

LITERARY THEORIES: TO COMPREHEND OR TO CONFOUND?

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Abstract

“Literary Theories/Literary Theory” appears to be the latest addition to the ever-expanding arena of English Studies in India. In the order of hierarchy in the postgraduate programme, it not only ranks the topmost, but also sounds the toughest. Literary Criticism, which used to occupy this kind of privileged curricular position earlier, has obviously vacated its slot now in favour of Literary Theories. The introduction of this new ‘elitist’ course has also promptly divided the English literature academics into those who (seem to) know the subject and those who either ignore it or condemn it for its latest usurpation. Literary theories teachers’ perception of this new genre appears to be a cause of pedagogical concern since they experience much confusion in understanding the very nature and function of literary theories. On the other hand, teachers who do not approve of its inclusion in the curriculum register their complaints and contentions. While confusion needs to be cleared, complaints and contentions ought to be addressed. Perhaps, what Lacan declared is true in the present case: “To understand is to misunderstand.” The results of the present study confirm the hypothesis that a majority of teachers of literary theories have poor comprehension of the nature and function of, and confusion over, literary theories.

Keywords: critical approaches, critical theories, theory of literature, literary criticism, world theories.

1. Introduction

English Studies within in Indian academia keeps on improvising (through expansion) its curricular structure in tune with what is happening within the Western academia. Of course, most universities have retained the old nomenclature ‘BA English/MA English’ approved by the UGC though autonomous institutions have rechristened them as BA/MA/M Phil English Language & Literature to show that the programmes accord some, if not equal, importance to the study of the English language. Chronologically and structurally, it was dominated by courses on British Literature up to 1960s and it started accommodating new courses replacing or compressing British literature courses. Some of them are American

Literature, Comparative Literature, Indian Writing in English, Commonwealth Literature during 1970s & 1980s, New Literatures in English, Canadian Literature, African-American Literature in 1990s. Faculty members of English departments in all higher educational institutions welcomed such curricular inclusions and epistemological expansion. A course or two on English language (teaching) were introduced eventually, but with some feeble protest from teachers. Finally, all universities that had introduced a course on Literary Criticism started including a course on Literary Theory both at MA and M Phil levels.

Curricular introduction of literary theories became a divisive force within English academia. Many departments of English, which had already been divided into Departments of English literature and Cells for English language teaching when language-based courses were mooted by the Educational Commissions and introduced with some funding by supervising agencies like the University Grants Commission, started experiencing yet another division once literary theory was introduced into the curriculum. While senior faculty members silently started distancing themselves from literary theories course, young teachers showed keen interest in teaching it. Young teachers either had a course in curriculum when they were students or started reading theory books and attended conferences on theories when they became academics. Of course, some of them have had some experience in 'using' theories as tools for interpretation of their texts for research.

Pedagogically, the teachers who handle literary theories treat these theoretical discourses at par with critical essays and explicate them line by line in classes with much difficulty in understanding the non-literary concepts that underline this new genre of writing. Some of them are under the impression that theories can be and therefore should be 'applied' in the interpretation of individual texts because theories (as in natural & social sciences) have application value. Some of them question this application value of theories since they think that theories are not traditional criticisms and Wilbur Scott's approaches. They argue that Wilbur Scott's five approaches are already used as interpretive tools for the explication of literary texts. Some teachers who are opposed to literary theories feel that it is a waste of time to teach theories as they are based on non-literary discourses such as philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, intellectual history, and social sciences. Moreover, the teaching of literary theories robs the readers of aesthetic-humanist-mimetic ideologies.

2. Research Methodology

The present investigation started with the defining identification and specific articulation of the very purpose of the study.

2.1 Objective of the Study

The twin-fold objectives that the study aims at are

1. Interrogating and crystallizing the teachers' attitudes toward the teaching of literary theories, their understanding of the nature and function of theories, and

2. Investigating if they experience any confusion in their attempt at comprehending theories.

2.2 Research Questions

No research is possible and meaningful without probing research questions into the issue that the study sets out to investigate. Hence, in order to focus the attention on different aspects of theories and teaching of the same, the following were questions were raised:

1. Which is appropriate: 'theory' or 'theories'?
2. How are they defined?
3. How do they differ from approaches, criticism, & theory of literature?
4. What is the nature and function of literary theories?
5. To what extent can they be application-oriented to individual literary texts?
6. Why are they resisted or condemned or ignored by English literature teachers?

