

An Overview of Textual Analysis as a Research Method for Cultural Studies

Aneri Arya

Junior Research Fellow, Department of English

Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat, Gujarat. D/5 Sarthak-row-house, Opp Shivanjali Park, Palanpur

Jakatnaka, Surat 395009, Gujarat.

Email - aneriarya.avi@gmail.com

Abstract: *Research methods are the techniques and strategies, concerned with how a researcher conducts research in order to gain new information or create a better understanding of the topic. In Humanities, there are various research methods, out of which, textual analysis is one of the most common research methods in especially literary and cultural studies. It helps to study the text in its cultural, social and historical context by interpreting it. The paper attempts to provide an overview of textual analysis as a research method for cultural studies. It seeks to provide the detailed study of the theoretical aspects of this method along with its application on the painting “Tarquin and Lucretia” by Titian and the poem “In a Station of Metro” by Ezra Pound.*

Key Words: *Textual analysis, text, research method, cultural studies.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Research methods are the techniques and strategies concerned with how a researcher conducts research in order to gain new information or create a better understanding of the topic. In humanities, there are various research methods, such as discourse analysis, interviewing, quantitative methods, ethnographic methods, ICT, visual methods etc. Out of them, textual analysis is one of the most common research methods within Humanities, especially literary and cultural studies, which helps to study the text in its cultural, social and historical context by interpreting it.

2. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AS A RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Textual Analysis:

Textual analysis is a term familiar to every researcher related to qualitative research. It is one of the key methods of research methodology being used in cultural studies. It relies on complex aspects like originality, creativity, inspiration, history and cultures we live in or study (McKee 73). Based on interpretive approaches, textual analysis is a type of qualitative analysis that focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of a text. Smith argues that textual analysis is used heavily within the field of communications as it is a trans-disciplinary method that is also present in a number of the social sciences and humanities. He also comments on the method of textual analysis that it can include variations that focus on more specific methods within these disciplines such as content analysis, semiotics, interactional analysis, and rhetoric criticism.

The roots of textual analysis, as Giles A. Hindle comments, can be traced in the Greek myth of Hermes, the mythological God, who, when faced with the momentous task of delivering the Gods’ message to mere mortals, needed first to interpret the Gods’ messages and then translate and explicate their meaning in a language ordinary humans could understand (Hindle 601). Textual analysis involves understanding language and symbols present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of the text. Textual analysis is done in order to interpret the text to get the sense or meaning out of it.

McKee says,

Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology- a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live. (McKee 1)

McKee further says that when we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text (McKee 1).

2.2. The Aim of Textual Analysis:

Fürsich discusses about the appropriate goal of textual analysis:

... it is not the goal of a textual analysis to uncover the one “true” or even “hidden” meaning of a text but to offer a variety of possible readings of the examined material. Instead of finding hidden meanings, “subconscious” intentions of the producer, or biases of the text, the task is to understand what cultural and

ideological assumptions were established at a specific time that allowed a text to be considered acceptable and become popular, even common sense. (Fursich 1)

The aim of textual analysis is not altogether to analyse merely the structure of the text but to get some concrete meaning or message out of it. Barthes asserts:

Textual analysis does not try to describe the structure of a work; it is not a matter of recording a structure, but rather of producing a mobile structuration of the text, of staying in the signifying volume of the work, in its 'significance'. Textual analysis does not try to find out what it is that determines the text, but rather how the text explodes and disperses. (McKee 135)

2.3. What is a Text?

Textual analysis is all about making sense of the text. But, what is a text? McKee says. "Whenever we produce an interpretation of something's meaning - a book, television programme, film, magazine, T-shirt or kilt, piece of furniture or ornament - we treat it as a text. A text is something that we make meaning from." (McKee 4)

The word 'text' also has post-structuralist implications for thinking about the production of meaning. Barthes has stated the marked difference between a work and a text:

The difference is this: the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field. The opposition may recall (without at all reproducing term for term) Lacan's distinction between 'reality' and 'the real': the one is displayed, the other demonstrated; likewise, the work can be seen (in bookshops, in catalogues, in exam syllabuses), the Text is a process of demonstration, speaks according to certain rules (or against certain rules); the work can be held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse (...); the Text is not the decomposition of the work, it is the work that is the imaginary tail of the Text; or again, the Text is experienced only in an activity of production. (McKee 156-157)

If one simplifies Barthes, a work is what the author writes, and the text is what the reader gets. So, in that context, a work can be a text, only when it is scrutable to the readers. Barthes believes that the text always should be plural, meaning, it demands the reader's active participation into it.

