

Review

A study of form and content

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This paper mainly takes four schools of criticism into account to make clearer the concept of 'form' and 'content'. No doubt, it had been debated too much from Plato onwards. Formalists (New Critics included) put premium on diction. In fact they exclusively hold that 'form' dictates 'content' as such 'content' is at the mercy of 'form'. They examine especially poetry and its constitutive components; for instance, metre, rhyme scheme, rhythm, figures, syntax, motifs, styles, and conventions. Genre Critics or Chicago Critics unlike New Critics consider all genres and its sub-genres. They hold 'form' 'shaping or constructive principle'. To them, the relation of 'form' and 'content' is in the manner of cause and effect. The cause is 'content' and effect is 'form'. They are inseparable. Marxist concept of 'form' by and large is based on man's relation to his society and the history of the society. This school altogether opposes all kinds of literary formalisms. This school seeks to observe cheerful dialectical relationship of 'form' and 'content'. However in the long run prefer to give stress on 'content'. The psychoanalytic approach mainly takes interest in the revelation of 'latent content'. They divide 'content' into 'manifest content' and 'latent content'. This school does not take much interest in style, form or technique. It simply analyses a work of art in the light of writer's psychology. In effect, separability of any sort cannot be justified because in absence of any of them, an artistic whole is altogether impossible

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper is an attempt to trace out the chequered career of 'form' and 'content' and their relationship in literary criticism. It has been hot commodity in literary criticism since Plato down to Marxist literary criticism chiefly. Simply 'content' means what is said and 'form' the way it is said. Abrams (2007: 107) writes that 'form' is not simply a fixed container, like a bottle, into which the 'content' or subject matter of a work is poured. The reference implies that 'form' undergoes change according to the writer's formal choice. By 'formal choice', the author mean, choice of sonnet form, ballad form, etc. broadly, forms of novel, short story, drama, and poetry. For instance, if a scholar wants to pour his content into a sonnet, he has to comply with certain rules of the sonnet form. It means that 'form' regulate 'content'. It is fallacious. 'Form' no way should be allowed to overcome 'content'; instead there should be architectonic relationship between 'form'; and 'content'. Both should look and be inseparable.

EARLY CRITICS

Aristotle in his technical treatise Poetics approved of the organism of 'form' and 'content'. Wellek (1963: 55) writes that the inseparability and reciprocity of 'form' and 'content' is of course as old as Aristotle.

In early 19th century, Coleridge was much influenced by German philosophers, especially A.W.Schlegel, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Immanuel Kant. Kant once wrote: 'Form' without 'content' is empty; 'content' without 'form' is blind. In principle, both 'form' and 'content' lose when separated from each other; the value of correlation, as a practical device, consists largely in overcoming or counteracting their divorce. Coleridge believed in the wholeness of art and made distinction between 'organic' and 'mechanic' form. He arrives at this breakthrough while defending Shakespeare from 'neoclassical' critics who claim that Shakespeare's plays are loose and utterly lack in 'form'. Coleridge explains 'organic form' by giving

an analogy of a seed that grows into a big tree gradually; similarly 'organic form' grows out of a seminal concept into a complete content. By contrast, creative thinking and tradition shape 'mechanic form'. Hence it is governed by rules and conventions; for instance, Absalom and Achitophel (1681). During 'neoclassical' period 'content' was compared with human body and dresses with 'form'.

In other words, expression is the dress of thought (Dryden). As Alexander Pope wrote in *Essays in Criticism*:

*True Wit is nature to advantage dress'd,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.*

Samuel Johnson, too, thinks language as the 'dress of thoughts'. The function of 'form' is to beautify the 'content'.

In the last decade of 19th century (Decadent Movement) Oscar Wilde never felt tiredness eulogizing 'form' at the expense of 'content'. He thinks that 'form' and 'content' can be separated. Other aestheticians like Walter Pater, A. C. Swinburne etc. prefer to include technical devices like rhythm, rhyme, and verbal textures, diction and, imagery under the term 'form'. So far what the author feel critics like Dryden, Johnson, Pope, Oscar Wilde, Pater, chiefly are to a greater or lesser degree prejudiced and hence do not believe in the organism of 'form' and 'content'.