2.3 Review of the Literature

Terry Eagleton (1983) and Peter Barry (1995) use the terms 'critical theory,' 'literary theory,' and 'critical approach to English studies' as synonyms and identify three broad theoretical traditions: humanist, structuralist, & post-structuralist. Moreover, they prefer the term in the singular. They also locate theoretical perspectives within English studies as an academic discipline. Jonathan Culler (1997) cautions academics against the tendency and temptation to treat literary theories as approaches and methods of interpretations since they rob theories of force and interest. He argues that theory is a new mixed genre from outside the field of literary studies that challenges and reorients thinking about literature and other fields from where it originates. Julian Wolfreys (2001) understands literary theories as "different and differing ways of reading and interpreting"... "our world and the texts which comprise that world." Wolfreys advocates the use of the term in the plural.

Patricia Waugh (2006) identifies the core subjects of literary theory as an intimidating interdisciplinary: human subjectivity, power, responsibility, gender, class, race, sexuality, mind, the construction of history, disciplinary boundaries, truth-effects, and the nature of the linguistic sign. Mary Klages (2008) suggests that the term 'Literary Theory' be renamed as "World Theory" since theories explain how meaning is made and how everyday world works. Habib (2008) equates literary theories with critical approaches, such as formalism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, gender studies, reader-response & reception theory, historicism, cultural studies, and film theory. Jeremy Hawthorn (2000) sees a realignment of literary studies that includes theories that expose the former to a wide range of intellectual influences and thus makes it more intellectually exciting and academically challenging. He explains theories in terms of function that they make us better readers of literature since they inform our reading. Clare Connors (2011) defines literary theory as 'a process of readings and reflections rather than a fixed set of ideas.'

2.4 Hypothesis

A majority of teachers of literary theories have poor comprehension of the nature and function of, and confusion over, literary theories

3. Research Design & Results

A series of informal conversations with randomly selected Madurai city college teachers who either 'teach' literary theories or are 'informed' of them or claim to 'know' them provided raw materials for reflection on comprehension of, and confusion over theories. This was done with a view to crystallizing their subjective internalization of new modes of critical enquiry on matters which are perceived to be exclusively non-literary. The study intended to be qualitative and descriptive, and therefore never aimed at quantifying their responses and understandings. The researcher held a series of consultations and conversations on theories over a period of three years in a staggered manner. The participants were never given to understand that the researcher intended to use their inputs for a research project. It was so causally done so with a view to eliciting their spontaneous, authentic experience and knowledge of reading, teaching, and using literary theories. The researcher noted down responses soon after the informal consultations with the individual participants finished, and before beginning of the conversation with another teacher. Whenever more than one teacher was involved in discussion, the researcher took extra care to store their responses and recalled the same at the earliest opportunity. The following statements are the summary of their responses and they crystallize teachers' misunderstandings and confusions over the issue at hand:

1. I have No clear idea about the sense in which the term 'theory' or 'literary theory' is used.
2. I think that theory ought to be APPLIED to an individual text.
3. I guess that literary theorists are literary CRITICS.
4. I have no idea about the MULTIPLE ASPECTS of a theory that warrants its use in the plural.
5. I teach each ESSAY (theory) as a critical PROSE piece.
6. The best way to test students is through fulsome ESSAY questions.
7. I don't relate theories to the teaching of literature lest it should LIMIT the thematic discussions of a text.
8. I think it is DIFFICULT to 'apply' theory systematically to teaching texts.
9. I think it is UNNECESSARY on the part of teachers to have some knowledge of linguistics or philosophy or psychology.
10. I don't have a clear idea of the EVOLUTIONARY perspectives of this new genre.
11. Classification of writings and theorists is CONFUSING.
12. I am NOT SURE of all the theoretical concepts of any one particular theory.

