

F.R. Leavis at his Best in Fostering Profound Creative Interplay between Literary Criticism and Educational Wisdom with a Focus on Language as a Living Inventory of Human Values: An Appraisal

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Abstract- This paper attempts to present the efforts taken by F.R.Leavis in fostering a thoughtful creative interplay between literary criticism and educational wisdom along with a special focus on language. This paper projects the views of Leavis on literature, criticism, language and education. This paper also projects the reason why Leavis considers the language as a living inventory of human values. Thus this paper brings out a strong bond between educational wisdom and critical thinking of minds through F.R.Leavis.

Index Terms- Literary criticism, education, language, knowledge, understanding, evaluation, judgement

INTRODUCTION

Twentieth century is said to have inevitably witnessed paradigm shifts in perspectives and practices and very obviously in the conception of what literature and education are: literature is one of those multiple career options with wide range of employability to secure one's future and education seems to be the process of getting there through cramming. Everyone seems to know it. What is literature in reference to life? How is it relevant to the society which it reflects? What vital function does it carry out in promoting human well-being and in responding to the unhealthy cultural digressions? These are a few questions that provoke the study of how the Leavisite literary criticism still contributes to enhance our understanding of the correlation between literature and education, more specially university education. Leavis promise of what literature and university education can deliver in the post-industrial society in the critical training of mind and cultivation

of culture makes him a prophetically distinct voice in the literary and cultural scenario.

What seem essentially important for taking note of the Leavisite point of view of literature and education is 'a biographical sketch'. F.R.Leavis was born on 14 July 1895 at Cambridgeshire, Cambridge. He was a controversial and cut throat literary and social critic in the Cambridge literary circle which he insulated himself into. As an English teacher at Cambridge, and as the founder and editor of a high-end quarterly *Scrutiny* for long 21 years (1932-53) he was able to efficiently engage the English literati in serious discussions on social and literary subjects. However, he was not spared of crude criticism: contentiousness, dogmatism and narrowness were the charges leveled against him. Despite all such opposing critical views fielded against him, Leavis was so much convinced that literature cannot be divorced from criticism of life and he used a touchstone to assess the literary works of authors evoking a mixed response. Some called it a narrowing literary function while others found it as a strengthening one. Leavis is at his best in concern, sensibility and penetration when he deals with his choice of authors and subjects. "Despite primarily being obsessed with literary criticism, he has instinctively delved deep into sensitive social issues along with the analysis of education for civilization as well." (Britannica VI: 107). In the words of David Matthews,

"He holds Eliot in high respect as a critic" (Memories of F.R. Leavis 8)

He further says,

"What I shall get from Leavis is contact with a mind that loves literature, that has wit

and knows what's what in writing from exercising style himself" (P 8).

On another occasion, he wrote:

"F.R.L writes gracelessly because of his inhibitions He is delivering the last of the Puritan Sermons but has denied himself the privilege of mentioning God" (8).

Truly speaking, F.R.Leavis is one of the strongest stalwarts of literary and social scrutiny in the 20th century and his socio-cultural diagnosis has taken him to the analysis and sharp criticism of the industrialized English society. This is how Leavis puts it:

"Literary criticism, then, is concerned with more than literature ... A serious interest in literature cannot be merely literary; indeed, not only must the seriousness involve, it is likely to derive from, a perception of – which must be a preoccupation with – the problems of social equity and order and of cultural health" (Bilon 3).

Laying focus on the cultural health of his contemporary society, his basic assumption is that the modern civilization is deceased and his primary concern is to foster the growth of the activities that will alleviate and remedy this condition for which *scrutiny*. The quarterly Review may be taken up as a concrete attempt to campaign his voice of concern so as to seek a remedy.

