UNIT 5 THE CRISIS IN ENGLISH STUDIES

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit we discussed the institutionalisation of the English language in mainstream Universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. We also focussed on the formulation of the myth of Englishness. In this unit we shall also look into the parameters that define literature as a category. We shall also look at how these boundaries are framed and whether they allow a degree of flexibility or not?

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Through the course of our discussion in this unit we will examine Widdowson’s idea of the relation between literature and criticism. According to him there exists a ‘reciprocal relationship’ between the two entities. We will also discuss Marxist theory and its assumed isolation by Widdowson from the implementation of theoretical strategies in academic institutions.

5.2 LITERATURE AS A CATEGORY

Widdowson’s essay, “The Crisis in English Studies” is an introduction to the book Re-Reading English that he has edited himself. As the title suggests this book offers a reinterpretation of English studies. Our purpose here would be to see how far this relook at English resists canonical formations. Is Widdowson really offering another radical perspective for the study of English or is the new theoretical premise another manifestation of the already established canon? Such an analysis would then help us question the assumptions of both the canon and the strategies of reinterpretation adopted by today’s academics. Widdowson identifies a ‘crisis’ in the field of English studies.

The term ‘crisis’ signifies the recognition of certain ruptures within theoretical studies pertaining to English literature. For Widdowson this theoretical upheaval is not based on a conflict between different critical approaches towards literature. The crisis in English studies according to him is a reflection on the breakdown of the insular category of English literature. As a result the index of identity formation of English is undergoing a change today. In the context of this argument we are going to study the direction in which English studies is headed. As Widdowson says
It is a question, posed from within, as to what English is, where it has got to, whether it has a future, whether it should have a future as a discrete discipline...the business of making one's own academic discipline itself the object of scrutiny of deconstructing and/or reconstructing it has not been commonly undertaken.

According to Widdowson, to challenge the assumptions of the canon it is important to dismantle literature as a closed entity. Our focus therefore should be on the simultaneous formation of and resistance to the category English. At the same time we have to study the techniques employed for this process of "deconstructing and/or reconstructing" to see whether they evolve a new attitude towards English. Widdowson studies the relationship between the implications of the myth of 'Englishness' and the changing 'social and political needs' at a specific moment in history. This means that he recognizes a connection between literature and society where social transformations have some bearing on the literary set-up. Widdowson has contextualised this crisis in terms of the debate that was raging in the University of Cambridge in 1981. According to him, the journal The Guardian stresses the need for a politically conscious 'English syllabus'. However, this same journal quotes Professor Ricks' remark on the need for upholding the 'canon'. This establishes the polarities towards the literary problematic—on the one hand is the view that looks at English as a category rigid in form and on the other hand is a perspective that takes into consideration socio-historic formations and their association with literature. A desire to maintain the canon is a marker of the threat posed to the dominant position of the canonical version of literature.

It should be clear to us that, the research and teaching faculty that supports canonical texts does so to maintain their superiority and to shun alternative readings of literature. Otherwise, how is research possible without an understanding of and experimentation with different theoretical stances? How can a faculty, favouring status quo bring about any change in the social set-up? This shows the connections between the Universities and the courses offered, as, the, outlines of the syllabus are determined by them. The Course in English Literature has to be formulated in a way that it brings about changes in the very structure of the literary frame. One of the ways of doing this according to Widdowson is by attacking value-based criticism.

Widdowson introduces us to the debate of the 'value' of literature. What does one mean by the 'value' of literature? He says,

*In recent years in Britain there has been a growing debate among radical critics about the value of 'Literature'; about the principles by which we evaluate different literary productions; and indeed, the category 'Literature' itself.*

The debate on whether or not literature is a value-laden construct can be attributed to an increased interest in inter-disciplinary activities with departments such as sociology or history. A shift in positioning based on the focus of a specific subject has introduced the possibility of other interpretations to the category, literature. Value implies the privileging of certain texts as important and others as part of genres regarded as 'low brow' such as popular culture. What is the basis of these demarcations that make certain texts part of the canon whilst sidelining the rest? According to Widdowson canonical interpretations are value-based. They look for a definite moral or ethical meaning in the text. Such an interpretation allows for the perpetuation of power structures in society. According to Widdowson a single critical premise will not offer the appropriate answer that can be located only when we question the 'received tradition' of literary works.

