

Contemporary Perspectives on Literature*

Laurel Braswell-Means**

Summarized by Cedric Hollinshead***

The Faculty of Arts was pleased to welcome Dr. Braswell-Means during her recent lecture tour of S.E. Asia. The lectures presented to staff and students of our faculty were as follows :-

1. The Allegorical Pilgrimage in Chaucer's Fourteenth Century **Canterbury Tales**
 2. Commonwealth Literature and Postmodernism
 3. Remembering and Re-invention of Diaspora
 4. Feminism and the British Legacy
- Brief details of each lecture are set out below :

1. The Allegorical Pilgrimage in Chaucer's Fourteenth Century **Canterbury Tales**

Dr. Braswell-Means outlined the historical background to the **Canterbury Tales** and the manner in which this book might be interpreted.

The practice of going on pilgrimages to Canterbury, the Centre of the Christian Church in Britain and the revered site of Thomas-a-Becket's martyrdom, appealed

greatly to medieval Christians who believed that making this journey could provide a means of redemption for their past sins and also bring them a degree of spiritual enlightenment. Chaucer (? 1342-1400) in his **Canterbury Tales** records the tales told by various participants for everyone's amusement and edification during the course of a pilgrimage to Canterbury.

The tales can be interpreted on four progressively more complex levels viz : the literal or historical level, the allegorical level, the moral level and the spiritual level. The first level of interpretation is concerned with the surface meaning of the tales ie. what actually took place en-route to Canterbury. The second and third levels of interpretation combine to provide an understanding of what lies beneath the veneer of surface meaning. This reveals the manner in which the pilgrimage functioned as a means of edification for medieval Christians who made the journey and how it fulfilled their wish to be cleansed from the burden of previous sins. The final level of interpretation serves to illuminate the revelation of the innermost meaning of the journey in terms of spiritual enlightenment. The medieval Christians came to realise something of the concealed mysteries of their faith in that their journey

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began to resemble a passage to some heavenly Jerusalem. This final analysis represents a hermeneutic approach to interpretation in which Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales** are related to Biblical Scriptures in order to establish the central, hidden meanings of the text. From this we begin to appreciate the symbolic nature of the pilgrimage: the most precious central meaning in the minds of the pilgrims.

2. Commonwealth Literature and Postmodernism

Dr. Braswell-Means described the use of postmodernism as a critical term and the manner in which this could be applied to postmodernist works which have recently come to the fore in Commonwealth literature.

Postmodernism began to evolve as a result of the massive social and economic upheaval precipitated by the First World War. Disruption and dislocation of traditions took place throughout Europe and repercussions were felt throughout the Western world. The Second World War intensified this process. It soon became evident that literature could no longer be written or interpreted in the manner previously considered acceptable. Consequently, a far more flexible means of expression arose; writers began to create forms which deviated markedly from traditional literature, e.g. novels which were half poetry and plays in which the audience participated more fully. These works represented a radical challenge to the previously accepted traditional forms and, in some cases, even began to parody earlier works. Strict time chronology was also challenged. Another feature of postmodernist works is the manner in which authors began to absolve themselves from the

function of guiding readers to a readily understood meaning. Interpretation of meaning became a subjective action left to the individual reader.

The postmodernist approach has become manifest in works of Commonwealth literature, the literature of former British colonies. These newly emergent, independent countries have begun to witness the powerful new creative force inherent in this approach, allowing them to shape their own national literature in a meaningful and individualistic way. Coinciding with the search for a new national identity, Commonwealth countries have discovered a rich source of new ideas, a process which is gaining momentum by virtue of the new feelings of freedom from the perceived oppressive yoke of British imperialism. Examples of this phenomenon can be drawn from the current literature of Canada and Singapore, countries which have entered a period of new nationalism. Writers in both of these countries are beginning to play a decisive role in the creation of their country's individual and distinctive new identity. Post-colonial writers have emerged possessing the ability to define a new image of their country which is a product of their own specific environment rather than the inappropriate transplant which had previously been based on the British environment. The traditional empirical forms of literature, those which resulted from an era when authority came from the outside, have become rejected and the dated; the Western humanist tradition is now considered to be obsolete. Canadian novelists, Joy Kogawa and Michael Ondaatje, exemplify the strengths of the new creative impetus. Similarly, Singaporean novelist, S. Christine Lim, has become a leading light in

