

**“The Author May be Dead But the Critic is  
Alive and Kicking”  
Making Methodological Meanings of  
Contemporary Literary Theory/Criticism**

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Reflecting on literature is a literary tradition that has evolved dialectically alongside writing/reading literature. However, as critics we have not always been conscious of our assumptions about realities (ontology); neither have we always been aware of the locations in knowledge (epistemology) from which we practice literary criticism. What does it mean methodologically to critique a literary work? What is the role of the reader/critic in literary criticism? How should a contemporary critic perform literary criticism in the face of diverse critical approaches? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in this paper. The paper will thus engage with the methodological roles of the critic (with regard to the intersecting and overlapping facets of ontology, epistemology, theory, subjectivity, methods, ethics and politics) in the dominant praxis of literary criticism.

In the paper, I will argue for the application of a new paradigm of critical engagement – that of a fusion methodology in literary criticism. A fusion in methodology allows the critic to have several concurrent understandings of knowledge—making - though not necessarily uniformly. These will involve the ontologies/epistemologies of New Criticism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and poststructuralism; theoretical concepts of Marxism, postcolonialism and deconstruction; ethics and politics relating to feminism and reader-response theories; and the method of feminist reflexivity; while the implications of the subjectivity of the critic/reader will be a cross-cutting issue.

The methodology for the paper is based on the strategic/theoretical surveying of literature on literary theory, criticism and methodology as well as other interdisciplinary texts on research methodology. It will not to provide a comprehensive overview of literary criticism; nor will it trace origins and historical trajectories; or propose theoretical typologies. Rather, the knowledge on literary criticism generated in this paper will

be limited to what struck me as significant in responding to my research questions during the period of researching/writing. Given the subject in question, understandings of various literary/critical/cultural theories and interdisciplinary research methodology will direct my critique/research process and conclusions. I will thus write from multiple epistemological standpoints that will combine modernism and postmodernism.

Reflecting on literature is a literary tradition that has evolved dialectically alongside writing/reading literature. As a research method, literary criticism has spanned a spectrum of methodological approaches: straightforward appreciations; literature reviews; linguistic analyses; hermeneutics; comparative evaluations; critical examinations; practical criticisms; deconstructions; theory applications and theorizations. The fact that the roles of literary theory/criticism have been discussed and contested as issues relating to ontology, nature, society, aesthetics, culture, rhetoric, linguistics, theory, poetics, subjectivity, history, politics and epistemology, conveys not only the diversity of critics' theoretical interests, but also the directions in the epistemological discourses/theorizations regarding literature over time.

'Each person who reads a story, a poem, or even a single word construes it differently' (Holland, 1998:143). As a psychoanalytic critic, Holland (*ibid.*) attributes the differences in reading to the distinctive psychological construction of identity in the readers. This paper however considers contemporary literary criticism from a broader methodological perspective than the psychoanalytical. It focuses specifically on the role of the critic in 'doing' literary criticism. What does it mean methodologically to critique a literary work? What has been the role of the reader/critic in literary criticism? Finally, (perhaps somewhat prescriptively), how should a contemporary critic perform literary criticism in the face of diverse critical approaches? The need to pose such obvious and unoriginal questions arises from the fact that as critics we have not always been conscious of our ontological<sup>1</sup> assumptions; neither have we always been aware of the epistemological<sup>2</sup> positions from which we practice literary criticism.

For the purpose of this paper, methodology in/as literary criticism is understood to mean the ontological, epistemological, theoretical, method-related and political/ethical aspects of critiquing literature.

Literary scholarship is taken to mean, quite simply, the theoretical discourses on making meaning of and the relevance of literature. The paper will confine itself to engaging with some of the dominant theoretical trends and issues of twentieth century literary criticism because of their vital influence on contemporary literary scholarship. The methodology for the paper is based primarily on what can be considered strategic/theoretical surveying of literature on literary theory, criticism and methodology as well as other interdisciplinary texts on research methodology. In social science research, strategic or theoretical sampling (in this instance for a literature review) is understood as 'selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position and analytical framework, and most importantly the argument or explanation that you are developing' (Mason, 2002: 124). Given the subject in question, understandings of various literary/critical/cultural theories and interdisciplinary research methodology will direct my critique/research process and conclusions. I write from multiple epistemological standpoints; in fact I argue from a fusion standpoint that constructs/allows the critic to have several concurrent understandings of knowledge—making - though not necessarily uniformly. For instance, the critic may espouse modernist<sup>3</sup> and postmodernist perspectives<sup>4</sup>; including those of postcolonialism, feminism and poststructuralism. These positionings can be construed as both complementary and contradictory. This fusion in epistemologies as proposed by me could well lead to allegations of incoherence from standpoints of modernism that value empiricism, rationality, realism, logic, and linearity. They could equally lead to deconstructions from postmodernist perspectives that implicitly valorize (though they deconstruct) notions of differences, instabilities, contingencies, and 'provisionalities'. Nonetheless, it is my argument that epistemologically competing and harmonizing conceptualizations are concurrently possible - given the current multiplicity in theoretical/epistemological options, and given the fact that literary scholarship is a subjective process.

