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THE SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE: A STUDY OF GATEKEEPERS OF LITERATURE



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Abstract: The sociology of literature is a study of the socio-cultural contexts of the day, the sociology of the writer and gatekeepers of literature that determine the existence and success of a literary work. The documentary or realistic approach to sociology of literature has a long and distinguished history, but it ignores the sociology of the writer and the gatekeepers of literature comprising the publishers, distributors, reading public, critics, censors and the public libraries. The Marxist approach also ignored the role of gatekeepers in the creation of literary works. It is in the works of modern sociologists of literature that we get the focus on the role of gatekeepers which determine the creation and success of literary works. In this paper an attempt is made to focus the determining role of gatekeepers in the creation and success of literary works.

Key words: Sociology; Gatekeepers; Critics; Reading Public; Publisher and distributor.

INTRODUCTION :

The contemporary text oriented literary theories comprising Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, stylistics and Post structuralism analyzed literary works in terms of their inner structure. As all these new theories were absorbed in textual or structural criticism, the determining role of gatekeepers of literature in the creation and success of literary works remained marginalized. However, the modern sociologists and literary critics devised a new theoretical parameter. The main object of this parameter is to take the cognizance of the relationship between literary works and the role of the gatekeepers comprising the publishers, distributors, reading public, critics, censors and the public libraries. This new parameter is known as 'the Sociology of Literature'.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE:

The sociology of literature is a specialized area of study which focuses its attention upon the sociology of the writer, social institutions and gatekeepers who determine the existence and success of a literary creation. It examines the relationship between the artist and society and the conditions of creation, production and distribution of literary works. According to M.H.Abrams;

“The term, 'Sociology of literature,' however, is applied only to the writings of those historians and critics whose primary, and sometimes exclusive, interest is in the ways that the constitution and form of literary work are affected by such circumstances as its author's class status, gender, and political and other interests; the ways of thinking and feeling characteristic of its era; the economic conditions of the writers profession and of the publication and distributions of books ; and the social class, conceptions and values of the audience to which an author addresses the

literary product or to which it is made available. (288).

This view clearly shows the role of the social context, creators and gatekeepers in the existence and success of literary works.

In fact, the sociology of literature has a long and distinguished history and during this long period of history the several critics and scholars developed its different approaches and methods. The early social critics such as J. C. Herder, Madame de Stale, and Hippolyte Taine regarded certain socio-political, cultural and geographical conditions of the day as the major determinants of literature. All these critics regarded the study of literary works as social documents, as assumed picture of social reality, but they ignored the role of gatekeepers in the creation and success of literary works. The Marxist approach that began with the rise of industrialism and capitalism also ignored these determinants of literature. In fact, ignoring these determinants is like denying their role in the creation and success of literature. So the modern social critics such as; Lucian Goldman, Leo Lowenthal, Robert Escarpit, Milton Albrecht, Terry Eagleton, George Huaco and others devised new theoretical perspectives and methods of sociology of literature to lay emphasis on the determining role of gatekeepers in the creation of a literary work. George Huaco explains that the literary phenomena are influenced and affected by five specific social structures. They are: 'author, readers, critics, patron, and publishers' (551).

As sociology of literature studies the cultural life, it is called as a subfield of cultural sociology. In fact a cultural study is not a unified movement but a group of tendencies, issues, and questions. In the words of Wilfred Guerin 'arising amidst the turmoil of 1960, cultural studies is composed of elements of Marxism, new historicism, feminism, gender

studies, anthropology, . . . those fields that focus on social and cultural forces that either create community or cause division and alienation'(240). Being a sub field of cultural sociology, sociology of literature studies all these social implications and raises the several para literary questions such as: Who supports a given artists? Who publishes his or her works? How are these books published and distributed? How it reaches the reader? What are his interactions with different social groups and his public? Why is it accepted by the public? How certain literary waves exit in a particular period? How a literary taste develops? How a reader accepts or rejects certain themes? The sociology of literature tries to answer these questions.