A discussion of the value of literature throws us back in time to the period of the pre-New Critical Theorists like I A Richards who asserted the need for value-based literature. As discussed in Unit III, the allocation of value to literature implicates the
Utilitarian model of the nineteenth century. In the contemporary situation we continue to look for 'value' in literature that will reinforce the moral codes in society. The value of literature implies that there is an intrinsic core to English that can be revealed in some way. This mystery can be understood through the tools of critical theory. It also reflects on the puzzles of human life that are difficult to understand and are best left in this incomprehensible state. According to Widdowson these associations stem from a bourgeois mode of thinking that project such thought processes as universally applicable. The interests of one particular class subsume within itself the contradictions of the other groups. This activity goes on in a subtle manner. We look at this phenomenon in the following section.

5.3 CRITICISM AND THEORY

Widdowson formulates the relation between literature and criticism in the form of a reciprocal equation. According to him literature has its own specific ideological space and criticism is usually understood as separate from it. Criticism is supposed to provide the methodological devices for understanding aspects of literature in their variety and particularity. The question that Widdowson raises is – Does literature constitute criticism or is it in turn determined by critical theory? As Widdowson says,

‘Literature’ is, in effect, being recognized as the construct of a criticism which, while assuming and proclaiming its ‘descriptiveness’, its ‘disinterestedness’, its ideological innocence, has so constituted literature as to reproduce and naturalize bourgeois ideology as ‘literary value’.

If as according to Widdowson criticism claims to be ‘descriptive’ and ‘disinterested’ it means that its devices describe the literary aspects of a text in an objective manner. In this sense criticism only extends the domain of literature making it more approachable. Widdowson explains the reciprocal relation in that criticism constitutes literature and literary value. According to him, the field of operation of critical theory is not ideologically innocent and employs certain devices for understanding a text. The category, ‘literature’ is formulated by the continual deployment of methodological strategies that slot certain texts as part of literature. According to Widdowson this is how criticism determines literature and brings about the formation of the canon. The implications of this are diverse. Widdowson notes that criticism by ‘selecting’ and ‘evaluating’ works of literature creates the idea of literary value – one that presents the interests of a specific group in society. These practices are bourgeois in nature and structure the canon in a way that makes these strategies seem natural. In fact, according to Widdowson, these values reflect the interests of the bourgeois group that believes in liberal individualism – the belief of a group of people who like to propagate a view of literature in consonance with the profit-making motive of a capitalist system.

You must be wondering what connection can possibly exist between literature and the economic system. We must understand that society has levels of power points that form an integrated structure. These power nodules influence literature even as it tries to resist them. However without an understanding of the connections between literature, society and power a fully formed resistance is not possible. In this context the powerful groups exercises control over the literary elite. This latter group continues to maintain its elitism by allying with the dominant groups even as it pretends to attack mainstream ideas. The bourgeois class regulates the ideological processes of the literary elite making literature reflect their interests. Critical theories, suggests Widdowson, are many and classify literature in their own various ways. However, our target is those methods that construct the canon in terms of value-laden statements. We have to caution the reader/writer against the deployment of such critical theories.
Widdowson argues that the bourgeois aspects of criticism have become an integral part of the British education system due to the simultaneous occurrence of certain socio-literary factors. In the previous chapters we have studied the reasons for the institutionalisation of English studies and the belief in the myth of Englishness. Widdowson also points towards Arnold’s conception of literature as an alternative to the religious ideology that had regulated the lives of the people in the past. This led to the emergence of the idea of culture – a substitute to religion that could save mankind. In terms of changes in economic structures this was the period when capitalism was establishing itself in Britain. This meant that the Utilitarian philosophy of the ‘greatest good for the greatest number’ had become the rule for life in the nineteenth century. However, for Widdowson even as these factors, they should not be overestimated.

