

# Bakhtin and the Questions of Interpretation in Literary Studies

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## Abstract:

Using M. M. Bakhtin's theory of interpretation that he proposes in the essay "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff", my paper revisits two significant moments in literary scholarship and interpretive exercise when T. S. Eliot in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) described the enduring relevance of metaphysical poets to the study of English culture and literature, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's feminist work "The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination" (1979) which revolutionised the critical reception of a major Victorian novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte.

**Keywords:** Bakhtin, T. S. Eliot, Interpretation, literary scholarship, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar

Bakhtin in his essay "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff" claims that literature must necessarily be connected to culture – and not only the socio-economic and materialist aspects of culture but to culture's various manifestations. In straitjacketing different aspects of culture, the interpenetrative nature of these differentials has been overlooked. The "questions of the interconnection and interdependence of various areas of culture" have often been pretermitted by literary scholars who are in constant search for the specifics of a given epoch (Bakhtin 2). Such an approach largely severs the study of the literary works from the rest of the culture from which they emerge. In what he laments as "a superficial struggle of literary schools", literary exegesis is superficially engaged with the culture from which respective literature emerges (Bakhtin 2).

Bakhtin contends that literary scholars should not make generalizations about the epoch without taking into account its internal contradictions and multiplicities. Scholars should also be careful of making generalizations based on the major literary works which are available to them. To do so will be to merely skim the surface without the knowledge of the literary underground that has not gained prominence. He invites literary scholarship to contextualize the literary works and place them within the "differentiated unity of an epoch's entire culture" (Bakhtin 3). Here, Bakhtin doesn't do away with the idea of an epoch but merely complicates it. "Differentiated unity" is not oxymoronic but the 'unity' in question is more difficult to arrive at and would require a kind of literary scholarship that is more extensive and that derives from disciplines other than literature (Bakhtin 3). Bakhtin elaborates his methodology of interpreting a literary work further by highlighting that the semantic depths of a literary work cannot possibly be revealed by the study of its epoch alone but has to transcend its contemporaneity. Bakhtin argues, "Semantic phenomena can exist in a concealed form, potentially, and

be revealed only in semantic cultural contexts of subsequent epochs that are favourable for such disclosure” (Bakhtin 5).

Bakhtin argues that culture and by extension, literature present several phases of revelation in correspondence with the literary trends of the succeeding eras. The idea of “great time” derives its logic from the same argument where Bakhtin allocates various possibilities of interpretation that accompany “great works” of literature (Bakhtin 4). For him, “great works” entail semantic possibilities beyond their contemporary time frame (Bakhtin 4). Similarly, the cultures of the past always comprise certain undisclosed semantic possibilities. It is in the subsequent ages that their meanings, political potentials and inner contradictions resonate and have to be reconfigured. Literary analysis should strive to present occasions of interpenetration of the past and the present. In my paper here, I would strive to examine the theory of interpretation that Bakhtin presents in the essay with what are now seen as two significant moments in literary history where T. S. Eliot in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921) describes their enduring relevance to the study of English culture and literature and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s work “The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination” (1979) revolutionised the critical reception of the major Victorian novel *Jane Eyre*. These two works not only enriched the critical works that were already done in the two areas but also served as two illustrative moments of the constant engagement of the present and the past that Bakhtin strives to bring out to the literary scholarship.

T. S. Eliot’s essay “The Metaphysical Poets”, published in 1921 was a review of scholar Herbert J.C. Grierson’s anthology *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*. Andrew Sanders in his *A Short Oxford History of English Literature* points out that Eliot’s essay was so influential that it almost established a hierarchic pattern in the history of English poets and poetry (206). However, Eliot uses this opportunity to register his commentary on the uniqueness of Metaphysical poetry and asserts its continuing relevance and contemporaneity with regard to the nature and quality of English poetry. The group of poets that Eliot regards as metaphysical poets includes John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Henry Cowley, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell, and Bishop King. Eliot sees them sharing what he terms as “the elaboration of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it” or the metaphysical conceit. He acknowledges Samuel Johnson’s recognition of the same element in metaphysical poetry as a poetic flaw. Samuel Johnson remarks the works of metaphysical poets as “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.” However, Eliot himself finds it as a defining ability of the poet to be able to bring together disparate ideas to achieve thematic unity in the work of art. He locates this in the concept of the ‘unification of sensibility’ – where heterogeneous elements came together to form a unity – something that he considered the aesthetic function of the artist.

Eliot’s role of both, a poet and a critic places him in what can be as a powerful lineage of English loyalists. Eliot in his works seems to have assumed the role of an inheritor of the authority that rests with poets and critics like Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold. At the same time, Eliot’s engagement with the past is not of a scholar revisiting the historicity of literary works but of a literary critic’s and a poet’s acknowledgement of the presence of the past in the present (278). This essay, in the process of reinventing the literary relevance of the