Based on identity theory, psychoanalytic criticism tends to think of 'the individual as embodying a dialectic of sameness and difference' (Holland, 1998: 144). My understanding of identity is more postmodern, as on the one hand, the critic as a subject is ontologically taken to be rational, agential, autonomous, and self-reflexive; striving for a singular unifying understanding. On the other hand, the same subject is also taken

to be ambiguous, inconsistent, unaware and shifting (Foucault, 1972; Braidotti, 1994; Butler, 1999; Belsey: 2000); and his or her understandings are variable, contingent and provisional. This argument can be further illustrated with reference to Belsey's point with regard to women's positionings in reality:

Women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, we participate both in the liberal – humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, inadequacy and irrational intuition.

Belsey (2000: 661–662)

Belsey (*ibid.*) argues that women (as a collective) simultaneously inhabit and are constructed in realities by conflicting discourses or ontological understandings of empowerment and oppression. This is because given the sheer multiplicity and diversity of human consciousness and understandings of realities, subjectivity is seen as displaced across and constructed in this range of discourses. Consequently, literary scholarship (epistemology) as well as other forms of human activity relating to the production of knowledge will imbue/reflect these ontological conceptualizations of the subject<sup>5</sup>.

As noted earlier, given my interdisciplinary background in scholarship I will apply several sociological concepts and methods in the paper. For instance, I will subscribe to the selective use of reflexivity<sup>6</sup> in critiquing and writing given my firm conviction of the need to expose/construct the subjectivity of the critiquing process as one means of providing methodological rigor and validity to my work.

This paper will thus engage with the methodological roles of the critic in the dominant praxis<sup>7</sup> of literary criticism. My intention however, is not to provide a comprehensive overview of literary criticism nor to trace origins and historical trajectories – given its impossibility due to postmodern destabilizations/deconstruction of the assumptions of singularity, hegemony, linearity and authority in modernist knowledge-making (Foucault, 1972)<sup>8</sup>. As far as the modernist tradition is concerned my mandate is to concentrate/construct methodological meanings of

literary criticism in so far as it relates to the reader/critic. In knowledge—making it is also problematic to assign/create theoretical categories and sections as they lead to the contrived and subjective structuring of knowledge. Nevertheless, I am compelled to do so – given the nature of my research questions and the desire to manage/structure the knowledge generated for this paper. Moreover, given the constraints of writing a paper (as opposed to a book); the breadth and depth of my topic and my particular interest, the knowledge on literary criticism generated in this paper is limited to what struck me as significant during the period of researching/writing. It makes no pretence of providing an all—inclusive understanding of the issues pertaining to literary theory and criticism; rather, the knowledge that it produces/constructs is, as all knowledge, partial (in that it is subjective, incomplete and provisional), as well as located in time and place (Haraway 1988).

#### Ontological/Epistemological Tensions

Given my argument/assumptions of ontology and epistemology as constituent aspects of the methodology of literary criticism, this section will consider the ontological and epistemological dialectics of ‘doing’ literary criticism. Ontology can be conceptualized and experienced by a subject at several levels. There might be grand all-encompassing perceptions of metaphysical realities centered on life, absence, presence, time, space, geography, and history; overarching epistemological or theoretical ontologies involving positivism, postmodernisms, constructivism, modernism, and naturalism; discursive, creative and imaginary realities of literature, art, culture, cyberspace and history; internal subjective realities of the self related to the psyche, linguistics, the body, being and becoming, sexuality, and dying; experiential realities that are located in relations of gender, socio-politics, class, economics, development, and culture. Individuals can be seen as experiencing and negotiating with these intersecting multiple realities simultaneously; depending on their heightened consciousness of the moment. However, because individuals themselves are part of ontology, they may be insensate to their interactions within ontology.

Epistemology can be conceptualized as the understandings of realities by a subject through knowledge and understandings related to time, space, geography, history, presence, absence; theoretical narratives

of poststructuralism, empiricism, constructivism, rationalism, critical realism; subjectivity-related awareness of the psyche, the body, being or becoming, sexuality, dying; theorizations pertaining to experiences of gender, socio—politics, class, economics, culture, differences. Epistemology is also related to constructions and representations within the cultural spheres of literature, artifacts and other creative works. Epistemology is concerned not only with what constitutes knowledge but also knowing, and how we consciously and unconsciously read/understand/analyze/construct/interpret/apply/justify/theorize/critique/validate these knowledges (*ibid.*). As noted earlier, the subject has difficulty in extricating the intricacies of conceptualizing knowledge of realities (epistemology) and experiencing realities (ontology).

The foremost ontological/epistemological tensions that need highlighting in literary criticism *vis-à-vis* the critic are the assumed linkages and fractures between the writer and the text - according to the different epistemological standpoints of various literary theories/criticism. Prior to the advent of literary, critical and cultural theories in the twentieth century, the literary interests of critics were, for the most part, focussed on a) the writers - in terms of their literary and historical biographies; b) the writers - in terms of their sensibilities and expressions; c) the text - in terms of philology and source hunting; d) the text - in terms of standards of literature and aesthetics; e) the readers - in terms of how the writer engages with readers in the text; f) the readers - in terms of processes of interpretation and the impact of literature on them (see Eagleton, 1994; Bressler, 1994; Fowler, 2001; Barry, 2002).

