

## **Death of the author by “Roland Barthes” - Critical Evaluation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this paper research has been done on the famous essay “The death of the author” by French literary critic Roland Barthes. It has been tried to explain in a very simple way. This work deals with the critical analysis of Barthes’ view that a particular text has multiple rather than a single or limited meaning. We discuss the statement of Roland Barthes that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author”. The following research paper also deals with the examination of Barthes’ role as a structuralist or post-structuralist in the field of criticism.*

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Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was a legendary figure whose ideas encouraged the advancement of a number of fields including structuralism, anthropology, post-structuralism, semiotics and social theory. He was highly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology throughout his life and thus, began to develop his own complex theoretical concepts that became central to a number of schools of thought in France and Europe. His career took several turns, but preserved a central theme: the conventionality of all forms of representation. In his early work, Barthes was a structuralist and semiotician, influenced by the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure’s study of signs and signification. He defines literature as “a message of the signification of things and not their meaning (by signification I refer to the process which produces the meaning and not this meaning itself)” He stresses the process of signification. Language is not a natural medium through which the reader grasps a unified truth. If we limit the language to being a natural medium for reader to seize the meaning, it is as if we are limiting a signifier to just one signified and repressing all discourses into one meaning, which is not possible.

Barthes was also a leading critic of his time and a prominent theoretical personality across Europe and America. Some of his well-known works included, ‘Writing Degree Zero (1953)’, ‘Mythologies (1957)’, ‘Criticism and Truth (1966)’, ‘The Pleasure of the Text (1973)’ and ‘Image Music Text (1977)’. Barthes left an indelible impression wherever he went and making himself known in popular culture as well. In ‘Elements of Semiology (1967)’, he believed that all the sign-system of human culture can be explained by structuralist method, but how can we explain this structuralist discourse? We have a “first-order” discourse that is the language of subject and we have a ‘second-order’ discourse that is the language of the semiological investigator. This second-order discourse is also called metalanguage. Any metalanguage could be put in the position of a first-order language and be interrogated by another metalanguage, so here we have an infinite regress, which destroys the authority of all metalanguages. In this sense, all discourses are equally fictive and none stand apart in the place of Truth. In other words we do not have a single truth, but a number of truths and each of them is capable of creating its own fictive reality.

What might be called Barthes’ poststructuralist period is best represented by his short essay ‘The Death of the Author’. This notion is already present in structuralism, which treats individual utterances (paroles) as the products of impersonal systems (langues). What is new in Barthes is the idea that readers are free to open and close the text’s signifying process without respect for the signified. There is no meta-signified that limits the reader’s interpretation, rather a number of signifieds, as many as the reader wants.

The famous essay written in 1968, in which Barthes proclaimed that “the birth of the reader, must be at the cost of the death of the author” an assertion that struck at the very heart of traditional literary studies, and that has remained one of the most controversial tenets of post-structuralism. So, the present research work deals with the contribution of Roland Barthes as a structuralist or post-structuralist in the field of criticism.

The literary concept of the “death of the Author” was explored by the French literary critic and the cultural theorist Roland Barthes in 1968. In this, he argues against traditional literary criticism’s practice of incorporating the intentions and biographical context of an author in an interpretation of a text, and instead argues that writing and creator are unrelated. In this particular essay Barthes argues against the method of reading and criticism that relies on aspects of the author’s identity – their political views, historical context, religion, ethnicity, psychology or other biographical or personal attributes – to distil meaning from the author’s

works. Readers must thus separate a literary work from its maker in order to liberate the text from interpretive tyranny. Each and every piece of writing contains several layers and meanings. Essential meaning of any work depends on impressions of a reader. In this type of criticism, the experiences and biases of the author serve as a definitive explanation" of the text. For Barthes, this method of reading may be apparently tidy and convenient but is actually sloppy and flawed: "To give a text an Author" and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it "is to impose a limit on that Text." Roland Barthes ideas explored a diverse range of fields and he inspired the development of schools of theory including structuralism and post-structuralism. As Barthes's work with structuralism started to flourish around the time of his debates with Picard, his investigation of structure focused on revealing the importance of language in writing, which he felt was overlooked by old criticism. Barthes's "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of narratives" is concerned with examining the correspondence between the structure of a sentence and that of a larger narrative, thus allowing narrative to be viewed along linguistic lines. Barthes split this work into three hierarchical levels: 'functions', 'actions' and 'narrative'. 'Functions' are the elementary pieces of a work, such as a single descriptive word that can be used to identify a character. That character would be an 'action', and consequently one of the elements that make up the narrative. Barthes was able to use these distinctions to evaluate how certain key 'functions' work in forming characters. For example key words like 'dark', 'mysterious' and 'odd', when integrated together, formulate a specific kind of character or 'action'. By breaking down the work into such fundamental distinctions Barthes was able to judge the degree of realism given functions have in forming their actions and consequently with what authenticity a narrative can be said to reflect on reality. Thus, his structuralist theorizing became another exercise in his ongoing attempts to dissect and expose the misleading mechanisms of bourgeois culture. In the late 1960s, radical movements were taking place in literary criticism. The post-structuralist movement and the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida were testing the bounds of the structuralist theory that Barthes' work exemplified. Derrida identified the flaw of structuralism as its reliance on a transcendental signifier; a symbol of constant, universal meaning would be essential as an orienting point in such a closed off system. This is to say that without some regular standard of measurement, a system of criticism that references nothing outside of the actual work itself could never prove beneficial. But since there are no symbols of constant and universal significance, the entire premise of structuralism as a means of evaluating writing (or anything) is hollow. The ideas included in "The Death of the Author" were anticipated to some extent by New Criticism, a school of literary criticism important in the United States from the 1940s to the 1970s. New Criticism differs from Barthes's theory of critical reading because it attempts to arrive at more authoritative interpretations of texts.