4. Analysis

Many teachers do not simply understand the sense in which the term 'theory' is used as the head of the noun phrase. It is most common to several of them to be familiar with phrases like economic theory, political theory, or even critical theory, but 'literary theory' presents them much confusion since its content draws on fields like philosophy, psychology, and linguistics. Since any theory can have application value, literature teachers assume that each theory can be applied to the interpretation of individual texts. However, no theory spells out the step-by-step methods of analysis for academics and research scholars to uniformly follow.

They also tend to equate theorists and critics. However, such tendency creates a source of confusion as well. Any reader who pays close, careful, comprehensive, and critical attention to an individual text is professionally known as a critic and their comments are called criticism. They are like judges who highlight both merits and limitations of the text under scrutiny. However, theorists are those who create theories. For instance, Homi Bhabha or Frantz Fanon are seen as postcolonial (psychoanalytic) theorists rather than literary critics. At the same time, literary theorists can also be literary critics. For instance, Paul de Man deconstructs Keats' Fall of Hyperion toward the end of his much celebrated essay "Resistance to Theory." Basically, he was a Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale. Sterling Professorship was the highest academic rank offered to a faculty member. Thus, a theorist can be a critic, but conversely, an academic critic need not be a theorist.

Most of them are under the impression that as the title of a course, it is always in the singular and the plural form simply means different theories. They do not have any idea about multiple aspects/strands of a particular theory over which theorists might or might not agree. For instance, all postcolonial theorists cannot be classified together. Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Aijaz Ahmad cannot be expected to toe each other's concepts and theories though all of them are known as postcolonial theorists. There are many versions of deconstruction and therefore Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Hillis Miller, Barbara Johnson, and Christopher Norris do not agree with all versions. So, we need to use terminologies like postcolonial theories, deconstruction theories, feminist theories, postmodern theories, and cultural materialist theories.

Many teachers treat this new genre of writing as essays and they teach them as critical essays as if they were to teach literary criticism. They are also expecting students to write fulsome essays on examinations and projects as they do for literature courses. It may be because of their inability to understand the nature and function of this new type of multi-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and trans-disciplinary writing that aims at challenging the readers on what they have taken for granted. They are therefore basically provocative and

self-reflexive. It leads to a situation wherein they also do not find any pedagogical value. They fear that use of theories does not provide scope for thematic interpretation. On the other hand, theories limit the scope of interpretation to a particular perception, which teachers find stifling their freedom. They also find it extremely difficult to apply theories to all individual texts. They have no idea of why and how a theory is chosen to 'apply' to a text.

Moreover, teachers are not familiar with all concepts that are associated with a particular theory. As a result, they do not have a comprehensive understanding of the theory. It presents several problems as it demands teachers to have a reasonable amount of knowledge in the fields from where the theory has sprung up. It may be philosophy, or linguistics, or psychoanalysis, or intellectual history, or cultural studies, or gender studies, or Leftist politics. Mostly, literature literatures are trained and certified in English literature or Literatures in English. Moreover, several theories cannot be clearly classified because there are many overlaps between/among theories. Some theorists also simultaneously belong to more than one theory or to a combination of several theories like (post) structural linguistics, feminism, and Marxism. Moreover, many teachers are not familiar with the origin of theories. They lack evolutionary perspectives of theories as an academic discipline or a new genre of writing.

5. Discussion

Academics, who feel a sense of discomfort with theories, nurture genuine grouses against them on the following grounds. One, they interfere with the fundamental function of literature: aesthetic sensibilities of readers. Two, they employ unlimited number of jargons which are not only meaningless and also just verbose. Three, they distrust the time-honoured foundational principles of the Enlightenment project. In other words, they represent a betrayal of Enlightenment reason, the destruction of humanist values, and a breaking of the vital link between discourses of truth and those of justice. Four, they are arid and abstract and not literary-specific. Five, the very term 'theory' has no place in literary education and hence it sounds like a contradictory term. Six, they question every other article of faith that humans have inherited from time immemorial. Seven, they shook the very roots of basic ideologies about language and canonical literature. Eight, they do not prescribe clear methods of literary analysis. Nine, theorists like Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, and Kristeva are charged with (accused) of importing into their discourses an element of scientificity and of indulging in confused thinking and uncertainties. Ten, they interfere with the 'close reading of literary texts' leading to abstraction. Eleven, they widen the gap between the academic world and the humanist world of letters outside the academy. The list is not exhaustive, but only indicative.