When it comes to ontological/epistemological assumptions, I see I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929) as a key text which led to critical movements that revolutionized literary thinking (as they subverted the hitherto aesthetic/literary standards and traditions associated with literature). The epistemological focus of criticism shifted from the writer and the reader to the text - as Richards (*ibid.*) saw a poem as an independent entity that could be assessed only on its own terms - divorced from its creators, consumers and critics; its forces of production; and inherited knowledges about its literary value. The 'methods' of Practical Criticism (and New Criticism) involved close readings that concentrated on the analysis of the text for the language of literature. This included close attention to literary details such as connotations, denotations, irony,

paradoxes, ambiguities, oxymoron and tensions. Of course, there were different emphases on different aspects of rhetorical, semantic and linguistics elements/structures; and some critics attempted to form some kind of concluding unity, synthesis or reconciliation.

By advocating a technical terminology and method to understand poetic effect, Richards (*ibid.*) was applying principles of what can be seen as positivist assumptions and understandings of ontology/epistemology that were founded on neutrality, objectivity and rationality. Though his work (based on his students' responses to poetry) highlighted the arbitrariness, subjectivity and therefore differences in the reading process, it also illustrated certain commonalities in the assumptions, experiences, beliefs and prejudices of this group of 'young, white, upper upper/middle class, privately educated English people of the 1920s' as pointed out by Eagleton (1994: 15). Here, Eagleton is appealing to a sense of social intersubjectivity<sup>9</sup> through reading experiences that resulted in a particular type of common cultural understanding of literature.

Another ontologically/epistemologically significant development in this context is the relationship that was assumed between the writers' intentions and textual interpretations. Of course, historically, readers and critics did not always have opportunities of actually gauging the writers' stated intentions *vis-à-vis* the literary work they produced. New Critics and Practical Critics argued against the relevancy and necessity of approximating a literary work to the writers' intentions in poetry criticism. New critics; Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1954) critical concept of the 'intentionalist fallacy' was forwarded against the valuing of expressionistic and relative responses to poetry that were influential in Romantic ideas of the poet and his/her inspired, spontaneous poetic outpourings. While they did not reject the significance of historical and biographical evidence, their focus shifted on to the text (and the language of the text) as opposed to the reader. Again, this was based on the understanding of the text as part of objective reality that stood independent of both the writer and the reader. Today, however, with the institution of a culture or even a habit of self-reflexivity<sup>10</sup>, especially in late—modern Western societies (Adkins, 2004), writers are often found discussing their creative expressions in the newspapers/radio/TV talk shows, at literary festivals and *via* other mediums of popular culture. The writers' intentions are key components in such interchanges. Consequently, the readership

cannot always avoid being acquainted with the writers' intentions in literary production.

The 'affective fallacy' (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954) with regard to poetry also transfers the central concern of the literary critique from the reader, to the text.

The 'Affective Fallacy' is a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does)... It begins by trying to derive the standards of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement, tends to disappear.'

(Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954: 21)

Such an understanding is, once again, striving to eliminate the subjectivity of the reading process unless the subjective impressions of critics took into account the reasons for these psychological effects on the readers. In contrast, for instance, Holland (1998) as noted earlier, argues that the meaning of a literary text can only be seen *vis-à-vis* the psychological identity of the reader of the text. The New Critics' stand can be seen as a reaction to the impressionism and relativism of 19<sup>th</sup> century criticism. The two arguments, termed 'fallacies' encouraged critics to concentrate on the text, the language and the words on the page; which signified the epistemological standpoint of Wimsatt and Beardsley (*ibid.*) that saw literary criticism in terms of truth, falsity, science and emotion, correctness and error.

Next, I will consider the tensions related to some of the ontological and epistemological understandings of the text in structuralism given the epistemological significance assigned to form, configuration and discourse in the text by structuralists and formalists. In theorizations on semiotics, language is seen as a signifying system; and meanings are the results of differential relationships between/amongst signifiers (see de Saussure, 2000). Similarly, for structuralists when it comes to ontology/epistemology, there is 'the realization that if human actions and productions have a meaning there must be an underlying system of distinctions and conventions which make this meaning possible' (Culler, 2000; 73). Textual realities are thus understood as constructed rather than as the representations of the natural by the author. The various internal components of the text therefore signifies an underlying system

or structure (that can be related to units, parallels, repetitions, binary oppositions and other patterns) determined by its constitutive rules. For instance, these relationships and systems can be seen in terms of chronotopes<sup>11</sup> of time and space (see Bakhtin, 2000), mythemes relating to recurrence of human experiences in mythology (see Levi-Strauss, 2000), and components of action in folklore (see Propp, 2000). Once again, the critical convergence is on the text (to the obliteration of the reader and the author). Therefore structuralism too, (like New/Practical Criticism and poststructuralism), is understood as an epistemology that is centred on the objectivity of the text - despite the agency<sup>12</sup> and intervention of the subjectivity of the reader/critic in the choice of which codes to prioritize in the text. In addition, structuralist and formalist meaning making also involves intersubjectivity (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2008). This is the idea of a bank of common, collective historical/cultural assumptions and implications, in this instance, relating to the codes identified in a text. Furthermore, it involves intertextuality<sup>13</sup> (Barthes, 1998), the notion of a text as not being an autonomous entity but as produced by the reader/critic from readings of other texts.