Widdowson points towards two more significant factors in the establishment of the canon – one is the development of professional criticism and the other the introduction of English into the academic curriculum of the Universities. It is a conglomeration of these factors that defined the canon. This took place in terms of what has been explained as a ‘reciprocal relationship’. As a result, English was established as a privileged literary and cultural signifier and English studies became synonymous with the area of criticism. In Widdowson’s words:

*The reciprocal relationship between the construction of Literature by modern criticism, and the establishment of that ‘English’ as criticism in higher education is a nexus of great importance in the sustaining of liberal ideology.*

What Widdowson means in this quotation is that the constitution of English studies as criticism had serious consequences in the formation of a networking between the study of English and the field of Criticism. Here we would like to caution the reader. In saying that literature is constituted by criticism, Widdowson seems to be privileging the latter over the former. However, the two need to be seen in a dialectical relation where both literature and criticism contribute to the formation of each which in theory can be called a significant problematic. If, English is, constituted by its reciprocal relation to Criticism then, we have a specific kind of English that is projected as the index of literariness. We also have a set of rules as part of Critical theory that go on to project the canon of English literature. What we mean is that criticism provides the yardstick to determine English in its canon form. This makes the rules of conventional or bourgeois critical theory acceptable as English. This as Widdowson explains is part of the liberal policy of the dominant group that favours English studies by a particular group over the others.

The liberal radicals fight for the individual’s rights of freedom. However, in this case there is no scope for the society to move in a collective manner. The space of one individual is bound to clash with that of another one. So are we not moving towards an anarchic world in which each individual is going to fight for his own specific interests? How can equality and harmony in society be visualised in such a case? What is the effect of this on the students specialising in English literature in the Universities? The canon has an active impact on the thinking power of the students whose minds are fed with fixed notions. They are manoeuvred into accepting the ideology of the literary elite. Research and study in literature is reduced to ‘listening’ to lectures framed by the people who have contributed to the canon. This prevents the students of English from making any valuable contribution to research or alternative areas in literature as we too often see.

According to Widdowson the spread of canonical tendencies in literature breeds two major assumptions. Firstly, the authorities that encourage canonical formations believe that there is an essential body of knowledge known as literature. This brings back the idea that literature has an inherent value of its own allowing space only for minor changes in the cultural field that surrounds it. The boundaries of the functional field of literature have been determined and all that exists outside it is non-literary.
Literature becomes text-centred and is not affected by changes in the social and historical formations. Secondly, another assumption that is circulated is that criticism is a holistic entity—a body of work that is undifferentiated in nature. As Widdowson says:

_The other assumption is...criticism exists as a largely undifferentiated corpus of scholarship—undoubtedly representing many different individual ‘views’ of literary texts, but innocent of other ulterior design or motive._

Mainstream methods advocate the existence of a ‘universal and immanent’ category ‘literature’ that has a specific literary value. Value-based Criticism ignores the different perspectives or critical theories within criticism. As Widdowson points out, criticism in the present state expresses the individual’s perception of a text but without a specific point of view. Looking at the text from a specific point of reference would mean a definite ideological stance. However, canonical forms that look at both literature and criticism as singular in nature negate interpretations that do not have moral overtones. In the absence of ‘ideological determinants’ literature and criticism remain free-floating and meaningless. Canonical readings of literature and criticism rule out the possibility of a reinterpretation of literature. This means that literature cannot be used to understand the contradictions in society and changes in its base or different superstructures. Literature cannot function to formulate a cohesive and meaningful ideology and would be left within the bourgeois frame of society. It is therefore necessary, according to Widdowson, to question strategies that naturalise literature and criticism so that these concepts can be understood in terms of a dialectical form.

Widdowson expresses his unease with the fact that this debate on the value of literature has still not acquired momentum. According to him in the Universities of the First World resistance to the canon is still sporadic. As a result departments that are into theoretical research have still not been able to counter the canon effectively. The reason is that even progressive academic departments ignore the context of their research and focus on value-laden critical methods. Widdowson explains that the reasons for the perpetuation of canon studies, is a lack of proof to explain the disaster towards which we are heading. However, Widdowson is being too empiricist in demanding a proof to substantiate his argument. The catastrophe has already hit us even if we fail to realise its impact. We are now in the new phase of capitalism—one where even literature has become a commodity to be consumed. Colonialism has manifested itself in the form of neo-colonialism. Signs of literary and social degeneration are evident everywhere around us. It is surprising that Widdowson has written off the history-centred Marxist approach from any realisation of freedom in such a scenario.

