

# LITERATURE REVISITED!

by Widyastuti Purbani

\*\*\*

In the seventh year of the existence of our English Literature Department, it is very wise to look back, to take time to contemplate, of what we have done so forth while questioning "Are we on the right track?" "Have we seen literature as what it should be?" "Do we produce graduates with title and competence as expected by the society?" "Have we equipped our students with skills and capability to suit the need entitled in the degree they will administered as literature graduates for future era in which literary texts are seen as problematical?" Or we have been seeing literature as our ancestors told us so, meaning that our current and future graduates have been defined and dictated by archaic, obsolete values. In other institutions this kind of curiosity had been stirring the members for a long time. Some have even done some real actions, such as; at least, formally transforming the name of the institutions from Faculty of Literature/Letters into Faculty of Culture or Science of Culture like what happened in Gajah Mada University and University of Indonesia. The curriculum had been revisited and redefined. There had to be some very important reasons why they did so. Among other reasons is the vast development of the way we see literature as texts, which creates a new meaning and understanding about this discipline.

In the past we tended to see that literature was or is a very special type of writing. It is NOT a pedestrian and common text because it has unique or has been written in a unique way. The segregation between literature and non-literature was and has been very distinct, clear cut and discreet. Literature, because it was believed to be written by a divine and gifted individual, was considered to be embodying religious values, and therefore had the capacity to enlighten the readers, which other texts were impossible to do. The words *belle letters*, *grand texts*, canonic text or even Literature (with capital L) were entitled

to this type of text, and clearly cut the literature and non-literature domains. The criteria of literature was very obvious, that was the texts embodying values and tastes of the elite group of people within the society, who unfortunately was not the majority.

The 'duty' of literary scholars was then to enlighten the mass, by pointing out its aesthetic and moral values. They had a role to reveal the text's sensibility with moral values and the finest human experiences', to keep alive or to preserve the subtlest and most perishable parts of Tradition embodied by grand text (canonic) text written by divine individuals.

In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is (apart from cases of the simple and familiar) only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgment. They are still a small minority, though a large one, who are capable of endorsing such first-hand judgment by genuine personal response...The minority capable not only of appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Hardy (to take major instances) but of recognizing their latest successors constitute the consciousness of the race (or of a branch of it) at a given time...Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is the direction in which to go. In their keeping..is the language, the changing idiom upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By culture I mean the use of such language. (Leavis, 1930)

The readers, after reading or being told about the values of the text were expected to be more sensible, and be morally better, because of the transcendental truth, wisdom and moral values they obtain while reading the texts or because they are told so by scholars. Reading literature was aimed at the acquisition of sensitivity of language and the dissemination of the cultivated

values necessary for an orderly society. It also leads to the acquisition of sensibility.

Teaching literature besides governed to teach moral and sensibility also had a duty to teach language skills like reading, writing, listening and speaking. Reading literature was believed to be able to contribute the learning of those skills. The view towards literature remains traditional i.e. seeing poetry as positive and pop literature as rubbish. Popular culture, street ballads, romances, comic books, films were considered as non literature, because literature was associated with the culture of the civilized, and those mentioned later were definitely seen as the works of and for "uncivilized" working class people, whose main aims were to satisfy the bliss, instead of the intellectual.

Because texts were written by sacred people, reading literature had to be a trustful reading instead of being a suspicious activity. Because Literature was seen as a fixed, unproblematic, safe, and unified text, reading it meant accepting the text without questions. Reading was seen as passive rather than active doings. Readers were not trained, because it was pointless, to read against the grain.

Although I used past tense in describing about the past viewpoint on literature, it does not mean that this kind of belief had been left and forgotten. In our country, even in our very department, such faith is still widely practiced and used as principles of teaching and learning. No wonders if a good number of students continue writing *skripsi* employing this perception, and therefore tend to produce complimentary analysis, and some teachers are allergic or feel disgust to particular type of texts because they don't think they have Literary Quality.