The assumptions of permanency and universality of linguistic/social relations and structures made by structuralists/formalists can be offset by new ontological/epistemological understandings relating to postmodernism, poststructuralism and deconstruction. These ontologies, epistemologies and methods of literary criticism, in particular, can be seen as oppositional to the idea of establishing linkages, relations and structures within the text.

The object of deconstructing the text is to examine *the process of its production* - not the private experience of the individual author but the mode of production, the materials and their arrangement in the work. The aim is to locate the point of contradiction within the text, the point at which it transgresses the limits within it is constructed, breaks free of the constraints imposed by its own realist form. Composed of contradictions, the text is no longer restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading. Instead, it becomes plural, open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning.

(Belsey, 1980: 104)

Ontological/epistemological ideas such as singularity, linearity, organic unity, coherence, objectivity of the text, and linguistic autonomy valued earlier are challenged (see Foucault, 1972; Derrida, 1976). Instead, notions of difference, multiplicity, flux, 'undecidability', decentring, displacement, and inconsistency take precedence in reading. Not only is there a free play of meaning expected of a text but meaning is repeatedly displaced. Moreover, meaning is constantly differed. As Derrida (1998:118) goes on to elaborate 'freeplay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and a movement of a chain'.

The differences between poststructuralist and structuralist discourses on epistemology are argued as follows:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism...

(Derrida, 1998:119)

Derrida (*ibid.*) argues that these two ways of making meaning are irreconcilable – even though both methods of interpretation exist simultaneously. Here, he is relying on modernist ways of making meaning (in conceptualizing these two binary opposites) to make his point. Similarly, Wolfgang Iser (1998) discusses indeterminacy in the text (a concept equally prioritized in postmodernist thought) in his modernist theorizing on reader-responses.

In other words, between the 'schematized views' there is a no-man's-land of indeterminacy which results precisely from the determinacy of the sequence of each individual view. Gaps are bound to open up, and offer a free play of interpretation for the specific way in which the various views can be connected with one another.

(Iser, 1998: 197)

Iser (*ibid.*) conceptualizes a free play of interpretation in the text even though he sees the reader's function as filling gaps and making connections. At this juncture, it is neither my intention nor my mandate in this paper to pursue constructing/showing the commonalities (and differences) between modernist and postmodernist thinking. However, the assumed bipolarity of these two epistemologies can be deconstructed not only by highlighting/constructing the overlaps and gaps but also by posing the very idea of a free play of meanings as common to both understandings. Furthermore, the fixity and authoritarianism of the methodology of both modernism and postmodernism (whether proposed as conceptualizations or deconstructions) need undermining given that they are subjective/intersubjective categorizations and bipolarities.

Like the New/Practical Critics and the structuralists/formalists, postmodernists, poststructuralists and deconstructionist also created/ utilized their own discourse and terminology for their understandings of realities. Poststructuralist and deconstructionist thinking in particular have transformed the writing/reading process (ontology); meaning of the text is left multiple, undecided and differed. Yet the notion of a postmodern critical praxis (through deconstruction) is rejected (Derrida; 1976: 1999) as it would involve the subscription to a definitive principle/methodology in the process of dismantling meaning.

This section discussed the tensions arising from some of the dominant ontologies and epistemologies of literary criticism. The phrase 'the death of the author' is used not only to indicate the author's or even the subject's loss of control over linguistic expression but also to undermine previous understandings of language as a neutral form of expression (see Foucault, 1972; Barthes, 1998; de Man, 1999). My own epistemological standpoint so far is one that was prepared to adopt/adapt/construct appropriate ontological and epistemological examples as befitting my arguments. Such a standpoint is founded on 'cherry picking'<sup>14</sup> or the appropriation of selective concepts and understandings of knowledge-making from various epistemologies (which may well be taken to be in conflict) so as to develop new understandings of literary criticism. This is because these are all, in the final count, ways in which writers and critics have conceptualized realities and are therefore not etched in stone.

### Engaging with Critical/Cultural Theory

Given my arguments/assumptions of theory and subjectivity as constituting aspects of the methodology of literary criticism, this section will consider the dialectics between the reader/critic and theory. K. M. Newton (1998) articulates the very valid point that any form of reading a literary text (even the most naïve), is underlain by some theoretical or critical principles. However, a distinction could be made in orientation rather than method; as a reader's study may not necessarily use conscious references to theory while a critic will contemplate her/his method of analysis from theoretical perspectives (Fowler, 2001). As far as the act of interpretation is concerned, Roland Barthes (1999) makes a distinction between 'readerly' texts (which are constrained by their openness to interpretation and which the reader consumes without too much thought) and 'writerly' texts (which are open to the free play of meanings and which the reader rewrites or reproduces through literary criticism).

