Literary Theory in Indonesian English Department: between Truth and Meaning

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Abstract

Literary theory in Indonesian English Department is faced with the questions of the integrity of theory and compatibility with local context. The integrity of theory found in other social sciences is absent in literary theory since it makes use of theories of other disciplines in such a way that it departs and yet relates to those theories in a new trajectory. Ecumenical posture should be the paradigm when approaching the plurality of literary theory. The compatibility with local context has to be understood in the interconnectedness of theory in the network of global academic conversation. The decision to use or not to use certain theory should not be driven by xenophobic views or the failure to understand the complexity of theory. In this perspective, truth and meaning are never singular.

Keywords: *theory, ideology, humanism, literature*

"To read in the service of any ideology is not to read at all." (Bloom, 1994: 1)

The above claim by Harold Bloom is based on the belief that literary criticism has to be objective not ideological or political. Bloom argues the aesthetic value is objective and that literary reading should focus solely on it. Reading a literary text with certain ideological presuppositions, so Bloom contends, will interfere fatally with the efforts to unearth the real meaning of the text. He accuses that those – whom he cynically calls the members of the school of resentment - employing ideology in reading a text do so because of their inability to recognize and experience the aesthetic (Bloom, 1994: 29). This argument between non-political and hence "objective" reading against political criticism is recuperation of the age-old problem of the literary studies' academic standing. In fact, the problem with literary studies has been problematized since its inception. In the beginning literary study was "merely" a section of language studies and the efforts to separate itself from the study of language has always been met with the theoretical questions of its methodology. As what Oxford's Professor of History, Edward Freeman said when refusing the establishment of a Chair in English in 1887:

> *We are told that the study of literature 'cultivates the taste, educates the sympathies and enlarges the mind'. These are all excellent things, only we cannot examine tastes and sympathies. Examiners must have technical and positive information to examine*. (qtd in Barry, 2002: 14)

This problem of methodology has been one of the heaviest challenges addressed to the literary studies as an academic subject, first by Freeman and several decades later by Rene Wellek when requesting F.R. Leavis to provide a more explicit theoretical ground of his close reading method. Now when English studies becomes an established academic subject not only in the West but also in Indonesia, the debate in literary theory as one the most important ingredients of English studies is worth revisiting. I will

explore some questions of meaning and truth in literary theory in the context of Indonesian English Department.

What is Literature?

My experience in teaching the students of English both the Undergraduates and Graduates indicates that they are not aware of the complexity behind the definition of literature and tend to take it for granted that what is and what is not literature is unproblematic. Given this circumstance, it is understandable that when studying literary theory, they are surprised by its range and scope and to find out that it often seems unrelated to literary theory the way they have imagined it. Clarifying the nature of the object of theory is therefore indispensable before discussing theory.

Let us look back at what Eagleton and Jonathan Culler have to say about literature in their introductory books: *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (1983, revised 1996), and *Literary Theory, a Very Short Introduction* (1997). Both elaborate the complexity and problems of defining literature. Eagleton, for instance, questions the once widely accepted definition of literature: literature is the kind of writing that uses language in a special way. In the Formalist technical terms, it is called estranging or defamiliarizing as opposed to "normal" day-to-day use of language. Although this definition, which is derived from Viktor Shklovsky's survey on the possible scientific facets of literary analysis, matches the characteristics of poetry, Eagleton shows the inadequacy of this definition for two reasons. First of all, not all literary works, a novel or a drama for example, use language with this estranging effect and yet they are still considered literature. Secondly, given a certain context any language might be estranging – which reminds us of the nature of meaning characterized by slippage and spillage.

Other commonly accepted definitions of literature, namely literature as fictional writing and literature as *belles lettres* (aesthetic writing) are easier to refute. To take a vernacular example, the inadequacy of the first definition is the fact that not all fictional writings, such as Indonesian *Gundala Putra Petir* comic strip or *Wiro Sableng* are considered literature. The later definition is usually taught to Indonesian high school students: etymologically, *susastra* (Indonesian word for literature) is derived from Sanskrit i.e. *su* meaning good and *sastra* meaning writing so that *susastra* means good writing which is synonymous with *belles lettres*. This definition leads to the impossibility of defining literature objectively because the next question would be who has the right to set the standard of beauty. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholders, so the saying goes. A work considered beautiful by a certain community might be ordinary for another. Since the definition of literature then depends on the "who" rather than the "what," both Eagleton and Culler agree that literature is like weeds: ontological definition of them is beyond objective formulation. The closest definition we might come to is that literature is some kind of writing which for certain reasons people value highly. Fictionality, language estrangement and beauty function as non-defining features rather than the defining characteristics of literature.