Singapore. Postmodernist novels by these authors illustrate the salient characteristics of Commonwealth literature, eg. *Itsuka* by Joy Kogawa; *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje; *Gift of the Gods* by S. Christine Lim.

3. Remembering and Re-invention of the Diaspora

Dr. Braswell-Means suggested the manner in which diaspora, the dispersal of a race of people, could be regarded as a principal theme relevant not only to literature of the past but also to current day literature.

The age old phenomenon of diaspora first appears in the books of the old Testament Biblical writings about the dispersal of the Jews. Diaspora may include a variety of elements, such as ethnicity (country of origin), tradition, generation and gender (sex). It often reflects the nature of mother-daughter or father-son relationships; parent figures being closer to the original roots of a newly dispersed race than their offspring. The three principal elements of diaspora in literature are separation from cultural traditions, family, and a more innocent (perceived in retrospect to have been happier) state of being. It would appear that the diaspor(ic) state frequently acts as a stimulus to the emergence of creative writers: the urge to write, often appearing amongst third-generation immigrants. Reflection on the possible reasons for the delayed appearance of creative writers involves some degree of speculation but the phenomenon may relate principally to the fact that earlier generations of immigrants are faced with the difficult, initial problem of establishing themselves in their newly adopted country. Furthermore, it may

be true to say that immigrant groups only become able to clearly visualise their feelings of being (or having been) under threat as a minority group by the third generation stage.

Aspects of the current use of diaspora as a key theme in literature are exemplified by the recent emergence of writers' works which comprise the rapidly growing body of Commonwealth literature, a literature in which re-invention of diaspora is recognised to be of paramount importance. The first Canadian novel in this canon was Joy Kogawa's, *Obasan*. The second (probably inspired by Joy Kogawa's novel) was Sky Lee's, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, a novel which uses a typically postmodernist approach in which real historical documentation is interspersed with fictional accounts. This kind of writing, termed metafiction (fiction which ironically admits that it could be either fiction or real), includes other postmodern characteristic features such as shifting back and forth in time and between characters. A semiotic approach (two levels of meaning) to interpretation is used in the novel, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, in respect of the exploration of parent-child relationships; denotative, in which the gender role of a parent is expressed and connotative, in which a very different (subjective) perception is applied to the image of a parent. The novel challenges the expectation of the reader by deviating from the course of events which might be expected. Its diaspor(ic) nature is evident in the fact that it is the story of a disappearing Chinese culture amongst a family of Chinese Canadians; a culture in the process of being assimilated into the national culture, but which appears instrumental in challenging the validity of some of the

questionable values of the Canadian society to which it now belongs. The author (she herself being characterised as one of the protagonists in the novel) acts as a bridge between the traditional Chinese culture and the new Canadian culture which is being reshaped in order to accomplish the formation of a truly multicultural society.

4. Feminism and the British legacy

Dr. Braswell - Means outlined the developments of feminist criticism. The meaning of the term was explained through reviewing the historical process which gave rise to this particular approach to criticism.

Literary criticism may be categorised into three main streams of thought within the body of Western literature. The first stream, so-called new criticism, began in the early part of the twentieth century and was largely concerned with viewing literature as an aesthetic object. This type of criticism developed from the neo-classical concept of humanism in eighteenth-century Europe. F. R. Leavis was one of the key exponents of this critical theory. Texts were examined for their structure, style, imagery and symbolism. A related, Russian-formalist school of criticism developed from this approach in which the exponents were more interested in form than content. Another approach to criticism, i.e. within this mainstream, arose from the same lines of development which made use of phenomenology, hermeneutics and reception theory in an effort to discover the inner meanings of texts. Hidden meanings of texts were also illuminated through psychoanalytical theory, based upon Sigmund Freud's theories relating to the role of the subconscious

mind.