In the 20th century, which is in fact an era of a number of critical theories, any kind of sweep generalization can risk the concept of 'form' and 'content'. It is said that all modern theories draw more or less on Aristotle and Plato, especially the former. Modern critics approve of organism of 'form' and 'content'. The concept of 'form' and 'content' can be analyzed under four heads chiefly- formalism, genre criticism, Marxist criticism, and psychoanalytic criticism. Aristotle in chapter six of the *Poetics* identified six constituents of tragedy. Rankly these are 'mythos' (plot), 'ethos' (character), 'dianoia' (thought), 'lexis' (diction), 'melos' (song), and 'opsis' (spectacle). All the aforementioned quoted approaches take on one or two elements. It at once surprises us. For instance, 'formalists' put premium on 'lexis', 'genre critics' on 'mythos', and 'psychoanalysts' on 'dianoia'.

MODERN CRITICS

The school of formalism, the first generation includes Eliot, Richards, F. R. Leavis, Yvor Winters, Cleanth Brooks, J. C. Ransom, Allen Tate, William Empson, and R. P. Blackmur. Structuralism and Russian formalism form the second generation. They slyly believe in the organism of 'form' and 'content' and do not acquiesce in any sort of separability. However in their writings, no explicit attempt is made to define 'form' and 'content'. In fact, concept of 'form' is a complex of many things. It

includes rhythm, metrics, structure, coherence, emphasis, diction, images (Wimsatt and Brooks, 1957). Language blended with experience takes on central position in the concept of 'form'. Richards, Eliot, Leavis and Brooks understand language and creative writer as social products. He acquires experiences from his society. Hence they observe an organic relationship between 'form' and 'content'. 'Form' in 'formalistic' approach is determined by the taste of society. To Brooks, 'form' is meaning and everything; a work of art which has meaning, has 'form' too.

Like Brooks, J. C. Ransom thinks that a critic should not concern the paraphrased content because reliable rendering into prose is not possible. Therefore he should be concerned with both determinate and indeterminate meanings in relation to 'structure' and 'texture'. When they are put together reveal the complete meaning. It is this combination that Ransom calls 'ontological criticism'. Ransom gives an image of room to explain 'structure-texture' relation. The room is a poem; walls of the room constitute 'structure'; paint and paper on the wall form 'texture'. Similarly 'structure' or 'logical meaning', and 'texture' or 'local meaning' go into the making of the poet's meaning. More precisely, the 'structure' is the story, the object, and the situation, or whatever, which gives us the 'argument' of the poem. The 'texture' is the 'thingness' of things by which it is particularized. To conclude, the author should say that new critics think a poem as an artifact; as different parts of a chair make a whole chair when they are joined together. They know organic unity but it is of different sort. In fact they do not bother about 'content' as much as 'form'. They talk little of 'content'. They put premium on 'form'. We found them talking a great deal about language of poetry. These all shortcomings led to the development of generic criticism. It is commonsense knowledge that a literary work is the product of a combination of 'form' and 'content', technique and sensibility. Negligence of any can hamper the proper understanding. The 'content' of a work is determined by external (sociological, historical, psychological etc.) crosscurrents that make an artist to express them in a work of art. The concern of the first group of formalists is to acquire an understanding of the way the statements are woven together to form the artistic whole.

Structuralism is solely interested in the process which facilitates the generation of meaning rather than the meaning itself. As such, 'structuralists' put author and reality as ends of reference outside of concern. Ferdinand de Saussure, the founding father of 'structuralism' was the first 'formalist'. It is commonly held by 'structuralists' that all elements of human culture including literature may be taken as parts of a system of signs, and no individual units can be comprehended in isolation until they are put in the larger network or structure. Structuralist approach to literature examines structures for instance, poem, essay, novel, drama, etc. along with their constitutive components which being put

together give meaning as post-effect to the text. For instance, a poem is a structure and its components are sounds, images, phrases, punctuation and words. These elements are held together by some internal governing rules. They generate meaning when they all are yoked collectively. Alternatively, India is a larger structure. It is comprised of 31 states, 1618 languages, 6400 castes, 6 religions, 6 ethnic groups, and 29 festivals. It is to say that India cannot be understood simply by saying India. When all its units are examined then India may be understood. All literary structures generate meaning differently. In fact, 'structuralists' want us to believe in the fact that 'content' is simply an effect of the structure. Say simply, 'content' is realized when all constitutive components of a particular structure is invoked cumulatively. There is no 'content' is absentia 'form'. 'Content' is a result of 'form'. Structuralists examine the 'form' of a text especially by viewing at elements like voice, setting, character and their combination.