This elusive notion of literature explains the preference of today's academia to use other terms, such as 'cultural texts' instead of literature referring the object of their investigation. This new term has the benefit of not to trap oneself to a very questionable elitist definition of literature. It sees that the limitation of the study of literature to the canon is not tenable anymore. This opening up of the object of the study has lead to what we know as Cultural Studies utilizing literary strategy to read basically any cultural forms. Rolland Barthes has exemplified this with his reading of wrestling – as a spectacle and not sports – and other cultural phenomena with a structuralist perspective.[1] With Derridean view that "there is nothing outside to the text" we may assume that what counts is not the nature of the object under study but the fact that our understanding of it is textual and therefore literary. This is where literary theory needs to be able to account for the academic reading of its objects when situated in a university course.

Literary Theory, Truth and Meaning

"Literary Theory is an illusion"
(Eagleton, 2003: 178)

The demand for the integrity and clarity of literary theory as an academic subject often baffles the Indonesian students of literature, especially if they lack literary training. This is due to the nature of literary theory itself that defies monolithic categorization. Theories such as Structuralism, Psychoanalysis, Eco Criticism, Postcolonialism and Feminism sound like disciplines belonging to Linguistics, Psychology, Biology and Political Science rather than Literary Studies. The fact that they are literary theory indicates that the discipline has to be approached with some caution by leaving behind our assumptions on the integrity of the theory as it is understood in other disciplines. This lack of unity or integral ground (probably except for the object of theory: cultural texts) among these diverse theories is what Eagleton means by literary theory is an illusion.

Bloom's statement that reading text with ideological presuppositions is not proper literary reading seems to be driven by the desire to tame this wild literary theory i.e. by grounding it on the aesthetic and negating the rest as political reading and hence not literary.[2] What he means by the aesthetic is originality, sublimity of the work and the difficult pleasure arising out of its sublime content. In other words, there is a strong sense of timelessness in the value of the work. This claim of non-political aesthetic reading is certainly difficult to sustain now considering the fact that ignoring political dimensions of reading is indeed a political decision. His claim that the traditionalists and resenters are political because of their inability to experience the aesthetic is therefore problematical.

Bloom situates his reading between two opposing poles: the traditionalists and the political critics. The traditionalists or the liberal humanists as they are often called are the literary critics who are generally evasive about the theoretical accounts of reading and emphasize the importance of the close reading of text (isolating text from the author and historical/ideological contexts). They often relate this close reading with moral judgment making their criticism moralistic in nature. They imagine that reading texts without ideological presuppositions is possible and even a must since the purpose of the critics is to unearth the pure meaning residing inside the text. They also advocate literary reading for more pragmatic purposes, such as the betterment of human beings, the propagation of humane values and the like. This approach is the oldest literary criticism in the history of English studies. In combining close reading and moral evaluation, the traditionalists believe that meaning resides securely inside the text and it is the job of the critic to unearth it for the readers. Undeniably there is a political dimension in this close reading method: to make the less disadvantaged English working class in the 19th century accept their lot without demanding the redistribution of wealth. This makes the social structure marginalizing them went unnoticed and the working class felt content despite the structural injustice. Truth and meaning were then in the hands of those benefited by the status quo by drawing an illusion that everybody belonged to the one great national project: upholding the glory of the United Kingdom. Similarly, during colonization the study of English was manipulated for the benefits of the imperialist projects: making the colonized live under the false consciousness that despite the oppression and exploitation, they took part in civilizing mission of the European empires. This evidences that liberal humanist reading method is prone to unrealized ideological cooptation while assuming the objectivity of the method.