Defining literature in relation to society, F.R.Leavis has attributed great power and significance to literature – especially in response to the unwelcome and hazardous cultural changes which then England was forced upon to adapt. To him, literature is not primarily just to please, not alone for aesthetic value. It embodies simultaneously a social response. And these social responses are not individualized fragments. They are held together to the substratum of what Leavis calls tradition. Tradition is the sum total of all wisdom generated all the way through the centuries. However, that does not mean to deprive the author of his or her contribution. Leavis himself states:

"Literature is not a matter of isolated works of art belonging to a realm of pre-literary values 'Literature is, in fact, at the service of a nation. They are created by individuals of specific creative

gifts. The tradition lays all the stress on inspiration and the individual genius. But to Eliot, it has to be impersonal. To the Marxist, it has to be social. However, the individual writer is to be aware that his work is of the literature to which it belongs and not merely added externally to it. Thus, a literature must be thought of as essentially something more than an accumulation of separate works; it has an organic form or constitutes an organic order, in relation to which the individual writer has his significance and his being. Mind is the analogy used: "He must be aware that the mind of Europe – the mind of his own country – a mind which he learns in time to be more important than his own private mind – is a mind which changes" (Scrutiny 3).

Literature stresses not economic and material determiners but intellectual and spiritual. There is a certain measure of spiritual autonomy in human affairs, and that human intelligence, choice and will do really and effectively operate an inherent human nature. And there is a human nature, an understanding of which is primary importance to students of society and politics. The literary critic's literature should be recognized to have for such studies; the study of it is, or should be an intimate study of the complexities, potentialities and essential conditions of human nature.

In Leavis's conception, "one cannot be interested in literature and forget that the creative individual is indispensable. Without the individual talent, there is no creation. While one is in intimate touch with literature, no amount of dialectics or of materialistic interpretation will obscure for long the truth that human life lives only in individuals, "the truth is only in individuals that society lives" (Scrutiny XII-4). Leavis here intercepts the Marxist ideology of 'communism' in literary creation. However, the past attests that a merger of the popular culture with the literary culture is possible at the level of great literature.

What matters in literature is value judgement and this is accessible only to the reader capable of intelligent and sensitive criticism and this does necessitate "his ability to respond appropriately and appreciatively to the subtleties of the artist's use of language and the

complexities of his organizations” (P 11). Without being an original critic, adverted and sensitized by experience and the habit of critical analysis even, for example, the social psychologist cannot learn about the social nature of the individual’s reality which men of letters like Conrad teach. Without the sensitizing familiarity with the subtleties of language, and the insight into the relation between abstract or generalizing thought and the concrete of human experience, that the trained frequentation of literature along can bring, the thinking that attends and political studies will not have the edge and force it too. According to Leavis, poetry is the sensitive spot in modern mind..... where a new response to life is taking shape; and “the poet is the point at which the growth of the mind shows itself” (Scrutiny XVI – 339). In his essay, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* Leavis quotes Mr.I.A.Richards again:

*“Matthew Arnold, when he said that poetry is
A criticism of life, sang something so obvious
that it is constantly overlooked. The artist is
concerned with the record and perpetuation
of the experiences which seem to him most
worth having” (FC 14).*

And obviously, Leavis attributes the tough role of the critical function of the society and culture to poetry and the poet becomes a sort of mentor that corrects the social tastes or a doctor that diagnoses and prescribes for the illness of the society. They are not custodians of ‘the tradition’. The positive characteristics of poetry are precisions of concrete realization, specificities and complexities. Therefore, poetry is supposed to manifest reality in sincerity. For example, “to say that Hardy’s poem has an advantage in reality is to say that it represents a profounder and completer reality” (Scrutiny XIX 93). The essence of Leavis’s essay *Literary Criticism and Philosophy* is his idea about the functions of poetry and a critic:

*“Words in poetry invite us not to think about
but to realize a complex experience ...
They demand a completer responsiveness
..... the critic (of poetry).... Is indeed concerned
with evaluation but to figure him as measuring
with a norm which he brings up to the object
from the outside is to misrepresent the
process” (Chris 27).*

It is these capacities for evaluation and judgement developed by training form the essence of what one calls the ‘poetic sensibility’. It is not to be sidelined

that “criticism enters overtly into question of emotional hygiene and moral value – more generally of spiritual health” (Scrutiny XIII 55). Leavis explains it through a critical process: “In the examination of poetry, the literary critic finds himself passing, by inevitable transition, from describing characteristics to making adverse judgements about emotional quality; and from these to judgements that are pretty directly moral; and so to a kind of discussion in which, by its proper methods and in pursuit of diagnosis of what we can only call spiritual melody” (Scrutiny XIII 60).

