literature has witnessed an unprecedented interdisciplinarity in its discourse. This paper tries to study the convergences of different disciplines in literature at different juncture that engendered new course of thoughts and interpretations. This paper also attempts to trace the role of interdisciplinarity in the historical development of English Literature as a discipline and the challenges it poses. This article is a theoretical study that applies analytical and qualitative methodologies to define, understand and explore the interdisciplinarity in relation to English literature.

Keywords: interdisciplinary, English literature, academic specialization, literary theories

“...literature is about everything- love, sex, friendship, family relationships, aging, death, social and historical change, religious faith, intellectual ideas and so on. In short, it is about life in all its diversity, and this is hard to accommodate within the narrow parameters of a discipline.” (Moran 21)

Interdisciplinary study added an unprecedented heterogeneity in academic world in production of knowledge and its dissemination. English literature is not untouched by this development. In fact, literature is interdisciplinary by nature since it is about life, reflecting all spectrums of it. To understand interdisciplinarity it is important to understand what is discipline and how did it originate. Etymologically the word ‘discipline’ comes from Latin word ‘*disciplina*’ which means

instruction or teaching of disciples (Latin word '*discipulus*' meaning pupil or learner) by their elders which refers to a kind of specialized system of knowledge. According to OED, it is "a particular course of instruction to disciples". Origin of disciplines is the outcome of the human being's attempt to organize knowledge. Greek philosopher Aristotle divided knowledge into different subject into three sub categories theoretical (theology, mathematics and physics), practical (ethics and politics) or productive (fine arts, poetics and engineering). With this classification of knowledge there emerged an inherent sense of hierarchy clearly stating what is more important or useful studies and not. Aristotle also mentions that though this classification of knowledge into disciplines was necessary but was also regrettable. And this is why he positioned philosophy as the "universal field of inquiry which brought together all the different branches of learning, a notion of unity in difference" (Moran 4). Aristotle was well aware of the harmful effects of specialization of knowledge. Over the time, this classical division was transformed according to market needs and societal demands. Growth of universities brought fundamental changes and helped in the consolidation of disciplines in modern times. Now specialization of disciplines narrowed down the universal rules confining it to a particular discipline aiming to solve a particular problem within a specific parameter. The positive side of this was that it hugely advanced the knowledge production in new science but it should also be noted that it only focused on a segment of reality not the totality of it imbibing exclusivity in it. Thus, with the consolidation of disciplines and multiplications of departments in universities with vested interest there is a lack of holistic outlook and knowledge system. In this scenario emerges interdisciplinary as a critique of this confining and limiting essence of discipline to establish a more unified form of knowledge ushering flexibility and openness.

Interdisciplinary is a widely contested term as discipline when it comes to be defined by the academicians or critics around the world. According to Joe Moran, interdisciplinary means "any form of dialogue or interaction between two or more disciplines" (16) and "can suggest forging connections across disciplines; but it can also mean establishing a kind of undisciplined space in the interstices between disciplines, or even attempting to transcend disciplinary boundaries altogether" (15). Moran tried to drag our attention towards the problematics of defining interdisciplinary due to its vagueness or paradoxical stand with discipline since the prefix "inter" itself is contradictory and ambiguous. He has also blamed the rise of terms like multi-disciplinary, transdisciplinary, anti-disciplinary, post-disciplinary that cluster around interdisciplinary intensifying its ambiguity. Roberta Frank rightly observed the relationship between discipline and interdisciplinary. "Interdisciplinary has something to please everyone. Its base, discipline, is hoary and antiseptic; its prefix, inter, is hairy and friendly...[discipline] suggests something rigorous, aggressive, hazardous

to master; inter hints that knowledge is a warm, mutually developing, consultative thing” (Frank 100).

“When the English School was first established at Cambridge in 1917, the lecturers appointed had been trained in other subjects such as classics, philosophy, history... As the initial name of its degree, [was] ‘Literature, Life and Thought...’ (Moran 26). These lines are the very evidence of the fact that interdisciplinarity was inherent in English literature as a discipline from the very inception of the department and the stalwarts of educational reformists and academicians advocated English students to study comparative literature, political, economic, cultural and social history that would help them recognize the impact of new sciences, capitalism, populist culture on literary output.

Interdisciplinary study in English literature basically refers to the borrowing of methodologies and or application of knowledge from diverse fields beyond English literature. English literature has profoundly borrowed theoretical viewpoints from other disciplines to explicate a literary text to generate interdisciplinary perspective to the discourse. English literature looked beyond textual interpretation by contextualizing a literary work. Literature when taught with an interdisciplinary approach, it makes literary study socially more palpable and relevant. Let us elaborately examine literature’s intersections with different fields like Psychoanalysis, History, Science, Economics, Medical Science, Gender Studies, anthropology, social studies, cultural studies, philosophy, geography etc.