The plural form is preferable to the singular since 'literary theory' is complex and multiple. It does not indicate a single focal point. It comprises multiple aspects and different identities. In other words, each theory, say, deconstruction, has several versions and comprehensions though they agree on certain core elements. Hence, Jacques Derrida, Barbara Johnson, Christopher Norris, and Paul de Man understand the concept of (literary) deconstruction from several perspectives. So is in the case of French Feminist theories, American Feminist theories, British Feminist theories, African-American theories, Marxist theories, Postcolonial theories, Queer theories, Gay theories, Gaze theories, postmodernist theories. If several identities or aspects are treated as one, singularity of each is not only disrespected but also erased from comprehension. Naming has its own power of identity! The review section of this article indicates the problematic nature of the term. There is no one definition acceptable to all. Though all these views and attempts at definitions are equally valid, no one of them can be privileged over the other. They are the products of specific histories and circumstances, and they are therefore self-reflexive in the sense that they are also open to interpretation. They can be comprehended in terms of what they are and what they do. According to Paul de Man, theories are

- i. Different versions of post-structuralism,
- ii. Methodologies of reading, and
- iii. Theories of reading

Post-structuralism that has origins in philosophy seems to assert that it is difficult to secure knowledge about things. It endorses the Nietzschean declaration that we have entered a planet where 'there are no facts, only interpretations.' Man cannot be certain about anything. What is certain is irony and paradox. No knowledge can be achieved through language because the latter is undependable. Meanings are fluid and therefore unpredictable. Language defies man's attempt to carry signification through words from speaker to listener or writer to reader. There is a huge amount of loss in transmission. Man is not fully control of language as medium. Above all, meanings are contaminated by their opposites. Thus, reality itself is textual. It questions the idea of reason as the supreme human faculty that can solve all problems and can lead to progress and development. It also equally interrogates the notion of the human being as an autonomous individual. Rather, it is seen as constructed or a product of social and linguistic forces. In Barthes' terminology, the subject is a 'tissue of textualities.'

Theories can be understood as methodologies of reading or theories of reading. Reading is not necessarily (literary) texts. Julian Wolfreys (2001: 4) rightly points out that reading suggests "a manner of interpreting our world and the texts which comprise that world." The way we read 'women' in society conditions our way of reading women in literary works. Theories inform us how we can read language, mind, the conscious, the

unconscious, power, self, subjectivity, gender, responsibility, race, class, discourse, dissent, subversion, hegemony et al. Method is the 'practical' application of doing something and methodology is the 'theoretical' and "ideological" application of these methods. Hence, they are understood as methodologies of reading and not methods. Methodology must come before method. Therefore, theories cannot be equated with 'critical approaches' as used by Guerin et al. since the latter mean the application of sister disciplines like sociology, and psychology for the interpretation of individual literary texts. Paul de Man attributes our refusal to read the contemporary theories of reading to resistance to theory.

Functionally, as an interdisciplinary and self-reflexive discourse, theories critique common sense notions that we have taken for granted for more than two thousand years. Hence, they seem to be provocative, intimidating, and endless. Literature is suggestive and therefore interpretive. Theories contribute to the professionalization of literary studies because the very idea of institutionalization of literature as an academic pursuit in western universities was hotly debated. Our assumptions about literature and its contents are determinant to interpretation. Paul de Man declares that "it is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true." Functionally and epistemologically, they are both anti-humanist and structuralist. They demolish the foundations of humanist literary theories:

1. Language is a slave/obedient tool of communication at the hands of man who is understood to be the source and measure of everything.
2. Literature is a passive medium of reflection of life.
3. Writer is an extraordinarily gifted, unique, autonomous individual.
4. Literature being a product of divine inspiration enhances human values and human life.
5. Literature is a transcendental signifier since it deals with universal truths about human nature which is unchanging.
6. Literature is privileged over other discourses since it shows truths that other modes of enquiry cannot.

They also question the assumptions of structuralist theories:

1. Since things cannot exist independent of structures, individual literary texts need to be read as part of the larger structures they are part of.
2. Structures are not objective entities in the external world since they are imposed by the human way of organizing experience.
3. Having roots in linguistics, structuralists believe that objective knowledge can be established through methods, systems and reason.
4. Since the world is constructed through language, we have no access to reality without language.