The views propounded by the modern critics and social thinkers clearly show that the sociology of literature studies literature in totality but its main focus is upon the sociology of the writer, socio- cultural and political situations and gatekeepers who determine the existence and success of a literary creation. In this paper the researcher proposes to focus on the role of gatekeepers in the creation and success of literature.

The Gatekeepers of Literature:

Gatekeepers play an important role in the creation of literary works. While explaining the concept of gatekeepers, John Hall says, 'the concept of the 'gatekeepers' has been developed by the mass communications sociology to refer to those whose role is to that of selecting the type of communication that the audience is to receive this concept can usefully be applied to the Sociology of Literature; indeed that the concept needs to be applied can be seen from the general tentativeness of the discussion and from the complete absence of any discussion of literary agents and literary prizes' (101).

The major gatekeepers of literary works that modern social critics and thinkers have discussed are: publishers, distributors, reading public, critics and public libraries. These gatekeepers can exercise their function in both positive and negative ways. Positively they can uphold the writers and their works and make the specific genre as well as work popular. They may influence the reading public by displaying the qualities and merits of the text and make the specific text available to every reader. The gatekeepers, on the other hand, can influence the text negatively. For instance the publisher can prevent manuscripts reaching the market, the critics can prejudice the reading public by focusing the shortcomings of the text, and the distributors can create the problems in reaching the text to the readers. In short, the fate of a literary text depends upon the role of gatekeepers. Let's see the role of gatekeepers in the creation of literature.

i. The role of the Public Publisher and distributor:
The social position of the writers and their works rests upon the complex structure of publishing, distributing and reward system. The publisher gives them security and financial support. If the publisher is a man of developed taste and exacting standards, the writers are fortunate; if not, they have to please the publisher at the expenses of their artistic integrity. In these circumstances the publisher has considerable influence on the work of the writers. Milton Albrecht observes:

The publisher is the crucial figure in the distribution of an author's work, and his enterprise, resources, and generosity affect the size of rewards for all concerned. Authors frequently move from one publisher to another in an attempt to maximize their income or to find more congenial relations, but, ultimately, writers are entirely dependent upon some publisher unless they are able to pay for publication of their work (350).

In short, the fate of both the writer and his text thoroughly depends upon the role of publisher. The sociology of literature studies all the problems and questions concerning the writer-publisher relationship such as; how do publishers affect writers and their works? How does a book get published? What is the role of the publisher in the creation of the book? What is the relationship between the writers and publishers?

The term 'publisher' refers to the individual project manager or publishing organization as a whole. As an individual, the publisher spends time and money in bringing the book in market for public purposes. His major function is to bring the book into physical existence by risking the costs of manufacture and distribution. This business is highly speculative. While producing the physical creation of a book, the publisher performs the roles of producer and distributor of the book. As a publisher he is responsible for typography and design of the text. In fact, publishing is the process of production and dissemination of literature. It comprises the several stages of acquiring and managing the book. They are contacting and contracting the author, copy editing, printing, proof reading, fact- checking, type setting, graphic designing, cover designing, photography and image selecting, paper quality, binding methods, advertising, marketing and distributing. Besides these technical aspects he has to follow the legal stages such as agreement with the writer, royalty rates, copy rights licensing of photograph form photo gallery and vilification. Although a publisher performs different roles for production and dissemination of literature Robert Escarpit reduced their functions in three words: choose, manufacture, and distribute (400). In the very process of publishing the publisher has to spend time and money.

The origin of publishing as a profession lies in the middle ages. In the older times the writer himself was the distributor of his literature. With the advent of press, the trade of publication centered at the publisher. As a result the publisher became the major mediator between the writer and the reader. Besides this he has to maintain the good relations with the distributors and the circulating libraries and while maintaining these relations he has to think of desires and tastes of the reading community and the possible demands of the distributors and the circulating libraries. He must take into account the aesthetic and moral systems of the society. The author makes his literary work available to publisher and publisher polishes that work for the marketplace, produces it attractively and appropriately for its audiences, and places it in the hands of as many buyers as possible through effective marketing. While describing the relationship between the author, publisher and reader, Robert Escarpit says, "...the modern publisher does not limit himself to the passive role of conciliator. He attempts to influence his authors in the

interest of the public and the public in the interest of the author; in a word, he tries to induce a compatible writer-public relationship" (401). This writer-public relationship is studied in the sociology of literature.