### 5.4 CANON AND CRITICISM

Let us now take a look at the response of canonical works towards cogent critical theories. Important theoretical concepts like Marxism and Feminism have called to question the assumptions of the canon. However, the proponents of the canon consider ideas of history and theory merely a distraction. As Widdowson points out, “That this is so is confirmed by the reiteration, in the Cambridge English debate, of the centrality of the ‘canon’ and the need ultimately to dispense with the distractions of history and theory in order to return to the unproblematic reality of the ‘literary works themselves’”. Widdowson cites the example of Marjorie Boultons book, _The Anatomy of Literary Studies_ that has not really moved beyond the writings of a Matthew Arnold and the Newbolt Report of 1921. This supports our argument about the effect of the canon on students of the succeeding period. If the myth of English and Criticism is going to be circulated and not resisted then only works like Boultons’ are going to be written and circulated. The canon looks at literature as a
well-defined body that formulates the rules for human behaviour. It lays down what Widdowson refers to as the ‘universals’ of life.

In this context another example of canonical blunders is the ignorance on the part of canon constructors of the association of Joyce and Paul de Man with the Nazis. This does not disturb those who construct the canon as they regard this as an aberration and learn lessons from it as also to make the academic world sufficiently conscious of the role those two may have played in the literary and cultural world. Literature is supposed to exercise a civilising influence on society. This is the claim constantly made. Those who adhere to this are considered as part of the canon and those who resist it are marginalised. This generates a structure of bourgeois morality that looks at literature in a biased way. What would happen if we extend this argument further to our own context in the Third World? The answer is clear. The canon of English studies generates universal human values. It is a rigid frame that cannot be questioned and altered. In this way the powerful sections of the developed countries set standards for the developing ones of the Third World. The languages put forth in the canon have a determining influence on the study of what then becomes the vernacular. The structures of power in our context are re-modelled on those of the powerful groups in the First World Academic Centres. Even the level of humanity and social awareness is to be determined by the privileged section of the First world. It is not a surprise that we take great pride in flaunting our acquired ‘Englishness’ without understanding its nuances in terms of our own cultural signifiers. Widdowson makes us partly aware of this and we should extend his argument further. Help in this regard is supposed to come in a major way from the Marxist Approach to literature.

5.5 MARXISM AND THEORY

Widdowson points towards the consequent need for questioning received traditions if one has to develop an active understanding of literature and literary theory. He says, “It is therefore imperative, if literature remains a massively consumed product in society, and if the study of it widely persists, that a criticism be mobilised which can positively engage with them”. What does Widdowson consider as a sound theoretical premise for questioning the canon? He begins by saying that the last decade has created the space for the advent of a process of questioning: However, we can mention that the 1970s failed to make way for progressive ideas. What actually happened was that the 1970s definitely produced new manifestations of a conventional mode of thinking. What are these modified forms? Further to what extent is Widdowson complicit with these ideas even as he claims to resist them? According to him, “Such a criticism is predicated on empirical practice, on the study of ‘texts’, and is heavily reinforced by the publishing industry, both in its large investment in Literary Criticism— even, increasingly and significantly, versions of Marxist criticism—and in its publication of ‘Libraries’ of ‘classic texts’ and ‘student editions’”.

Conventional criticism for Widdowson is associated thus with the empirical practice of reading the text. This is particularly true in the case of theorists like de Man and Derrida who foreground the text and its nuances and ignore the context to which it is related. This is then another version of New Criticism that in an early phase of theory drew the readers’ attention to the ‘words on the page’. Theorists in the present day continue to focus on the text, only the coordinates have changed, they have become more ‘de-centred’ and archaic. It is true that the publishing industry has made available a large number of texts and has brought about a boom in the different branches of literature and social sciences. However, it is strange that Widdowson equates versions of Marxism with ‘classic’ texts and ‘student editions’. Wherein does the connection lie? He is trying to suggest that the relationship of Marxism with society is the same as that between society and the classic texts. Against the
supposedly dated ideas of Marxism Widdowson privileges theory at a ‘high level of abstraction’ which has somehow lost its appeal. Even though Widdowson critiqued conventional criticism as the product of a bourgeois and capitalist ideology, he looks at theory as an abstract concept hidden somewhere in the pages of the text. He states clearly that he does not want to identify himself with what he calls ‘crude new empiricism’. This new form of empiricism appears to be the relationship between theory and the formative influences in which it originates. The potentiality of theory energising literature to play a social role is largely lost on Widdowson.

