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The Role of Contexts in Textual Understanding of Literature

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From the onset of the twentieth century there has been an ongoing debate on context and text. Literary theorists all over the world propounded many theories that either divorced the two or made their bond stronger. From the 1920s there came a wave of critical theories, the New Critics pleaded for critical monism. The New Criticism took the poem as a work of art, a structure having an independent existence. They completely divorced the work of art from the biographical, sociological context; removed the piece of literature from time and space and made the work an independent, autonomous and self-contained entity. Criticism, according to the Structuralists, is an activity and it is not concerned about the world but with certain linguistic formulations. Deconstruction presumes that literature is a form of writing. A poem or a novel or a story is a structure of traces. A critic who makes an attempt to discover the meaning of a word in a poem or the poem as a whole does one thing- that is, he substitutes one word for another or indulges in a play with words.

Reader Response critics believed that the meaning lies not in the texts but in the minds of the reader. For them, a text does not exist without a reader. They, too, focused on a context but from a point of view of the reader. The readers according to his/her own experience connotes the meaning, which is to say that his /her own context, era in which the reader is living has edge over that of the author's. The Feminist Critics approach the text from a woman's point of view. The context remained a women's world, her roles and duties, her sufferings, according to which she could interpret the text. New Historicism resituates the text in the context. Postcolonial criticism, particularly Edward Said maintains that the 'text' is 'worldly' for it exists in the world and about the world. In any reading of the literary text we have to take the author, the text, the reader and the world into consideration.

Whichever the school of criticism is, the context remains a paramount module in understanding the text. The purpose of the paper is that any literature- Australian, American, Indian, Caribbean, and South Asian etc. cannot be completely understood or the meaning distorted if we put the text out of its millennia. Though with the application of different critical approaches one can find multitude of meanings for a given text but we have to keep in mind that all critical theories cannot be applied to a single text. And there is much more that the text reiterates than the critical theories can bring into view. In my paper, thus, I take up literary texts and show how context is important for textual understanding. For this purpose I take into account examples from Indian Literature.

The history of Indian literature is neither, too, vast nor, too, old. Literature, as it is said, is the mirror of society and it depicts the social, political, economic, religious sentiment of a particular era, century, millennium or age. Since its inception, the canon of Indian literature, which is huge, cannot be read if one does not know the contexts or the historical background of the nation. The triumvirate, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, had been frantically and effortlessly depicted the struggle for freedom from the British shackles. In many of their novels they introduced Gandhi, a central figure in the Independence struggle, as either a character or an influence to the protagonist in the novel. Mulk Raj Anand in his novels *Coolie* and *Untouchable* describes the social condition that the country was suffering from at that point of time. In a very realistic manner he puts down, “well we must destroy caste, we must destroy the inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations. We must recognize an inequality of rights, privileges and opportunities for everyone.” Raja Rao in his widely acclaimed *Kanthapura*, the tremors of Gandhian impact on a South Indian village are recorded. The theme of the novel may be summed up as ‘Gandhi and our village’ where Gandhi influences Moorthy, the protagonist of the novel and earns the name of miniature Gandhi.

Khushwant Singh and Nayantara Sahgal, the next generation novelists, talked about the free India. Sahgal, daughter of Mrs. Vijaylakshmi Pandit, in her novels *This Time of Morning* and *Storm in Chandigarh* talks about the power politics which prevails in free, independent India; of what happens in the corridors of power, in the drawing rooms of politically very important people, or in the lobbies in Parliament. Sahgal knew the reality too closely, as she enjoyed the privilege of not only as a daughter to a prominent political leader but was also a niece to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s niece and the particular context in which she wrote her novels was the decline and fall of one of the pillars of the Government. As one reads the novel, and recapitulates the political events in India in the last years of Nehru’s prime ministership, one cannot resist the temptation to equate some of the characters’ in the novel with historical figures. In *The Train to Pakistan*, Singh gives a picture of India and Pakistan devastated and in the process claimed many lives in riots, rapes, murders and looting. The two countries began their independence with ruined economies and lands without an established, experienced system of government, not only this, around fifteen million people were displaced from their homes. These novels also bring to focus a very famous novel, *Animal Farm*, which is an important political satire on the Stalin Government. To read it dissociating it from its context does not bring out the true meaning of the work.

The contemporary generation of writers in India- Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Kiran Desai and the like never got separated from the ethos, values, history of the nation. They changed in their manner, tone, narrative techniques, and plots but with prudence showed the economic, political, social and communal aspect of the country. Where the earlier writers harped on the success of independence of their motherland, the new age writers took a stance and asked what kind of independence had we actually received? They

disagreed with the previous age writers and vociferously claimed that it was the Partition of India and no independence. Many of the writers like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, reacted staunchly to the partition and in their work gave a new vision to the epic incident.

In Rushdie's novel *The Midnight's Children*, the literal cracking up of Saleem represents the fracturing of Nehru's promise 'to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell'. The figure of the fissuring body politic recurs in *Beethoven Among the Cows* by Rukun Advani. Advani's narrator fears he is doomed 'to see India crack up like the fragments of my multi-channeled mind'. Through his work *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh too, is joining the fray, questioning the fixity of culture and whether cultures can be contained within boundaries demarcated by maps. Borders to Tha'mma, the unnamed narrator's grandmother and a major figure in *The Shadow Lines*, are absolute physical and tangible realities. She has a blind love for her nation, though her nationality is certainly questionable as she is a migrant from Dhaka during the Partition of India. The inquiry into her nationality as well the determination of nationality is made when Tha'mma has to fill out a form on her trip to Dhaka, to persuade her uncle to leave Dhaka, which is in the midst of a revolution and come to Calcutta with her. When filling the form, she states her nationality as 'Indian' but soon after starts wondering about her roots and origin once she writes her place of birth as Dhaka, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). This raises the question on how nationality should be determined. Does birth in a country give you right to nationality? And if so, how do you become the other if borders demarcating the nation change?

