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**“What does it matter who is speaking?”: Literature and the idea of Authorship**

Kritika Sharma

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“What does it matter who is speaking?” someone said, “What does it matter who is speaking?,” – writes Foucault, quoting Samuel Beckett, in his essay ‘What is an Author?’ (215). Foucault’s essay raises a question that is not new in any sense but is extremely important, especially since it is part of a larger discourse situated around the idea of authorship in literature. Not long before this essay came out, another French theorist, Roland Barthes had famously announced the death of the author. In his essay ‘The Death of the Author’ Barthes defines a literary text as ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’. (Barthes 187) He markedly eliminates any mention of an ‘author’ in his definition of a literary text. What Barthes does in his essay is assert that a literary text is absolutely free of the possibility of being unified or limited under any notion of the author’s intention. In fact, once the text enters public transmission, it becomes a more or less free-floating discourse. Almost in response to Barthes’s essay, Foucault writes his own ‘What is an Author?’. With a very telling ‘what’ in the title instead of the expected ‘who,’ Foucault displaces the idea of author or authorship from the possibility of a merely humanist reading. He goes on to dismiss the word ‘author’ itself from consideration. Instead what we should examine in any given text is what he calls the ‘author-function’ (Foucault 220). An author does not write or even produce a text as much as introduce a discourse into circulation, a discourse which then takes a form of its own as it gathers more participants. ‘Author’ therefore is a false category. What we have is a ‘scriptor’ or writer who seemingly becomes one of the many voices taking part in the discourse once it is disseminated. Foucault suggests in his essay what he sees as the logical conclusion of Barthes’s pronouncement of the death of the author. He claims to take into account what Barthes did not. He suggests that the gap or absence left after the death of the author can be filled by his category of ‘author-function’. Both Barthes and Foucault, therefore, emphasize the relative independence of the literary text from any sort of single, unified, imposed-from-outside meaning.

The existence of a literary text as a free-floating discourse and the multiple semantic possibilities that gives to the interpretive task, are subjects that are dealt with by the poststructuralists and deconstructionists who follow Barthes and Foucault. Most of them revel in the ‘nothing outside the text’ discourse and comment on the polysemic potential of most literary works, free from the consideration of the ‘author’ as a critical or ethical imperative.

However Barthes did not exactly leave the space vacated by the eliminated author empty. Instead he ended his essay with the assertion, not one he pursues in detail, that the death of the author coincides with ‘the birth of the reader’ (Barthes 188). Earlier in his essay, Barthes implies that that the death of the author also means the birth of the text. These are two possibilities presented by the idea of the death of the author. While Foucault focuses more on the latter, the formation of a text as discourse, the former, the replacement of author by reader is dealt with by other schools of criticism. One such school is that of Reader-Response criticism. Critics who are normally considered part of this school of criticism have different points of entry into the critical discourse surrounding a text. However, what is common to them is the importance they place on the reader. Most of them do not devalue the author, nor do they seem to pronounce the author as dead. But they too seem to agree with the premise that once a text enters public discourse, the reader becomes an important part of the discourse, more, if not

equally important when compared to the writer. The theories of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss seem to imply that the relationship between the author and the reader is rather like that of the composer and performer of a piece of music (Richter 976). Both are mutually independent of each other but important in the establishment of a literary text as itself. Stanley Fish in a relatively more radical manner pronounces that it is interpretive communities themselves that create a text. A text is not a text until it is subject to interpretation by an audience. He also asserts that a text is a completely malleable entity and totally at the mercy of its reader who can manipulate it into whatever form he wishes. (Fish 1023) The 'author' is separated from the interpretive process. It is the reader who becomes the performer of the text. In tandem with Foucault and Barthes these theories would suggest that the author is merely a functionary with no other role than scripting a discourse. Once the discourse is disseminated, it is also out of the control of any one meaning-giving entity.