The primary evaluation of all texts can come neither from science, for science does not evaluate, nor from ideology, for the ideological value of a text (moral, aesthetic, political, alethological) is a value of representation, not of production (ideology reflects, it does not do work. Our evaluation can be linked only to practice, and this practice is that of writing.

(Roland Barthes, 1999: 31)

Consequently, he argues that the critic's attention should be on writerly texts given their capacity to yield plural meanings<sup>15</sup>. Thus, on the one hand, texts are open to as many readings as there are readers. Yet the possibility of a 'pure reading' that is dedicated to a single theoretical formula also becomes problematic in view of the play of subjectivity in the reading process. Even though books on literary criticism provide categorizations of theories according to their dominant ideological or methodological interests (see Newton, 1998; Warhol and Herndl, 1997; Wolfreys, 1999; Rivkin and Ryan, 2000; Mcquillan, 2000), these categories often overlap one another; and combine, relate to and contradict one another in multifaceted ways. They will also differ during each individual act of reading.

Therefore, on the other hand, it is equally possible to see the attribution of theoretical/literary/cultural meaning and significance as a highly intersubjective process. Meaning and significance is dependent

on a common recognition between the subject and the object as well as amongst subjects with regard to the object. In an extended understanding of intersubjectivity, Fish (1998) posits his argument of 'interpretive communities' that refer to a set of common strategies that authors adhere to in writing texts (that is in place prior to the act of reading), to explain the resultant commonality in interpretations (as well as diversity in interpretations when people occupied a different interpretive community).

The turn to literary, critical and cultural theories and their application to literary texts has been a turning point in literary criticism because of the critic's conscious reliance beyond the text, the writer and the reader/critic – on theory. Furthermore, the sovereignty of the author to determine meaning in a text has been transferred to the reader/critic (Fetterley 1997; Barthes 1999). From a modernist perspective, the application of a particular theoretical analysis presumes *a priori*, conscious understanding of ontology/epistemology on the part of the critic that leads to a particular text being linked to abstract theorization/s prioritized according to the subjective propensity and positionality of the critic. From postmodernist/poststructuralist perspectives, *a priori*, unconscious as well as conscious understandings of ontology/epistemology on the part of the critic lead to the text being destabilized, or 'deconstructed' again from particular theoretical angles prioritized according to the subjective propensity and positionality of the critic.<sup>16</sup>

Thus as far as modernist literary criticism is concerned, and specifically, as far as theoretical positionality is concerned, Marxist, feminist and postcolonial analyses not only read, link or impose the overriding socio-cultural and political concerns of their respective perspectives on the text, but they also adopt a standpoint of resistance from their respective perspectives. Gikandi, in an interview by Jefferess (2006) identifies the reader's interaction with the text as either analogical or resistant in discussing the appeal of postcolonial literature to the Booker nomination committee. In other words, literary criticism are epistemological exercises that approximate/analogue the text (and the writer) *vis-à-vis* a specific reality; or they problematize/challenge the text (and the writer) *vis-à-vis* a specific reality.

Literature as a mirror representation of the world or literature as an analogy of the world (whether admitted from a particular theoretical

lens or not) is an epistemological standpoint that has been in existence from the time of Aristotle in western knowledge traditions. Of course, the precise theoretical nuancing may differ. For instance, when it comes to the verisimilitude in literature, strands of Marxist analyses promote analysing society from the point of social realism (based on a socialist perspective as well as insider experiences) as opposed to critical realism (Lukacs, 1998). In many of these instances, the reader is in a complementary relationship with the literary text/writer. This could be because, in the words of Althusser (2000: 301), the text, or the ideology of the text 'hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects' through its appeal to the 'obvious' or 'commonsense' that is valorised in positivism. However, as he points out in the often cited line, 'what is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live' (Althusser, 2000: 296). Thus Althusser's (*ibid.*) epistemological outlook is careful to distinguish between an external reality and the internal imaginary engagement of the reader. Despite the over-determinism of the subject/reader implied in Althusser's (*ibid.*) theorization, it is an important ontological explanation of the subject as/in ideology given its significance in literary criticism. In which case, why are resistant readings/critiques made? Obviously, one response is in postmodernist understandings of the plurality of subjects, subjectivity, subject groups, 'real relations', representations of realities, ideologies as well as epistemologies. These need to be seen in continuous contestation with one another. This is where Gramsci's prioritization of hegemony comes into play, particularly in relation to the power of ideology over the subordinate classes as maintained by Fiske:

Hegemony, on the other hand, posits a constant contradiction between ideology and the social experience of the subordinate that makes this interface into an inevitable site of ideological struggle. In hegemonic theory, ideology is constantly up against forces of resistance. Constantly, it is engaged in a constant struggle not just to extend its power but to hold on to the territory it has already colonized.

(Fiske, 2000: 311).

