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Post-Truth: A Historical Amnesia, or a Neo-Colonial Imposition?

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Abstract: Soon after its inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016, the word ‘Post-Truth’ has gained an unprecedented presence and prominence in public and intellectual discourses. Common citizens and netizens seem to be completely awed by its unparalleled use and appearance. In the academic circles, particularly in universities and other educational establishments, post-truth has had its strong impacts too. Contrary to how the word has baffled the public as something new and radical, there has been however a historicity of epistemological debates on Truth, its nature and ethics. The Present paper, therefore, attempts to deconstruct the amnesia of academia and the ignorance of public of the historical antecedents of Post-Truth.

Keywords: *Post-truth, Epistemology of Truth, Argumentation*

Since its inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary 2016, the word ‘Post-Truth’ has gained a linguistic dominance in the public discourses beginning with the Brexit and the U.S.A. Presidential election. So much so, it has gained an entirely unprecedented acceptance amongst academicians and intellectuals across the globe. What is ironical is this ‘unquestioned incorporation of Post-truth into academia’, particularly in the discipline of English Literature and English Studies. As we learn from our schoolmen, literature and philosophy have been the dominant disciplines for interrogating, elucidating and proclaiming the nature, ontology and even the very philosophical epistemology of TRUTH. In literatures, either national, regional, or colonial, the very concept and idea of ‘post-truth’ has been historically present and

inherent. 'Truth' and 'whatever is treated with truth' primarily constitute literary sensibilities, literary practices as well as literary pedagogy. Ironically, when all discussions pertaining to Post-truth are sporadically happening in the public domains, there is hardly any voice from the intellectual or academic domains regarding its already marked presence ever since human knowledge. Understanding this amnesia of post-truth presence in academia, the present paper would analyze some of the examples from philosophy and literature that questioned the nature, purpose and politics of truth.

As we understand the word 'post-truth' has been included in the Oxford English Dictionary as an unavoidable new vocabulary the dominated the European minds. The members of the Dictionary found that Europeans are suddenly awakened to a statistics of more than 2000% rise of the use of the rod post-truth in 2016. The exit of Britain from the Euro group and the win of Donald Trump in America have led the Europeans to think how manipulated facts, filtered news, fake news, make-belief stories can be pushed to and fro through the intermediaries of social media can result in defining or, rather redefining what is truth in our times. Obviously, the Brexit and Trump victory are two obvious surprises for the people across the globe to accept. However, what is under question is not the exit or the victory as mentioned above, but people's active/passive participation in promoting such facts or post-truths as well as believing in others who too are indulged in such post-truth facts producing cyber industries. To simplify, truth in our times are based not on reason or logic, but on how people across the globe depend on their emotions, feelings, cultural backgrounds, etc. to define and accept truths. The Oxford English Dictionary itself defined post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Wang, 2017).

The Dictionary's seeming salutation to public perception and its democratic consideration to declare 'Post-Truth' as the word of the year 2016 generates several questions. Primarily, how such inclusion can lead us to public amnesia about the historicity of Truth and its rebuttal in the ontology of human knowledge. Secondly, how it would entail question of subverting the VALUES attached with truth. Thirdly, it would promote unethical ideas and attitude towards truths around us. Finally, it would

impose a dividing line between truth in good olden times and truth in our post-enlightenment times. Besides, there are several other pragmatic and ideological peculiarities that would emanate from the next few years. Let's say, how such concepts would influence the political and social scenarios in the no-European countries.

In metaphysics as well as in the domain of philosophy and language, truth is a syntactic and semantic structure entailing properties of language like sentence, phrases, punctuation, assertions, beliefs etc. that aim to proclaiming a reliable truth or a believable truth. The ultimate aim of our belief is intended towards truth as much as the opposite of it, i.e. fake news or falsity is an unbelievable dungeon. The metaphysics of truth proclaims that truth is one- to- one corollary or representation of words and objects or events around us. Any deviation would drift us from the orbit of Truth. Socrates, Plato (428-328BC), Aristotle (384-322BC), Augustine (354-430AD), and Aquinas (1225-1274) would all engage philosophically about the idea of truth. But this metaphysical interpretation of truth was never unchallenged.

Realizing the gradual corruption of human soul on one hand, and rising anxieties and immorality in human society on the other, Plato would opine the weakness or frailty of human minds to prove, perceive of proclaiming ideal-truth through their senses. His idea of eudemonia and idea state would thus debunk reason and logic of things or objects as they appear to human sense. Therefore, he believed that excessive reliance on things or objects would empower to interference in moral justice is an untruthful act, thus associating truth with justice. Surely, Plato did deconstruct truth, but it's unlike the post-truth murder of truth. Plato intended towards idealism an ideal world having all happiness and justice, a society that would march towards happiness beyond our physical or materialistic world. A world that would entail Platonic idealism, where truth, ideals, justice, ethics, and morality would be adored and preserved. So like Socrates, we have Plato as one of the early philosophers deconstructing truth.

