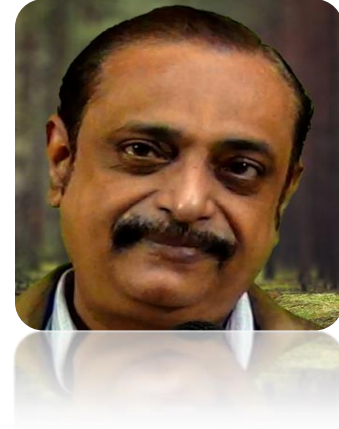


Jaideep Mookherji

Indologist & Independent Researcher
Book Review



“Redefining the Definitions:

Essays on the Exponents of the Postmodern Theories in Critical Literature”

by Avik Gangopadhyay

Abstract- "Redefining the Definitions" by Avik Gangopadhyay offers a comprehensive exploration of key postmodern theorists' contributions to literary and linguistic analysis. Gangopadhyay delves into the works of influential figures like Ferdinand de Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Claude Levi-Strauss, Noam Chomsky, and Julia Kristeva. Each chapter examines the unique perspectives these theorists brought to the understanding of language, literature, and culture, challenging conventional notions and setting new trends. Gangopadhyay meticulously dissects their ideas, providing clarity and insight even on complex concepts like Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction. The book serves as a valuable resource for students and researchers in linguistics and critical literature, offering a lucid exposition of theories often considered daunting. Through detailed analyses and clear explanations, Gangopadhyay invites readers to reconsider the significance of these theorists' contributions and their implications for literary and linguistic studies.

Keywords- Postmodern theories, Literary analysis, Linguistics, Avik Gangopadhyay, Ferdinand de Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Claude Levi-Strauss, Noam Chomsky, Julia Kristeva, Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, Structural linguistics, Intertextuality, Feminism, Critical literature, Reinterpretation

Redefining the Definitions: Essays on the Exponents of the Postmodern Theories in Critical Literature by Avik Gangopadhyay, is an astutely insightful probation into the most notable theories in the postmodern era that have attempted to analyze literature in the twentieth century. Avik Gangopadhyay, a scholar in English Language and Literature, a columnist and academic, has successfully forayed into the relatively less explored domains of linguistics, philology, literary criticisms and cultural studies with books that have won international acclaim such as "Literary Criticism, Beyond Modernism", "Literary Essays on Types, Trends and Genres", "Philosophical and Religious Isms", "Quest for Uncertainty", "Reality Rips", and "Diaspora, Roots of Trauma Literature." He is not less known for the popular and familiar realms of

academic interest as is evident from such books as *Shakespearean Scholarship and Criticism, A Perspective, Everyman's Glossar to Literary terms, Cinematic terms, Science fictional terms, A Companion to History of English Literature, Essentials of English philology, phonetics and linguistics, Aa Glossary of Grammatical Terms, Unique Essays, Cogitations on Milton's Paradise Lost, Book I*. His creative instinct is manifested in his anthology of poems and thought provoking short stories.

The book under review attempts to critically scan the literary and linguistic theories put forth by some of the pioneers of philosophical, literary and linguistic thoughts in the twentieth century. Each of these writers challenged the conventional notions and broke into the philosophical scene with ideas that were thitherto unknown (and for that matter, regarded inconceivable). They broke new grounds and set new trends that deeply impacted the analyses of literature. Yet much of what they said have been superficially understood, or taken for granted, or discarded as pedantic ideas serving as ingredients of intellectual gymnasium. Rarely have these ideas been thoroughly examined and their significance discussed with perspicuity that enables the lay reader to comprehend the crux of the matter or facilitate the curious scholar to survey the ambit of their applicability. Ferdinand de Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Claude Levi- Strauss, Noam Chomsky and Julia Kristeva revolutionized the conventional referents of judging a piece of literary work with their path - breaking ideas on language, expressions and commonly employed jargons in quotidian speech that till then had assumed naïve connotations unchallenged by gauche speakers and writers. Avik Gangopadhyay explores these ideas which have thrown up definitions that are quite pregnant with ramifications which are normally overlooked. The title suggests the goal of the author --- redefining the definitions of terms employed by the theorists in their treatises.