The question of the role and importance of the author is certainly not a new one, but it has been more pertinent in the last few decades of literary theory. After the Renaissance and the humanist bend it gave to the arts, and the Romantic age, the notion of the author has been attributed with a certain, almost divine sort of power. The famous Wordsworthian pronouncement of literature as a 'spontaneous overflow' of strong 'emotion' is perhaps the best, and the most abiding, articulation of this idea of authorship. A literary text as these humanist, essentialist theories (like Wordsworth's) will tell us is an expression of a particular author's mind – his thoughts and imagination. It is this expressive theory of authorship that has been challenged since at least the modernist period.

However, the solutions given to Beckett's question that began this essay, by Barthes or Foucault or Iser have not been satisfying. They have an associated abstractness that literary theory often finds itself propagating. In today's era especially, an author is often held to account for his text. This does not imply that biographical readings of texts dictate its meaning, nor does it mean that the intentional fallacy is brought into play. Readers might not always read a text according to what they think the author intended but they often interpret texts according to what they think the author might have intended. In a way therefore, readers construct an author for the text. They attribute to the author intentions that he might or might not have had. What is of importance here is that even when we assume the author is not dictating the discourse around his text, and that interpretation is paramount, that interpretation often takes the author into consideration.

With the word 'author' are associated the ideas of authority, ownership, and control. By extension the categories of duty and responsibility also come into play. It is all of these that the modern author seems to straddle. So even when Barthes's or Foucault's pronouncements free him of any authority or control over his text, once it enters a more public discourse, the categories of duty and responsibility are often thrown up in that same discourse. Especially when a literary text ends up having real-world consequences, it does not seem to be answerable only to itself. Neither is, as Sean Burke puts it in his essay, the author in such cases 'beyond ethical recall' (489). Making a case that in the discourse of authorship, 'intention' should be separated from 'responsibility' Burke argues that 'knowledge of who is speaking is essential to any reconstruction of why ethically troublesome or pernicious discourses come into being at certain junctures' (489). He argues that 'societies are not, in any case, likely to lose interest in who is speaking', which is why according to him 'we feel justified in holding an author to account when real-world effects are clearly and demonstrably intended by the work' (488). Though his argument teeters dangerously into the intentional fallacy, what Burke is pointing out is that a literary work, if it intends any real world consequences (and what literary

work does not?), can never be as free-floating a discourse as the post-structuralists or deconstructionists would have us believe. Which is perhaps why, in today’s era one hardly comes across a literary work whose author can be deemed satisfyingly irrelevant. Modern publishing, because of competition, commercial rather than intellectual, puts great emphasis on publicity and marketing not only of the text but of its author as well. Social networking, blogging and other web based services do present us with the sort of public space amenable to the kind of literary discourse Benjamin envisaged in his ‘The Author as Producer’, but it also gives a lot of exposure to the author, so that even in this sort of discourse the author is anything but absent. This extends to the meaning and interpretation of a text as well. With more proximity between the author and reader, more contact between the two, the text is not free of the intentions or meaning or effects attributed to it by either. Literary awards, even the most coveted ones, are given to individual authors, not discourses. Salman Rushdie is issued a fatwa. Milan Kundera is sentenced to exile when his novel *The Joke* comes out, while anonymous pamphlets and other anti-government discourses expressing similar sentiments are not acted upon only because they have no visible ‘authors’.

