

## STYLISTICS WITH REGARD TO INDETERMINACY OF MEANING IN LITERATURE

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**Pronema P Bagchi**

Ph.D. Scholar, Dept. of English

Savitribai Phule Pune University, India.

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Abstract:

Language makes us human and man is the only species that is unique in evolving with the complexity of language. With this creative force evolves literature that is another unique combination of the spoken and the written word. The full understanding of a work of literature is a study of many elements among which, language and style, however important, are only one. The present study is, therefore, a modest attempt to analyze how meaning becomes a free-floating concept in literature, giving rise to a chain of indeterminate utterances, situations, and contexts. The study concludes on a positive note highlighting the need for stylistically analyzing literary texts which will firmly acknowledge the agency of readers without demeaning the importance of the text as a work of art.

Keywords: indeterminacy of meaning, stylistics, interpretive communities, defeated expectancy, text as the universe, etc.

Language is dynamic in nature; it keeps on changing and literature shows how language evolves over time. Literary language is a deviant use of language and so it differs from the ordinary use of language. Ronald Chapman says, "Literary language is chosen and manipulated by its users with greater care and complexity than the average language user can or wishes to exercise." The language of literature is not simple and literary writers work in a special domain which is a matter of art and challenge. Everyday communication is expected to be clear, unambiguous and direct and indeterminacy is unacceptable but in literature, indeterminacy of meaning becomes a virtue! In day-to-day speech, indeterminacy is negative and erroneous but in the context of literature, it is positive and never looked down upon.

"Indeterminacy, in literature, is the multiplicity of possible interpretations of given textual elements."<sup>1</sup> So indeterminacy means something that is not specific and thus ambiguous. Indeterminacy is the technique that evokes undecidability within a text. It usually comes about by having threads with competing for meaning that cancel each other out. More importantly, indeterminacy is the notion that the meanings are never fully realized; they remain in an embryonic state such that the reader can make out glimpses and flashes of meaning but can never bring them fully to the fore.<sup>2</sup> According to Derrida, the meaning is endless and "the possibility of interpretation and reinterpretation is (also) endless." Here, Paul de Man's version of deconstruction<sup>3</sup> becomes helpful to understand that if we give primacy to rhetoric<sup>4</sup> then we do not care for rules and create a heap of meanings which results in the indeterminacy of meaning. In this case, uncertainty or inaccuracy about one kind of value is accompanied by the accuracy of another kind. Since literary language is fluid and non-absolute, indeterminacy of meaning begins to play a very crucial role in this context. However, the majority of a literary text will have words and phrases with obvious meanings with only a few lexical items less obvious. One reason this may occur is due to vagueness.

But some poets have a fine talent of using even the familiar in such a way that they become suddenly impervious to every ordinary sense and still burst with a great air of having something important and precise to say. E. E. Cummings experimented with poems as visual objects on the page. His poems are examples of graphological deviations whereby poetry becomes a primary source of using the deviant style of language. Here is a poem by Cummings written & presented as follows:

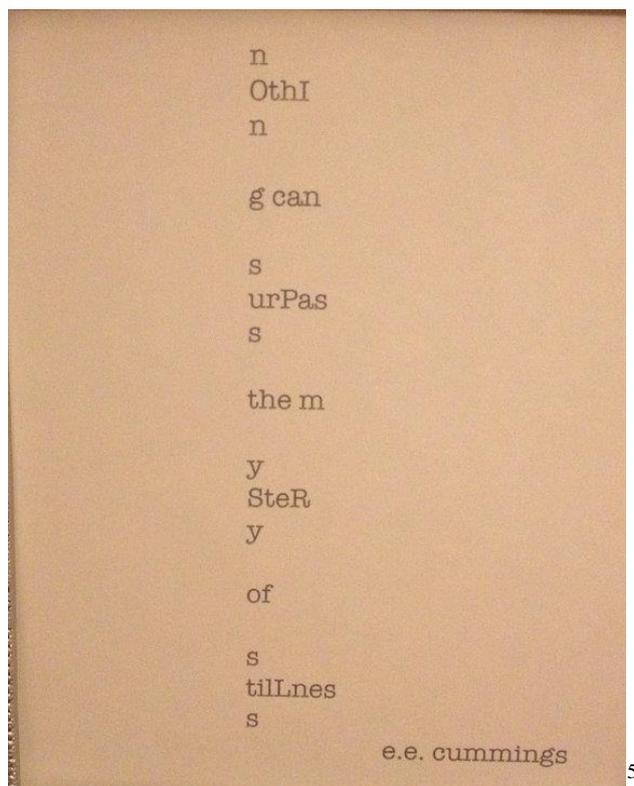
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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/285153/indeterminacy>

<sup>2</sup> <https://peaceandwarpoetics.wikispaces.com/indeterminacy>

<sup>3</sup> Deconstruction denies the possibility of essential or intrinsic and stable meaning and the unmediated access to 'reality'; it thus rejects the possibility of a 'pure presence'.

