



EDITORIAL

Dear *JALDA* reader,

According to Patrick Colm Hogan, in the US academic context, few people in literary theory or comparative literature have much familiarity with non-Western literary theories, and fewer still have research expertise in the field. While working on a project in non-Western literary theory, he was surprised to find that many of his friends and colleagues found it difficult to understand what non-Western literary theory might be. And when he explained that by non-Western theory he meant theory before European colonialism, he was, more often than not, faced with looks of blank incomprehension. Hogan blames ethnocentrism for this blank incomprehension because “it is at least in part a matter of assuming that theoretical reasoning is somehow peculiarly Western, that abstract reflection must have its source and impetus west of the Black Sea and north of the Mediterranean. It is closely related to the blank incomprehension which greets such phrases as ‘Classical Indian logic,’ ‘Medieval Arabic mathematics,’ and ‘Ancient Chinese empirical science and technology.’”

Hogan’s attitude, although rare, is quite fair, but is both heart-warming and disappointing to a non-Western reader interested in literary theory. It is heart-warming because the non-Western student of literary theory realizes that what seems to belong to his world receives some attention, and it is disappointing because it is confirmed that the dominant framework of literary theory is totally Western and that it might not provide many opportunities for those who would like to publish on non-Western literary theory with the prominent Western journals, which do not seem to have a room for the unknown topic.

Hogan’s report, which is about the situation on the other far side of the Atlantic, does not say anything about literary theory at present down in what he calls the “Arab” world, a term that seems to be interchangeable with the Muslim world that includes, say, Iran, where the situation seems more disappointing. The disappointment arises from the fact that almost everyone here seems to have given up the view that there might be non-Western “literary theories” alongside the imported theories from the West. Even in departments of Persian literature, alongside departments of English, in universities in Iran everyone has been willing to specialize in applying the canonized Western literary theories to the reading of Persian literary texts of any type and size, whose outcome, to me, is usually an incongruous juxtaposition of entities that may seem worlds apart from each other. And everybody’s attempt is to be faithful to the theories they find themselves obliged to learn lest their work be considered illegitimate and non-scientific.

Literary theory then seems to have turned into an indispensable aspect of literary studies in its Western sense, and interesting findings have resulted and are

still resulting from it. However, it does not mean that resistance against it is impossible or there is no resistance against it. Dialectically, there are ‘theories’ and movements in the field of literary studies that turn against the traditional view of theory, leading to different horizons towards tackling literature. Such critical views of theory seem to be capable to open a way out of what Hogan calls ethnocentrism in literary theory dominating the academic contexts. Stanley Fish’s distinction between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism in literary studies seems to be a promising attitude in this regard, for instance. Fish holds that theory comes in two forms: foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. Having stated that anti-foundationalism is not properly theory at all, Fish argues against the foundationalist strategy with a reference to Chomsky’s theory in linguistics as an example, implying that such a view of theory is problematic because it ends up with the tendency that there are ‘universal rules’ governing “correctness” and correct behaviours.

In short, the successful foundational project [such as that of Chomsky’s] will have provided us with a “method,” a recipe with premeasured ingredients which when ordered and combined according to absolutely explicit instructions ... will produce, all by itself, the correct result. In linguistics that result would be the assigning of correct descriptions to sentences; in literary studies the result would be the assigning of valid interpretation to poems and novels; and in the teaching of composition the result would be the “discovery of rules that are so fundamental as to be universal,” rules that if followed would lead directly to coherence, intelligibility, readability, persuasiveness, etc.

An anti-foundationalist view of issues, on the other hand, does not insist on “universal rules” but emphasizes the situatedness of the issues. Fish’s account of anti-foundationalism is succinct and bears the potential for new happenings:

Anti-foundationalism teaches that questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity, and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extra-contextual, ahistorical, non-situational reality, or rule, or law, or value; rather, anti-foundationalism asserts, all of these matters are intelligible and debatable only within the precincts of the contexts or situations or paradigms or communities that give them their local and changeable shape. It is not just that anti-foundationalism replaces the components of the foundationalist world picture with other components; instead, it denies to those components the stability and independence and even the identity that is so necessary if they are to be thought of as grounds or anchors. Entities like the world, language, and the self can still be named; and value judgements having to do with validity, factuality, accuracy, and propriety can still be made; but in every case these entities and values, along with procedures by which they are identified and

marshalled, will be inextricable from the social and historical circumstances in which they do their work.

The instability attributed to such components as reality, rule, and value on the basis of concepts of context and situatedness should create interesting, fruitful effects in literary studies and especially in literary theory. One of the effects of such instability is challenging the very concept of the scientificity of theory in its foundationalist sense. The claim for scientificity in literary theory itself is a cultural, historical phenomenon; how is it going to be extended then to every situation in the world? Science in the sense of the universal validity of findings is not an acceptable concept anymore. The picture anti-foundationalism provides is “a picture of men and women whose acts are socially constituted and who are embedded in a world no more stable than the historical and conventional forms of thought that bring it into being” (Fish, 346). From such a perspective, particular methods and theories will be needed to operate in contexts that are culturally and historically different. Reading ‘theories’ is one thing; reading literature is another. Theories are not read or studied for the obligatory application of them to literary texts regardless of their place in society. Literature, in contrast, is read and studied to be applied to solve life-world problems, from filling up the leisure time to improving students’ reading skills to understanding life! From this perspective, reading literature precedes dealing with theories in value. If we face problems with reading literature in classes, we should look for solutions according to the rationales and judgements that emerge from our context of situation. This may lead to what Hogan would call ‘Arabic’ (Muslim) reading of literature.

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