Edward Said points out that the political nature of humanist reading is rooted in the politico-ideological constraints. Although his or her writing does not have a direct political effect upon reality in the everyday sense the way a politician does, Said argues, his reading is nevertheless ideological. Said puts the paradox thus:

> *[T]he general liberal consensus that "true" knowledge is fundamentally non political (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not "true" knowledge) obscures the highly if osbscurely organized political circumstances*

> *obtaining when knowledge is produced.* (Said, 1978: 10)

This political nature of text is what Said calls in his other book, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983) as the worldliness of the text[3], namely that a text is always constrained its ideological context. Text is always wrought with – to borrow Raymond Williams' terms (1985: 121-127) - the dominant, the residual and the emergent.

Situated in the opposite camp is a group of critics whom Bloom calls the Resenters – most likely because he accuses them of resenting the aesthetic. He emphatically states: "Pragmatically, aesthetic value can be recognized or experienced but it cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions" (1994, p. 17). They are, among others, Antonio Gramsci, Stephen Greenblatt, Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore. Antonio Gramsci is targeted because of his claim on the impossibility of disinterested intellectual; Stephen Greenblatt employs what is now called New Historicism while Sinfield and Dollimore invent its UK version: Cultural Materialism.[4] Included in this same camp are the Feminist, Marxist and Postcolonial critics. The common denominator of their error according to Bloom is the political perspective in their reading. Instead of finding the real meaning of a text, such reading is, for Bloom, similar to forcing their political perspective upon the meaning of the text.

The view that meaning resides securely inside the text and that the proper procedure to find it is by purifying our thoughts of any hitherto assumptions and ideological leanings underlies Bloom and the liberal humanists' reading. Despite Bloom's disavowal of his "membership" in the liberal humanist camp, his approach to literature indicate the same strategy. This is obvious, for instance, when Bloom retold how he read Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

> *I had to write a lecture on Milton as part of a series I was delivering at Harvard University, but I wanted to start all over again with the poem: to read it as though I had never read it before, indeed as though no one ever had read it before me. To do so meant dismissing a library of Milton criticism from my head, which was virtually impossible.* (Bloom, 1994: 26)

His conviction that although getting rid of the existing knowledge and paradigm is virtually impossible and yet practically possible is at the heart of liberal humanist reading. From the current theoretical perspective, rather than conditioned by the absence of pre-existing knowledge like what Bloom believes, his new understanding of the text is more likely constrained by it. This is the kind of productive constraints by which new interpretations are generated.[5] In this sense, meaning is not inside but outside the text – something that we assign to the text.

The view that meaning is outside the text forms the dominant perspective in current literary theory. Structuralism, Cultural Materialism, Reader's Response Theory, Psychoanalysis and Postcolonial theory are sustained by the logic that meaning is something that we assign to a text rather than the inherent property of the text. This operation of meaning-making in literary criticism is to be based on a theoretical perspective in order to be able to stand an academic test. In a thesis defence, the question of truth i.e. the true meaning of the text is to be examined by the board of examiners on the basis of the justification for employing certain theoretical perspective(s) and how far the deployment of a theory or a combination of theories empowers (or cripples) the reading of the text. The question of ideology against objectivity is irrelevant since ideology, understood as our ways of perceiving and feeling is already inseparable part of the process.[6]

The next question would be how we shall justify the study of literary theory postulated mainly in the Western academia in the context of English Language Studies in Indonesia? Are we to be coopted by the West in the process? The efforts to formulate Indonesian theory actually became current in 1980s when some critics such as Subagio Sastrowardojo questioned the applicability of Western theory to criticize Indonesian literature and have encouraged the formulation of what they consider to be an

'Indonesian poetics'. The idea of inventing it has been driven by the belief that value systems are not universal; since literary theory is constructed within certain value systems, their application to works across different value systems is questionable. In response to the application of Western theories, Rachmad Djoko Pradopo in his dissertation reported:

> *Oleh karena itu, timbullah berbagai reaksi atas penggunaan teori Barat itu, terutama pada tahun 1980-an. Reaksi pertama timbul pada awal tahun 1980an dengan "diskusi-diskusi Sanggar Bambu" Yogyakarta yang berusaha mengarahkan terciptanya poetika (ilmu sastra) yang khas Indonesia. Reaksi kedua dicetuskan oleh Subagio Sastrowardojo (1984) dalam makalah kritik sastra pada temu sastrawan dan kritikus sastra di Jakarta (DKJ). Tulisan-tulisan Subagio Sastrowardojo yang mereaksi teori-teori sastra dari Barat itu menimbulkan usaha lebih luas untuk membentuk poetika yang khas Indonesia.* (Pradopo, 1992: 691)

There were some responses on the use of the Western theory, especially in 1980s. The first response was from the Bamboo Group in Yogyakarta by holding discussions in the early 1980s in order to formulate Indonesian poetics. The second response was by Subagio Sastrowardojo (1984) through his article presented in a poets and critics forum at the Jakarta Arts Council. Subagio Sarstrowardojo's articles responding to the use of Western theory have stimulated further efforts to formulate Indonesian poetics.