So this essay deals with the critical analysis of Roland Barthes view about literary text and the Author. The following part of the essay talks about Roland Barthes's theory of literary criticism and theory of Structuralism and Post- Structuralism.

## **I. DISCUSSION**

Roland Barthes is a key figure in international intellectual life. He is one of the most important intellectual figures to have emerged in postwar France and his writings continue to have an influence on critical debates today. 'The Death of the Author' is one of the most well known and controversial essay by Ronald Barthes. The essay was written in 1968 and included in 'Image-Music-Text'. The essay challenged the traditional literary studies when it was published. It can also be taken as the articulation of the post structuralist critical moment, Though in a very provocative manner. Barthes wished to stress the fact that limited meanings and It is for the reader to reveal these meanings. Barthes declares, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author". One of the issue with this essay is that there is more than one way to read a book. You can extract the plain meaning from the words themselves. Or you can go deeper, looking for subtext, re-reading for something you can only catch the second time around, putting together the Narrative Filigree into a coherent whole. The latter is what's called close reading. A trope might be present in a close reading that might not in a simple reading. He believes that the facts can be narrated transitively or intransitively. The transitively narrated facts are the facts which are narrated with view acting directly on reality. On the other hand, the facts narrated intransitively may be without any real function. They are not motivated by any utilitarian end and in the presence of such facts the author loses hold over the meaning of the words used. Barthes's comments, "The voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death in such situations." Barthes obviously has a particular situation in mind when he speaks of the death of the author. Barthes says that in traditional literary and critical theory, excessive importance has been given to the author. He is highly critical of the personalisation of the act of writing in traditional societies. He says that the author is a modern figure, the product of our society. The capitalist ideology attached a great deal of importance to individualism. It related the meaning of a work to the author's beliefs. The author was seen as a medium or a means through whom the work got articulated. He was obviously seen as a mediator. The author centred ideology was anxious to unite the man with his work. The failure of the work was attributed to the failure the man because the literary work was supposed to reflect his person, his life, his tastes and his passions. The text was considered to be the voice of the author. The presence of no other voice was felt in the text and the whole of the critical analysis was centred on

the author. Barthes challenged this view and gave his personal ideas concerning the author and the text. Ronald Barthes surveys the attempt in French literary and critical circles to depersonalize art. Though, the sway (impact) of the author remains powerful, some writers have long attempted to counter it. Stephane Mallarme, a French symbolist poet, did a lot in this direction. He was the first to realise the necessity of substituting language for the author. He tries to stress the view point that it is language which speaks, not the author. Paul Valery also challenged the question of the primacy of the author. He stressed the written nature of all linguistic and philosophical projects. Finally, surrealism also played the role in weakening the hold of the author of a work's meaning. It was another literary moment which worked to demolish the myth of the author. The moment also propagated the notion of automatic writing, the view that several people can be writing together. Thus the revised theory of language decisively killed the author.

Indeed, Roland Barthes's essay refers only to close reading, specifically of a story by Honoré de Balzac. He notes simply how in the act of writing a complex work, Balzac's voice as an author diffuses into multiple planes, so that one cannot know from a close reading if the narrative voice, character voice, and plot voice truly express the author's perspective. In other words, it is impossible to truly extract insight into the full range of Balzac's thoughts, viewpoints, and beliefs from a close reading of the work. Barthes does not deny that they are present, that they might be useful to interpretation of the work, or that they can be made clear with a basic reading of the book, just looking at the fundamental plot points and story beats. Barthes traces the history of the evolution of critical thought from a focus on the author to that on the text. Barthes says that in traditional literary and critical theory, excessive importance has been given to the author. The author was seen as a medium or a means through which the work got articulated. He was seen as a mediator. Therefore, the meaning was to be sought in the personality of the author. Barthes gives a high place to French thinkers who played an important role to depersonalise art. Stephen Mallarme, a French symbolist poet did a lot in this direction. He was the first to realise the necessity of substituting language for the author. He stressed the written nature of all philosophical and linguistic projects. Roland Barthes quotes Proust to make sure that literature has an essentially verbal character. It cannot be linked to the inferiority of the writer's soul.

The meaning of a sentence doesn't depend on speaker's existence. The words themselves are enough to make clear meaning. Also this idea declines the supremacy of the author of any particular work. According to Barthes there's no fixed meaning of any text. It will be right to say that the ultimate meaning of any work can't be obtained. Ronald Barthes brings to light another significant contention of post-structuralist thought when he makes language more Important than author. He believes that the unlimited power of language can be understood in the multiplicity of the meanings of a literary text. Texts made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Like this, in order to give writing its future, it is important to ensure the birth of the reader which can be at the cost of the death of the author. Barthes leads to the conclusion that writing can be seen properly only when the author dies. He says, "To give that text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with final signified, to close the writing." So, it is right to say that Barthes gave a big contribution towards literary theory and criticism. His theory of structuralism and post-structuralism is has a great importance in English literary theory and literary criticism.

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