These ideas become clear in Widdowson’s discussion of Marxist criticism, theory and literature. He recognizes Marxist thought as a sustained theoretical critique that focussed on the lacunae in the hegemonic state of dominant forces. It attacked the belief system of the bourgeois class that tried to regulate the economic and literary structure of society. However, according to Widdowson this has had an adverse effect on the problematic of theory. According to him this has led to a synonymy between Marxist criticism and critical theory. He says, “But the result has been in effect, that Marxist criticism now means critical theory”. Contrary to what Widdowson thinks it is not as if Marxism has hindered the development of other theoretical points of view. In the past decades we have seen the consolidation of feminism as a sound theoretical premise. Has Marxist thought inhibited the expansion of feminist thought process or has it in some way contributed to it? Let us pose another question to answer this one. Can we think about equal status for women in a class-based society? The answer is that Marxism and feminism form the strongest allies that can together try to initiate a new social order.

However, Widdowson has written off Marxist thought as of no consequence for literature since he believes that Marxism has vacated the field of critical theory. According to him, “It becomes ‘something else’, a ‘different’ autonomous self-generating intellectual field, tending to leave the empirical field of study clear for the continuing operations of literary critical practice”. Widdowson is suggesting that the active applicability of Marxist thought is not possible anymore and that Marxism exists only as a passive category that can have no meaning for the society in which it is formed. How can a theoretical enterprise based on the existing living conditions of society not be active or relevant? This is the problem of the First World theorists who are quick to eliminate Marxism from their context without realising that the Marxist outlook is closely aligned with working masses. We have already analysed a similar problem in the case of Bergonzi who has relegated Marxism as an ‘obsolete weapon’ in the context of Thatcherite politics. Theorists like Bergonzi and Widdowson have ‘naturalised’ the idea of context in the process of resisting it. Also they discuss the validity of Marxism if at all with respect to their own world as if no other exists. They ignore the Third World where Marxism is seen as a powerful force to counter strategies of bourgeois thinking. One may apprehend that the next target of the First World thinkers is going to be feminism so that any possibility of change is ruled out. This is a fine example of wishing away common masses and women – the capitalist structure under which the former operate and patriarchy under which women get oppressed.

5.6 HOW TO CRITIQUE WIDDOWSON?

Widdowson studies the relationship between Marxism and the ‘untransformed education system’. Just as he considers context as a singular construct, he also regards the education system only in terms of its canonical versions. The education system is one of the most active and vital institutions trying to wriggle out of the oppressive bond of the bourgeois class. And this has become possible only due to the active application of Marxist and Feminist methodology. But Widdowson assumes that the faculty of the English academic institutions regard with ‘disdain’ the ideology of the left. Assuming gradually becomes acceptance. He states the reason for this by referring to Marxists critical practice in these terms... “The wild young
persons of the Left striking despairingly at the immanent phenomena of Literature and Criticism, when we can all see that the texts are solidly there...to be understood and when understood to be valued". Widdowson regards the thinking of the Left as nothing more than a periodical fervour of youth. He considers all the thinkers of this theoretical enterprise as ‘wild young persons’ who express their academic frustration by ignoring the text. He overlooks the fact that the ideology of the Left never attempts to eliminate the text, literature or criticism. It only provides radical methodological devices to understand it. Underlining the socio-ideological role it may play in its environment. Marxism sees a vital connection between literature and society. One is surprised thus to know that Widdowson's position has changed at the end of his essay.

