

Interpreting the Reader-Response Way: Understanding Contemporary Literary Theory

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ABSTRACT

As students of Contemporary literary criticism all of us have studied Stanley Fish's famous essay "Is there a text in the Class?" and the possible responses that one could possibly elicit to it. In fact, Stanley's arguments in the essay are primarily based on the premise that the text is not a stable thing with a determinate meaning. Accordingly, a proposal is being made to reinterpret the Scheherazade story from Richard Burton's "The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night" from a contemporary perspective and thereby list out the multiplicity of views that a single story could evoke.

Keywords: Text, decode, dialectic, subversion, hegemony.

THE SCHEHERAZADE STORY

Once upon a time there was a king who had the practice of getting married to a Princess every day for on his wedding night he would kill his wife. One such day, it so happens, that he gets remarried and as was his practice, issues order to the Wazir that he should execute his wife. The Wazir, as is customary, asks the Princess to state her last wish and she promptly responds saying that she would like to narrate a story. The narrative happens to hold the attention of the wazir for a thousand nights and consequently her Death-sentence is postponed by an equal number of days. And on the thousand and first night the King relents and she is forgiven.

Hermeneutic View

The text of the above-story could mean differently to different readers as every reader would decode it according to his/her point-of-view. The Princess reads the situation and realizes that she must enter into a narrative process (the one talent that she has been gifted with), in front of a listener, who is an elderly man. And therefore, the task of drawing and holding the attention requires an extraordinary effort in order to have the remotest of hopes of escaping from this situation. Both the Princess and the Wazir have the understanding that the text by way of the narrative mode may or may not open up a different horizon. Hence, there is an interface between the world of the Princess

as it was constructed and the world of the Wazir. The Princess as reader can only approach the situation with her own fore-understanding which is grounded in her Arabian culture and tradition. The Princess, accordingly, seeks to provide an alternative but equally valid interpretation by an interplay between her cognition of the narrative as a whole and the Wazir's retrospective understanding of its component parts.

Psychoanalytic View

The crunch or the boundary situation in the which the Princess is placed contributes to her realization that the process of true creativity invariably warrants an active participation. One can visualize how she responds to her imaginative capabilities in a manner that can be shared across the consciousnesses of the King, the Wazir and the Princess herself (as we share fundamental paradigms, symbols, myths etc.) She knows it well that her life would only have meaning if the narrative communicates the meaning created by her individual psyche. Accordingly, in response, the Wazir, at the unconscious and sub-conscious levels, in keeping with the material provided by the narrative, opens a path between the two and thereby occasions the germination of richer knowledge and realization in the subsequent thousand days. In addition, the narrative also

gives expression to the Princess' positive state of mind in the face of odds. She consequently appears well grounded in the art of human psychology and psychoanalysis for she works not only on her own imagination as an artist but also upon the social standards of morality and propriety. The Princess in other words is also a therapist who reveals the true content of the narrative and its positive effect on the reader (listener) – Wazir.

Phenomenological View

The narrative of the Princess in the story functions as a set of instructions for its own determinate processing, which needs to be completed and concretized. As such, the reality of the narrative lies between the Princess and the Wazir. In fact, the narrative is the result of a dialectic between the Princess and the Wazir. In Edmund Husserl's terminology, the Princess through the thousand and one-night long narrative sets out to analyse the consciousness of the Wazir and in turn the King himself. The Princess deliberately/intentionally wills the narrative and directs it to the Wazir as an object (for his lack of active participation). In other words, the Princess, in this unitary act of consciousness, becomes the thinking subject and the Wazir – the object intended and eventually both are interinvolved and reciprocally implicative at the level of consciousness. The narrative (active) text of the Princess thus carries the potential to set forth the active reading/participation of the Wazir by a process of consciousness which concretizes/actualizes his consciousness and depicts a reality that exists independently of the narrative, which in turn indirectly influences the consciousness of the King, who finally pardons her.

Structuralist View

In the story of the King and the young Princess, it is important to note that the narrative needs to be correctly decoded by the Wazir, which invariably requires a level of competence in how narratives work in the Arabian tradition. Accordingly, the Princess constructs a narrative in keeping with a set of objective but socially shared conventions, which have been assimilated and put to good-use at the most appropriate times. Thus, the understanding of the meaning of the Princess' narrative largely depends on the competence of the reader. In responding to the structures and practices of the narrative, which operate both implicitly and explicitly, the Wazir becomes a competent

reader. He has interpreted things exactly as they should be interpreted and this is what is desired by the Princess. The immediate purpose of arousing the curiosity of the Wazir at a crucial point of time in the story as the day is about to break, is explicitly achieved when the Wazir postpones the execution of the Death sentence not merely by a night but by a thousand nights.

