Rhetoric and Rhetorical Studies: The Diversity and Eclecticism of Scholarship

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Abstract

Developed in the ancient Greece as the verbal art of public delivery, rhetoric at present finds wide application in diverse disciplinary terrains as a means of effective communication, structure for artifact creation and system of critical inquiries. This paper serves three purposes with rhetoric and rhetorical studies as the main subjects. First, it introduces the ancient art of rhetoric with reference to its key definitions and postulations. Second, it discusses rhetorical criticism/ study and the representative critical dimensions. Third, it highlights rhetoric's disciplinary expansion and discursive eclecticism in the contemporary times.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Rhetorical Studies, Eclecticism, Contemporary Applications.

Introduction

Rhetoric usually poses a challenge of definition. It's almost saturated use in everyday parlance as a referent to bombasts, lies, and inflated speeches makes it as commonplace as any other ordinary word. But its aesthetic, discursive and academic aspects are diverse and ever-expansive. The paper seeks to broadly address two fundamental questions. Firstly, what is rhetoric and what are rhetorical studies? Secondly, what is the contemporary status of rhetorical studies from the lens of theory and praxis? The overall purpose of this paper is to provide readers a broad overview on rhetoric and rhetorical studies as eclectic fields of scholarship across the disciplines of humanities and social sciences.

Rhetoric is believed to have come into practice as an art form from as early as the fifth century BC. It was developed by exploiting the fundamental human faculty of using communication skills to make things happen. In ancient Syracuse rhetoric was taught to farmers especially those who were conditioned to prove their claim over a controversial land (Foss 854). In other words, it was a civilized means of avoiding violent conflicts that would ensue from bilateral claims over confiscated property (Lamb 108). The sophists of Greece taught rhetoric and earned fame as professional educators. But they were criticized, particularly by Plato, as the promoters of falsehood and trickery. Plato insisted

that rhetoric "should be reserved for the intellectual elite since this ability was too powerful for ordinary people" (Renegar and Malkowski 49). He openly castigated the sophists for cheapening rhetoric through popular use.

Aristotle, reportedly the first Greek scholar to organize a treatise on rhetorical artistry (*The Rhetoric*), introduced rhetoric as a systematic form of public communication. He promoted rhetoric as an important component of democracy, a way of formally empowering citizens. His idea of rhetoric involving the ability to find "available means of persuasion," therefore, is the earliest simplification of rhetoric as an instrument for effective communication (36). Persuasion, despite its negative potential for being mere verbal maneuvering, was a process for wining positive causes by establishing a sense of value both in the speakers and in their audiences.

In successive times, the scope of rhetoric was understood to involve human communication beyond persuasion. According to Kuypers and King, Cicero (106-43 BC), the popularly known Roman orator, advocated its use "as a means of serving people" (2). A century later, Quintilian (35-96 AD), who was "Rome's greatest teacher and codifier of rhetorical knowledge" extended its use for informing, motivating and inspiring (2). In the fourth century, St. Augustine (354-430 AD), who was responsible for initiating the Christian uses of rhetoric, introduced mandatory teaching of rhetoric to all those who desired to remain pious and protected from evils. Kuypers and King further note, St. Augustine reasoned that "since the devil had full access to all of the available resources of rhetoric, others ought to study it if only for their own protection" (2). Thus, rhetoric was perceived to transcend moments of public oratory to wider goals of communication and education. Particularly, the Greco-Roman world "established a tradition of discourse that has been taught throughout Western history and continues to grow and to develop down to our own time" (Kuypers and King 2). This corresponds to the extent of achieving "vibrancy" in the form of "international transdisciplinary endeavour" (Macdonald 2).

