

Analysis of T.S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': Its Implications for the Concept of Intertextuality

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Abstract

The present paper aims to analyze the concept of 'Tradition' and 'Individual Talent' propounded by T.S. Eliot and its implications for 'Intertextuality'. Intertextuality is widely used phenomenon which states that every text whether spoken or written is connected with the pre existing texts. No text is an island and it always emerges in a context or in a relationship with other texts. Though the term is coined in different ways by different theorists, it has a concurrent relationship with Eliot's concept of tradition, historical sense and depersonalization of poetry.

Keywords- *Text, Intertextuality, Tradition, Historical Sense, Individual Talent.*

Introduction

The concept of 'Tradition' has a close association with renowned poet and critic, T.S. Eliot. He asserts on the significance of tradition for the writers and readers in his famous essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Eliot focuses on two important ideologies for writing and analyzing a work of art -first is the concept of tradition and second is impersonality in poetry. Eliot has given a new definition to the concept of tradition and explains that to follow tradition is not mere by copying the works of old writers rather it is something which needs author's tremendous efforts and skills to shape a new work of art. An efficient author with a sense of tradition should have the knowledge and consciousness about the past writers and appropriately utilize this in his own creation. Eliot even states that awareness of not only the past writers but also about the works of contemporary writers is significant. "... The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities" (Eliot 45). Past and present are closely knit and cannot be

separated from each other as past directs the present and present modifies the past. A mature and skilled writer bears this responsibility of writing a new work of art by acquiring historical sense and sense of tradition.

Eliot argues against the viewpoint of the poets of romantic period who consider that poet's own feelings and emotions are presented in his works. He believes that a mature poet is one who refrain his own feelings and emotions from his work. Only those feelings and emotions which are significant for the poetic work are given place in the poetry by a mature and skilled poet. He writes, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Eliot 52-53).

'Intertextuality' refers to the relationship or connectivity of a text with other texts. Julia Kristeva first coined the term and propounded the theory that all texts or artistic creations are intertextual in nature. Kristeva's notion of intertextuality is based on the Bakhtinian theory which asserts that utterances are not independent rather depends on previous utterances, the way in which they are presented and received. To appreciate any work of art, it is very crucial for an author to find out and analyze intertextual elements involve in it. In the present scenario, the term Intertextuality is applicable not only to literature but also to many other fields such as painting, films, theatre etc.

Theoretical Background

Intertextuality

The term 'Intertextuality' is widely accepted and appreciated for its universal applicability. It is defined and appreciated by theorists in different ways. This concept deals with the relationship and interaction of one text with another. The concept was first given by Kristeva though it is believed that the concept has its origins in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and T.S. Eliot. According to Kristeva, The text is dynamic in nature and a literary work is not a product of the single author but it's a creation shaped by using intertextual figures like allusion, quotation, parody etc. or some other borrowings from other literary texts. Kristeva writes, no text is independent of other relating texts existing before it; "any text is an intertext – the site of an intersection of a numberless other texts" (Abrams 285). Barthes also mentions that, "... a text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning...but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash (Barthes 149). Graham Allen sums up the concept and writes, "no text is original and unique-in-itself; rather, it is a tissue of

inevitable references and quotations from other texts (which) in turn conditions its meaning” (Allen 15).

Traditional approach towards literary analysis focuses on originality in the text. Julia Kristeva argues against the traditional ideology and writes, “A literary work is not simply the product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself” (Kristeva 66). She proposed a new theory of analyzing or understanding a text giving importance to three factors i.e. writer, reader and the exterior texts. She presented the idea that a text can be interpreted on two axes i.e. horizontal and vertical. Horizontal refers to the relationship between author and reader and vertical connects the text to other texts. In this way a text can be interpreted in different ways and hence it does not have any fixed or static meaning. Every reading can give a new meaning to a text. As Kristeva points out, “Every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it” (Culler 105). Intertextuality asserts that meaning of a text lies in its language and not in the author. Process of analyzing a text can be accomplished successfully if the readers can interpret it in the view of intertextual elements involve in it. Meaning of a text is derived not from the text which is created by author but from its relation with other texts. Thus, meaning lies between the intertextual framework in which it is created or exists. Graham Allen writes, “The act of reading [...] plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts” (Allen 1). Leitch defines the term intertextuality and writes “a text’s dependence on prior words, concepts, connotations, codes, conventions, unconscious practices and texts. Every text is an intertext that borrows, knowingly or not, from the immense archive of previous culture” (21).

