



The Scope of Literary Anthropology: A Hinge Between Anthropology and Literature

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Abstract:

Over the course of history, literature has witnessed various types of subjects, themes, genres, movements, which directly or indirectly has had its influence on the field of study. The social, political, historical and cultural factors of the society have impacted literature to a great extent, and still does. The provinciality and time period in which a literary work is written is very much reflected in the text. And with this in view, anthropology—as a scientific field of study—intending to unearth the processes of change in us over the years, the uniqueness we possess, and how different communities have structured their social lives, tries to fall back upon the literature of the times to study their subjects in depth. Therefore, this paper looks into the emergence of the rise of literary anthropology as a sub-branch of anthropology can be said to be an investigation into the various types of expression that falls under the category of style, technique, mode, and into how these categories can be discerned to be studied in connection with a historical distinctiveness, and its social, cultural and institutional analysis.

Keywords: Literature, History, Anthropology, Fiction, Culture, Institutions.

Introduction:

In its broadest sense, literary anthropology can be understood as the study of how literature reflects and shapes human culture and society. We can even understand it as the study of how literary texts are shaped by the cultures in which they are produced. It can further be defined, in general, as the study of how people use stories and storytelling in their everyday lives to make sense of the world around them and the culture under study in particular. It is the study of how people interact with literature. It can encompass everything from how people read and interpret texts, to how literature is used in daily life. It can encompass the study of how literary works are created, how they are received and interpreted by readers, and how they influence the wider world. The consolidation of literary analysis with anthropological research yields a plethora of information on social practices, religious convictions and cultural patterns. The aim of this paper is to situate literary anthropology as a new field of study and how it acts as a hinge between the study of anthropology and literature.

Literary anthropologists often seek to understand how people use literature to construct and express their identity, and how literature can be used to foster social and cultural cohesion. The field of literary anthropology

can be said to be a disciplinary mutation that goes beyond the limits of traditional anthropology encompassing many different sub-disciplines, including history, sociology, psychology, and even biology. It is a relatively new field that has its roots in the 18th and 19th centuries, when scholars began to notice the close relationship between literature and society. This close relationship is said to be first explored in depth by the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim who believed that literature was a key tool in understanding a society's values and beliefs. Dell Hymes in her book *Literary Anthropology: A Reader* notes that literary anthropology "seeks to define the ways in which literary texts reflect and reveal the culture and values of the societies that produced them". Hymes explains that literary anthropology "encompasses a wide range of critical approaches to the study of literature."

Literary anthropology opens up ways to understand people through the world of stories, myths, and symbols. It focuses on how these stories are used to make sense of the world and how they are passed down from generation to generation. While this field of study can easily be confused with that of cultural anthropology which is more focused on the ways that people live and interact with each other, literary anthropology is mainly interested in how stories are used in understanding the world. Cultural anthropology is the study of human cultures and how they change over time. It is interested in the ways that people live and interact with each other, and how their cultures influence their behavior. However, both literary and cultural anthropology are interested in how people use stories to make sense of the world. And cultural anthropology is more focused on the ways that people live and interact with each other, while literary anthropology is more interested in how stories are used to understand the world.

And by the late 20th century, Literary Anthropology has grown into a thriving field of research that draws on a variety of disciplinary approaches, including anthropology, literary criticism, and cultural studies. The main aim of literary anthropological study is to understand how people interact with literary works and how these works shape their understanding of the world. Scholars in this field have contributed extensively to our understanding of the human condition and the socio-political and cultural impact on people.

In 2015, the perceived identity of the field has been problematised by Paul Stoller in his short but incisive essay titled 'What is literary anthropology?'. The *Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology*, an inception of a book series on the subject, initiated a revision of the same question with an extension as what could and should the field encompass. And Ellen Wiles in her essay suggests explaining literary anthropology as a central stem with three main branches. The first is to avail literary texts as ethnographic source material. This will be of immense importance, specifically for historical anthropologists. Second, she suggests using literary styles in ethnographic writings— to lighten the prevailing ethnographic method by the creation of fiction as ethnography, as for example using metaphorical language, symbols, etc. Lastly, she propounds the idea of anthropological examination of literary cultural and production practices.

One of the significant aspects of literary anthropology is the study of oral storytelling. This can be done by looking at the way that different cultures tell stories. For example, some cultures use storytelling as a way to give lessons to children about the world, while many use it as a source of entertainment. By studying the manner in which different cultures tell stories, anthropologists can acquire knowledge about the way their view of the world marks its difference.

Thus, we can discern how literary anthropology sheds light on everything—from the origins of warfare to the evolution of language. It has produced some of the most famous literary criticism of all time. For example, literary anthropologists have argued that the epic poem *The Odyssey* reflects the values of the ancient Greek culture that produced it. They have distinctly argued that this epic poem reflects the values of honour, bravery, and fidelity. Another approach to literary anthropology is its concern on the ways in which literary texts can be used to understand the cultures that produced them. Like, the novels of Charles Dickens can be used to understand the culture of Victorian England, such as the importance of hard work, thrift, and respectability. A third approach to literary anthropology is to view the ways in which literary texts are interpreted by readers from different cultures. For example, some scholars have argued that the ways in which the Bible is read and interpreted by Christians and Muslims reveals a great deal about the values and beliefs of these two cultures and their ways of approaching daily life.

As Rose De Angelis expressed in her introduction to her edited volume, *Between Anthropology and Literature: Interdisciplinary Discourse*—‘neither literature nor anthropology is a unified, self-contained discipline’ but ‘critical discussions in each field’. These fields, she suggests, should ‘intersect’ and ‘the origins, sources, and intersections of the two disciplines’ should be ‘constantly revised, re-conceived’. Instead of thinking of breaching the disciplinary boundaries as a route to ‘chaos’, De Angelis expounds it as a route to ‘creativity and new possibilities of understanding and explicating texts, literary and anthropological’.

Conclusion:

There are many different approaches that can be considered when studying literary anthropology. However, all approaches share the common goal of understanding how literary texts can be used to reveal the values and beliefs of the cultures that produced them. Despite its long history, literary anthropology is a novel field of inquiry. This is due in part to the fact that it is an interdisciplinary field, which can make it difficult to define. However, it still remains an important and vibrant field of study that is constantly evolving and expanding.

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