The second stream of critical theory broke away completely from the traditional preoccupation of searching for a single, coherent meaning of a text. This stream's origins can be traced back to Romanticism; an artistic movement of the early nineteenth century when poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge sought to intensify the effects of their poetry through the use of images which portrayed the grandeur of nature (the effects of which varied widely according to context). From these roots, came the development of structuralism and semiotics. Literary criticism not only began to resemble a scientific process but it also began to involve much broader, open-ended systems of analysis. Structuralists started to view literature in its wider social contexts. Anthropological aspects and genre of literature came under scrutiny. The universal role of archetypes and myths, as applied to body of world literature, was also elucidated through the work of the Canadian critic Northrop Frye. Through the structuralist approach, literature came under strict structural and verbal analysis as opposed to being subjected to interpretation through the making of value judgements directed towards establishment of core-aesthetic values. Arising from structuralism came the development of post-structuralism in which literature began to be viewed as an open-text; a text open to a multitude of interpretations. Meanings of a single text could only be determined by consideration of factors such as the writer, the reader and the historical context. Texts had to be de-constructed or dismembered in order to establish meanings. Postmodernism is a critical term applied within the context of the post-structural

development of criticism and describes the ultimate development within the trend which rejected traditional approaches.

Placed mid-way between the two opposing main streams of critical theory, a third main stream has arisen known as sociological criticism. This system of critical theory concentrates attention on the idea that literature has to be viewed as an expression of society and its ideologies. It embraces the concepts of gender, Marxist, racial, racial/ethnic and post - colonial criticism. Sociological criticism borrows many techniques of analysis applied within the other two main streams of critical theory. The context in which literature develops is all important in sociological criticism. Consequently, it is considered important to relate texts to such factors as economics, politics, race and gender. Feminist criticism, arising as a subdivision of gender criticism, may thus be seen as the fulfilment of a lengthy process of evolution.

Although feminist criticism involves consideration of the structure of a text and its possible multiple meanings, it is primarily concerned with the sociological context of literature. The key question which it focuses on is what literature means to women and how women are perceived. Two distinct schools of thought have arisen, one attributable to the French and the other to the British. French critics are particularly engaged in the search for the inner aspects of what it means to be a woman. They draw upon the fields of psychology (including phallogentrism), philosophy (particularly existentialism), linguistics and creativity. Simon de Beauvoir's, **The Second Sex** (1947), became a seminal work in this process of

enquiry into the "inner-woman". In contrast, British feminist critics have based their ideas on the "outer-woman". Historically, there is a strong tradition in British literature relating to the nature of womanhood; a tradition hardly featured at all in French literature. In looking at the "outer-woman", British feminist critics have begun to review earlier literature to ascertain the manner in which women have been presented within their traditional and historical contexts. Women's roles have come to be defined more closely in terms of their reaction to patriarchy and empiricism. Feminist criticism also focuses on minority groups which are distinguished from one another in terms of race, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

In Canada, a country with a cultural dichotomy of French and English speaking peoples, feminist critics borrow ideas from both schools of feminist thought. However, Canadian critics owe a great deal more in terms of indebtedness to the British legacy than its French counterpart. Feminist critics in Canada are closely linking ideas drawn from the country's post - colonial experience, post - colonialism, (a reaction to British - male - hegemony) and the diverse origins of its people, multiculturalism (female multiculturalism in particular). Texts of feminist writers worthy of note are those of Silvia Townsend - Warner (British), Adrian Rich (American) and Margaret Atwood (British but studied at the University of Toronto). Works by these authors are particularly relevant in that they illustrate the nature of womanhood and women's quest for an enhanced feeling of fulfilment arising from a renewed sense of self-identity; one freed from male domination.