2.4. The Process of Textual Analysis:

According to McKee, textual analysis varies based on the differences that affect sense-making, such as the differences in cultures, differences in value judgements, differences in the existence of obstruct things, differences in the existence of concrete things, differences in relationships between things, differences in reason and thinking and differences in seeing things. Because of these differences, one can get the idea of various cultures. As McKee says,

Performing textual analysis, then, is an attempt to gather information about sense-making practices - not only in cultures radically different from our own, but also within our own nations. It allows us to see how similar or different the sense-making practices that different people use can be. (McKee 14)

Any serious textual analysis, asserts Belsey, depends on a grasp of how meaning works. Meaning is not at the disposal of the individual, and not, whatever stout common sense any indicate, a matter of intention, an isolatable 'idea', fully formed prior to its inscription. We learn to mean from outside, from a language that always pre-exists us (Belsey 163). Belsey comments on it further if the meaning is acquired from language, we can make words up, but they will become meaningful only if other people understand them. We can make up codes, and they become languages only when they are intelligible, at least in principle, to another person. (Belsey 163)

This very difference has been elaborated further by Barthes in terms of textual analysis. To read the text and get the meaning out of it by analysing it is an objective process rather than subjective one. Making sense of a text, does not mean to bring out the meaning out of it as one fantasises something out of it. (Belsey 166). Textual analysis is all about to understand this something from the text. And this can be done by 'understanding the process of interpretation as the effect of a relation between a reader and a text' (Belsey 166).

According to Belsey, textual analysis is about the close reading of cultural artefacts for which she brings up the post-structuralist concept of signifier and signified. She asserts,

The text, as a tissue of signifiers, makes certain demands on the textual analyst, and provides the material for analysis. The material is by no means an empty space, a vacancy into which we pour whatever we like; instead, the text itself participates in the process of signification. It reproduces or reiterates meanings, which always come from outside, and are not at the artist's disposal, any more than they are at ours. (Belsey 164)

A post-structuralist approach to meaning-making does not accept that any text has a single correct interpretation. It happens because every sign means different to each individual. Talking about meaning, Belsey asserts thus:

Meaning, then, subsists in the relations between people, inscribed in sounds or images. It has its own materiality: meaning intervenes in the world, defining our understanding of values, requiring us to obey rules

and, indeed, calling us to arms. But because it never appears in itself, as pure intelligibility, as idea, but is always inscribed in the signifier, in the sound or the image, meaning is never fixed, single or final. The signifier, Jacques Derrida insists, supplants any imagined idea, takes its place. What we have is always the signifier, never what it signifies. (Belsey 163)

Mckee also clarifies that ‘doing textual analysis, we are interested in finding out likely interpretation, not in deciding which of them is the most correct one’ (Mckee 63). Textual analysis wants to find out what interpretations are produced, and which ones are most likely in a given cultural context.

Belsey further notes that there is no such thing as ‘pure’ reading. Interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge, some of it being general cultural knowledge, and some of it being derived from secondary sources. (Belsey 160). However, it does not mean a reader is free to bring whatever meaning out of the text as it suits him, as the process of deriving meaning is not of free association. To support the thought, Belsey has again given the Barthean concept of reader, that discards the sole of the authority of utopian author over the text, but also does not replace that authority to the reader as an individual:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing, are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (Barthes 148).

A reader must be familiar with the cultural and social context of the signs of the text he is going to analyse so that he can spare himself from the personal bias. For the textual analysis, then various cultural and historical secondary sources are considered in the context of the culture and history of the text. The differences of perspectives on the subject, and modifications in the text from the factual information is traced. Other texts with similar subjects and themes are compared, bringing out the additions and originality of the text from the repetitive patterns of the previous texts. The goal is to find the newly added aspect that has not been explored or dealt with previously. Textual analysis also utilises other methodologies as well as research methods for the analysis. Considering all such aspects, the process of textual analysis brings upon the multiplicity of possible meanings and readings adding more knowledge to the body of research.

3. Textual analysis of “Tarquin and Lucretia” by Titian



“Tarquin and Lucretia” by Titian Belsey’s textual analysis of Tarquin and Lucretia, which is an oil painting by Titian provides the example of the research method. Here, the painting is our ‘text’. Apparently, the picture depicts rape in its very initial visual even if the viewer is entirely unaware of the background story. Tarquin’s raised dagger, his knee between her legs, his dominance over her body, the white bedlinen over her thighs as an only protection against violation on her naked body and Lucretia’s frivolous resistance are the indicators of the following sexual assault. However, that horror is left for the viewer’s imagination. Rape, being a progressive action, is difficult to capture its dread in a static painting or image. But this comes very close in the depiction of it. (Belsey 157) The painting raises questions about two major aspects of the portrayal of female nudity: power dynamics and sexuality.