One method of conducting a resistant reading/critique is to look at the subtext or what is unspoken in a literary text. As far as history is

concerned, Edward Said calls resistant readings/critiques 'contrapuntal' readings *vis-à-vis* postcolonialism that involves 'reading a text with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life on England' (Said, 2000: 286). This also means that 'it must take account of both process, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it – which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what has been forcibly left out...(*ibid.*)'. The postcolonial critic is still in the process of looking at literature as an analogy of reality; but he/she exposes the power hierarchies in culture/society that operate on assumptions of culture-based homogeneity, prioritizations, exclusions, misrepresentations and silences in literary content and production. Yet Said (*ibid.*) cautions that no reading should try to generalize to such an extent that the autonomy and identity of the author, the text and the political movement of resistance become subservient or are completely effaced. For instance, feminist critic, Fetterley (1997) points out the discomfort and alienation experienced by many women/girls reading literature that is androcentric and misogynist and that portrays patriarchal or gender inequitable ontologies. She argues that because the 'implied reader' is male, the female reader becomes a resistant reader. However, this argument is essentialist (de Laurentis 1989, Spivak 1990) because of its attribution of homogeneity to women readers and the assumption that all women occupy the same political/theoretical standpoint. Which is why under Marxist analysis, the critic is warned of an imperative to totalize even though it can be taken to encompass the praxis of Marxism itself (in its various forms) when it comes to considering its own 'local ideological limits or strategies of containment. As ideological criticism then Marxism is simply the place of the imperative to totalize, nothing more, nothing less' (Weber, 2000: 269).

While the application of theory does involve relating the specific to the general and the universal, the risk of lapsing into totalization in theoretical criticism (especially when it comes to historical texts) is high as pointed out by poststructuralist critiques. As Weber argues further:

history, then, whether as ethnocentrism (Levi-Strauss), phallogocentrism (Derrida), the genetic-developmental stages of object-development (Lacan), or as a strategy of power operating by the exclusion of discontinuity (Foucault), has been subjected



to a re-examination that has tended both to question the qualities of self-identity, universality and objective necessity hitherto attributed to it, and to redefine that attribution itself as part of a strategy that seeks to impose itself precisely by denying its own strategic, partisan character.

Weber (2000: 267)

In combination criticism then (for instance of feminism and deconstruction), the critique does not end with the problematization of grand theoretical narratives and assumptions of politics, culture, language and society. Rather the epistemological foundations of these critiques are also deconstructed (*ibid.*). No doubt this affects the validity of these theoretical arguments. Resorting to dual / fusion theorizations (emanating from modernism and postmodernisms) can be utilised as an alternative means of making meaning that allows the critic a range of simultaneously complementary and contradictory understandings.

This section discussed the methodological implications of applying critical/cultural theorizations to literary texts. However, given the outcomes of pluralism, relativism and mutual equalization of each epistemology in the exercise, it may be useful to consider the ethical and political significance of literary criticism.

#### Ethics, Politics and Method

Given my argument/assumptions of ethics, politics and method as also constituting aspects of the methodology of literary criticism, this section will raise some of the ethical and political implications of critical praxis. It will also consider the significance of reflexivity in critiquing as a crosscutting method in literary criticism.

From a modernist understanding, the prioritization of readers' viewpoints or the ascendancy of the critics' intervention *vis-a-vis* a text poses compelling ethical/political questions about literary practice; while postmodernists would question the very possibility of ethical and political accountability as based on metanarratives and totalitarianism (Lyotard, 2000). Usually hermeneutics or the act of interpretation is taken for granted and the subjugation of the creative process to the critical is not always questioned. To pursue a modernist line of thought, theorization in literary criticism, in particular, raises ethical/political issues -

irrespective of whether the agency of the writer is taken into account. Thus, some of these issues relate to the very ontological and epistemological assumptions made by critics with regard to the author, the text and the reader. Others are connected to the attribution of theoretical meaning and the ideological tendencies and gaps identified in the text by feminist, queer, postcolonial, psychoanalytical and Marxist standpoints (especially when it concerns authors of earlier periods who have not had access to such theorizations). Given the critical orientation of literary criticism, is it fair then to penalize such writers for their (implied moral / ideological) lack – especially as theoretical critiquing involves the imposition of moral, political and ethical values on the author? Although these may be essentialist questions, interestingly, they have been issues relating to author intention and reader affect that have concerned generations of critics. In theoretical critiquing therefore it is important that the critic reflects on the implications of his/her own standpoint<sup>17</sup> (Harding: 2004) to overcome these concerns. Furthermore, within a feminist communitarian model, 'interpretive sufficiency' based on multiple readings of ethnographic accounts grounded in cultural complexity (Christians, 2004) can also be attempted *vis-a-vis* the text in redressing the ethical problematic of a singular, authoritarian interpretation. In contrast, erasing the author in favour of an autonomous text is a denial of the author's innate creativity, craft and labour. The epistemological ascription of textual unity or contradictions provokes further ethical and political questions relating to the critic's responsibility to the author. On the other hand, not divulging the subjectivity of a critical reading can generate questions about the critic's responsibility to her/his readers.