English Literature and History are interlinked from antient times. Whereas history as a discipline is the study of or record of past events of a particular time period, literature is implicitly or explicitly records history and often helps the reader to witness a subjective experience of history. Literature as a mirror to society reflects socio-cultural reality of a particular historical period. It is not that literature’s relation to history is limited in describing incidents and events in a fictional way. History and literature are interdependent. Historical documentations can be complemented by literary descriptions and vice versa. “The new historicists, like Tillyard, try to establish the interconnection between the literature and the general culture of a period” (Seldan 191). Disciplinary intervention of literature and history reaches new dimensions with the eruption of New Historicism. This theory was expounded by American scholar Stephen Greenblatt who stressed on the textuality of history and historicity of text. They considered literature as the cultural production capable of reflecting the intellectual history of the time. Historical positioning of the author is important in the interpretation of a literary text since a work according to the New Historicist is a production of a particular social, political, and historical milieu. Similarly, literary texts impinged into the arena of

history as equally important historical documents. Without this interdisciplinary approach it was unthinkable to consider a fictional piece of work as a serious document of history.

Interdisciplinarity helped in establishing a refreshing relationship between literature and philosophy as well. Philosophy as a discipline has always been held in high pedestal since it brings together all other fields of learning. As an “universal field of enquiry” (4) or “universal science” (Moran 8) it tries to understand the fundamental questions about human existence like the significance or meaning of life, nature of reality, epistemology, value of ethics and morality etc. through rational argument and critical reasoning. Though a work of literature is a fictional rendition of life, it nonetheless deals with the philosophic questions of human existence. Every piece of literature is an expression of an artist’s philosophy of life of a particular philosophical idea, human experience, perception of reality or moral conflict. Thus, the critical theories of philosophy influence literary production as well. A work of literature often conveys a specific social and philosophical outlook. Numerous literary compositions have been written on political philosophy that deals with the questions of political power, justice, state-citizen relationship, government, authority, rights and freedom etc. Philosophies of great philosophers like Plato, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Marx infiltrate in the literary arena. Political philosophy shares wall with political science and sociology as well. Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) is an exemplar of such an interdisciplinary work where literature, philosophy, sociology, political science even economics as disciplines converge. Sociology as a discipline examines the social structures, social interactions and social problems to study the impact on human behavior. Literature as a social production witnesses the application of sociological theories like Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism. When analyzed through these critical lenses, a literary work emerges as the thoughtful study gender roles, power dynamics, class struggle, economic inequality, cultural imperialism etc.

Intersection of literature and psychology is noteworthy in understanding a literary text as well as in understanding human psychology. Psychology is the scientific study of mind and human behavior whereas literature portrays human behavior through fiction. Readers can successfully borrow psychological resources to unravel the characters’ inner most thoughts as depicted in literature. Similarly literary works can aid students of psychology understand diverse psychological conditions of human beings.

The text understanding analysis in respect of the interdisciplinary aspect suggests its complex examination, based on the principles of science such as cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology, social psychology, psycholinguistics, text linguistics, social linguistics and pragmatics. (Dossanova et al. 3616)

Psychoanalytic criticism is the rendezvous where the two disciplines psychology and literature meet. “Psychoanalytic Criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature” (Barry 92). Psychoanalysis is a method of therapy that intends to cure mental disorders by exploring conscious and unconscious element of mind like free talk, investigation of childhood memories and dreams. This methodology was founded and developed by the Austrian Neurologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). When applied to literature, this complex and interdisciplinary field helps readers understand the psychological conditions of both characters and authors. Nonetheless it helps the readers as well to understand their own psychology. Freud himself applied his theory to analyze characters from Shakespeare’s plays. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), he analyzed Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex and Shakespeare’s Hamlet for their Oedipus complex and thus elaborated the connection between literature and psychoanalysis. Thus, it can be seen that this interdisciplinary method is highly rewarding approach in interpretation of literary text.

A contemporary field of study that is ready to engulf the very existence of literature as a separate discipline due to its interdisciplinary nature is Cultural Studies. It emerged in 1950s with the establishment of “Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies” at Birmingham University under the directorship of Richard Hoggart.

A key feature of Cultural Studies as it developed was its interdisciplinary mode of working. The bringing together of different disciplinary perspectives, together with the study of key theoretical texts, was crucial in breaking down disciplinary boundaries and promoting the interdisciplinarity which has become a hallmark of Cultural studies. (Jordan and Weedon 249)

It immensely draws knowledge from disciplines like sociology, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, geography, psychology, literature, visual arts, politics, linguistics and what not. According to Moran, “cultural studies has never seen itself as the logical development of a particular discipline, but as creating a space between disciplines to examine all forms of culture in relation to questions of power” (64-65). Cultural Studies tries to explore the cultural practices involved in meaning making process shaping everyday life. It studies the power paradigm, ideology, hegemony, cultural identities in context of race, gender, class, sexuality etc. Thus, it analyses a literary text as a cultural product capable of reflecting cultural discourse of a particular era or thought.