‘Where is the emphasis in this picture?’ ‘How does it invites us to see Lucretia?’, ‘Is she presented as a victim struggling to resist a brutal assault?’ or ‘is she offered as an object of desire for the spectator, as well as Tarquin?’ (159). Belsey brings in discussion two major ideas from the feminist studies about images of women and the nature of rape. On the one hand, the falling light on Lucretia’s naked body and her bed indicates her sexual objectification meant for gaze. On the other hand, her breasts which are usually the centre of erotic gaze are only indicated, and the violent position of Tarquin holding dagger towards Lucretia who is weak to defend herself is rather shocking which seem to emphasise the power relations of the assertion of force over vulnerability.

Now, as we have discussed, the text reproduces or reiterates meanings and in this sense, “Tarquin and Lucretia” also reiterates familiar tale. Bringing in historical and cultural differences, help in interpreting the painting in a better way. It brings questions such as: ‘Do people normally sleep in their portable property in this way?’ and ‘do people keep significant amount of jewellery despite being completely naked?’ Lucretia can be seen wearing jewellery like earrings, necklace, bracelets and wedding ring in her bed. But they are there for the purpose. These jewels, along with the apparent translucent silk bed linen and embroidered pillowcase, indicate the wealth of Lucretia as well as the higher and decent social position. The historical facts provide with the facts about the figures and events that inspired the painting. Tarquin was the heir to the Roman kingdom and Lucretia was the wife of his friend Collatinus. Here again question arises: ‘Does the painting make a relation between rape and rank?’ as Lucretia too belonged to a noble class. Her wedding ring is at the centre horizontally emphasising her marital status. Historically, the rape of married and aristocratic woman was considered more culpable. The etymology of the word “rape” takes to the word “theft”. Rape was “a crime against the property of a husband or father” according to medieval law. Further, the virtue of aristocratic wives was a distinctly valuable object, and the theft of it by Tarquin was very disgraceful, leading to Lucretia’s suicide.

Tarquin’s Roman costume signifies that the assault was more ‘state political’ rather than ‘sex political’. Belsey agrees to it thus: The painting, then, does not confine its interest to sexual politics. State politics, too, contributes to its meaning, and the contest it depicts is not only between a woman and a man, but also between a class and its oppressor. (Belsey 167) What Tarquin’s dagger signifies is also supports this argument. Lucretia’s rape, thus, is an abuse of power. The presence of dark-skinned shadowed figure adds more to the historical and cultural angle of the painting. That enigmatic observer is probably a slave as slavery was quite common in medieval Venice. Tarquin will kill her if she does not submit, and will place a dead slave in her bed to destroy her reputation. Adultery with a slave was more scandalous than rape by a king’s son in that culture. Lucretia gives in. The image of the slave, taking a look in the scene add fuel to Tarquin’s proposal. If one is aware of the history of roman republic, he must know that the entire image signifies the genesis of the strive for the republic as Lucretia goes to her father next day and tells him the horror befallen to her in the presence of several witnesses and commits suicide which leads a wave of anger and revenge to drive Tarquins out of the Rome bringing the end to monarchy and rise of Republic.

Further, if we carefully look at the Lucretia’s hands, they do not appear to be as firm, extended and rigid fighting against the upcoming assault. Is her resistance in question? Or has she surrendered herself mentally to the pointed dagger and the presence of slave? Some of the secondary sources confirm with the second point. But could the gesture of Lucretia’s hands on Tarquin’s chest be considered caress? Could there be a transition from resistance to pleasure in Lucretia’s mind? Does this image capture that inner struggle of Lucretia? Art critic Norman Bryson argues that the painting depicts Lucretia’s consent. Does the painting depict Lucretia’s reflex against violation? Or does it depict the fear through her tears? Or does it depict her conscious consent? Or the desire as she holds the attacker in her direct gaze? So what is the painting about? Rape and resistance? Rape and consent under duress? Or is it adultery, and not a rape? (Belsey 174) Thus, the painting provides a multiplicity of readings as offered by textual analysis.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF “IN A STATION OF METRO” BY EZRA POUND:

Another “text” for the textual analysis is taken from literature which is “In a Station of Metro” by Ezra Pound. It is a masterpiece of Imagist poetry. The poem combines mortal and immortal worlds together using strong visual imagery within only fourteen words:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Pound 108)

