

Frontiers of Criticism:

'Frontiers of Criticism' is a lecture delivered by T.S. Eliot on 30th April 1956 at the University of Minnesota and later published in 'On Poetry and Poets', a collection of Eliot's critical essays in 1957.

Eliot in this essay 'The Frontiers of Criticism' is trying to outline the broad contours of criticism.

'... there are limits, exceeding which in one direction literary criticism ceases to be literary, and exceeding in another it ceases to be criticism'. In this way Eliot attempts to define the boundaries of literary criticism. It is not that he is trying to do the same for the first time in this essay. He has earlier done the similar kind of exercise in 1923 when he published 'The Function of Criticism'. But thirty years had passed since the publication and things had changed much from then. So, Eliot thought it to be necessary to rethink about the function of criticism in newer ways that so that the newer things that happened in those thirty years in between can be taken into consideration while discussing the frontiers of criticism.

Eliot himself mentions - 'each

generation brings to the contemplation of art its own categories of appreciation, makes its own demand on art, and has its own uses of art'. In other words, what Eliot tries to mention here is that each age has its own ways of figuring out what art it and what they demand from art. Therefore, it is necessary that each age thinks about art and criticism in its own ways. What is done thirty years before may not be done at the present. Things keep on changing and evolving and therefore there is a constant need to change the ways in which one thinks in terms of the function of criticism.

In this essay 'The Frontiers of Criticism', Eliot tries to bring in new directions to his thoughts of criticism which are different from what he thought at the early stage of career.

Since the publication of his essay on 'The Function of Criticism' in 1923 many things had changed in the ambit of criticism. The foremost change happened with the publication of I. A. Richards book 'Principle of Literary Criticism', published in 1925. This book changed the directions of criticism to some extent for the next few years.

As per T. S. Eliot, Criticism

in English language started in a proper sense from S.T. Coleridge onwards and he mentions that "The Criticism of today, indeed, may be said to be in direct descent from Coleridge, who would, I am sure, were he alive now, take the same interest in the social sciences and in the study of language and semantics that he took in the sciences available to him". Two things Eliot mentions here in the above passage:

- 1) That the criticism in English has taken a decisive turn from S.T. Coleridge onwards. (It is to be remembered that Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is a significant book on criticism and should be read in detail to understand the beginning of proper English Literary Criticism).
- 2) That the criticism in English is not anymore limited to literature itself and that it has diversified itself in bringing into its ambit other social sciences which are used as a tool of analyzing, understanding and enjoying literature.

While this is true that literary criticism has developed much with its expansion into other branches of social

sciences, but there are problems with 1-23
literary criticism of the times; some 24.
of them Eliot enumerates in detail in
the next part of the lecture 'The Frontiers
of Criticism'.

1) 'The best of my (Eliot's) literary criticism -
apart from a few notorious phrases
which have had a truly embarrassing
success in the world - consist of essays
on poets and poetic dramatists who
had influenced me'. Eliot mentions
that he shares this kind of criticism
is something that he shares with
Erza Pound. There is dangerous
problem with this kind of criticism -
the problem is that the poet-critic
only makes observations on the
poets who had influence him or
her. Eliot is of the view that this is
not criticism proper as it only presents
a biased view about how a poet
or a particular group of poets have
influenced the poetic process of a
particular poet. Eliot goes on to
draw the limitations of this kind
of criticism which is termed as
'workshop' criticism.

To be continued in next
lecture.