\*\*\*

Language, as we observe, is power. Within language we can find conflict and struggle. 'weapon as much as poison', 'poison as well as cure', 'the bars of the prison house as well as possible way out' (Eagleton, 1985). Texts, therefore, should be seen as, because they are, fragmented, problematical, and sites of conflicting meaning. Some texts can both excite and entrap. It can provoke and manipulate the readers' opinion. It can motivate and deceive. Written texts, especially literature, have the power to construct the readers' subjectivity. Texts are also believed to be able to make and create reality. And letting the readers, including the English literature students to be passively constructed, and be the object, instead of the subject of and by texts will be a big mistake. As Hollindale argues:

There are hundreds of books which passively borrow and reproduce the sexual stereotyping which inherit from earlier fiction. No one notices, except radical adult readers who are alert to it and offended it. ....Unexamined, passive values are widely shared values, and we should not underestimate the powers of reinforcement vested in quiescent (quiet) and unconscious ideology. (Hollindale, 1988:7)

As we observe, we can show very clearly that colonization, imperialism and other forms of violence or abuses do not only exist in physical layers, but are inherited and intertwined within texts, uprooted within the language, the choice of words and expressions. 'It manifests itself not only in the company balance-sheets and in airbases, but can be tracked to the most intimate roots of speech and signification' (Eagleton, 1995:215). Seeing language and literature merely as means and medium of communication, and believing that studying literature as studying a means of communication is a naïve perception.

Passive reading as perceived by the traditional view would definitely fail to see the hidden ideology argued by Hollindale. Who are responsible to train readers to be "alert" on that implicit ideology, then? To treat English merely to develop and mobilize the national consciousness thought necessary by some for the maintenance of the status quo would be slavish and uncritical (Daly et al. 1989).

As educators we have duty to unblind our students to understand the relations between language and society, culture and economics, knowledge and power. It is our duty to make them alert; to be conscious to the existence of unexamined ideology embodied by texts, both high and low ones. We are obliged to develop goals, classroom approach and material which will transform English to the study of how and why our entire culture is produced sustained, challenged and remade.

Terry Eagleton has observed the failure of Department of Literature in higher education as part of the ideological apparatus of the modern capitalist state. He says further that:

They are not wholly reliable apparatuses, since for one thing the humanities contain many values, meaning and tradition which are antithetical to that state's social priorities, which are rich in kinds of wisdom and experience beyond its comprehension. For another thing, if you allow a lot of young people to do nothing for a few years but read books and talk to each other then it is possible that they will only begin to question some of the values transmitted to them but begin to interrogate the authority by which they are transmitted. ....Becoming certified by the state as proficient in literary studies is a matter of being able to talk and write in certain ways. It is this which is being taught, examined and certificated, not what you personally think or believe .....Literary studies, in other words, are a question of the signifier, not of the signified. Those employed to teach you this form of discourse will remember whether or not you were able to speak it proficiently long after they have forgotten what you said.....Literary theorists, critics and teachers, then are not so much purveyors of doctrine as custodians of discourse. Their task is to preserve this discourse....(1995: 200)

This provoking statement has reminded us on the danger of using a set of curriculum which core is that of language skills, which places literature merely to assist language learning, because our graduates will not be meaningful, as they are numb to the socio-cultural problems emerging in the society. It is impossible to expect these graduates to be agents of change in the society. The study of

literature, rather, has a duty to make the students to be 'sensitive, imaginative, responsive, sympathetic, creative, perceptive and reflective' (Eagleton, 1985) 'about nothing in particular' which at the same time could be understood as 'anything you care to mention'. It is very obvious here that the process of learning is far more important rather than the object of learning.

\*\*\*

Any nation always consists of many different levels of people. If literature is written and read to humanize the whole nation, and if what so-called literature is limited to only high writing, then how much of the whole will be able to humanize? There will be only a little number of people who will get the access to reading them. While a nation consists of many social classes, how many people will be really "enlightened" by literature without the help of mediator who must 'translate' and then interpret the text for them without any bias? Who guarantee that that "high" literature will be easily digested by common people? How many people will have the joy of reading Shakespeare's works? So, if the category of literature should be narrowed to canonical work, or work with grand quality then we might fail to embrace as many members of the society.

Cultural studies must act on the democratic principles assumed by Raymond Williams that the discourses of all members of the society should be its concern, not just those of educated elite. As he repeatedly disputes: Culture is ordinary! We must not be satisfied until all of us, the whole nation, come to perfect human being. The working class, the ordinary people who usually defined as the raw and imperfect men must get the 'sweetness' and the 'tenderness' of the elite minority.

The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have labored to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to

humanize it, to make the efficient outside clique of the cultivated learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of the sweetness and light (Arnold in Storey 1994: 7)

Referenses:

Eagleton, Terry. 1995. *Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell

Eagleton, Terry. 1985. "The Subject of Literature".

Eathope, Anthony. 1991. *Literary into Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge

Hollindale, Peter. 1985. "Signal 55". The Thimble Press

Storey, John. 1994. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. New York: Harvester