<sup>4</sup> The skill of using language in speech or writing in a special way that influences or entertains people



At the very first appearance, the poem looks obscure and therefore it becomes difficult to extract meaning out of it. But Cummings says, “Don’t try to understand it, let it try to understand you.” Sometimes, reinforcement of meaning is not the only possibility open to the poet in his patterning of the corporeal form of words. He may simply use it as a source to have multiple levels of interpretation as any literary text is a weave of various strands in language and such poems fail to have any specific beginnings or endings. This idea of indeterminacy of meaning rejects the traditional view of considering a literary work having explicit boundaries. A text then becomes a grid of several permutations and combinations of meaning where readers build on their expectations based on the various styles of writing and any literary writing that surpasses the levels of anticipation results in the principle of ‘defeated expectancy’ among the readers.

An example of this kind is the novel ‘If on a winter's night a traveler’ by Italo Calvino. A cycle of stories, a whirlwind of narrative in its self-consciousness – for as soon as you have read it, it is false. And with this, the reader becomes the single imaginary reader, manipulated throughout by Calvino. Through these information gaps, the writer defeats the reader's expectations. The surprise is part of the pleasure of the book where we run across eight more novels of different origins. The aesthetically of allusiveness to different authors and stories enriches the language of the text in which meaning remains indeterminate from the start to the end. Reading literature is an endangered pleasure and Calvino wants to give us the

<sup>5</sup> <http://wonderingminstrels.blogspot.in/2000/07/poem-42-e-e-cummings.html>

pleasure and also talk of its danger – literature that is indeterminate does not present a straightforward message or possibly even one message at all. This mixture of predictability and the breaking of these predictions make Calvino's work exemplary of indeterminacy which prevents text from being nailed down. It is open indefinitely for interpretation and an individual's reading of this novel would drastically differ from another's interpretation of this particular text. So we simply have to follow the dictum: *Text is the Universe!*

In the book 'Stylistics and the teaching of literature,' H.G. Widdowson comments, "*What literature communicates, then, is an individual awareness of a reality...The reader of literature has his expectations aroused by the patterns of language which give shape to the writer's perception of this other reality and then experiences its elusiveness as these expectations are denied when the patterns change.*" In the process of interpreting literature, the connotative<sup>6</sup> meanings play a significant role over the denotative<sup>7</sup> meanings. 'The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection' is a short story by Virginia Woolf who uses language playfully which involves active participation of the readers in the meaning-making process. Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein believes that language pictures the world, and he also asserts that the use of language is similar to playing a game and each use of language constitutes a separate 'language game.'

In this sense, the effect of the connotative meanings is so high that sometimes the text cultivates an intimacy between the author and the reader. The mirror in this story is described as bringing the very stability – it seems to arrange into a picture the objects of the room, lending them.

Additionally, the work created by a writer is half-done and the other half is to be finished through reading and imagination of the readers. Stories reveal a kind of amalgam of the spoken and the written and such literary pieces appear to be a mode of communication which do not submit themselves to the conventional use of language. So what might appear determinate at the face-value is actually indeterminate in essence.

Furthermore, in order to appreciate deviation in poetic language which has the true source of power very effectively concealed in itself, we must first understand the norm. "*Since a literary work does not link up with other discourse it has to be designed so as to be self-contained and the very design, the creation of unique patterns of language, inevitably reflects a reality other than that which is communicable by conventional uses of the language code.*"<sup>8</sup> As far as the designing of the poem as a whole unit is concerned then usually, a Ramanujan poem has a typical structure because he crafted his poems very meticulously. One of the

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'connotation' refers to the additional or implied meanings that a word or phrase has beyond its central meaning. This may also refer to the attitudinal or emotional meaning.