To Russian formalists, their prime concern is 'literariness'. To achieve this end, they talk much of metre, rhyme scheme, rhythm, figures of speech, and other devices that are ancillary (syntax, structure, imagery, motifs, styles, and conventions etc.) to poetry. They often make distinction between literary and ordinary use of language. These all symptoms provoke us to conclude that Russian formalists have elevated and focused much on the 'form' rather than the 'content'.

It would be wrong to say that the new critics and Russian formalists are not intelligent and have no sense of organism of 'form' and 'content'. They must be credited for providing new perspective. In fact, they have done all this deliberately. Despite all these, the author feel one serious flaw of which both schools are guilty is that they talk much of poetry at the cost of other genre. Rene Wellek (1982: 128) writes: The Russian formalists consideration form the result of two operations, deformation and organization. He further quotes: Form is the organization of pre-aesthetic materials.

Genre critics, popularly known as neo- Aristotelians or Chicago critics, treading on the lines of Aristotle brought forward their theory contrary to new critics particularly that of Cleanth Brooks and William Empson in the fifties of 20th century. Chicago Critics evolved their concept of form basing on Aristotle's *Poetics*. They examine the overall structure and plot of literary works. Their ideas are exclusively put in the collection of essays titled *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (1952). Their leader, R. S. Crane edited it. They all belong to Chicago University.

Of course, Chicago critics are all out to assail new critics ruthlessly. New critics exclusively concern poet's language. On other hand, Crane and his associates prefer to put language on the lowest rung of the ladder of poetic discussion. Chicago critics never forget the study of genre, and its sub-genres. To these critics 'form' is an 'emotional power' that varies from work to work; and

'shaping principle' that controls and synthesizes all the components into a beautiful and effective whole (Abrams, 2007: 107). Thus 'form' unifies all subordinate components into a whole. The concept of 'form' is prime thing to Chicagoans. To them, the relation of 'form' and 'content' is in the manner of cause and effect. The cause is 'content' and effect is 'form'. But at the same time, they also say that the 'form' can be abstracted from material only for discussion and elevation. In fact they equate overall structure, which is plot, with 'form' in terms of power, that is, poetic effect. Thus they are inseparable. So plot approached from the standpoint of effect is form, and from constructive or shaping principle, it is the matrix that nurtures the whole corpus, and from organic points it is the synthesizing power. The author thinks their standpoint is saner and cogent. R. S. Crane criticizes Cleanth Brooks whom language is everything. He finds fault with him while making distinction between *Odyssey* and *The Waste Land*. Thus their 'pluralism' and neo-Aristotelianism characterizes their greatness.

Marxist concept of 'form' is by and large based on man's relation to his society and the history of his society. Marxist criticism altogether opposes all kinds of literary formalism. Marx himself believed that a work of art should reveal organism of 'form' and 'content' because mere stylistic observances pervert 'content' and finally imprint vulgarity on 'form'. 'Form' is an offshoot of 'content', and 'form' is of no value unless it is the 'form' of its 'content'. Marx has been always faithful to the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, who in his *Philosophy of Fine Art* (1835) wrote that 'every definite content determines a form suitable to it'. Faulty 'form' arises out of faulty 'content'. Form is changed, transformed, and broken down with time-to-time change in the 'content' (Eagleton, 2002: 21-22). As such, he identified 'form' as the manifestation of 'content'. Marxist criticism seeks to maintain a happy dialectical relationship of 'form' and 'content'. However, Marxists ultimately prefer to give primacy to 'content'. Of course in Marxist criticism, writer's exposure to the world that is his outlook matters much. This view ultimately determines both his 'content' and 'form'. This world-view is not static, rather dynamic and subtle of which the writer himself is not altogether conscious. So it is world-view that carries weight.

