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Book Review: *The Post-war Novel and the Death of the Author* by Arya Aryan

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The Post-war Novel and the Death of the Author, Arya Aryan's inaugural monograph stands out as a comprehensive exploration of the renowned debates surrounding authorial roles within the novel genre, particularly emphasising the era towards Postmodernism. While the book delves into the concept of authorship, tracing its evolution by emphasising the "High Theory" moment as Aryan defines, it unveils a captivating historical excursion, mapping out the diverse functions and modes of the novel as a genre in recent years. In his opening chapter Aryan suggests that the theoretical and philosophical discussions about authorship in the 1980s had already been addressed indirectly in literary works by the authors of the period. Despite not explicitly framed as theoretical discussions, the authors of that time had already delved in the concept of authorship in their literary works, essentially addressing aspects of authorial stance and related ideas before they were formally theorised.¹ Thus, what Aryan states as the main purpose of the book is "to consider the overlooked discussions around the functions of authorship since the 1950s and therefore to leave sufficient scope for metamodernists (post-postmodernist) conceptions of authorship of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century which is highly unexplored."² It would not be wrong to express that Aryan's study stands out as a substantial contribution to the theoretical discourse on authorship, filling a notable gap. It surpasses the conventional approach of conducting a mere literature review of established debates. Instead, the study distinguishes itself by presenting an alternative reading by

¹ Aryan, Arya. *The Post-war Novel and the Death of the Author* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp.1.

² *Ibid.*, pp.2.

introducing fresh inquiries. Particularly noteworthy is its focus on long-neglected aspects, including mostly overlooked positions of women's literature within the theoretical landscape of authorship. Hence, Aryan's book not only adds depth to existing discussions but also prompts a re-evaluation of the discourse by bringing attention to previously ignored perspectives.

Beginning with an introduction that outlines the major arguments and analysed works of each chapter, the first chapter titled "The Rise of Theory and the Death of the Author" explores the development of the famous "Death of the Author" discourse primarily associated with Roland Barthes, followed by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. As Aryan asserts, these prominent figures in French intellectual scene, questioned the fundamental principles of modern Western intellectual history established since Descartes.³ They challenged assumptions about the subjective origins of artistic works, which traditionally emphasised the artist or author's mind as the source. Thus, the thinkers aimed to deconstruct and reassess established notions, fostering a critical perspective on the foundations of intellectual and artistic discourse. This comprehensive chapter divides the perspectives of three theorists by examining their major arguments about the authorial concepts. It concludes the argument by analysing Jorge Louis Borges's authorial practices in the light of the arguments held throughout the chapter noting that, prior to the 1960s arguments of the Death of the Author concept that uncovered new critical perspectives in the 1980s, Borges's *Labryinths* published in 1944, as well as Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), which are included in the following chapters, can be regarded as earlier examples of the authorial fascination with the various concepts and themes later theorised by the critics.⁴ In other words, those authors whom Aryan names as proto-postmodernists had already engaged with concepts

³ Ibid.,pp.3

⁴ Ibid.,pp.36.

and such as self-referentiality, authorial voice and originality long before these became crucial elements of fiction writing in a theoretical context.

The subsequent chapter, titled “Women Writers, from Madness to Agency” introduces an even more captivating argument into the authorial debate. The chapter focuses on leading women writers like Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing and Muriel Spark. What distinguishes this chapter is Aryan’s masterful reassessment of women’s literature by uncovering authorial practices that are mostly male-oriented. The chapter explores how women’s authorship is linked with madness and hysteria as long been considered to be the biological attributes of femininity. Aryan challenges this concept not only through feminist discourses but also by relating it to the death of the author discourse, making this study distinctive. According to Aryan, the three female writers that he exemplified through different perspectives underscore women’s bodies in their works as the initial step to liberate themselves and gain authorship. Aryan argues that without liberating the body from the enacted patriarchal view, authorship cannot be attained, which turns fiction into an exercise of creativity and intellect.⁵ To delve into how this practice is generated concerning authorial debates, Aryan directs significant questions, particularly highlighting the debate about Barthes and second-wave feminism. Despite the concurrent emergence of second-wave feminist practices and theoretical discourses on authorship, Aryan observes that Barthes’s views, while not explicitly gender-related, maintain masculine references in the discourse about killing the author.⁶ In essence, the death of the author concept, explored with Barthes, Derrida and Foucault in the book’s first chapter, remains a male-oriented system. However, all the female authors examined by Aryan in this chapter carve their unique path in writing practice. Although they do not conform the author-God discourse, the understanding of femininity and the purported biological state of the female

⁵ Ibid.,pp.48.

⁶ Ibid.,pp.49.

body becomes a subject of problematisation. Regarding the discussions, Aryan notes the similarities between female practice and authorial debates, intertwining different perspectives and offering an original lens for reading for the first time in these discussions. Expanding on the exploration of female authorship and agency, the book progresses with its third chapter titled “Postmodernist Fiction, Madness and Agency”. Within this chapter, the book observes the before and after practices of authorship, examining the process in between through the lens of writers such as Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov and John Fowles. These selected authors play a pivotal role in comprehending Aryan’s major argument, asserting that they problematised the death of the author concept before its formal theorisation. Each work in this chapter undergoes thorough examination, allowing readers to discern distinct modes within the death of the author discourse. For instance, in *The Unnameable* Samuel Beckett closely explores existential possibilities to ground his writing. John Fowles, in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* addresses the liberation of both author and the reader by freeing the character and creating a gap for the reader fulfil in their own sense by self-consciously referring to the historicised concept and author’s position in the age of Roland Barthes. Nabokov’s novel, on the other hand, serves as a significant source challenging the romantic understanding of the novel. While this chapter appears as the most thorough examination of fictional works within the context of the death of the author discussion, the fourth chapter “The Author in the Age of Risk Society” introduces a debate on authorial issues by focusing on the aftermath of the high theory moment by examining authors such as Salman Rushdie, J.M. Coetzee and Hilary Mantel. The main argument in this chapter revolves around how contemporary authors in a global context define the author’s position and whether they embrace high theory understanding of authorship. This chapter complements the ongoing debates throughout the book. While the reader remains focused on the prior and present aspects of High Theory, this chapter shifts attention to present and beyond. As Aryan observes, the new global structure

compels writers to approach their practice with increased seriousness and responsibility, surpassing the postmodern playfulness prevalent in earlier times.

Covering a wide array of debates, the book delves into comprehensive theoretical research and fiction analysis, necessitating a thorough discussion to address all the author's points. Amidst the diverse discussions, the book's primary argument regarding the before and after outcomes of the "death of the author" concept stands out, providing profound insights for the reader. Aryan's work enables readers to discern the nuanced perspectives of critics from the same period, connecting various angles they provided. In addition to the theoretical concepts, the analysis of novels introduces the notion that fiction writing and theoretical thinking are inherently interconnected concerning author's position. Through his deep understanding and rich background of theoretical knowledge, Arya Aryan effectively supports his arguments by referring a diverse range of critics and sources, avoiding a reliance on mainstream ideas. Instead, he unveils arguments about works that predate the debates and extend to the most contemporary ones. As a final note, despite the book's extensive coverage of theoretical and literary sources, it maintains clarity and guides the reader through each section by articulating arguments and readings meticulously. Aryan's monograph deserves recognition as a significant source for the authorial discussion, prompting readers to observe innovations in the author's voice and text by considering earlier debates and evaluating their relevance in contemporary times.

Works Cited

Aryan, Arya. *The Post-war Novel and the Death of the Author* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)