As a verbal art form, in the strictly classical sense, rhetoric is understood in its formal dimensions: the five canons and three genres. The canons include invention, disposition (arrangement), style, memory, and delivery. The canons stand for the fundamental process of creation and presentation of a public discourse. Invention signifies discovery and choice of materials, both experiential (ethical, emotional) and external (textual, logical, factual) deemed requisite by the rhetor to create influence on the audience. Disposition denotes the organization

of information those materials in such a way that suits the nature of influence the rhetor aims to have on the audience. It concerns careful foregrounding and backgrounding of ideas by way of their placements in the text. Style comprises the stock of lexical, syntactic, phonological, and performative structures a rhetor is able to manoeuvre in an attempt to ensure aesthetic fervour in the artifact. Memory and delivery entail mental and verbal exactness of an orator during a live oral presentation. The canons are, nevertheless, equally contributory to the process of performing invention, disposition and style. All the canons collectively constitute a formal set of methodological categories for the Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical study.

The three genres of rhetoric–epideictic, deliberative, forensic–organize formal artefacts into three basic types of discourse. The genres denote three situations and places where rhetoric takes effect. Epideictic rhetoric reflects ceremonial occasions and is placed in a consciously designed space, such as a US President elect's acceptance speech, or a prime minister's address to the nation on a national day. It is characterized by the focus on the matters of present occasion, on the elaboration of a subject's virtues and vices through praises and blames. The deliberative genre takes social, political issues and signals a future course of action. It is a public discourse, much akin to the speeches of politicians to mass gatherings. The forensic genre is related to legal proceedings, especially the debates inside the law courts. In the everyday context, it includes all those formal and informal texts that make critical judgments about events in the past.

The canons and genres are complementary to one another. The discovery and choice of materials and the decision for organization and stylistic features depend largely on the type of discourse the rhetor intends to construct. The genres are the products of the canons and canons the genres' taxonomy. Some scholars illustrate that the genres are the actual sources of invention, disposition and style. This is to say, knowledge of the genre and the readiness to create it inspires the type of ethical, logical and emotional materials as well as determines the overall textual construction and the choice of stylistic elements.

Rhetoric's Expansion to Diversity

The contemporary applications of rhetoric incorporate a wide variety of subjects and disciplines beyond the one-to-one speaker-audience communicative situation. Jonathan Price calls rhetoric the "craft of communicating through one or more media with a particular set of audiences for specific purposes," a mode of

communication that involves as many functions as "informing, entertaining, attacking, or reassuring–far more than just persuading" (Price). A more inclusive characterization takes rhetoric for the human use of symbols to communicate (Foss 855, Sonja Foss 3). More than considering a human act, it is even perceived as "a natural faculty," incorporating "analogies in features of communication among non-human animals that live in groups and seek to influence each other's actions by utterance or gesture" (Kennedy 146).

The Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric testifies rhetoric's recent acceptance as a means of representing socio-cultural meanings within multiple disciplines. The Encyclopaedia explains, "In recent times, scholars in such areas as philosophy, literary theory, and communications have renewed their attention to rhetoric as a way of understanding many areas of culture and social life" (1). The simple reason for this eclecticism is the effort of scholars to identify and popularize rhetoric "as a global phenomenon . . . a universal function of language," not a "peculiarly Greco-Roman cultural activity" (Sullivan 103). The reason could also be rhetoric's functional presence in all communicative artefacts, "both inside and outside the text" (Mailloux 21). Above all, the change in time has had a significant impact in the practice of and scholarship in rhetoric.

The emergence of multiple societies and new contexts of communication in the recent times has contributed to the proliferation of diversity in print, audio, video, or online texts resulting in the expansion of the scope of rhetorical study. Scholars have, therefore, voiced the need to extend the application of rhetorical scholarship to adapt to the diversity of texts and contexts. In this line, Hasian argues, "In a transnational world filled with mobile signifiers, commodities, and diasporic communities, our traditional ways of thinking about rhetorical theories, methods, and criticism will have to undergo massive changes" (22). Warnick contends that traditional notion of rhetoric, which considered the rhetor (speaker/writer) the principal source of persuasion or "followed the tradition in emphasizing the figures and tropes of style," needs to be redefined to adapt to today's "disorganized, open texts in cyberspace" (61). Warnick's emphasis is on the "interactive and Web-based communication" of the digital world in which users switch across multiple environments in order to negotiate their identities through text-based channels and play with all the potential areas of language use and transactions.