metaphysical poets, also becomes a pivotal moment for T.S. Eliot himself, when the poet makes a case for his own poetry as a radical break from the poetry of the nineteenth century. The poetic ideals that Eliot seeks to establish and propagate are the ideals that the metaphysical poets imbibe and validate in his understanding. Donne and Herbert are celebrated as their poetics inhabit the unified sensibility as opposed to the dissociation of sensibility as practised by the subsequent generations. At the same time, the Romantics, as seen by Eliot were pivotal in the dissociation of sensibility. Only, Shelly and Keats show enough struggle to capture the unified sensibility in their works. Austin Warren argues that this necessity of reordering the poetic tradition arises from the need to validate the poet's own poetry. Eliot's own attempts at rearrangement can be seen as his own advocacy of an English poetic tradition which elevated the "School of Donne" but bypassed the effectiveness of Romantics. Eliot in his attempts of rearrangement regards the world of post-Elizabethans as the heydays of English poetry. Eliot, in his book *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* writes, "From time to time, every hundred years or so, it is desirable that some critic shall appear to review the past of our literature, and set the poets and poems in a new order." Eliot here has perceived the Bakhtinian argument regarding the ability of a generation to seek out its poetic ideals in the past, thus establishing a dialogic encounter between the past and the present. Literary works that occupy 'great time' are not only relevant to the epoch in which they were conceived but also resonate even with the concerns of epochs that come after (Bakhtin 5). The essay *The Metaphysical Poets* by T. S. Eliot thus described the enduring relevance of the Metaphysical Poets and recovered them from the moorings of their particular context. It gave them a semi-autonomous status of occupying a line of literary tradition.

One more prominent example of Bakhtin's approach, which is discussed here in this essay, is a reexamination of Victorian literature by two American feminist critics and scholars – Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination", where the writers revisit the questions around the status of women by unearthing the problematic feminist sub-texts of Charlotte Bronte's 1847 classic *Jane Eyre*. The novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) is considered one of the significant feminist works of the Victorian period. Essentially, it has been seen as a bildungsroman, tracing the growth and development of the titular character vis-à-vis society. Supplementing a feminist reading to the text, the writers brought forward the 'angel of the house- madwoman in the attic' dichotomy that circulates throughout the text. This enabled the critics and readers to analyse the position of women in Victorian society in light of feminist literary criticism that emerged in the second wave of feminism and even allowed the scholars and readers of nineteenth-century Victorian literature to re-examine and critique the social hierarchies and stereotypes that the characters were made to fit into.

The character of Bertha Mason who remains confined in the attic house of Thornfield Hall in the novel written by Bronte is later understood to have been secretly locked away by her husband – Rochester, the male protagonist of the novel. Bertha's narrative is treated as a subtext of the larger narrative whose focal point remains the character of Jane Eyre and her journey from girlhood to womanhood. Bertha is portrayed as a woman of mixed racial ancestry and is often described in violent images. She is initially exoticised and later held responsible for mysterious happenings at Thornfield Hall. The novel mentions the marriage of Rochester and Bertha Mason as an ill-suited arrangement where Rochester was lured by the wealth of her family who were involved in plantation activities in the West Indies. The feminist

criticism, thus unleashed by the work of Gilbert and Gubar, identified the omissions and political agendas that the nineteenth-century proto-feminist literature carried while functioning within the larger forces of colonialism, racial hierarchies and 19<sup>th</sup>-century liberalism.

Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* brought a significant change in the readership and criticism of the novel. Rhys' novel reworks the original plot, bringing in the character of Bertha Mason (stereotyped as a madwoman in the attic, as argued by Gilbert and Gubar) from the periphery into light and hence providing her with a voice that was denied to her in the original. While earlier she remained not only shut behind the doors but also shut from the reader's view, Rhys transforms the 'ordinary' incident of the novel into a crucial reading, opening up a horizon of critical interpretation. She reconstructs not only the plot but also the history by bringing Jamaican life and culture to the forefront. Rhys' work can be seen as a significant feminist reading when it comes to revisiting the politics of a text like *Jane Eyre* since it not only challenges the way creoles were perceived but also opens up a wider scope of critical approaches to the latter. The feminist perspective provided by Gilbert and Gubar in their landmark work is furthered through Rhys' work. The latter not merely acknowledges the binary position within which Bertha Mason is stereotyped but most importantly, reinvents the logic of feminist portrayal and nineteenth-century politics of representation by letting the character speak for herself.

Therefore, in the works of literary scholarship and research literature, it is necessary to incorporate the elements of our present political and cultural context into the works of the past. The notion of 'outsideness', where the reader acts as a foreigner with the faculty of what Bakhtin calls "creative understanding" is crucial to the operative process that the literary scholarship has to adapt. The reader is spatially, culturally and temporally removed and hence avoids any duplication. Bakhtin urges that a "dialogic encounter" between different cultures is productive to literary scholarship in order to realize "new semantic depths". His idea, though distantly, can be related to what Homi K. Bhabha terms as "*in-between spaces*"(216) whereby he elaborates on the experience of a postcolonial subject operating between the spaces. Such an experience cannot be determined through the stratification of culture into enclosed categories and therefore he suggests a negotiation between these spaces that comes through a sense of contamination. Bakhtin too suggests the idea of viewing a culture from outside in order to understand it better and hence develop fresh socio-linguistic perspectives. The outsideness of the reader and the possibility of multiple meanings of a literary text are two significant points of discussion, that Bakhtin argues, hold the key for interpretive exercises in research and scholarly works. Literary scholarship must remain open for creative readings in their interpretative exercises.

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