Now we have Aristotle who would come up with a more analytical and systematic approach to learning. Unlike Plato, Aristotle deconstructed truth and reality by appealing for the application of fundamental principles of mathematical proofs to differentiate 'truth' from natural things as they may appear whimsically to human senses.

And his contribution to the analysis of truth can be seen in his writings on the 'nature of things as they are' and the 'nature of causes as they happen'. And as we know Aristotle's intense and in-depth approach towards establishing correct methodology has led the foundation for scientific method and science; something Descartes and Bacon would heavily bank upon to formulate their methods of learning during the English Renaissance. So the question therefore is- 'is post-truth the new beginning of understanding truth?'

Similarly, when St. Augustine would adhere to Plato's philosophy reviving what is called Neo-Platonism, Thomas Aquinas would subscribe to Aristotelian logic of Truth, i.e. Aristotelian Scholasticism to unite man's will and reason with that of the God. According to his logic, God created an ordered natural world having some purposes; a man should, therefore, apply his reason given by God to justify His world. Thus Aquinas combines truth and theology, never disassociating truth from its ethical values. And this leads us to question the way the European world is trying to disassociating truth from ethics and values.

The Pre-post-truth era had many scholars and philosophers who have debated and critiqued upon truth. If we come to the Renaissance period, let's say in England, we have Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Francis Bacon(1561-1626) both giving two most convincing methods for the advancement of learning, not to mention of their books on the advancement learning around that time. Descartes was famous for his methodical approach to knowledge or epistemology. For him truth can be perceived by (i) accepting as "truth" only clear, distinct ideas that could not be doubted, (ii) breaking a problem down into parts, (iii) deducing one conclusion from another, and (iv) conducting a systematic synthesis of all things (*Discourse on Methods* 1950). Similarly, Bacon's method required (i) accumulating a store of particular empirical observations, (ii) from these inductively inferring lesser axioms, (iii) from these inductively inferring middle axioms, (iv) and then proposing the most general of notions, each in progressive steps (Dick 1955: 519).

Both Bacon and Descartes would address the anxieties of his age involving, religious dogmas, monarchical hegemony, human frailties, the urgency of scientific learning and above all knowledge that would benefit the human society. Unlike the modern minds of post-truth promulgators, Bacon would deconstruct the human minds to show how

individual human mind and that of the social mind can be victims of ignorance, false impression and prejudices. Following is the example of how Bacon did think about the connection between the human mind and how we should be warned of it:

Idols of the tribe: False notions due to the human nature and common to all men. An example would be geocentricity which was due to the limits of human insight.

Idols of the cave: Personal interpretations due to individual makeup or disposition. An example would be Gilbert's "magnetic world view."

Idols of the market-place: The problem of language and the confusion of words and terms. An example of this relates to the problem with definitions of words which likewise depend upon words.

Idols of the theatre: The dogmas of philosophies that are received from wrong "laws of demonstration." This involves the results of the Aristotelian method of syllogistic argumentation. (Dick 1955: 470-471)

Thus we have had a long history of engaging with truth and falsity. These are only a few examples, besides many other philosophical, theological and intellectual treatises and papers. However, it is only during the European and English Renaissance we find an obvious engagement with truth, reality and practical knowledge. The advancement of knowledge, the conquest of new colonies, the spread of trade and commerce, even literature would thus establish a new era of trying with truth. Thus we have David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau, J.S. Mill, Bertrand Russell, Martin Heidegger, etc. to name a few. And in all their discussions, there was a persistent attempt to understand truth and to relate it with human beings in general. The excessive individualism, selfish interpretation, evil intentions and materialistic ambitions never deterred them so hysterical as we find during the post-truth. we need to question the truths being designed and sold, pictures being morphed, theories being circulated, to mention a few modern malice. We need to revive faith in morality, injustice, in god and in idealism that the school-men did emphasize upon. No doubt that they were the men of the school of suspicion, as we are the creators of the society of suspicions, but we cannot forsake our ethical responsibility

towards our community and society. We need to doubt truth, but not at the expense of love for ethics, justice and humanity. And this is what Shakespeare echoed during a time when science and humanity were at loggerhead with each other, much like ours:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I.

- Lord Polonius reading in *Hamlet* (Shakespeare 1994: 682)

We have a plethora of creative writers till T.S. Eliot who would periodically question the anarchy, de-humanity, existential problems of modern societies, hinting at the fall of truth and ethics. Therefore, should we not question the sudden incarnation of Post-Truth phenomena in our times, and particularly its unquestioned entrance into academics? For me, such hegemony of post-truth in academia is not only an infringement into already proven post-truth epistemology earlier (as we have discussed above), but also a kind of neo-colonialism of academics, particularly in the context of the Oriental world.

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