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Author Cannot Die! A Critical Evaluation of Ronald Barthes' Essay *The Death of the Author*

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Abstract: *The status of the Author's identity in Literary Criticism regarding the ownership of meaning created in a text is still unresolved debate. Postmodern critics like Barthes and Foucault attribute no importance to the author in the matter of interpretation of his own literary work. The present research has focused on highlighting the significance of the existence of the Author for a comprehensive understanding of the text and proposed the notion of the coexistence of the Author and the Reader in order to retain the privilege of the Author as well as to circumvent misleading interpretations on the part of the readers by aligning his interpretation with the thought of the author. The study concludes that it is the author who directs readers' understanding of the text and adds to their knowledge and that the readers cannot be left alone to stagger between their indecisive interpretations of a text.*

Key Words: Absence, Author, Literary Criticism, Identity, Roland Barthes, Meaning, Reader

Introduction

The matter of the author's identity in the history of literary discourse has aroused controversy. The author has earned notable prestige since the time of Homer. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was mandatory for a literary discourse to carry the author's identity, and information of the text (date, name, and circumstances of its writing) so that it might be acceptable among the readers and gain value and meaning (Foucault, 1969). The author was unanimously considered the whole and sole source

interpretation of his writing. It was not until 1968, with the publication of Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author", that the focus shifted from the author to the reader. According to Barthes, the author's presence in the text is not relevant, and the text should be analyzed independently of the author's identity or intentions. The essay is seen as an overt attempt to upgrade the position of the reader by giving him the freedom to rely on his understanding of a text and construct his own 'knowledge'.

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Barthes disregards the author as a creator of an idea or, broadly speaking, a written work for several reasons. To Barthes, "it should be positivism, resume and the result of the capitalist ideology which has accorded the greatest importance to the author's 'person'" (1968). He seems not to believe in the 'genius' and intellect of the author that drives him to the production of a text.

Moreover, Barthes rejects the notion of seeking an explanation of work from the person who has produced it. Quoting Mallarme, he argues that "it is language which speaks, not the author", thus raising language to the level of autonomous activity. Language gains superiority to the author for being rich enough to lead the reader to the meaning.

The need for authorship has been dismissed by Barthes as he regards no writing to be 'original' but "a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture". He views a 'created' text as merely a 'recollection' of the ideas already embedded in the given culture.

Furthermore, Barthes is more interested in turning to the reader for the interpretation of the text, for, he argues, "the unity of a text is not in its origin (author) but in its destination(reader)". The reader should be overpowered by the overarching voice of the 'author' but should be allowed to look into the 'words' for meaning without associating them with the psyche, identity and ideological affiliations of the author.

This research concentrates on maintaining the plausibility of the conception that the author's identity has unique significance in creating a text, for every writing is based on a thought that provides true insight into the purpose of its creation. The author can be seen as not 'dead' after putting down his thought, but as being 'living' within the text.

Literature Review

Discourse is generally defined as "language in use". Linguistically defined, discourse is a piece of language longer than a sentence. In a broader sense, it refers to written or spoken

language used in a social context. Foucault (1972) describes discourse in terms of practices that devise the objects of which they speak. Potter and Wetherell (1987) find discourse difficult to view with complete objectivity. Discourse is considered manipulative and constitutive in nature. It is used as a tool to manipulate social and political positions and constitute power relations through language. This Machiavellian aspect of discourse prompted the rise of a discipline named "Discourse Analysis" that could provide a platform to design and practice certain methods and strategies that could serve to identify, analyze and address the issues related to discourse both on linguistic and extra-linguistic levels.

The term *Discourse Analysis*(DA) was first generally used after the publication of a series of papers by Zellig Harris in 1952 that focused on the nature of formal equivalence relations on the syntactic level in a coherent discourse. Leo Spitzer's *Stilstudien* (1928) is supposed the earliest example of discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is an umbrella term which encompasses a variety of research activities with entirely different goals and theoretic backgrounds that focus on language as a common interest(Burr,1995:163). "*Conversation analysis, discursive psychology, interactional sociolinguistics and all of the strands of critical discourse analysis are implicitly different forms of discourse analysis*" (Burr,1995:163).