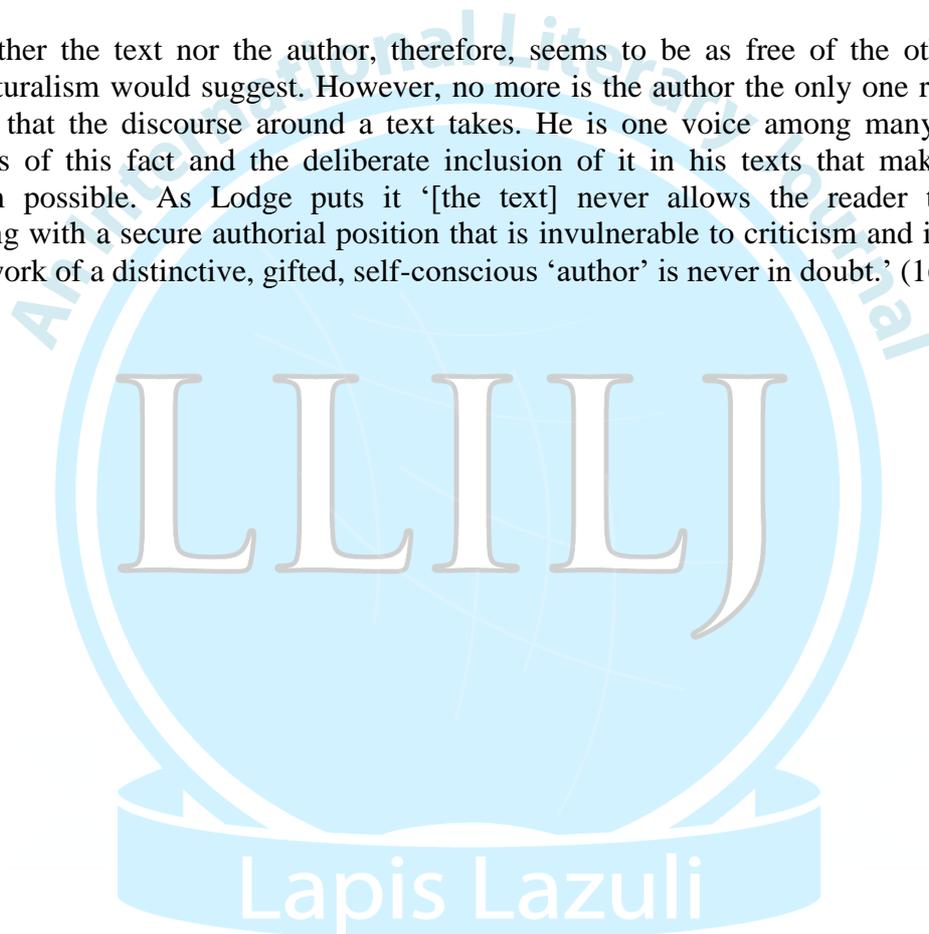
It is Mikhail Bakhtin who seems to present an adequate synthesis of these two strands of theory around the idea of authorship –one where the author is dead and one where he is ever present. Mikhail Bakhtin in his books contends, albeit in a slightly different context, that ‘the topic of the speaking person has enormous importance in everyday life.’ (578) The speaking subject is important not only until, but even after, the text has been spoken. What Bakhtin suggests is that an author invariably has intentions when authoring a text, whether deliberate or unconscious. But according to Bakhtin’s own famous theory, it is not only the author’s voice that is present in a text. Instead, as an instance of polyphony the voice of the author becomes just one of many voices in the text. Writing specifically on the novel form, Bakhtin asserts that it is a form of literature that thrives because of its dialogism and heteroglossia. A novel is not monologic, it does not have just the one voice, or one (authorial) consciousness that controls meaning. Instead it is made up of a multiplicity of voices, making the text essentially a collection of many discourses, not unified by the imperative of just one meaning. The author becomes a voice in his own text, and that voice is just one of many voices, thereby also abnegating control in certain ways, of the production of meaning. Thus, even after the text is published and open to public interpretation and discourse, the author is deemed neither dead nor irrelevant. He remains an essential part of his own text. Bakhtin uses this thesis to study the novels of Dostoevsky, and celebrates the dialogic possibilities of a text.

The question is how to reconcile the author who is one part among many of the text, to the author who writes or orders all those parts. How an author does that is suggested by David Lodge in his work on Milan Kundera’s novels. Elaborating on the ‘critical anxiety’ surrounding the question of authorship Lodge claims that it is ‘difficult to understand how an anonymous discourse (such as Foucault will have us make of a text) could ask of itself who controls it (a question Foucault poses).’ (155) Taking the example of Milan Kundera speaking of his novel *The Joke*, Lodge writes’

Since his books refer to the bad faith and injustices of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, must not this be what his fiction is about? That is precisely how *The Joke* has been received in the West. Kundera records, in the preface.. ‘When in 1980, during a television panel discussion someone called *The Joke* “a Major indictment of Stalinism,.” I was quick to interject, “Spare me your Stalinism, Please. *The Joke* is a love story”.’ This interjection itself is a statement of authorial intention, which we are not bound to accept. (Lodge 159)