In literary criticism, accuracy is a matter of relevance. Criticism is not an individual and closed enterprise whereby only matters of literary concern alone are entertained; it has a nobler function to deliver. As Leavis argues in ‘A Note on the critical Functional,’ “it will always be necessary to insist ... that criticism is a collaboration and creative interplay. It creates a community and is inseparable from the process that creates and keeps alive a living culture” (M.Sean 55). “Leavis employs close analytical reading as his main critical tool. In Leavis’s words, language is the index of the mind and language has to be subjected to critical evaluation as the literature it bears. In his analysis, Leavis perceived language as “a living inventory of human values, requiring the ongoing process of critical refinement and reorientation (Terry 25). Leavis was said to be largely instrumental in launching the “two cultures” debate over the disparate roles of scientific and literary language. He denigrated the scientific language calling it responsible for the degeneration of culture and elevated the literary language to its old pedestal.

Leavis also agrees with Eliot in his understanding of tradition: it is the means by which the vitality of the past enriches the life of the present to renew our association with traditional wisdom. As a literary mind, he is obsessed without what literature is capable of offering to the humanity which other disciplines failed to offer. It is in literature alone that culture and tradition are so vitally present. Leavis was considered to be “a combined avatar of Johnson and Arnold, offering again the former’s moralism and the latter’s social vision and anti-theoretical critical practice” (Berry 29). Leavis’s approach to literature is overwhelmingly moral. Its purpose is to teach us about life, to transmit human values (16). Like Matthew Arnold, the 19th century English critic,

Leavis saw great literature as ‘moral exploration’ at religious depth and literature always acts in correspondence with the currents of the society. Literature, according to him, at the service of nation. Literature pleases and teaches minds; directs and orients the race of human race; conserves and gate keeps the invaluable inherent culture in the society. It functions as a vital organ in the life of a nation.

One of the traditional aims of literary study is to understand literariness; the aim of university education is to understand intuitionality and implicitly humanism. The university encompasses the varied senses of the word ‘institution’, including the cultural representation as well as the material phenomenon. The university arises from the web of ideas, historical events and cultural representations that combine to make the institution. New man, in the most famous instance of the idea, held the view that the purpose of the university was to give students a liberal or generalist knowledge of different bodies of knowledge, and inveighed against utilitarian purposes. But for Leavis, “the purpose of the existence of university is for a real training of intelligence, a real education, which should start from, and be always associated with, the training of sensibility in the literature of the student’s own language where alone it is possible”. (Scrutiny 111-117).

Liberal education is Leavis’s concern. To him, if some effective cannot be done with liberal education at the university level, it would seem vain to hope much of effort in education at other levels. The universities are recognized symbols of cultural tradition. What is essential, according to Leavis, is to have an educated and morally responsible public which can act as cultural gatekeepers for guarding and bringing to a check the forces that threaten the survival of the existing English tradition. The university is supposed to be the centre of education for favouring the utmost possible communication and co-ordination. In actual and ideal conception, the university exercises the function beyond the formal education and official machinery. It essentially has to provide in formal intercourse and interaction which would in turn produce a wider cooperation and larger profit. Leavis writes:

“The educated men will not be the product of merely of the literary – critical training; nevertheless, such a training will be

essential to his education. He who cannot tell the difference between the living in contemporary literature and the Book Society classic is disabled for discrimination and perception without which there can be no effective thinking about contemporary civilization”.

Leavis borrows Dr.Meiklejohn’s words to express his understanding of intelligence:

“Intelligence is readiness for any human situation it is the power, wherever one goes, of being able to see, in any set of circumstances, the best response which a human being can make to these circumstances. And the two constituents of that power would seem to be, first, a sense of human value, and second, a capacity for judging situations as furnishing possibilities for the realizing of those values. It is very near to wisdom” (P 126).

An education which aims to present the basic ideas that express the civilization of our time must be the result of the unification of multiple disciplines which only can exhibit the interplay of ideas, influences and forces. This interplay will consequently lead to directions of human values and human desires. Leavis suggests three areas of concerns in developing criticism over the educational system in general and university education in particular: i) the system of examination ii) curricula iii)system of instruction and guidance. All these are interdependent and universities are centres of education and wisdom. Thus, it is to be noted rather clearly that both literature and university should be taken up as humane centres for effecting social transformation and enculturation and the healthy interplay between literature with its critical function and educational wisdom does effectively co-ordinate the critical training of minds.

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