Based on literary theory, literary criticism is another type of discourse analysis that deals with the critical analysis of a piece of literary discourse. The history of literary criticism dates back to the 5th century BC when Greek philosophers raised questions about the act of reading and writing. Afterwards, Plato (427-347 BC) and his successor Aristotle (384-322) denied the originality of the works of art and regarded them as just imitations of the real world. Though, later on, Plato acknowledged the worth of poetry.

It was Cassius Longinus (213-273 AD) whose critical methods predicted New Criticism and Reader's Response Theory. He set a

criterion for the accurate judgement of a literary work and that was that it should be read well. Moreover, he set a criterion for both the author and the reader that says that the author must have a great mind and soul and that the reader/audience must be the learned ones to determine the value of the work.

Longinus' notion of readers' response was further developed into modern *Reader Response Theory* in the 1960s and 70s that influenced literary critic Roland Barthes who, inspired by the concept of the authority of the reader rather than the writer, became the mouthpiece of the movement and gave vent to his thoughts of the denial of authorship in his seminal essay *The Death of the Author* (1967). The said essay is the subject of the present research. The essay provoked a debate regarding the prestige of the author and the explicit attempt of shifting active agency from the author to the reader.

Before Barthes, the notion of the superiority of language over the author, or, more precisely speaking, over the poet was put forth by Wimsatt and Beardsley in 1946. In their essay *The Intentional Fallacy*, they claimed that a poem does not belong to the author but to the public when once published because it is embodied in language that is a public possession. They argue that the intention of the author is neither reflected in the text nor is wanted by the reader, so intentions must not be regarded as a standard to judge the success of an artwork. Though the argument sounded valid, it was likely to evoke controversy regarding the authority of the author.

Foucault (1969), in his essay '*What is an Author*', supported the notion of the 'death' of the 'author' and presented the idea of the '*author's function*'. He identified the author only as an instrument to bring a thought into writing and the worth of the author was limited just to the front page of the book for the sake of bearing responsibility for his 'production' rather than 'creation'. Foucault (1969) propagated Barthes' stance of giving freedom to the reader from necessarily knowing about the background and intentions of the author and solely relying on their own understanding of the text.

Contrary to the argument of Barthes and Foucault, Burke, Sean (1998) defends the author's position of a 'creator'. He rejects the postmodern idea of the devaluation of the author and firmly asserts, "*the principle of the author most powerfully reasserts itself when it is thought absent*" or "*the concept of the author is never more alive than when thought dead*" (Burke, 2011:6-7).

In the same way, Farrell, and John (2017) strongly advocate the consideration of the author's intentions. Farrell strictly denies that an author's work is only a slip of the pen and that the literary work is self-sufficient to be judged by the reader. He argues that by reading a text, one tries to acknowledge the creative skill of the author. His work is not merely a collection of words, but rather a fine display of his mastery over language. He also opposes the idea of the autonomy of language as affirmed by Barthes and states that language does not have the power to shape reality. He suggests guaranteeing the intentions of the author behind the work to be known which would allow the interpreter to rely on his noteworthy power of inference. Farrel's argument of '*Authorial Intention*' has served as a facework for the author and effectively restored the privilege of the author.

Irwin (2002) replaced the conception of the 'death' of the author with the 'resurrection' of the author. Recollecting Barthes' and Foucault's arguments in favour of their stance, he articulated the implications of their essays. He relates that the reader's function is to only fill the 'gap' created by the death of the author (Ahmadi, 2012). He forms a construct known as 'urauthor', to be created "in the likeness of the original, the author herself", but he limits to include only what is requisite and relevant for interpretation. He takes an intentional stance by promoting the point of recovery of the author's intentions.