Gender studies is a burgeoning interdisciplinary field that emphasizes on the complex interplay between race, class, sexuality, disability to examine sociocultural aspects of gender. As a discipline it draws upon theoretical frameworks of sociology, history, psychology, political science and literature to understand the nuanced nature of gender. It studies gender as a cultural construction

exploring the power dynamics associated with gender identities. In literature the critical lens of gender studies is applied to examine gendered representation of characters. It often analyses the impact of gender in shaping the narratives and characters studying the construction of gender identity. Gender Studies not only read the reflection of diverse gender identities and experiences in literature but also evaluates literature's role in subverting the power structure of conventional gender inequality.

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field that studies the relationship between literature and environment drawing resources from multiple disciplines like ecology, geography, anthropology, cultural studies, history, sociology and feminism. It interlinks human and nonhuman world. Its objective is to raise eco-consciousness evaluating representation of nature and climate issues present in literature. Ecocriticism not only analyzes representation of nature in literary text but also investigates the cultural and sociopolitical implications of such treatment of nature. "Its interdisciplinary nature allows for a comprehensive examination of how literature engages with ecological things and the human nature relationship" (Tajane et al. 2163). Ecocriticism recognizes literature's crucial role in environmental conservation and sensitivity to climate change. Intersectionality of ecocriticism with post colonialism, feminism and other critical frameworks explores the intersection of identity, power and social justice. This multifaceted area of ecocriticism in literature generates critical thoughts in environmental discourse and a critique of human exploitation and degradation of nature.

Animal Studies encompasses the study of complex relationship between human and non-human animals with an interdisciplinary approach drawing from various fields like biology, anthropology, zoology, literature, history, sociology and philosophy. Animal studies intersect with posthumanism as they challenge the anthropocentric (human centric) view. They advocate a more inclusive environment based on symbiotic relationship of its organisms. This area of studies examines literary texts to analyze the representation of animals and animal welfare. Animal Studies talks about animal rights and stresses on the relationship between animal and human to draw our notice towards power structure and hierarchy. This interdisciplinary branch of study ultimately tries to improve the quality of life for both human and non-human for an ecologically balanced society.

Medical Humanities refers to an interdisciplinary field of humanities, social sciences and the arts. It investigates the intersection of health, disease, art, psychology, cultural experience through the lens of the humanities. Medical Humanities is an emerging and promising field in world academia as it is being included to medical curricula to improve the relationship between patient and the health caregiver. Students integrates medical aspects of health with socio-cultural and moral dimensions as well to examine the complex relationship of health care. Medical Humanities believes

that literature enables the health care givers work emphatically and critically evaluate issues involved in their practices. According to Das, “Medical Humanities helps in addressing the human aspects of medicine from within discipline like history, philosophy, sociology and literature. It also calls for the intersection of medicine and the arts; and the schooling of more insightful and compassionate caregivers” (para 9). However, Medical Humanities not only improved medical education and practices but also enriched literature shedding light on a new aspect of literary text. It has also generated a particular kind of literature which is composed to cater to a certain demand. Without an interdisciplinary reading, this complex nexus of disease, human suffering, human experience, economic condition, religious allegiance, socio-cultural context cannot be addressed.

This amalgamation of literary analysis with other disciplinary perspectives encourages creativity, stimulates critical acumen and scholarly examination. Interdisciplinary study strengthens pedagogical research, helping the literary practitioners understand its ability to enhance teaching methodologies especially in tertiary education contexts. Interdisciplinary study is adventurous in intellectual pursuits. To study English literature in isolation as a separate academic field will delimit its potentiality since it has witnessed and imbued the cultural shifts, technological encroachments and caught in the complex nexus between literature, culture, history, psychology etc. Tchudi and Lafer argued that “literature taught in an interdisciplinary context makes literary study authentic” (22). Thus, interdisciplinary study in relation to English literature is not only fascinatingly fruitful but also inevitable.

Academics have become increasingly conscious of the need to combine skills and perspectives from multiple disciplinary fields to find a better answer to critical questions. Interdisciplinary is an approach that complements societal interest in holistic perspectives that emancipates human knowledge or humanity from the confinements of single dimension. This interdisciplinary approach stimulated important discussion on literature and its societal role. It is not a whimsical choice or option but an explicit necessity for present roadmap and an all-inclusive future destination.

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