These efforts to formulate an Indonesian poetics can be seen as Indonesians' efforts to fathom the degree of cultural boundedness and how far it undermines theory's application to texts written in different cultures. One of the most notable efforts came at a seminar in 1988 whose proceedings were published in a book entitled *Menjelang Teori dan Kritik susastra Indonesia yang Relevan* (Esten, 1988)(*In Search of Relevant Indonesian Literary Theory and Criticism).* The seminar failed to come up with a theory which we might call Indonesian poetics.(1988)

It may be true that theory formulated in the West is not always suitable as a theoretical tool for analysing Indonesian text, typically because such theories refer to and are shaped by contexts whose characteristics are probably absent in Indonesia. However, the theorising of Indonesian poetics looks like addressing the wrong question from the start. This can be seen from the two points worth noting from the 1988 conference. First, the participants urged that the search for Indonesian theory should not be based on the inability to understand or keep up with the development of theory in the West. Second, while noting the importance of taking into account of local contexts, it would be impossible to isolate theory from global conversations. The choice of theoretical perspectives, be it vernacular or foreign, has to consider these two important points and the complicity of theory with certain cultural contexts rather than haphazardly dismissing whatever is Western in the name of false academic piety.

Conclusion

The connection between literary theory and truth and meaning turns to be rather complicated. Current literary theory has shown that this is the case considering the many theoretical perspectives deriving their precepts and political orientation from different disciplines, such as Linguistics, Psychoanalysis and Philosophy, all of which are not always compatible with each other. The orthodoxy of liberal humanism looks pale now in the face to current literary theory. This certainly raises a question on the "tag line" of Sanata Dharma University: *cerdas dan humanis* which has been translated through the university policy to a teaching strategy called Ignatian pedagogy. Inspired by St. Ignatius's spiritual exercises, this model has been developed to empower the teaching and learning process in such a way that the students will be able to achieve the 3Cs (Competence, Compassion and Conscience) by the end of their learning process.

Competence and compassion certainly relate to the basic tenets of liberal humanism, prone to cooptation and manipulation as the history of English studies has shown us. Consequently, it is crucial that the design of

current literary theory in English Department is able to help us see that compassion and conscience are never a neutral category – they are ideological. Liberal humanists are not wrong in advocating the propagation of humane values through literary criticism. What is wrong is that these values are not seen in their worldliness. As what we have seen in literary theory, this oblivion to the worldliness of values, criticism and text has give birth to the current literary theories, such as Postcolonialism, Cultural Materialism, New Historicism, Eco Criticism, several branches of Gender studies, like Black Feminism, Lesbian and Gay theory, Asian Feminism, etc. For literary scholars this plurality of theory, meaning and truth is never discouraging since a text always invites ceaseless surrogation of another text so that the silenced can be heard.

Rerefences

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[1] *For the complete selection his articles, see Barthes' Mythology (1972)*

[2] *Jonathan Culler delivers similar opinion that the proper literary theory is Poetics studying the economy of meaning-making. Culler believes that Poetics id more difficult that political criticism and this is the reason why critics prefer ideologically oriented criticism rather than Poetics (Culler, 2002: viii)*

[3] *Said discusses the worldliness and the worldlessness of the text in the introduction and Chapter 1 of (Said, 1983)*

[4] *For the comparison of both approaches see the introduction section of the book (Sinfield, 2000)*

[5] *Similar conclusion is also found in Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) where he claims that colonial discourse has become productive constrains for writers. Instead of crippling them, they stimulate writers to generate literary works tacitly supporting colonial ideology.*

[6] *Terry Eagleton contends that ideology is not "simply the deeply entrenched, often unconscious beliefs which people hold" but "more particularly those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power" (Eagleton, 13)*