Whereas he had initially decried the association of value with Literature as bourgeois, he now reinforces it as an essential category. Literature has an inherent core that the students can understand. This limits students’ attitudes towards Literature and Criticism in a way that the larger cultural environment is left alone. They are conditioned into looking for essential meaning within a text instead of looking for a meaningful relation between literature and society. Isn't Widdowson's understanding of the category ‘student’ somewhat narrow? Another charge that Widdowson levies against Marxist theory is that, “It allows little or no operational space to those who are not primarily theoreticians, but who wish to occupy the new spaces created by the theoretical work, and who are still teaching Literature in schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities”. That it appears Widdowson is trying to extend the study of literature to more and more people. But, for him, to educate the masses is another level of equality that Marxism strives for in society. If we examine closely, we shall find that its’ thinking is in no way restricted to the literary elite. In fact Marxist thought speaks in a way that is easily understood by the youngest members of the educated community – both teachers and students. Widdowson is unable to see this. Bergonzi in his discussion of critical practice of one of the Marxists says that, “It regards the great literature and art of the past as a common human inheritance, which should be wrested from the exploiting classes and made available to the whole of humanity”. However, he goes on to twist in a manner that the Marxist criticism ceases to be meaningful in the context of actual, concrete literary works. There are close parallels between Bergonzi and Widdowson’s thinking. Both attack Marxism for being a ‘dying culture’. They do not see a re-structuring of society in Marxist terms. But where Widdowson attacks Marxism for limiting the operational space of theory, Bergonzi charges it for the utopian idea of spreading education to the masses.

These are some of the idiosyncrasies of the First World theorists. Widdowson discusses the conflicting forces at different levels of power in the academic institutions such as students’ interpretation of literature, conflicts within theory and difficult theoretical concepts that make literary theory inaccessible to the student. The teachers and the students are then compelled to take to ‘establishment criticism’ or what he terms ‘progressive criticism’. Widdowson does not comment on the use of the former. However, in the case of cultural studies, a part of progressive criticism, he feels that there is only a problematisation of the social forces but no solution. This, according to Widdowson leads to an ‘intellectual schizophrenia’ where the index of intellectual activity remains passive. The teachers and the students indulge in futile mental activity that has no application to the real world. Widdowson does not have a logical basis for the claims he is making. Even if one follows this argument it points towards the necessity of formulating a theory that would take into cognisance the literary and social needs of the masses. However, Widdowson sees Marxism as the germ of this entire problem. This reflects the unease of such theorists as Widdowson with a radical theoretical construct.

He believes that Marxism has hindered the progress of other theoretical enterprises. But what these other categories are he does not specify. He hints at the body of empirical thought that would enable the academia to arrive at interesting conclusions. He says,
What it does imply is the need for critical work to be produced which challenges the assumptions and practices of conventional criticism, not in the form of theory, but as a detailed rebuttal of them in practice and as a substantive replacement for them which teachers at all levels may draw on and refer to in their classes and courses.

Widdowson is formulating a connection between the University, its members—both teachers and students and the field of theory. This forms a closed triangle that does not take into consideration the co-ordinates in the space outside. He stresses the need for an empirical understanding of the forces in society. Despite his tirade against value-based criticism, Widdowson’s ideological agenda seems to privilege it, as he believes that criticism must address itself to the value of the literature being studied. He also believes that criticism must take into account the aim of criticism, the object or literary work being criticised and the ‘conditions’ in which this is taking place. He calls this materialist criticism. Widdowson is picking up ideas from Marxism but the limitations of his argument prevent him from declaring it in theory. This is because Widdowson is trying to work towards the benefit of only a specific group of teachers and students whose job is to appreciate concrete texts. He shies away from the idea of a complete social movement as visible in literature. Literature and Criticism have to be understood in terms of a theoretical construct without which their application would be sporadic and casual.

5.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have examined the implications of studying literature as an essential category. Widdowson is seen as underlining the relationship between literature and criticism. According to him, criticism is not merely a tool to understand works of literature. It constitutes literature in the process of evaluating it. Widdowson enlists the problems associated with Marxist thinking and considers Marxism as a theory that has ‘vacated’ the domain of literary theory. However, there are problems with his argument. For one he sees Criticism as determining literature whereas the two need to be seen in a dialectical relation with each other and with society. Secondly, he identifies the cause of weakness in literary theory in Marxist thought. In this unit we have also seen a few inconsistencies the First World Theorists suffer from.

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by Literature as an essential category?
2. What is the relationship between criticism and literature?
3. Do you think that Marxism has become outdated in literary criticism? Give reasons to support your answer.

5.9 GLOSSARY

Identity formation: To look at a construct in a specific way so as to determine its boundaries.

Value: The essential meaning of a word or text. It is supposed to be inherent in the text.

Naturalise: To subsume differences within universal assumptions. To make ideas easy and convenient.

Neo-colonialism: A phase in which the powerful countries over the globe exercise control over the developing ones through culture and literature.