Subsequently, the academic dimensions of rhetoric can be perceived in at least six representative definitions (Table 1 below). These include rhetoric as

persuasion, art, communication, identification, invitation and symbolic convergence. The first three are broad definitions of rhetoric with clear classical orientation, as its being an effective verbal art. The remaining three expand the scope of rhetoric with new functions and new components. For example, Burke's notion of identification and Foss and Griffin's invitation partly establish that persuasion alone cannot complete the essential function of rhetoric and that of human communication in general. Rhetoric as symbolic convergence is built in the aspects of group communication, and particularly highlights the concept that communication constructs realities for humans.

Table 1. Representative Definitions of Rhetoric

Definition	**Basic function**	**Components**	**Proponents**	**Fields of Scholarship**
Persuasion	Move the audience	Genres: Forensic, deliberative epideictic Appeals: Ethos, logos, pathos Canons: Invention, disposition, style, memory, delivery	Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian	Communication
Art	Pleasure, inspiration, motivation	Genres, tropes, verbal strategies	Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian	Literary criticism, Rhetoric and composition,
Communication	Write and speak effectively	Verbal and non-verbal symbols	Common parlance Sonja K. Foss, Kennedy	Literary Criticism, Communication Studies
Identification	Search for a common ground	Courtship, association, disassociation, consubstantiation, transcendence Pentad: act, scene, agent, agency, purpose	Kenneth Burke	Communication

Definition	Basic function	Components	Proponents	Fields of Scholarship
Invitation	Rejection of competition and dominance	Equality, imminent value, self-determination	Sonja K Foss, Cindy L Griffin	Communication
Symbolic Convergence	Construction of shared reality	Dramas, fantasy themes, rhetorical visions	Earnest Borman	Communication

(Source: Author's compilation from different theoretical writings)

Rhetorical Studies

Rhetorical study (or rhetorical criticism), in general, critically examines the process of communication as represented in verbal artefacts. Kuypers notes rhetorical study as "a humanizing activity" in the sense that it "explores and highlights qualities that make us human" (13). The underlying human qualities make a critical act more of a subjective endeavour though a critic works with awareness of objectivity. Edwin Black contends, "Criticism is not supposed to be always objective. It is, of course, supposed to be always intelligent. More to the point, it is supposed to be always fair" (29). Thus, only in the process of being fair the critic may switch between subjectivity and objectivity. Black further notes that "the relationship between objectivity and criticism is not constant, it is variable" (29).

Sonja Foss describes rhetorical criticism more formally as a broad system of "qualitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes" (6). The method includes such "primary dimensions" as i) systematic analysis as the act of criticism; ii) acts and artefacts as the objects of analysis in criticism; and iii) understanding rhetorical processes as the purpose of criticism (6). Though generally perceived as widely polysemic and critical methods of communication studies, rhetorical discourses incorporate at least three overlapping paradigms of research. Eisenhart and Johnstone explain:

They [rhetorical discourses] are empirical, in the sense that they are based in observation rather than introspection alone; they are ethnographic, in that they seek to understand the rhetorical workings of discourse and context through

the eyes and minds of those engaged in them; and they are grounded, returning again and again to their data as they build theory to account for it. (3)

Rhetorical theorists largely converge about the value of freedom assigned to a rhetorical critic regarding the choice of a subject and a method. Kuypers explains, "The very choices of what to study, and how and why to study a rhetorical artefact are heavily influenced by the personal qualities of the researcher" (14). A similar idea, one that allows a critic's 'personal qualities' to determine, is reflected in what Sonja Foss says: "The artefact you choose also should be something you really like or really dislike, something that puzzles or baffles you" (10). Foss's suggestion to a rhetorical critic for meeting the challenge of determining an artefact is, ". . . let your interest in your daily encounters with artefacts guide you in your selection of an artefact" (10).