While majority of English literature teachers are wedded to the basic tenets of humanist literary theories, they feel threatened of their very existence as readers and interpreters of literature with the invasion of literary theories into the foray.

Since all theories subscribe to the basics of post-structuralism as an intellectual re-orientation, they are described as their different avatars with special emphasis on different aspects of this intellectual outlook. Post-structuralist thinking manifests itself in the following assertions of literary theories that are open to interpretation and contestation.

1. It disputes common-sense views about meaning, writing, literature, and experience.
2. Reality is not what is 'present' at any given moment. Reality itself is textual.
3. The meaning of a text/discourse is not what the speaker 'had in mind.'
4. Language is not representational.
5. Language shapes reality. In other words, language does not record reality but creates it. Man cannot control language which does not guarantee anything solid.
6. Literature is the expression of the unconscious and therefore there is no such thing as author's meaning.
7. Literature is producing a reality that is hyper real; it is not a passive medium of reflecting reality.
8. Literary reading is not an innocent activity. Rather, it is always political because human mind is, instead of being an empty slate, ideologically loaded.
9. Since truth is always relative, not absolute, definitive meaning is a myth. There is only ambiguity, fluid meaning, and multiplicity of meaning (play) in a literary text. Its interpretation will never lead to a final, definitive understanding.
10. There is no definite reading of a text and therefore no one meaning. A literary work is an autonomous structure made of language.
11. The notions of our own identity (gender, national) are not stable and fixed, but rather fluid, changing, and unstable. They are 'socially constructed.'
12. What people think or do is, to some extent, the product of their past experiences, past beliefs, and ideologies, and therefore there is no such thing as objectivity.
13. Culture is seen as always manufactured, rather arbitrary and provisional, and as an end product of an endless series of interactions and exchanges. No culture can claim authenticity and no culture gives access to truths that lie beyond it.
14. Culture cannot transcend the material forces and relations of production.
15. Literary text is a time- and place-bound verbal construction that is always political one way or the other. Therefore, there is no place for universality in literature.
16. Literature cannot be privileged over the non-literary since it cannot monopolize truth.
17. Subjects (writers) cannot transcend their own time, but live and work within the horizon of a culture constructed by ideology and discourses.

18. "It is not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language."
19. There is no relationship between the sign and reality because there is no longer anything real to reflect.
20. A writer is not autonomous, inspired individual whose genius and imagination produces original, timeless works of art; (s)he is produced by social contexts.
21. Literature seeks to change the world and not just understand it.
22. There is a female language and it is not available to men.
23. Representations of women as Other or Lack are challenged.
24. Power relations in terms of patriarchy need to be examined.
25. Female and male identities are different.
26. Questions of cultural difference and diversity are being foregrounded and as a result, hybridity and polyvalency (simultaneously belonging to more cultures) are celebrated.
27. The unconscious dimension of the text (aporia, the unread, the unreadable, the yet-to-be-read) must be uncovered.
28. The divine pretension of authorship is rejected in favour of parody and pastiche.
29. Fragmentation is liberating and exhilarating (instead of lamenting) since it is symptomatic of escape from fixed systems of belief.
30. There are no depths of significance; there is only surface.
31. Grand narratives are questioned in favour of mini-narratives that are provisional, temporary, contingent, & relative.
32. Liberal notion of unique, individual selfhood is deconstructed in favour of self which is merely a linguistic effect, and not an essential identity.
33. The way one perceives things is affected by what they know or what they believe.
34. Ecocentrism (the centre) is privileged over anthropocentrism (humanity at the centre of everything). Landscape in literature is not seen functioning as setting or background or symbol.
35. Nature is a feminist issue since nature and women are unjustifiably dominated and subordinated.