Christopher Caudwell holds that 'form' is something that tries to impose an order on chaotic views of writer, which is probably drawn from middle class culture. In fact, writer's social relations determine consciousness and consciousness controls his attitude towards the world and finally his attitude determines 'form'. It is common-sense knowledge that every man's attitude to the society varies and so the 'form' of art is determined largely by his class-consciousness. He prefers manifest content or referential content to the emotive or latent content that is why he intends to reject poetry as 'barbaric form'. He appreciates novel because it conveys meaning directly. In late twenties Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling, being

primarily historicist, under the influence of Marxism call poetry 'more primitive and barbarous' form than prose.

Leon Trotsky, another Marxist conceives the relationship of 'form' and 'content' in his book *Literature and Revolution* (1924). To him, 'form' is determined and developed under the pressure of a new need of a collective psychological demand that like everything else has its social rules. Novel is bourgeois epic and it is epic of the world. He thinks that 'content' is important. Like other Marxists, he thinks realistic novel is the best form of novel.

Frederic Jameson in his book *Marxism and Form* (1971) simply argues that 'form' is only 'the working out of the 'content' in the realm of superstructure. As such, Jameson opposed Russian formalists whom 'content' are mere an adding to 'form' and vulgar Marxists whom 'form' is mere ornamentation or window dressing (Murfin et al., 1998: 204).

Georg Lukacs noted Marxist approves of 'content'. Therefore he criticizes those who are exclusively concerned with techniques, form, and experiment. In his essay *The Ideology of Modernism*, Lukacs disapproves of modern literature for its exclusive interest in style and technique. According to him, modern writers flout cogently Aristotelian dictum that man is a social being. They represent their characters alienated and incapable of making relationship with others. He believes in the totality of art. He prefers work with 'content' to experimental works, which are mainly characterized by 'form'. To say briefly, Marxists concept of 'form' is practical. It is determined by the inner logic of 'content'. In fact, Marxists approach synthesizes subject, object, emotion and thought, individual and world.

Now we move on to 'psychoanalytic approach'. Sigmund Freud comes to our mind first. He thinks art or work of literature as a source of 'substitute gratification'. To him, the 'content' of a work of art expresses the repressed desires and passions, that is, unconscious motifs. In his masterpiece *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud divides 'content' into 'manifest content' and 'latent content'. He says that the literal surface of a work before to our conscious mind is called 'manifest content'. In distorted form, 'latent content' that is hidden content or unconscious or unfulfilled desires find occasional semblance of satisfaction. So to him like other psychoanalysts, the prime concern is to expose the 'latent content' of a work art. He does not concern with the style, form or technique. Though, he accepts slightly the use of symbolic language in the sense that, it may embody key belief, ideas or concepts about reality. He was primarily concerned with the 'content' of a work of art. He in his essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' takes novel as a platform where unfulfilled desires get satisfied. To him the role of 'form' is only to break barrier. 'Form' is a kind of fore pleasure.

Norman Holland another psychoanalyst studies the patterns of fantasies. 'Form' to him is a sort of strategy to control the 'fantasy content'. In the larger sense and in narrower sense he studies 'rhythm, rhyme and sound (narrower) together with plot sequence of incidents, characters etc. (larger sense) to control 'content'. By and large it can be said that this concept is incomplete as it never tries to penetrate the relation of 'form' and 'content'. It simply observes the relation between the writer and his work and the work and reader.

Post colonialism taking on 'interrogative stance' appropriated, modified, and generated many forms in which its critique of empire and imperialism may be made. As such postcolonial writers were clearly concerned with questions of forms, style, genre, and language. Postcolonial writers commonly favour 'Magic realism', 'politically informed fiction', and 'social realist' forms (Nayar, 2008: 220-221).

CONCLUSION

Thus, we see the development in the concept of 'form' and 'content' and their relationship. All critics have their own prejudices and preferences. In fact the concept of 'form' undergoes ups and downs. Formalists prefer exclusively poetry ignoring other genres. Sociological and psychological approaches concentrate on novel. Only neo-Aristotelians emerge stand out with saner opinion. They concentrate on all genres and its sub genres. It is now imperative to point that 'form' is not technique or skill instead it is an impression that a work of art yields. 'Content' is actually an aesthetic experience. Both 'content' and technique unite to produce an artistic whole or 'form'.

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