



TITLE AS A MISNOMER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE TITLE

SK MUSTAFA MD N EHSANUL HOQUE

Research Scholar, Department of English
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, U.P., India



SK MUSTAFA MD N
EHSANUL HOQUE

ABSTRACT

The titles of literary texts perform several functions- designating the work, indicating the meaning, enticing people etc., As one of its functions is to indicate the meaning sometimes it moulds our reading the text through this indication. As the author of the text generally gives the title we may say that it is the author who is indirectly controlling our reading of the text. Roland Barthes in his 'The Death of the Author' proclaims that the 'death of the author' will coincide with the birth of the reader. But because of this restrictive presence of the title through which the author still remote-controls the interpretation of the text, to some extent, it seems that the famous proclamation has given the birth of a stillborn reader. Still there is the dominance of the author but in a modified manner.

Keywords: Title, Roland Barthes, Gerard Genette, 'The Death of the Author'

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The road to the interpretation of a literary work is always a risky and slippery one. Numerous theoretical schools, each from different theoretical orientations offer different modes of interpretation. Some attests supreme importance to what author says about possible interpretation. While the structuralist critics reduce the author to an empty space, and for them what dominates the interpretation is the complex linguistic structure. Psychoanalytic and Marxist analysts of literature remove the author from the privileged position. For them what controls the meaning of a literary work is not the author himself but the dominant ideology and economic modes of production of the particular age the author belongs to. Stanley Fish, a prominent reader-response critic, questions about the existence of a stable literary text. Post-structuralist critics like Jacques Derrida questions the assumption that language is a reliable medium of communication. He is of the opinion that the contradictory forces within the language undermine the possibility of a fixed and unified stable meaning.

Thus we cannot have a single interpretation of a text, but there will be more than one interpretation of a text. While another post-structuralist critic Michel Foucault questions the existence of an author around whom our attempt to interpret a text will revolve. Thus, in this babel of interpreting voices where everyone is being critical of other's views and approaches no approach towards the interpretation of a text is beyond criticism.

Roland Barthes in his essay 'The Death of the Author' offers a different kind of reading of literary texts. He in the essay proclaims the death of the author so that the readers can have free-play of meanings. According to him the author stands as a barrier and transforms any critical interpretation of text into a mere allegory of the author's life. He says:

"The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child" (Lodge, 147)

The removal of the author will proclaim the birth of the reader and will free the readers from this shackle. The interpretation of a text can be the allegory of the author's life only in those cases where the author's biographical details are available to the readers. But what will be the case where the readers are not familiar with the author and the author's name appears as merely a combination of some words- an empty signifier? Here the author is not dead in Barthesian terms, but he is not present too with his biography- where Barthes' objection lies. This is a logical undecidability where the author is present, but is still absent. Here, as Barthes says the author's presence should not impede the process of interpretation as there is no biographical reference available to allude to.

As far as literature is concerned Barthes is of the opinion that the author does not know what he/she is writing. While writing a critique of Racine's work, *On Racine*, where he makes the controversial claim that Racine, otherwise celebrated as the epitome of deliberate composition, did not quite know what he was writing. Here Barthes refers to Freud's *Totem and Taboos*. Freud in this book talks about the primeval patriarchal society where the father is the head of the community and enjoys boundless sexual freedom. The women of the community become the subject of contention between the father and all the male members of the society. One day all the male members of the community rebel against their father and overthrow their father's tyranny. But this act of rebellion to settle the possession issue gives birth to further wars in the successive generations. Barthes wants to highlight the point that Racine's plays depict this archetypal struggle for possession where fear, envy, and jealousy are inherent elements; but Racine was quite ignorant of the fact that he is depicting an archetypal element of fear, jealousy, and envy relating love. Thus in his criticism of Racine's work we can foresee the Barthes of later years who will proclaim the 'death of the author'. But here Barthes takes up the same issue from a different perspective. Here he is considering the intervention of the author because of the presence of the author's biographical details.

However, we must admit that owing to the unavailability of biographical details the reading

achieves freedom to a certain degree as there will be no attempt made to justify or falsify any interpretation referring to the biography of the author. But there occurs the question- is the text completely free of the grasp of the author's tyrannical presence?

If we are worried about the authorial intervention in the process of interpretation we must know that there are numerous other ways wherefrom the authorial infiltration can take place. And the title of a text is one of them. Titles are generally given by the authors themselves which serve as a kind of guide to the readers. Because the readers, after coming to know the title start thinking that the text is about this topic and then the reading becomes a prolonged search for events which will justify that particular nomenclature. But we should consider one question is the title part of the text, at least when there is one available? Gerard Genette in his *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation* considers title as paratext- an extra-textual element. He then goes on to elaborate the functions a title play; which according to him are: "(1) to identify the work, (2) to designate the work's subject matter, (3) to play up the work." (Genette, 76) A title may not function all the three at the same time, but the first one according to Genette is a obligatory. This "function can be fulfilled by a semantically empty title that does not at all "indicate its subject matter"" (Genette, 76). Thus as he further adds, even a code number can fulfil this function.