<sup>7</sup> 'Denotation' is that part of the meaning of a word or phrase that related it to phenomena in the real world or fictional world or possible world.

<sup>8</sup> H.G. Widdowson, Ch -4: *The nature of literary communication*, pg- 54

examples of his poem as a single-sentence unit is 'On the Death of a Poem.' This poem unfolds a huge drama as the narrative-like structure develops into a story. The poem is, therefore, an instance of an extended metaphor with obvious elements of allegory in it. The poem is divided into three triads which are connected logically with each other having certain causality between the uniform units.

"Images consult

One

Another,

A conscience—

Stricken

Jury, And come

Slowly

To a sentence."

The last phrase '*to a sentence*' involves a pun on the word 'sentence.' On one hand, the whole poem has technically appeared in a sentence and on the other, the judges seem to have given their verdict i.e. they have passed the sentence! The poem has a fictive element, a story-telling strategy and is about the creation of poetry itself. So now, if you compare the whole poem with its title, then it looks paradoxical because the poem is indeed on the birth of the poem and not on the death! So the clinching conclusion of the poem highlights the sense of pressure and uneasiness involved in any creative process and poetry being the major source of celebrating the indeterminacy of meaning in literature, gives depth and complexity to the meanings parse.

Meaning is bounded. Determinacy implies definitiveness; to define means to terminate or limit the boundaries set on meaning. On the contrary, indeterminacy implies a potentiality of being unbound. As language evolves over time, meanings change, constantly renew themselves and this attribute of the playfulness of meaning enhances the concept of indeterminacy altogether. Once one accepts the lack of ground for determinate meaning, it is impossible to believe in definitions and in final interpretations. In the process of demeaning the meaning, the theater of the absurd has caste the practice of interpretation in a radically different light. The play 'Waiting for Godot' by Samuel Beckett is a supreme example of this type. It is saturated with contradictory dialogues which best exemplify the notion of a semantic anomaly. They say, "*Let's go. Yes, let's go,*"<sup>9</sup> but still, do not move. Even Harold Pinter's 'The Caretaker' is anomalous where the dialogues do not follow the principle of coherence<sup>10</sup> and principle of correspondence<sup>11</sup> but even out of such obscurity, we delve into the plays to come up with our own understanding of the texts. This is truly the joy of reading literature by coming across an endless labyrinth of indeterminate meanings. Interpretation

<sup>9</sup> Estragon says this to Vladimir in Act I.

<sup>10</sup> This principle endows the utterances of the speaker with a medium of logical truth

<sup>11</sup> This principle endows the speaker with a degree of true belief about the world

never ends; so the more you get involved with the text and proceed further, the larger are the possibilities of you coming up with multiple layers of meanings. Hence, literary language refutes the claim of truthful and authoritative representation of the world made by some literary works of art.

So to conclude, it can be said that literature is multi-interpretational because of indeterminacy. This is the beauty of literature and indeterminacy should not be subject to criticism. Interpreting literature is like solving a puzzle which is a very challenging task. Along with the author, the readers are also creative as they can provide logical justifications to their interpretations. So by being reflective, imaginative and creative, the reader is expected to share the author's responsibility. The role of the reader thus becomes crucial as every reader perceives differently, interprets between the lines to understand the text and finally contributes to the larger rubric of indeterminacy. Therefore, reading literature becomes a matter of pleasure due to the feature of indeterminacy. With regard to this situation, Northrop Frye says, "*Reading literature is like a picnic; the author gives you the tiffin but you have to get the food.*" Literature is like the superstructure which primarily includes poetry, drama, and fiction along with their indeterminacies. Literature is indeed unstable, incomplete and kaleidoscopic. It is for this reason that literary works can never be satisfactorily paraphrased or explained by any single definite shape of conventional statement as meanings are necessarily porous and fluid. The field of Stylistics has a vital role to play in the case of indeterminacy of meaning in literature. Language is the material out of which literature is made and we simply cannot neglect it. Therefore, stylistics will be helpful in doing the analysis of the literary language in an objective way without the goal of arriving at any fixed descriptions or interpretations or evaluations. Instead of going beyond the text, stylistics will allow the text to speak for itself as the discipline believes that there is nothing outside the text and with this approach to literary texts, it can provide the readers with newer insights of dealing with the indeterminacy of meaning in literature.

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