In the realm of philosophy, definitions generally serve the purpose of not only enhancing the clarity and precision of a term, but also of solving epistemological problems. Definitions, from the lexicographical point of view, are nominal and merely seek to describe what exactly a term denotes. But the philosophical purpose of definition is to explore the stipulative, explicative and even the ostensive aspects of a term. In the words of Bertrand Russell, 'all nominal definitions, if pushed back far enough, must lead ultimately to terms having only ostensive definitions....'(Human Knowledge) which depend on context and experience, and can enrich a language.

Avik Gangopadhyay explains, 'Since theorists of literature often draw on a very heterogeneous tradition of Continental philosophy and the philosophy of language, any classification of their approaches is only an approximation '. Yet he does not use this argument to desist from clear demarcation of the diverse schools of thought. He delineated each theorist's concepts from the others, more often than not by comparing and contrasting, and does not leave even the most

intricate and abstruse or seemingly nebulous ideas to the reader's intelligibility on the plea of being inexplicable. There is nothing that obfuscates the reader.

One of the most conspicuous features of the book is that the Foreword is not a mere justification of the choice of subject. Nor is it an acknowledgement of the source materials that constituted the ingredients of the text. It is a lucid exposition of the preliminary ideas in minute detail to ensure that reader without any foreknowledge of Literary Theories and Criticisms does not have to skim through primers to gain access to the text.

The main body of the text commences with Ferdinand de Saussure. A brief history of Saussure and his works are given after explaining the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Laryngeal Theory, Saussurian Linguistics, Saussure's concept of Sign, Signifier, Signified and Referent, Syntagmatic and Associational relations have all been succinctly but clearly discussed. Saussure's contribution to linguistics and even a guide to the study of his General Course in Linguistics has been provided.

Next topic is Mikhail Bakhtin and his contribution to the understanding and interpretation of language. Bakhtin's concepts of Heteroglossia, Chronotope and Dialogism have been discussed with reference to the radical criticisms of M I Kagan and P N Medvedev as well as other members of the Bakhtin Circle. Bakhtin's Theory of the Novel has been discussed at great length. His study of the problems in the poetics of Dostoyevsky and the world of Rabelais have been highlighted with special reference to carnival, history and popular culture. Even Speech Genres and Other Late Essays have been analysed. Bakhtin's impact on critical study of literature has been discussed threadbare.

The next theorist whose views have been examined is Jacques Lacan. Despite being a psychoanalyst, Lacan's theory of language has had a profound and indelible impact on several branches of humanities. What is more, Lacan's theories have nonplussed scholars for decades, which is why most critics either avoid him or deal with him in a slapdash manner. Avik Gangopadhyay has thoroughly investigated Lacan's philosophy of language and how the Unconscious mind of an individual follows a linguistic pattern. The influence of language on law as well as its therapeutic utility has been discussed, that too with reference to Freud. In addition, the complexity of the philosophical aspect of language as propounded by Lacan has propelled Avik to establish a mathematical relationship to simplify matters: Lacan = (Freud+ Saussure) - Derrida. Lacanian ethics too finds a detailed analysis in this book. For those who regard Lacan as a hot potato, REDEFINING the DEFINITIONS is a must read. Readers will form a clear notion of the relationship between psychoanalysis and the structure of language. When Avik takes up the even more perplexing topic of misrecognition of the self, he uses vivid examples to explain EGO, FANTASY and the realm of the IMAGINARY. Lacan's interpretation of the term 'other'

too has been discussed at great length. The idea of the FATHER and the role of PHALLUS have been vividly explained.

The very next topic reveals the didactic acumen of Avik Gangopadhyay as he discusses about the contribution of Roland Barthes. This is yet another difficult subject and generally critics either maintain a studied reticence or quote from his books verbatim. Avik virtually teaches the reader the path to be charted while studying Barthes. From *Écrivain* and *Écrivain* to *Textuality*, from the *The Death of the Author* to *Semiology and Myth*, from *Surrealism* to *Flirtation with Scientism*, Avik leaves no stone unturned. Even *Neutral* and *Novelistic writing*, *Symbolic Meaning* and 'punctum' have been dwelt at length.