In fact, the relationship between author and publisher is collaborative and not adversarial. It is true that the publishers publish the novel by considering the public opinion and by the power of the great circulating libraries. In order to cater the taste of the readers, they insist the writers to change and revise the passage and sometime ask to drop the passage which excites the sensual desire of the readers. According to John Hall the Victorian publishers though very powerful were not free to ignore public opinion, especially if the feelings of that opinion were interpreted for them by Mudie, the head of the most important circulating libraries. In order to prove this he states that in 1851 Chapman rejected Eliza Lynn's novel *Realities* since she would not revise passages which excited the sensual nature and were therefore injurious (Hall 1979). In the same way the literary works of some writers create problems to publishers due to their severe criticism on politics, government and religion and there are several examples of such criticism. In the history of modern English literature we find that George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *Homage to Catalonia* and *Burmese Days* were rejected by Cape, Gollancz and Faber on the ground of libel action. (Meyers, 02). When Orwell's *Burmese Days* was turned down by Gollancz, Harpers prepared to publish it in the United States on the condition to change libelous situations. After satisfying demands, Harpers published it in the United States, where it made its debut in 1934 and due to its positive criticism it was later published in Britain. As a result Orwell got name and fame as a novelist. In short, to avoid certain problems in publication and distribution and to fulfill the demand of the reading public, the publisher persuades the writer to change or revise his ideas. Sometimes under the fear of libel action the publishers dare not to publish such literary works. In short, the acceptance or the rejection of the literary work is thoroughly in the hands of the publisher. In this regard Gupta says, 'one's rise and fall and even the recognition as a writer depends upon the publisher or editor... the publisher remains the most important unit regarding the publication and distribution of literature. This makes the study of writer-publisher relationship much important' (75). In a nutshell, the attitude of the publisher really affects the name and fame of the writer and his works. The success of both the writer and his works thoroughly depends upon the publishers who are nowadays performing the role of distributors. They persuade the reading public towards the specific books and make manuscripts of the literary works available to the readers. In short the role of the publishers is very important in the creation and success of the literary work. The sociology of literature studies the different strategies of the publication and distribution while studying literary works.

ii. The role of the Reading Public: The term 'reading public' suggests both 'the ability to read' and 'the habit of reading' and both ideas have importance in the sociology of literature. In the middle ages 'reading ability' and 'reading habit' had neither social status nor even the mark of necessary achievement for the members of the nobility. But with the

rise of the middle class the reading ability got a mark of social status. During the 15th century the spread of reading habit among the middle class supported a periodical literature. This support of the middle class was mainly responsible for the rise of the English novel. According to Hall, during the course of the century the reading public grows sufficiently to support nearly eight hundred journal and periodical. This growth continued in the next century and was helped significantly by the serializing of novels (Hall 126). The impact of this practice resulted in many countries: As a result the production of books increased and the writers could earn tremendous sum. 'In England', says Hall, 'the growth of the reading public can be seen from increased book production: 100 books appeared in 1600; 600 hundred in 1820; and 2600 in 1850' (ibid: 126).