Theories are different from literature, literary criticism, critical approaches, and theory of literature. Guerin et al. published their *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* in 1966. This book addresses the pedagogical problems and practices of teaching literary analysis in Western academic institutions. Academics and students could not distinguish between initial felt responses to a text and rich later responses to a text as a result of application of critical approaches to literature. The authors use several expressions with more or less similar meanings: perspectives, critical approaches to literature, critical techniques, interpretive approaches, approaches to literary criticism, critical-interpretive perspectives, critical tools, and (critical) approaches. The purpose of the book appears to be defeated with such confusing terminologies. A discerning reader can easily understand the

anxiety of authors that innocent and agenda-less personal reading of, and response to literature has no pedagogical relevance within the academic circle though the initially felt-response to a literary text constitutes aesthetic experience.

Earlier, T.S. Eliot, an eminent critic, had declared that criticism was as inevitable as breathing and identified criticism along with literary history, and language history formed an important part of literary studies. The authors have recommended seven approaches plus additional approaches. They are traditional approaches (historical-biographical & moral-philosophical), formalistic approach, psychological approach, mythological approach, feminist approach, cultural studies, and additional approaches that include a number of poststructuralist theories. What they mean by approaches is the application of sister disciplines like psychology and sociology to the interpretation of a literary work. They also liberally refer to literary theories as critical theories that had their genesis in the late 1960s. Confusion has come full circle!

'Literary theory' is often confused with the 'theory of literature.' Rene Wellek and Austin Warren published a seminal work of literary scholarship titled Theory of Literature in 1949. What they mean by the title is not the same as term 'literary theory' in the modern sense of the term. When they affirm, "[l]iterary theory, an organon of methods, is the great need of literary scholarship today," (19) they mean different approaches to interpretation of a literary work. Their considered view is that literary criticism and literary history attempt to essentialize the individuality of literary works, or of an author, of a literature, or of a period, and literary approaches produce academic knowledge out of literature which is not available to ordinary readers. This academic literary scholarship is insights and judgements produced by academics with the help of extrinsic approaches to the study of literature, such as biography, psychology (literature is the product of an individual creator), sociology, history, economics, politics (literary creation in the institutional life of man), and theology, philosophy (literature is the collective creation of the human mind). While discussing the function of literature, they slightly move away from the classical humanist objectives and state that though it has its expressive side, it "wants to influence the attitude of the reader." (23) Hence, the term 'theory of literature' is used to identify a prescriptive grammar of the literary work both in terms of materials and structure (poetics).

6. Suggestions

In the light of the results of the study and reflections over the nature and function of literary theories, and discussion of the issue, the following suggestions can be considered by academics and academic administrators who are part of decision-making bodies:

1. Poststructuralist approaches along with humanist approaches to the study of literature at undergraduate level can be introduced as in Western academia.

2. A minimum of two courses on literary theories can be incorporated into the postgraduate English curriculum with one in the first year and the other in the second year.
3. Students should be encouraged to read poststructurally what is happening around them first and the texts next. Group projects at undergraduate level and independent project at postgraduate level can be planned.
4. Teachers should demonstrate the theory-informed reading and interpretation while teaching canonical and contemporary texts.
5. Teachers can participate in international online conferences on literary theories.
6. University Grants Commission can organize in-service training and development programmes on literary theories.
7. Teachers can compile and edit select theoretical pieces for students' use as supplementary and complementary study materials.
8. Study groups among students can be organized on different theories and each group can be given an opportunity to make presentation of their discussions.
9. In-house seminar or symposium can be organized for the benefit of all members of the department.
10. More books on theories and allied areas like linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, intellectual history can be added to the department library. Value add-on courses on allied areas can be offered to students outside the curriculum.

7. Conclusion

Reading is not an innocent politically neutral activity. It does not just happen. Reading means doing: doing reading, interpreting, and writing about what is being read. It depends on reader's understanding and experience of the world they live in, on presuppositions, and on ideas and assumptions that they take for granted and do not question them. Readers' interpretations of the same text are different because they have different presuppositions. Presuppositions are about life, politics, ecological concerns, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, expectations, education and so on. Each reading might show up things the other readings might miss. Reading literary theories means exploring new ways of reading and interpreting the world and the word. Studying different ways of reading and interpreting (doing literary theories!) offers new, interesting, and exciting perspectives on the world and textual (fictional) experiences, and generates new understandings about the world and ourselves. Literary theories have come to stay. The more they are resisted the firmer they become.

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