One of the foremost characteristics of Imagist poetry is to present a very concrete image. Upon its very first reading, a clear image of a metro station appears in mind. Crowds of people, their hurry, their pace everything can be visualised through the image depicted in the poem. Crowd is associated with the apparition of the faces, and their hurry and commotion are also indicated. Apparition denotes the ghost-like appearance of people on the metro station. The question arises what makes a lively human being an apparition? Most likely, the mechanical monotonous routine life? According to one critic, the connotation of the image ‘apparition’ encompasses a wide range of thoughts. Bringing in the modernist context, he comments that:

It implies that the people who are appearing suddenly and getting out of sight just as fast at the station, are like spirits of dead person, symbolising that the modern man is spiritually dead. His endless materialistic pursuits have deprived him of spirituality and aesthetic sense, and disconnected him from nature and ultimately from his creator. It shows that, he has become an automaton, owing to his over busy routine and fast mode of life. (80)

The question may arise that why the word “apparition”? Could it not be spirit or shadow or ghost? Apparition can be applied to any object which is alive by being dead. Further, Pound has chosen the image of Metro station to depict the crowd of people. One can find a crowd anywhere - at the theatre, at the beach, at the stadium, at ceremonies. But the image of the Metro station is full of busy people, in hurry, mechanical, sometimes clueless. The Metro station also serves as a symbol of modern man’s downward movement, his desire to stay underground, thus getting further away from the grand, wide, vast and colourful universe. (81) Further, Metro is a modern invention. One can also travel by train or bus, and their stations are also crowded and clumsy. But here poet’s preference on Metro signifies the modern insensibility and futility, and so does the crowd. Instead of using the word “people”, the poet has used the word “crowd” which connotes to disorganisation. Can the image of Metro station be replaced with beach crowded with people? Then would the word apparition be able to make a sense that it makes in the poem?

Coming to the second line, though it also signifies the essence of the crowd, the kind of image which has been taken, is completely opposite from the first line. “Apparition” and “petal” are, in a way, contradictory images that have been used here to indicate the same target. The wet bough can be indicating the dampness caused by the rain. The poet’s clever use of petals on a bough is quite notable here. Instead of using the image of plucked flowers, or flowers in the garden, he has used the petals stuck to the branch. Though the petals are stuck to the bough, they soon will be withered and so will the human being indicating mortality and transience of human life. Petals on the wet black bough denote each segment attached to the flower, but it connotes that even if it is a part of the beauty, attached to firm support, it is going to be dead. Why petals and not flowers? Poet’s choice of “petal” instead of “flower” is, maybe, because petals symbolise the short-term existence of the modern life emphasising the connections of the previous image of the crowd at the Metro station. No one dwells in the Metro station forever yet one visits it regularly. People get tired of routine life, yet they have to go on. They are human being tuned into apparition yet there is a kind of beauty the petals have however fragile it may be. But still there are questions. Is the poem really about the angst of modern life? Or is it an experiment on metaphors?

5. CONCLUSION:

According to the theory of language that has been invoked by scholars like Belsey and McKee, for textual analysis, there cannot be a final signified: no one true meaning can ever come to light. All we can be sure of, in other words, is the signifier, and this cannot be tied up to any unique reading-to-end-all-readings, and the meanings are almost always ultimately undecidable. (Belsey 172) However, the strength of textual analysis lies in providing a multiplicity of readings and meanings which leads the researcher to explore all the possible aspects of the text bringing in diversity in the domain of cultural research.

REFERENCES:

1. Barthes, Roland. “Death of The Author.” *Image-Music-Text*. NT: Fontana Press, 1977.
2. --- “Textual Analysis of Poe’s Valdemar.” *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*,
3. Edited by Robert Young. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
4. Belsey, Catherine. “Textual Analysis as Research Method.” *Research Methods for English Studies*, Edited by Gabriele Griffin. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
5. Fürsich, Elfriede. “Analysing Text.” *The International Encyclopaedia of Media Studies*, 1st
7. Edition. Vol. 7, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014.
8. Hindle, Giles A. “Developing a Systemic Textual Analysis Methodology Based on the
9. Human Activity System Modelling Language of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM).” Vol. 24, Issue. 6, Nov-Dec, 2007. Pp. 599-612.
10. Makhdam, Saadia Jawad. “Poetic Complexity in “In a Station of the Metro” by Ezra Pound.”
11. *International Journal of Academic Research and Reflection*. 2015. Vol. 3, Issue. 2. Pp. 77-83.
12. McKee, Alan. *Textual Analysis: A Beginner’s Guide*. SAGE, 2003.
13. Pound, Ezra. “In a Station of Metro.” *The Mystic Drum: An Anthology of Poems in English*.
14. Orient Blackswan, 2012.
15. Smith, Jason. “Textual Analysis.” *The International Encyclopaedia of Communication*
16. *Research Methods*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017.