Regarding the choice of a method, Black takes a very liberal, as well as radical, stance. He assigns the critic a dominant position of the "only instrument of good criticism." He prefers "convictions, values, and learning of the critic, ... the observational and interpretive powers of the critic" to "any external perspective or procedure or ideology," which corroborates his claim that "the method of rhetorical criticism is the critic" (32). Condit and Bates show identical stance in opposition to strict adherence to a method. They suggest, "Rather than adopt methods, rhetorical critics first adopt a critical posture and then choose critical referents for their analyses" (110). It is not necessarily the mastery in one or few methods that leads to good criticism. A critic should rather have "received formal training in rhetorical theories," so that she can select "referents that best help to understand a given text" (110). This idea comes closer to what Eisenhart and Johnstone call taking "an inclusive approach" in the performance of rhetorical study (3).

But rhetoricians assert the importance of a standard perspective even though they agree that a critic could use her convictions and power of imagination in the analytical process. Kathleen German shows the need of "a critical methodology which brings the artefact into sharpest focus" no matter "whatever the approach" (87). So, the critic should take such perspective that "gives the reader new insights into the forces of rhetoric" (89). For Kuypers, methods "are not to be used as formulas, however" and though the perspectives/methods lend the critic certain view of the world, the critic "must direct the criticism" (22). In other words, perspectives are there "to help a critic, not direct the criticism." Kuypers suggests that "a successful critic's ideas blend in with those of the perspective"

not that the perspective is "forced upon a rhetorical artefact" producing "mechanistic and rigid criticism" (23).

The Eclectic Nature of Rhetorical Study

As delineated above, the contemporary practice of rhetorical criticism assigns relative freedom to a critic/reader. The following distinctions (Table 2 below) between traditional and contemporary modes of readings, drawn from Campbell shed some light on the kind of shift rhetorical criticism has undergone over the years (517). The purpose here, however, is not to elaborate the distinction between the classical and modern ways of practicing rhetoric, but only to list the basic tenets of the shifts in rhetorical scholarship.

Table 2. Classical vs. Contemporary Rhetoric

Classical/Traditional Rhetoric	Contemporary Rhetoric
Influence by argument	Influence by language
Invention of the speaker	Interpretation of the reader
Historical/Biographical study of speakers and speeches	Close reading of texts (literature, journalism etc.)
Explanation of a single text	Critiques of bodies of texts
Conception of rhetoric as orally delivered speeches	Re-conception of rhetoric as symbolic action through which as humans we construct the worlds in which we live

Along these lines of shifts in scholarly practices, rhetoric sustains its position in three broad academic-philosophical categories. The first concerns the wider field of rhetoric as an epistemological system. The field claims its orientation in studying histories and types of rhetoric and abstains largely from becoming a job- and market-oriented scholarship. Scholars seeking to trace and develop specific versions of rhetoric in geo-cultural (such as Indian rhetoric or Nepali rhetoric, western or non-western rhetoric) and historical (such century-wise, decade-wise, era-wise practices) dimensions belong to this category. In the second category lies the aspect of rhetoric as a specific mode of communication. Rhetoric in this sense is one of the seven established communication theories, and rhetorical studies, in its numerous dimensions, is one of the methods of communication

studies. The field has its wider applications in the study of the inter-personal, group, and mediated forms of communication. The third line of scholarship is rhetoric and composition studies housed under the English Studies departments, mainly of American universities, and centers of philological studies elsewhere. The field studies the rhetorical nuances of literacy practices and text productions in diverse socio-cultural settings with particular focuses on the aesthetics of writing.