Given the epistemological nature of many of these questions they are not always resolvable. My argument however is not against the application of theory; rather, my proposition is to temper literary critiques with a conscious reflection on these issues; in fact, not only on these issues but the entire methodological process of literary criticism. This is because the subjectivity involved in the act of reading/interpreting/critiquing cannot be dislodged by other textual concerns - even though contemporary literary criticism can be conceptualized as a three-way, transactional relationship between the agency and creativity of the writer (expressed in the text); a degree of relational objectivity in (the independent existence of) the literary text and the subjectivity of the

critic inscribed/displaced (within the literary critique). One method of expressing the critic's subjectivity (despite his/her ambiguity, inconsistency, shifts and diversity) is through reflexivity.

The act of reflexivity in social science research has been defined as 'the process of monitoring and reflecting on all aspects of the research process from the formulation of research ideas to the publication of findings, and when this occurs, their utilization' (Jupp 2006: 258). But how far is this possible, given the role of the critic's unconsciousness in this process? Feminist writers, Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) identify and differentiate reflexivity as an act of critical consciousness located in the subjectivity of the researcher, since it involves 'reflecting critically on the consequences of your presence in the research process' (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 158). This does not mean that the critic/scholar does not leave traces of his/her unconscious in the textual output. In contrast, Morley (1999) argues that reflexivity in feminist research involves 'emotional and theoretical literacy on the part of the researcher, who can engage sensitively with the research study while/ because s/he is aware of her/his own responses, values, beliefs' (Morley 1999: 19). While this will still not allow the critic access to his/her unconscious it will explore 'the hesitancy, uncertainty and caution arising from researchers' understanding of the theoretical complexities of a particular topic' (Morley 1996: 139). It may call for the critic to highlight the personal feelings invested in the scholarly project, and the time and emotional energy devoted to writing up – to the extent that the critic was conscious of these. The ideological, political and moral concerns fuelling the research/critique that are generally ignored, or deliberately expunged from the research process, are brought to the forefront. However, it is also an admission of the fact that the unconscious of the researcher cannot be consciously accessed or articulated.

Why should reflexivity be a key feature in literary criticism? In the face of diverse critical approaches, one way of justifying the critic's methodology is through reflexive criticism. It can link the critic's interests with her/his methodology so as to give validity to the critique. Reflexivity can unmask the fiction of 'objectivity' that is explicit (and implicit) in some approaches of literary criticism. As there cannot be value-free, impartial or objective research, strong objectivity can only be achieved through strong reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Harding 2004a)

in literary criticism. Revealing or constructing standpoints and intersections in subjectivity<sup>18</sup>, as well as the situatedness of knowledge (Rich 2003), is a form of accountability for the meanings made, as it 'outs' the scholar in the process of meaning-making to the utmost possible degree. Therefore, as all knowledges are partial and situated (Haraway 1988; Harding 2004a), reflexivity can explore the ontological/epistemological and therefore subjective extents and limitations of literary criticism. Finally, as the critic is commenting on/evaluating/responding to a creative text it is only ethically and politically correct that she/he discloses his/her own political interests, ideological assumptions, and methodological issues in critiquing.

What does it mean methodologically to be a reflexive critic/reader? While it is not my intention to be presumptuous and dogmatic in prescribing a methodology for literary criticism, I would still like to suggest possible ways of being a reflexive critic – for the most part from a modernist perspective. As the subject is understood to be constituted through biological, social, sexual, political, cultural, economic, linguistic, ideological and discursive forces, conscious agency and unconscious compulsions, reflexivity should reflect on the aspects of subjectivity that are connected to the act of literary criticism. Of course, some of the psychological impulses of the critic may invade the exercise of reflexivity and only a limited degree of psychoanalysis of the self is possible – if one is to take into account Felman's (1998) psychoanalytical deconstruction of the critic's desire for mastery in interpretation. Nonetheless, the overt expression of the critic's subjectivity and standpoint as well as the significance of her/his varied life experiences in terms of how they relate to literary criticism are important in validating knowledge. Rich (2003) articulates an array of these possibilities in her essay on the politics of location. Location can also involve the critic's previous knowledges (including understandings of intertextuality, disciplinary and theoretical positionings and research methodology) as well as his/her temporality and situatedness in time/place. On the whole, reflexivity can be a method of analysis and writing since it involves articulating the positioning of the researcher and the internal workings of research methodology. Moreover it can be expanded further to encompass readership reactions and reflections on the meaning of research once it has been published (Richardson 2000).

One risk of reflexivity is that it can easily turn into an overindulgent exercise if the critic is not careful, since the act of theorizing and writing the self can be a very liberating experience. It is here that self-censorship in writing up becomes a vital control in ensuring that the subjectivity revealed is significant, and linked to the process of criticism. Finally, there seemed to be a misconception that the issues raised and recorded through reflexivity have to be resolved in writing. It is highly doubtful that any scholarly process is able satisfactorily to reconcile some of the methodological issues that the critic grapples with, as they relate to larger ontological or epistemological issues or political / ethical issues that do not have clear-cut solutions Mockler (2007).