The above discussion shows that it is significant to recognize the role of the author's identity in constructing knowledge and the author is needed to fully understand the message and purpose of producing a particular work. Likewise, the reader has his own

importance in making a writing a success but the gap between the author and reader still remains unfilled. It is necessary to find such a solution that would save both the author and the reader and none of both has to die for the sake of the other which is the focal point of this study.

Research Methodology

Employing Gee's model of "Seven Building Tasks through Language", the current study is based on a qualitative analysis of Ronald Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author". The discussion accompanies /is reinforced with references from the open-ended responses to Samuel Beckett's mime "Act Without Words 1". The respondents have been specifically chosen using a homogeneous sample selection technique that is the respondents with considerable knowledge of literature and literary criticism have been purposively selected in order to authenticate/elucidate the analysis of the literary discourse under discussion.

Theoretical Framework

As mentioned in the second section, this research is drawn on the theoretical basis provided by Gee's (2010) model of *Seven Building Tasks*. Gee ascertains that language is used to inform(saying) perform certain functions(doing) and builds identities(being). He categorizes the tasks built through language, or, more specifically, discourse. These building tasks are described as follows:

1. Significance: language is used to render or lessen the significance of a matter, event, object, etc. It is through language that things are made more significant or less significant (p.17).
2. Practices: language is used to become recognized as being engaged in a certain practice on one hand, and, on the other hand, practices mark the use of language in a particular way (p.17).
3. Identities: languages are used to build a desirable identity for oneself. Certain identities are attributed to others too through language (p.18).

4. Relationships: *we use language to signal what sort of relationship we have, want to have, or are trying to have with others* (p.18).
5. Politics: *language is used to build a perspective on the nature of social good* (p.19).
6. Connections: *we use language to construct connections or links between things like ideologies, events, etc.* (p.19)
7. Sign system and knowledge: *language is used to impart more prestige to a particular variety of languages or a sign system than the others* (p.19).

Research Objectives

The research aims to:

1. identify the significance of the author's identity.
2. evaluate the reader's capability of judging a literary work especially when read and interpreted independently regardless of having knowledge of the author's identity and intentions.
3. observe the effects of the absence of the author

Research Questions

1. Is the absence of the author justified keeping in view Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author"?
2. Does the freedom of interpretation given to readers lead them to the true essence of the writing or to the misinterpretation of the author's message?
3. Is every reader capable of understanding and interpreting a text in the right way?

Analysis

As inferred by Gee (2010; p.17), "Whenever we speak or write, we always construct or build seven things or seven areas of 'reality'. The researcher has sought to critically analyze the literary discourse formed by a French essayist, literary theorist, and critic Ronald Barthes in his famous essay "The Death of the Author". The 'realities' or tasks constructed by Barthes in his essay have been evaluated one by one in the

light of Gee's (2010) theory of 'Seven Building Tasks' of language or discourse, which is as follows:

Significance

According to Gee (2010), certain things or facts are rendered as more significant or less significant through language. As in said essay, it has been observed that Barthes has emphasized the role of language more than the role of the author. When Barthes talks about 'language', his use of *it-clefting* accentuates the significance of 'language' in producing a text. Quoting Mallarmé, he claims that '*it is language which speaks, not the author (Barthes, 1967)*'. This statement explicitly accords language and deprives the author of his antecedent accord of creating a piece of art. He firmly asserts that language alone 'performs', and the author is merely an instrument through which language finds its way into writing. Here arises a question that if, in the process of writing, language performs autonomously, it should act through every person whether he/she is an author or not. Why does it manifest itself through the selected persons, once called the 'author'?

Likewise, the writer intentionally uses such words that imply the worthlessness of the 'author'. Mentioning Mallarmé's opinion of authorship of a poetic work, his use of the words '*suppressing the author for the sake of writing*' clearly indicates his intention of toppling the status of the author and consolidating his stance of the absence of the writer in a text. The use of expressions such as '*secularize the image of the author*' and '*the destruction of the author*' underline the insignificance of the author regarding his position as a 'Creator'.