Table 3. Expansion of Rhetorical Studies

Types of Rhetorical Criticism	**Extensions of Rhetorical Study**
The Rhetorical Situation or Situational Criticism	Rhetoric and Post Structuralism
Neo-Aristotealian/ Traditional Criticism	Rhetoric and Cultural Studies
Close Textual Analysis	Rhetoric and Literary Studies
Genre Criticism/ Genric Elements in Rhetorics	Rhetoric and Feminist Studies
Metaphoric Criticism/ Criticism of Metaphor	Rhetoric and Critical Race Studies
Narrative Criticism/ Narrative Perspective	Rhetoric and African American Studies
Dramatistic Criticism/ Dramatic Form of Criticism	Rhetoric and American Indian Studies
Pentadic Criticism	Rhetoric and Asian American Studies
Framing Analysis	Rhetoric and Latino Studies
Fantasy Theme Criticism	Comparative/ Contrastive Studies
The Mythic Perspective	Rhetoric and Religion
Gender/ Feminist Criticism	Rhetoric, Technology and Technical Writing
Ideographic/ Ideological Criticism	Visual Rhetoric
Critical Rhetoric/ Continual Critique	Rhetoric and Program Administration
Conceptually oriented Criticism	Rhetoric and Teaching of Composition
Cluster Criticism	Rhetoric and International Relations
Generative Criticism	Rhetoric and Health and Medicine
Social Movement Criticism	Digital Rhetoric
Eclectic Criticism	Rhetoric and Critical Pedagogy
Burgchardt, *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*; Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*; Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*	(Ratcliffe pp 185-236; Lunsford, Wilson and Eberly, *The Sage Handbook of Rhetorical Studies)*

There is more to say about the contemporary expansion of rhetorical scholarship. Rhetoric has visibly developed into "an interdisciplinary and synthetic art capable of bringing together knowledge and ability in various fields and exigencies of various kinds" (Lunsford et al. xii-xiii). Krista Ratcliffe attests to its permeation in as many as twenty different academic disciplines. These include areas as diverse as "advertising, anthropology, classics, communication, critical theory, economics, ethnic studies, law, literary studies, management, marketing, medicine, natural sciences, philosophy, psychology, rhetoric and composition, theatre, theology, transnational politics, and women's and gender studies" (185). A more recent observation detailed in *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* unfolds rhetoric's conjunction with more than thirty seven disciplines including, among others, the areas as diverse as law, politics, historiography, pedagogy, poetics, tragedy, comedy, philosophy, epic, declamation, fiction, music and arts, literary criticism, humanism, sciences, theater, architecture, feminism, race, political theory, presidential rhetoric, New Testament Studies, semiotics, psychoanalysis, design, social epistemology, environment, and digital media. Apart from such multi-disciplinary proliferation, the trend of contemporary rhetorical scholarship unfolds its expansion in equally varied critical-theoretical orientations (See Table 3), with application to such fields as poststructuralism, cultural studies, literacy studies, feminist studies, religion, program administration, and technical writing, among others. Likewise, as eclectic the disciplinary expansion, so diverse the methods of criticism/study. A count from three popular books on rhetorical criticism reveals as many as nineteen standard methods of criticism (See Table 3). Kuypers even mentions over "60 formally recognized perspectives . . . with many more being used and with some critics even blending perspectives" (18). This proves the formation of a strong base for rhetoric as simple and lifelike as "seeing, making and doing" (Lunsford et al. xxi).

Conclusion

The early Platonic castigation of rhetoric as the promoter of falsehood and trickery does not hold any ground at present. The over-generalized non-scholarly usage as the surrogate for bombasts or lies is too small to overshadow rhetoric's recognition as an interdisciplinary and eclectic field of scholarship. Rhetoric provides structure for creating public texts of influence and functions as a lens for understanding such influence and resultant belief systems. Rhetorical study continues to serve as a perspective for understanding and analysing artefacts

representing diverse contexts and exigencies. The field constantly unfolds a wide spectrum of critical insights in the aspect of verbal and non-verbal communications across various fields of scholarship. For its eclecticism in application and usefulness in every day contexts, general awareness of and specialized knowledge of rhetoric is one essential pathway for personal and critical empowerment.

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