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paper argues for the application of a new paradigm<sup>19</sup> of critical engagement – that of a fusion methodology in literary criticism. By fusing the epistemologies of modernism and postmodernism it was possible to conceptualize literary criticism as simultaneously constituting multiple methodologies as well as one methodology (with intersecting and overlapping facets - of ontology, epistemology, theory, subjectivity, methods, ethics and politics). This was inferred from the arguments made with regards to these methodological aspects/categories. For instance, postmodernism was considered both theory and epistemology. The politics of reading have been discussed with regard to both ethics and theory. Ethical issues were also epistemological considerations. However this paper has not presented a methodological conclusion. Rather it has proposed a methodological possibility on making meaning that is a result of my current thinking on the subject.

The fusion methodology proposed in the paper also involved combining various theoretical strands of literary criticism (related to reading/critiquing). These involved the ontologies/epistemologies of New Criticism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and poststructuralism; theoretical concepts of Marxism, postcolonialism and deconstruction; ethics and politics relating to feminism and reader-response theories; and the method of feminist reflexivity; while the implications of the subjectivity of the critic/reader was a cross-cutting issue. The methodological point argued was that depending on the possibilities of each individual text, literary critics could combine their knowledges when approaching the text –

resulting in multiple understandings. Therefore, contemporary literary criticism was conceptualized not as an issue of the reader being born at the cost of the death of the author (Barthes, 1998). Nor was it simply an issue of the critic/reader being alive and kicking. Rather, it was necessary to consider all three matters - of the writer being resurrected; the objective potentiality of the text being acknowledged and the critic being mitigated.

**Note:**

1. Ontology refers to consciousness of realities of the self (or being) and understandings/conceptualizations of the forms, nature or aspects of reality which impinge on, are part of, or motivate the act of literary criticism.
2. Epistemology can be conceptualized as ways of knowing or understanding the ontological realms of the act of literary criticism or researching.
3. Modernism is understood as a perception of the reality (ontology/epistemology) centered on rationalism, positivism, realism and empiricism.
4. Postmodernism is understood as perceptions of realities (ontology/epistemology) that are anti-foundational, unstable, pragmatic, pluralistic, contingent, local and provisional.
5. Given the difficulties the human consciousness experiences in separating realities from knowledges of these realities, there has been a symbiotic link made between consciousness of ontology and the conceptualizations of epistemology in Western knowledge traditions since the time of Aristotle.
6. Reflexivity can be understood as the conscious process of monitoring and reflecting on all aspects of the research and writing process. With regard to English Studies, I take reflexivity to mean the inscription of the consciousness of the relationship between the critical questions posed by me and my methodology in the exercise of literary criticism. Given the constraints of writing a paper I have confined myself to a selective subscription to reflexivity.
7. I use the word praxis in a loosely Marxian sense of fusing theory and practice (in literary criticism).
8. This does not deny that origins and trajectories still signify a parallel way of making meaning according to a modernist perspective.
9. Meaning and significance are attributed to objects, individuals and phenomena due to a sense of intersubjectivity or common understandings between subjects as opposed to individual understandings.
10. This is the contemporary tendency to reflect on and analyze the self by the self *vis-à-vis* its feelings, characteristics, activities, behaviors and so on (especially in relation to the creative process and in cultural production).
11. The term was borrowed from Einstein's Theory of Relativity, but given specific literary connotation by Bakhtin (2000).
12. Giddens' (1984) Theory of Structuration from the social sciences is important in conceptualizing the subject's agency. He (*ibid.*) argues that the subject has the capacity to be conscious of the situations (structures) in/with which she or he interacts; as well as the capacity to create/sustain these very same conditions which make his/her interaction possible.

13. The term was coined by Julia Kristeva in 1986 though Barthes (1998) also discussed the notion in 'The Death of the Author'.
14. Cherry picking is criticized in social science academia by Scheurich and McKenzie (2005) and Griffiths (1998) as not accounting for a writer's theorization in totality and therefore as leading to incomplete scholarship. However, the reader is subjugated by the parameters laid by previous theorizations according to this argument. Furthermore, it presumes that a subject (critic) can possess complete knowledge.
15. Yet, having made this distinction Barthes (1999) seemingly deconstructs his classification by choosing a readerly text (Balzac's *Sarrasine*) for a writerly purpose.
16. Poststructuralist critics' prioritizations may include searching for / deconstructing differences, uncertainties, gaps, traces, etc.
17. Feminist epistemology discusses standpoint as the particular perspective of a collective identity or group standpoint (Harding, 2004).
18. Feminist standpoints and intersections in subjectivity have been related to experiences located in class, race/ethnicity, indigenous groups, caste, language, geography, age, transgender, disability, the non-western, postcolonialism, and nationalism (Collins 1991; Harstock 2004; Sandoval 2004; Harding 2004a; Narayan 2004 etc.). Weedon (2003) traces the subjectivities assumed by various epistemological and theoretical approaches.
19. The concept of a paradigm in knowledge is commonly held to originate with Thomas Kuhn and his idea of how scientifically unexplainable anomalies in scientific traditions and practices lead to the conceptualization of new foundations for scientific practice (Kuhn 1970). These new methodological foundations are proposed to explain and resolve the existing anomalies in knowledge-making.

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