The reading habit was basically limited to the middle class and their purpose of the reading was amusement and instruction. While comparing the reading public in the middle class with the aristocratic class in England John Hall Quotes Gedin as; 'In this country there probably are not less than 2, 00,000 persons who read for amusement and instructions, among the middling classes of society. In the higher classes there are not as many as 20,000' (ibid: 126). The sociological study of the reading public shows the reading habit of the middle class reader has flourished the publishing industry and created the significant literary culture in the history of literature.

iii. The role of the Critics: The main task of the critic is the education of the general public in matters of artistic taste and discrimination. The general purpose of the critic during the eighteenth and nineteenth century was to the appreciation of literature. The critics in those days were called as 'men of letters'. Their main role was to preserve learning and taste of the learned people. As the taste of the increased reading public developed, the level of critics raised and they became the tastemakers of the readers and performed the role of interpreter and guide. Moreover, this specific role of the critics has changed in the modern period. According to Judith R. Kramer 'the social role of the literary critic, defined here as mediator between artist and audience, and primarily interested in shaping literary judgments, has undergone a number of important changes since its emergence in the eighteenth century' (437). He presents the detailed data of the social role of the literary critic, in both England and America, during the past three centuries. This data shows that the modern critic, in both England and America, occupies a special place in the art institution. He now writes for a select group of his literary peers. He is not devoted to the advancement of literature or with raising the level of literary taste. The modern critic is supported chiefly by universities and foundations, and he regards his work as a specialized criticism.

iv. The Role of Public Libraries: Libraries played an important role in catering the literary taste of the reading public and distributing literary works among the masses. So John Hall says, 'no study of the role of gatekeepers is complete without some comment on public libraries since these, especially since the important act of 1919, are designed to provide access to books for all the population' (118). The libraries not only distributed the books but also

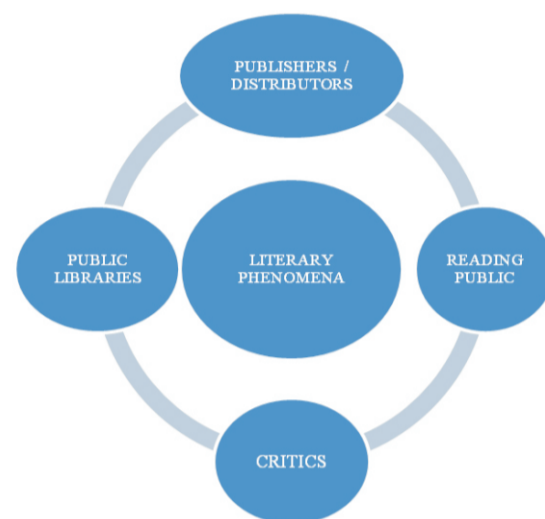
affected the structure, plot, style, and even imaginative world of the novel. As the owners of the private circulating libraries were acting both as a censor and the controller of the literary products, the subject, scope, and morality of the novel for fifty years remained controlled by them. The establishment of circulating libraries by booksellers and publishers during the Victorian period provided a means of gaining profit and creating social centers within the community. The circulating libraries not only provided a place to sell books, but also a place to lend books for a price. These circulating libraries provided a variety of materials including the increasingly popular novels on a subscription fee. According to Laurensen 'until the 1880s the lending libraries- Mr. Mudie's in particular- employed the writer on contract to produce three-decker novels to be rented to families with leisure on their hand' (119). He also points out that the circulating libraries knew the taste of the readers which they communicated to the writers. In short, the libraries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries played an important role in the life of the writers and their works.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, libraries were part of an awakening consciousness that saw education as an instrument for social change. After World War II, mainstream libraries gradually started to extend their services to community groups and, by the 1960s, a special focus was set on reaching marginalized groups. In the following years, libraries played an important role in national literacy campaigns. These centres began to explore new relationships with their users, valuing local culture, supporting community development, and preserving indigenous knowledge.

Nowadays the role of libraries and professional librarians has been changing worldwide. They are no longer passive keepers and preservers of books; rather, they have evolved to become facilitators of information and lifelong learning opportunities with an emphasis on service. It is true that the role of the libraries and librarians is crucial in the emergence and success of the writer and his works.

CONCLUSION:

Sociology of literature is, thus, a specialized area of study which focuses its attention upon the crucial role of gatekeepers comprising publishers and distributors, critics, reading public and public libraries in the creation and success of literary works. It also emphasizes that a literary work is not an individual but a collective phenomenon. It is shaped by the several social aspects and gatekeepers of literature as shown in the following diagram:



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