Political or Ideological View

Texts normally include statements, assumptions, attitudes, which are intrinsically ideological. In other words, texts express attitudes towards beliefs about a certain set of social and political realities, relations, values and powers. As a text is produced in a certain social and political milieu it cannot have embedded ideological assumptions. Both the Princess as the narrator and the Wazir as the reader have their ideological convictions and understandings and therefore the effort must be Herculean in nature. The Princess must vanquish the Wazir (who represents the ideology of the King) by overpowering the conviction and the understanding of the Wazir. And this is what she eventually does.

The Princess' narrative consequently demystifies the hegemonic ideologies of the King and the Wazir. Not for a minute does the Princess lose sight of her reader's ideologies but on the contrary, she maintains her heightened awareness for a thousand nights. Without such a critical reading of her reader's mind, the narrative could have reinforced aspects of the reader's cultural ideology and the Wazir could have missed meanings and connections for want of an understanding of the ideological structure of the narrative. But, fortunately, nothing of such a nature happens.

Post-Structuralist View(s)

The Post-structuralist view states that (i) Meaning is indeterminate. (ii) It is not in the text but in the play of language and the nuances of conventions in which the reader is immersed. (iii) The reader constructs a text as he participates in the play, driven by the instabilities and meaning potentials of the semantic and rhetorical aspects of the narrative.

In the above plot, we have a boundary situation, wherein a Princess using the strategic device of a narrative or discourse succeeds in delaying her death by a thousand nights. We have here the basic binary opposition between the narrator i.e., the Princess and the listener i.e., the Wazir. The

narrator stands for life-creativity and the listener stands as a representative of Death. As a reader, the Princess reads the definite and conclusive situation before her and therefore immediately resolves to enter into a creative act, which alone can ensure her survival. The consequence of the Princess' confrontation with a death-like situation is that she succeeds in effectively communicating, without any indulgence in absurdities and translating Death into Art (life). She escapes because she is creating Art – a marvellous existential act- under the shadow of Death. It can be conclusively established that Art justifies life in the heightened consciousness of Death.

At the outset, the King and the Wazir set about their purposes with fixity of meaning. The King is under the impression that he would get away with this situation as in the past. The Wazir thinks that by executing the death-sentence he would have performed his duty. However, this determinacy that they have receives a jolt when the Princess states her last wish and then begins her narrative. Her play of language during the course of the narrative is such that the reader (Wazir) stands immersed and impressed. The Wazir's participation in the world of the Princess destabilizes his own position and makes him construct a text very different from his own original self. He is the same Wazir who has served the King for a considerable length of time and has faithfully executed all his commands. The change that comes about in the Wazir's mindset is a proof of the Princess' linguistic competence (semantic and rhetorical).

Stanley Fish's view here is that the reader (Wazir) belongs to an interpretive community. He would have taught himself to see a certain set of forms, topics and so forth. His is one view, which refers to the world of discourse of the reader as being the determinate factor. The narrative process thus involves the Princess' countering or re-interpreting the prevailing views (of male supremacy). She succeeds in forcing the direction of the narrative to the Wazir for she has the potential to reconceptualise (reinterpret) and sustain the

narrative for a thousand nights. The Princess, thus, deconstructs the Wazir as a reader. The experience, the language, the assumptions – of the Wazir – all have been undermined. Being the reader, he becomes the real agent (as in all post-structuralist positions), for he is open to polysemy (multiple meanings and the sliding and interplay of signs) and is willing to participate in the Princess' own (socially shared) world of discourse, in a world discursively and socially constructed.

CONCLUSION

Thus, one observes, that there is a subversion of paradigm in the story. That which appeared to be a male-dominated bastion with the King and the Wazir right at the top and all 'Queens' (dead and alive) at the very bottom, is subverted inside-out towards the close of the story. The 'female' principle as represented by the Princess achieves supremacy (meaning) and succeeds in positively effecting a paradigm shift with now the 'Princess' occupying the top/upper position and the King and the Wazir the very bottom. This is a fine illustration of the sovereignty of feminine discourse over male discourse. The Princess, so very exquisitely, uses the tool of language to not only undermine, resist and reject the incorrect practices of the King and the Wazir but also provide an alternative mode of discourse. She, as a superior reader inverts and deconstructs the fixed verbal hierarchies of patriarchal discourse and offers a feminine innovative (communicative) narrative (rhetoric) using the same tools of language. In other words, the Princess undertakes to merely situate or reinscribe the text of the King/Wazir in a system of difference which shows the instability of the seemingly intelligible but paradoxical text. (Abrams 59).

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