More importantly, the status of the reader has been raised to the highest point of significance regarding the creation of meaning and the success of writing. When Barthes maintains at the end of his essay that '*the birth of reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author*', he seems to aim at reversing the hierarchy by placing the reader at the top and the author at the bottom, rather by removing

the author from this hierarchy as the author is 'believed' to be 'dead' since the writing begins to thrive independently and suffices to lead the reader to 'knowledge' it is meant to deliver. Hence, the reader is eminently made more significant than the author.

However, this statement is self-contradictory and raises questions in regard to the relation of the reader with the author. If the birth of the reader is conditioned with the death of the author, how the prestige of the reader is recognized? If the dichotomy between the reader and the author does not exist, how will it be assessed who is more significant and why? If the reader continues to live and the author is necessarily supposed dead, then the existence of the reader is redundant in the fact that two oppositions are identified in relation to each other.

Practice

Gee (2010) proposes that certain practices are getting recognized through language or discourse. The essay under discussion is seen as a practice of literary criticism. Being a critic and literary theorist, Barthes aims to criticize the anterior position of the author who has been considered the sole source of creating a work of literature. Barthes objects to the distinction drawn between the reader and the author where the reader is seen at the mercy of the author for the sake of getting the 'proper' understanding of the text. He supports the reader to rely on their own understanding of writing and not to try to penetrate into the mind of the author. He disapproves of the idea of knowing the person, his background, personality, psyche, tastes, etc. thus, he believes in emancipating the reader from the old tradition of associating work with its 'creator'. His critique of the status of the author is an account of his rejection of the authorship, albeit he himself is an author and is known by his writings, not by his readers. He negates the notion of originality of a work of art by referring to it as '*a tissue of citations*'. He affirms that literature is a neuter and composite that comprises countless sources of culture.

This practice of criticism enacted by the writer not only relates to the other practices such as writing, initiating a discourse and acting as a proxy for the readers but may also establish new practices like new literary movements to resolve the controversy related to the conditional existence of the reader.

Identities

The essay is an overt attempt of reconstructing the identities of the author and the reader. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the author was the overarching voice that was echoed in the reader's interpretation of the text. The reader was always in the background, taken for granted. The author (as Barthes pronounces him the Author-God) was singular acclaimed authority over a piece of writing. In this essay, the identity of an author has been reduced to a writer, rather a 'Scriptor' or an 'Inscriber' who does not originate an idea but just copies the already existing narratives. To Barthes (1967;p.04) the only power of a writer is '*to combine the different kinds of writings*'. It is not the creative skill of the author that brings about the creation of a text, but an automatic procedure of writing in the hands of the 'writer' who only writes '*as fast as possible what the head itself ignores*'. To justify this new identity attributed to the author, Barthes refers to the linguistic concept of an utterance that is entirely void that certainly does not require the interlocutor to fill this emptiness.

On the other hand, the reader has been introduced to a completely new, authoritative identity. For Barthes, it's the reader, not the writer, who serves as a 'locus' where the multiplicity of the writings is united. He denounces the notion of unification of ideas into text in its origin (the author), but in its destination (the reader). Now, it is the privilege of the reader to draw his own meaning that is exempted from their knowledge of the author. Redeeming the status of the readers, Barthes confers them with a more distinguished identity as compared to the author.

Relationship

Barthes points to the superfluous relationship between the book and its author. As he disapproves of the author being a creator, in the same way, he disfavors the idea of the book being an original piece of literature. Neither the author nor the book is 'real'. The author is just an imitator and the book is only an imitation. The author is '*the past of his book*', as proclaims Barthes, '*the book itself is only a tissue of signs, a lost, infinitely remote imitation*'. The book is no more an expression of the author's emotions, passions, humour and impressions; it is only a collection of words that extends not from the creative genius of the author, but from the enormous dictionary held in the brain of the writer. The author only feeds his work with words.

Barthes' description of the relation of the writer with his work is rather optimistic. Contrary to the author, he considers the writer to be born with his work. He is the one who performs the action of weaving the strands of different texts to produce a new one. He does not impose himself on the reader, not even on his work. The relation between the writer and his work is just that of an inscriber with the inscribed. His hands remain detached from his 'person'.

