

THE CONCEPT OF AMBIGUITY

GENERAL INTRODUCTION :

The appearance of William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity in 1930 was a major critical event in the history of literary criticism. The book discusses the concept of ambiguity and for the first time very emphatically states that vagueness and imprecision are poetry's chief strength. The book is considered as a 'classic of Modern Criticism'.¹ It is praised by critic M. C. Bradbrook for its educating purpose.²

The concept of ambiguity is not quite new, as S. E. Hyman quoting from Demetrius points out : " As far back as the third or fourth century B. C. the unknown Demetrius wrote On Style : " As wild beasts gather their limbs together for an attack so language also should gather itself as it were into a coil to acquire force". From Demetrius' "coiled language" to Empson's any consequence of language, however slight, that adds some nuance to the direct statement", is not very far the difference lies principally in Empson's determination to explore the types and variety of coil".³

Empson's concept of ambiguity is essentially a refinement of I. A. Richards' 'emotive language'.⁴ Richards who stressed the communicative aspect of language and stated that language of poetry is different from other uses of language and its distinctive feature is ambiguity.⁵ Empson being Richards' student was deeply influenced by his critical opinions. In the preface to the second edition of Seven Types of Ambiguity Empson clearly mentions about the encouragement and help given by Richards to him while writing this book.⁶

It would be proper to see the origin of the term; the word 'ambiguity' is derived from Greek Word, ambiguite meaning, 'Wander about', 'to waver'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term: 'capacity of being understood in two or more ways', 'a word or a phrase susceptible of more than one meaning as equivocal expression'.

To Empson ambiguity means : " any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language".⁷

This definition states that the words have several distinct meanings. They have different shades of meaning that create different impressions in the mind of the reader. Because these several distinct meanings are united together, they form a new relationship. Ambiguity means a sort of indcision, an intention to mean several things. As words acquire this quality of manifold meaning the statement suggests several meanings.⁸

Long before Empson in 1922, F. C. Prescott stated the same idea; that the language like the imaginative mental picture, like the vision or the dream of the poet, shows condensation, hence each word is apt to have two, three or many meanings. But Prescott's approach is psychological and he tries to probe deep into the mind of poet for these several meanings and their relations.⁹ However Empson's concept deals with what Ransom calls "texture".

Making the survery of Modern Criticism,

W.K.Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks point out in Literary Criticism : A short History: The choice of the term "ambiguity" was perhaps not altogether happy, for this term reflects the point of view of expository

prose, where one meaning and only one meaning is wanted. The presence of a second or third meaning create puzzle the man habituated to expository prose asks 'what is the meaning? Because the term "ambiguity" connotes doubt and puzzlement, Philip Wheelwright has argued that we need more a positive term and one that will suggest richness of the meaning. He proposes plurisignation.¹⁰

In the modern criticism ambiguity is considered as 'richness' or 'wit'. It is taken as the natural characteristic of language, which is significant in verse. There is indirect and arbitrary link between form and content. Syntax suggests two or more meanings. Linguists say that one 'surface structure' may conceal two or more 'deep structures'. We hardly notice ambiguity in ordinary speech though it is common, because by context we select one of the alternative meanings. On the other hand, verse displays extra levels of structure so it is more ambiguous. The doctrine of ambiguity is not licence for self indulgence. Multiple meanings must be justified by their interrelationship. Ambiguity provides linguistic explanation for poetic complexity and wit. The poetic devices used to embellish language such as metaphor, simile, pun are the aspects of ambiguity.



NOTES

1. ✓ Elder Olson, Critics and Criticism, ed. Crane, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1952) P. 25.
2. M. C. Bradbrook, "The Criticism of William Empson", Scrutiny, Vol II, No.3, Dec.1933, P. 253.
3. S. E. Hyman, The Armed Vision, (New York: 1948) PP. 237-38.
4. David Lodge, 20th Century Criticism ed. (London, New York: Longman, 1972) P. 146.
5. Elder Olson : Critics and Criticism, P.25.
6. William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, (New York : Chatt^o and Windus, 1930, Reprint 1965) Preface to the Second Edition P. viii.
7. William Empson, Seven Types P. 1.
8. William Empson, Seven Types PP. 5-6.

9. ✓ F. C. Prescott, The Poetic Mind,
(New York : The Macmillan Co.1922)
PP. 171-72.
10. W. K. Wimsatt (Jr) and Cleanth Brooks,
Literary Criticism : A Short History
(New Delhi : Oxford and IBH Publishing
Co. 1957, Indian Reprint 1970). P. 637.

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