My concern here is not with this first one which serves as an empty signifier, but the concern is with the second one which indicates the subject matter and with the third one which entices the people. Whenever we go to purchase or read a text we look at the title of the text after we come to know who the author is. From the title we try to foretell the content; we imagine that such and such things are going to come when we will read the text. Thus before we go on to read the text we develop a preconceived notion of the text. And thus when we start reading the text, in case the text offers a different content or interpretation, our reading becomes an encounter between what we have conceived of the text and what the text is offering us. In this battle between meanings, in most cases

the meaning offered by the title creates a halo effect upon us and thus enjoys some privilege as we experience it earlier than the contrary one the text offers. And as this paratextual element has been inserted by the author himself it may be assumed that it is the presence of the author who, through the title of the text, is remote-controlling the textual interpretation.

There is no evil in the fact that the title is offering a different kind of interpretation which the text may not seem to offer. In fact, the titular halo effect sometimes attempts to preclude and cancel out every other interpretation as invalid and brings into being authentic and authoritative meanings. This kind of interpretation takes for granted that the title is the crux of the text. This indirectly acknowledges the active presence of the author in the interpretation of the text as this necessitates the assumption that the title has been given by someone who is the master and final interpreter of the text. This is indirectly accepting the presence of the author as the final arbitrator of textual interpretations.

In this case of title anxiety Shakespeare's *Sonnets* serves an ideal example. The numerical titles of Shakespeare's sonnets do not indicate any subject matter. They only serve the first of the three functions listed by Genette- to just designate the work. As they do not indicate the subject matter there is no option for a preconceived notion to generate. Thus these numerical titles do not authenticate any particular meaning and in doing so they open up the possibility of multiple readings of the texts which can be equally valid. In his sonnet 30 Shakespeare is moaning about his past- his past loving experiences, his dead friends etc.. We cannot cap all these themes under a title 'Sorrows' or 'Past Sorrows' because the poem includes not only sorrowful experiences but also the experience of bliss that he experiences when he thinks about his 'dear friend'. But looking at these if we entitle the poem 'Sorrows and Bliss' it will overlook the anxiety and mental instability in the poet that are reflected in his contradictory statements:

"Then I can drown an eye, unused to flow,
....."

And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd
woe,

.....
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before."
(*Golden Treasury*, 34)

Here the poet first says that he is not accustomed to weeping but what the following lines indicate is the frequent recurrence of such moanings in the poet's life. As Shakespeare does not add any title the interpretation of the poem is not limited to or does not privilege any particular aspect. Thus we can see that if we add a title to the text it will cause unnecessary foregrounding of a particular interpretation which will background all other possible interpretations.

On the other hand the poem by P. B. Shelley sometimes entitled *The Moon* is really two separate poems without any title. In the Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* the poems appear without any title but in the Higher Secondary textbook of WBCHSE, the poems appear as a single poem with the title *The Moon*. The nomenclature here serves to present a simplified reading of the poem which backgrounds or conceals to some extent other possible readings of the poem like the representation of the poet's own self which, like the moon is 'wandering companionless'. The phrase 'different birth' may possibly allude to the poet himself that endeavours to explain the social alienation and ostracisation that were the poet's lifelong companions. Thus the reading which follows after the addition of this title entirely suits the purpose of the Board for whom the text is meant to be read by the students of class xii. Similarly Wordsworth's famous poem *The Daffodils*, which we remember for its beautiful portrayal of the daffodils dangling 'beside the lake and beneath the tree' could have suffered a different fate had it been named after another important component in the poem- that is Wordsworth's philosophy of the composition of poetry. The inclusion of this title emphasizes the beauty of the flowers, of the serene scenario and pushes to the background Wordsworth's theory of poetry.

But it is always to be remembered that titles deceive us into giving a particular reading in our first or uncritical readings when we just seek the justification of the title in the text. But in our subsequent critical readings we may be able to overcome that. This title issue is significant more for the amateur readers who do not generally give a text second or third critical reading. For this kind of readers 'the death of the author' is less important than the death of the title; as amateur readers hardly possess any biographic and esoteric detail about the biography of the author that they can influence their reading of the text. On the other hand they are more vulnerable to the title issue because they are not critical readers. It is also to be admitted that as all titles are not equally coercive in their restrictive function. Some are based on their central characters like *Othello*, *Macbeth* while some focus upon particular theme like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Possession*, and in the similar way effect varying degrees of imposition.

Thus it turns out that the reference to the biography of the author is definitely a handicap upon the interpretation; but what is also equally important is that the innocent looking title too is an accomplice with the author in this process.

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