The relation between the reader and the writing determined by Barthes is even more positive. He calls the reader '*the destination*' of the writing. The writing does not gain any value until it reaches its destination. Therefore, it's the reader, not the author, who is responsible for the success of a literary work. If the reader has an inverse relation with the author, it has a direct relation with his writing. Though, it is certainly a matter of debate how the producer, the product, and the consumer stand in such a contrast constructed through their parallel relations.

Politics

As politics involves the gain of a social good for oneself or for someone else and vice versa, there are very obvious intentions of the writer to provide a social good to the reader and to

deny any good to the author. Barthes maintains that literary criticism has always been ignoring the reader and has always been forced to unravel the 'secret' of the author's personality. His main intention behind declaring the author 'dead' is to liberate the reader from the labour of discovering the author and his hypostases. Barthes*1967; p.5) argues that '*once the Author is gone, the claim to "decipher" a text becomes quite useless*'. Therefore, the death of the author, by all means, is in the interest of the reader.

As far as the author is concerned, in Barthes' opinion, he is not justified to earn any prestige as the 'genuineness' of his work is questionable. Barthes' denial of the creative skill of the author puts language at a higher place in the process of creating writing. Although, he seems to ignore the fact that prominent authors like Shakespeare and Milton had added hundreds of new words to the English language.

The essay puts the reputation of the author at stake for the sake of valuing the reader's response regardless of the fact that how far it might be from the clear message of the author. Shifting authority to the reader might be advantageous for the author, though not intentionally, only in the way that it would lessen the author's responsibility for propagating some misconceptions in society.

Connection

Barthes' hostility towards the issue of authorship is rooted in his belief that the 'Author' is a product of capitalism. The 'sovereignty' of the author has been connected with capitalist interests. As Foucault (1969), in his essay 'What is an Author', relates that in the 17th and 18th centuries, books were only valued if they bore the name of their creator. It's a common observation to the date that a book is known by its author and publisher that is sufficient to persuade the reader into buying their favourite author's book. Authorship is a means of manipulating the reader's choice of a book. Barthes again denies the necessity of the presence of the author by labelling his position as the 'accord of capitalism'.

Furthermore, Barthes constructs a connection between the Author and the Critic. The notions of authority of the author and criticism are interdependent. Barthes is of the view that if there are no authors, there are no critics. The critic's only job is to discover the author, his themes, emotions, and intentions which can only be found out by associating his works with his background, philosophical affiliations and his psyche. The success of the critic lies in his success in 'discovering' the author and 'explaining' the text. Thus, to Barthes, the dignity of the critic's work is depending on the existence of the author. If the author is dead, the critic is no more needed. Barthes suggests overthrowing the critic along with the author.

Being a critic himself, Barthes indirectly undermines his own place of being a 'Reformer', for a Critic's job is not only to discover the meaning 'hidden' in a text but to unveil the implications underlying the text that may lead the reader to a better understanding of the text and the motive of the author behind writing that text. Connecting criticism with the authorship, Barthes cannot disconnect himself from all these allegations he has imposed on the critics as well as the author.

Sign Systems and Knowledge

In his essay, Barthes assigns privilege to the language itself. He claims that ultimate knowledge comes from the language itself, not from the author. Language has been announced to operate alone regardless of the significance of the head it is operating in and the hands it is performing through. This argument raises serious questions. If language alone is sufficient to convey the message of the text, then why do the readers always demand the book of a particular author?

The author's genius creates his space in the text that requires his presence to fill that space. The researcher has presented some open-ended responses from five participants, including the researcher herself, to test this hypothesis. She has chosen Samuel Beckett's 'Act without Words' which is actually a mime (the link and the responses have been attached at the end of

the article). There are no words in the act to support the idea that it is a language that speaks. The participants have drawn their interpretation in relation to the author and the School of the Thought he belongs to that is Absurdism. Their interpretations are close to the message of the author but still, there are ambiguities that demand the presence of the author to get resolved. For example, the character's frequent examination of his hands is a mystery for even a learned reader or spectator.