Michel Foucault is the next theorist to be discussed about. His influence is incontrovertibly felt in the fields of hermeneutical, Freudian psychiatry and Saussurian Semiotics. As Avik Gangopadhyay puts it, Foucault's works have great brio and belligerency; he is well ensconced in the French intelligentsia tradition. This book succinctly discusses the major works of Foucault --- *The History of Madness*, *Archaeology and Genealogy (Discipline and Punish)*, *History of Modern Sexuality*. The author has also stated to what extent feminism finds a place in the Foucauldian analysis of power. Foucault's linguistic thoughts have also found a mention as the author assesses *The Order of Things*. There is a comprehensive discussion on Foucauldian philosophy with reference to Kantian philosophy. There is a disquisition on the *Analytic of Finitude* with reference and comparison to Husserl's phenomenology as well as Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. The author finally writes about the *The Confessions of the Flesh* referring to Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. The author concludes by pointing out how Foucauldian thoughts provide an insight into Saussure's linguistics.

Jacques Derrida, the next theorist for discussion, is quite lucidly dealt with. The concept of Deconstruction, as found in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, is often half understood by students of *Literary Theories and Criticisms*. Avik Gangopadhyay has taken up the topic at length, making it crystal clear with appropriate examples. The author discusses *Metaphysics of Presence* and *Logocentrism*, *Difference*, *Time and Phenomenology*, *Speech/ Writing*, the concept of the *Other*, *Possible and Impossible Aporais*, *Hospitality*, *Forgiveness*, *Mourning*, and finally wades into the polemics of Derrida as a philosopher or, rather anti-philosopher. In this connection, he makes a comparison to Nietzsche's thoughts. This chapter will dispel any misconception that the reader may have about Derrida's ideas.

The subsequent chapter takes up the role of the celebrated anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. The writer discusses how Levi-Strauss applied the structural linguistics of Saussure to anthropology. Then he explains the anthropological theories of Levi-Strauss. Next he proceeds to discuss how the concept of Binary opposites can be used to define social structures. Then he

critically reviews Levi-Strauss ' book The Elementary Structures of Kinship. Finally he estimates the impact of Levi - Strauss as an anthropologist in the various fields of humanities.

Next comes the discussion on the renowned grammarian, linguist and cognitive psychologist Avram Noam Chomsky. Avik Gangopadhyay points out how Noam Chomsky in his Cartesian Linguistics and other works invokes an alternative philosophical tradition that opposes the denial of freedom and responsibility of the individual by emphasizing the inherent rationality of mind and its liberty to exercise powers of autonomous judgement. Avik Gangopadhyay discusses in graphic detail Chomsky's Automata Theory with reference to formal languages and formal grammars. Chomsky's difference with Bakhtin too has been discussed at length. His strong disagreement with post - structuralist and post - modern criticisms of science has been discussed clearly. The author has included two special essays in this chapter on whether Linguistics is a pure science and whether the study of Literature can be classified as a social science. The last section of this chapter deals with the topic Bakhtinian Scholarship and Chomsky.

The final Chapter of this book deals with the contribution of Julia Kristeva, her contribution to linguistics and the study of literature. In this context, the terms Intersexuality and Hypertext have been clearly explained. There is a section on Kristeva and Barthes. Feminism, the politics of Marginality, Kristeva 's brand of feminism, Abjection and Sexism, all find a place in this chapter.

Redefining the Definitions is not only a must buy for the serious student of linguistics and critical literature, but also an important reference book that can be an ideal supplementary material to those interested in doing research work on these writers. Sujoy Mukhoti, Rajib Choudhury and Mounamita Roy deserve accolades for the attractive get up. Published by Bhasabandhan, Kolkata, the book is priced at Rs 380/-. ISBN 978-81-908363-1-9

The critic and the reviewer can be reached at jaideepmookherjee@gmail.com