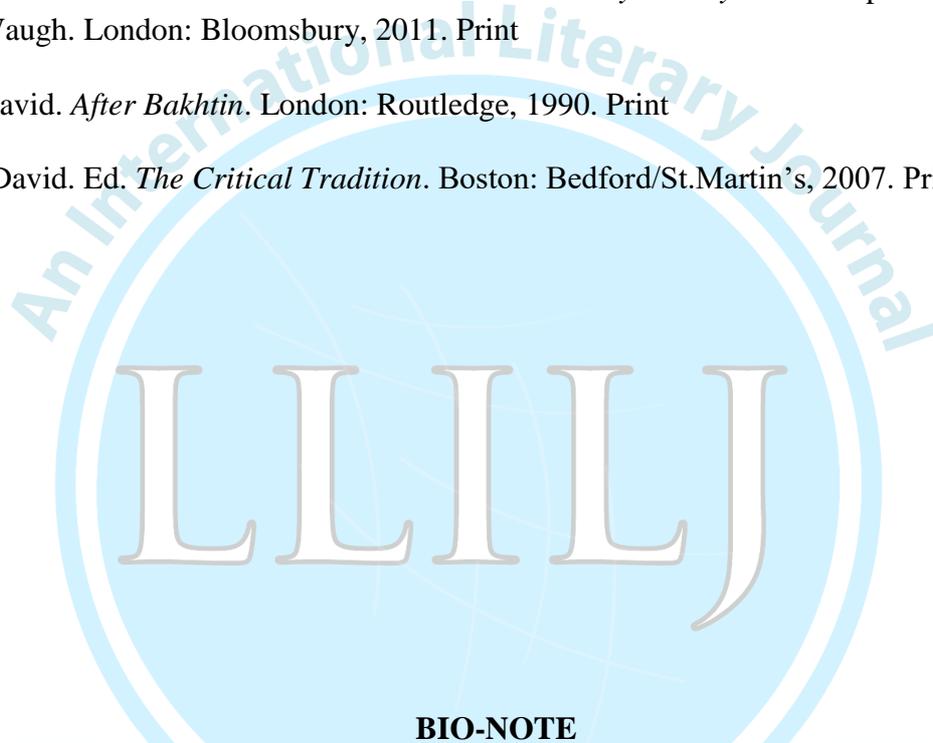
Kundera's remark might be somewhat facetious, but it does serve to show that a text is neither free of the material, ideological, and cultural conditions of its production, (in Kundera's case a politically charged country), nor is it wholly subject to its author's intention. So how does a text keep alive the author's intention, presumably reflected in his voice inside the text, and other voices which make multiple discourses possible? Lodge suggests that an author does it through the very deliberate maneuver of appearing 'as a trope in his own text'. (Lodge 161) This is somewhat similar to what Bakhtin had suggested. The author makes his presence felt, among other things, through authorial interventions, or through creating a narrator or teller who proceeds to speak in the author's voice, or through as David lodge puts it, other 'masks, disguises, obliquities and ambiguities'.(Lodge 161) Thus, through very self-conscious literary devices the author incorporates his own voice among others in his text. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* for example, one of the narrators identifies himself as 'Milan Kundera' and goes on to narrate events that the real Kundera experienced. Nowhere however is the assertion that the other narrators are less reliable or unequal or more fictional than the one who assumes the author's name.

Neither the text nor the author, therefore, seems to be as free of the other as French poststructuralism would suggest. However, no more is the author the only one responsible for the form that the discourse around a text takes. He is one voice among many and it is his awareness of this fact and the deliberate inclusion of it in his texts that make any sort of dialogism possible. As Lodge puts it '[the text] never allows the reader the luxury of identifying with a secure authorial position that is invulnerable to criticism and irony. But that it is the work of a distinctive, gifted, self-conscious 'author' is never in doubt.' (167)



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Kritika Sharma has been working as an Assistant Professor (Ad-hoc) in the Department of English, Hindu College, University of Delhi, for the past three years. She was awarded an M.Phil degree by the Department of English, University of Delhi in 2015, and her dissertation was titled “Reading War Poetry: Genre and its Limitations.”

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