Conclusion

The author's identity has an eminent place in literature. Putting his mind and soul into his writing does not result in his death but rebirth. It is his writing that keeps him alive and present not only in his work but also in the mind of the reader. The reader should not be restricted to knowing the author's identity but should be encouraged to try to know the very essence of

the writing that is the author himself. A knowledgeable reader is comparatively in a better position to interpret the writing. The accomplishment of the writing lies in the true understanding of a literary work that is more possible if the reader or spectator is able to access the message of the writing through its creator that is the author. A literary work may, undoubtedly, have more than one interpretation but the one intended by the author can lead the reader to the right meaning and free him from the responsibility of some expected misjudgments. To conclude, it can be argued that the death of the author is not the birth of the reader but the birth of another author, for it, is just the case of shifting of the authority of interpretation. Instead, the existence of the author's identity means the preservation of the identity of the reader. The author should be known and acknowledged for making his reader more informed and learning about the reality of life and the world around them.

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Appendix

Responses to Samuel Beckett's "Act Without Words"

Youtube link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qb_eM_MqUjTA

Participant 1

The world has several billion people. The way of thinking varies from experience to experience.

According to my opinion, this whole video revolves around the Man of Today.

*Goal of our life is to gain materialistic needs.

* If we have no aim (goal) we became lazy and wander aimlessly. We will remain empty-handed.

Sometimes the goal of life is quite near. But due to our laziness and lack of confidence, we are unable to hit our target.

Participant 2

Well, everyone has their own distinct interpretation of this play. According to my observation, this play enlightens the factors of life. It shows the struggle of an individual in the world.

At first, the man is trying to get out of the area and try to explore the world but he can't and every time he falls back.

The whistles maybe indicate the charm of the world but one can't see it without getting proper knowledge of it. That's why he was failing in his every attempt to go outside.

The tree shade disappeared after he got a pair of scissors. It may be telling us that all the supports and initial reliefs we get in life have to go one day and then we have to decide if we can effectively use the tools to make ourselves stronger.

The water may refer to our goals. He tried hard to get his goals but with every try, his goal went far from him. It was a great disappointment.

Participant 3

It can, of course, be interpreted in many different ways. To me, it seemed like a depiction of a man thrown into an unwanted situation from which escape is not an option...the man tries to change his situation but fails and ultimately accepts his fate and gives up the fight apparently blaming himself for his fate by looking at his hands.

Participant 4

When a man is thrown into the world, he cannot move out of it after all his efforts. He has to follow the rules of the world. The tree symbolizes happiness in his life that comes for a short time. Whatever comes before him, he tries to get but he cannot because it is his fate. In the end, he has no other option than to accept his fate.

Participant 5

in the beginning, it seems that the formula 'Man proposes God disposes' is dominant but after moves or feats, the viewer being aware of Beckett's style and Heidegger's philosophical orientation, can easily relate the scenes with nothingness and absurdism found in life. A man waits for nature to come and help but nature (dissenting views exist whether nature or God are identical or not) does not completely open up. It gives hope at a stretch, trees are emblematic of hope, rebirth and regeneration, and scissors symbolize the need to trim whatever is found in embryonic form.

Helplessness persistently overshadows man's existence, sometimes at the hands of nature's dripping, at other times at his own failed attempts to set new paths to tread.

The Researcher's Interpretation

The act symbolizes the absurdity of life in the case if we don't live it actively. The comforts, like the shady tree, don't stay in our life for a long time. We find opportunities in life to achieve our goals but we miss these opportunities due to our sluggishness, miscalculation of the situation and making wrong decisions. As the man in the act does not

make wise use of the scissors and also wastes his time moving and removing the cubes. Perhaps it points to the fact that when we learn to avail opportunities, they are gone. In the end, he abandons being a puppet in the hands

of our fate and no more runs after water that may symbolize his desire or life. His looking at his hands again and again has not been understood.