Tradition and Individual Talent

Tradition and Individual Talent (1919) is a noteworthy essay by T.S. Eliot. The ideologies and beliefs expressed in this essay are innovative, influential and significant. Eliot writes about the historical sense, sense of tradition, position of artist in poetic process and theory of impersonality. Eliot criticizes the way of reading in which critics’ attempt to find out the originality or individuality of the poet. He argues that, “...we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (Eliot 43). Explaining about significance of Tradition, Eliot writes that artistic works in which creator takes inspiration from the past and write originally with the awareness about past is the best work of art. Tradition for him is not the

mere imitation or blind adherence to the works of past generations rather it is something which polishes the poet's works and require rigorous efforts. He also states that tradition can be acquired by those artists who have historical sense.

Eliot points out the art of depersonalization and asserts that a poet or artist must keep his own personality aloof from his artistic creation. He sets an analogy between the role of catalyst in a chemical process and that of a poet in the creation of poetry. He states that as catalyst plays a prominent role in completing the chemical reaction but it remains unaffected. Similarly poet's creative mind completes the poetic process but his own state of mind must not be reflected in his artistic creation. He writes, "... the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Eliot 48).

Implications of Tradition and Individual Talent for Intertextuality

T.S. Eliot notes that each work is created from a pre existing tradition and it is something from which a new work gets its definition and shape. Eliot mentions that basis of a text is tradition, culture and old texts from which it emerges and hence a writer should have the awareness about tradition and history. A writer is not a separate entity rather a part of existing historical background, tradition and culture. Eliot's concept of tradition is implied or closely related with the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality and sense of tradition both affirm that all texts are related to each other and no artist can create a 'unique' creation. Concept of 'Tradition' by Eliot and modern literary term 'Intertextuality' is parallel or similar to each other. Eliot's tradition affirms that every new work has the elements or traces of culture or pre existing tradition and in this way no work of art is unique in itself because it always posses a relation with other texts. Similarly the relationship or interconnectedness of a text with another text or texts is termed as Intertextuality.

Eliot's theory of impersonality which states that poet's own personality is not significant for creation of a new work of art and a poet needs to depersonalize his work of art to bestow an influencing and significant work of art. Eliot writes, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition" (Eliot 47). This ideology is also compatible with the ideology of intertextuality which asserts on the significance of absence of author in a work of art.

Eliot further points out that new work should be read in the light of old ones and old ones to be interpreted with the understanding of past works. He mentions that present work is well

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interpreted through past works and past works can be modified and reinterpreted through present works. This type of reading of one text through other needs multiple readings for appropriate interpretation and this ideology of Eliot is similar to the ideology of intertextuality which also directs multiple reading of the text. Intertextuality states that a text does not have a fixed or absolute meaning and meaning of a text cannot be derived from single reading. Meaning of text lies in intertextual elements involved in the process of creating or interpreting a text and to find out those elements multiple reading is must.

Eliot claims that art must not be read in vacuum rather it must be interpreted in the context of pre existing trends. He writes, “In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past” (Eliot 45). Theory of intertextuality similarly states that no text exists in vacuum or isolation and a new text is a part of pre existing or contemporary literary texts. A text is always created in a particular context and that context is a part of historical, social, political or literary aspects which influenced the mind of reader. Thus, as Eliot’s idea of sense of tradition and historical sense influences the process of producing or analyzing text similarly contextual references associated with a text influences the emerging text, its creation and interpretation.

Conclusion

Though the term Intertextuality is a post modernist concept and first coined by Julia Kristeva, its study and appreciation reveals that it is a universal phenomena and formerly known as *Influence*. It is believed that whatever is read or observed by a writer has its influence on his writings and in this way a new text is always inspired or influenced by pre existing texts. Creation of new work of art or a text is not possible in vacuum and it always emerges in relation to other texts or contextual references. This connection and interdependence of texts is Intertextuality. In the *Art of Fiction*, David Lodge refers to the inevitability of intertextuality and writes, “That all texts are woven from the tissues of other texts, whether their authors know it or not” (98-99). The concept has a wider significance and close association with Eliot’s concept of Tradition and Individual talent. Eliot’s concept of Tradition and the concept of Intertextuality both have given importance to the works of past writers and consider the awareness of past works and existing literary canon for both writer and reader. Intertextuality regards that no text can be created in isolation and it is always created with reference to a previous text or context. In the same way Eliot affirms that no text is unique in itself. He states that a text cannot be created or appreciated alone rather one requires sense of tradition and historical sense to create and appreciate a text. On

the basis of detailed analysis of Eliot's essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* it is very obvious that Eliot's theory of tradition, historical sense and depersonalization in poetry laid the foundation of Intertextuality. Different theorists have given different definitions and explanation of the concept of intertextuality but views of Eliot are concurrent to intertextuality. Presently the concept is applicable to many other fields apart from literature but it has its roots in the works of Eliot and Saussure.

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