As she plans to fly to Dhaka in 1964, she wonders whether she would be able to "see the border between India and Bangladesh (the East Pakistan) from the plane". When her son laughs at this and says, did she really think "*the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas,*" she muses:

"But surely there's something . . . if there aren't trenches or anything how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? What was it all for then- partition and all the killing and everything if there isn't something in between?"

The concept of the international borderline is central to the novel "*The Shadow Lines*" and the question on Partition is revoked when Jethamoshai considers the implications of the creation of nation and the ambiguity of Partition, "*I don't believe in this India-Shindia . . . suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? . . . As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here.*"

The narrator is able to demonstrate the power of borderlines to create national consciousness that privileges the goings-on of the nation while excluding the outside world. This scene visually highlights the distorted proximities of space created by borderlines. It is precisely this construction that makes Dhaka, Bangladesh seem further away than Delhi after Partition.

On her return to Dhaka, after about twenty years, Tha'mma feels like a stranger and keeps questioning as to where her "Old Dhaka" is. She even starts to feel like an outsider. Tridib, the narrator's uncle tells Tha'mma:

"But you are a foreigner now, you are as foreign as May- much more than May, for look at her, she doesn't even need a visa to come here."

Someone born in the country is made to obtain a visa to re-enter it, while the citizen of the colonial oppressing power is allowed free entry into it. Tha'mma plays a unique role as a 'loser' in literal sense: her birthplace Dhaka was changed by "them", her nephew Tridib was killed by "them" and her gold was gifted to the war fund "to kill them before they kill us" and "to wipe them out". This is in striking contrast to the novels of 1930's where the writers lay full force to promote the 'we' feeling or the feeling of Independence among the masses.

If it would not have been the context, it would have been difficult to assess the depth of these works. Many dramatists like Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Satish Alekar, and Mahesh Elkunchwar correspond to the twenty-first century. Dattani portrayed communal riots in the remarkable play *Final Solutions*. The play frames time and its burning problems; the issue of communal harmony is raised. In the Note on the Play, the director of this play, Alyque Padamsee is candid in his observations,

"The demons of communal hatred are not out on the street....they are lurking inside ourselves. The mob in the play is symbolic of our own hatred and paranoia.Can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes? Will we ever be free or ever-locked in combatArabs against Jews, whites against blacks, Hindus against Muslims?"

Tendulkar, Alekar and Elkunchwar voiced the opinions, problems, tribulations, of the middle class. Tendulkar is concerned with the middle class individual set against the backdrop of a hostile society. The decadence and degeneration of human individuals belonging to a middle class milieu is exposed through the interactions among the members of a family. The beating up of a father by his own children, the two brothers' forcible abortion of their sister's child, the mutual hatred among the members of the family, underline the fundamental evil inherent in human character. In the character of Rama, in *The Vultures*, he is able to create a sensitive, naturally kind and good hearted individual. She is like a helpless, submissive, tender little bird among the vultures. The play depicts with a strange admixture of ruthlessness and compassion, the degeneration of a family, economic and moral. Mahesh Elkunchwar, the great Marathi playwright, uses contemporary situations and social problems to project the life-in-death attitude of modern life. The central theme of the play, *As One Discardeth Old Clothes*, is a sense of utter meaninglessness in our existence, which leads to a state of metaphysical anguish. Elkunchwar presents the total absence of communication between one man and another in contemporary life. With Elkunchwar's *As One Discardeth Old Clothes* drama takes a departure from pseudo modernism and traditional symbolism to the drama of 'non-communication' modern man's failure to understand each other which is real tragedy of human life. In the play there are many instances where the dramatist presents a complete breakdown of communication at various stages between husband and wife, children and parents.

Not only Indian Writings in English but also Indian Writings in Translation cannot be read without its context. While translating one has to keep in mind the background of the author, the proximity to the language, and complete knowledge about the age the author wrote. Mahasweta Devi in her works has give a picture of the Naxalite Movement in her novel *Hazaar Churasir Maa*, translated into English, *Mother of 1084*. In her short stories, she has also portrayed the subalterns and their suffering and living and the minor incidents and accidents which take place in the everyday worlds but go unrecorded. The ‘history from below’ comes alive in these works of art. For instance, the death of Brati, the protagonist in Devi’s *Mother of 1084*, provides an insight revelation to the mother Sujata. It gives a striking satire on the kind of society we live in and the power propaganda that political parties follow.

“... Do you think there are no arrests because the newspapers don’t write about them? Have the shootings stopped? Has anything stopped? Why should it stop? What has ended? Nothing. Nothing has ended. Only a generation between sixteen and twenty-four was wiped out. Is being wiped out . . .”

Another text which I will consider here is Imtiaz Dharker’s *Purdah*. It provides an interesting perspective on the way people’s ideas about female subject relate to the way she is seen in public.

‘Old enough to learn some shame’:

It implies that when the world (especially the male gaze) starts seeing her as an object, the girl ought to respond by taking recourse to purdah. ‘

‘But they make different angles in the light, their eyes aslant, a little shy’:

Since the girl is seen by the world as a woman, the entire perspective changes as she is seen by people even by those who have known her, with different eyes. Here, Dharker is trying to suggest that for men, irrespective of the way they may relate to a woman in age or stature, there is a process of objectification at work; men who look at her may not do so directly as the words ‘aslant’ and ‘sly’ indicate, and this is a sign of men’s hypocrisy.

‘She stands outside herself’:

the girl is able to distant her personality from her physical state and consider herself as a subject; in doing so she realizes how heavily dependent she is on the patriarchal structures that govern social norms and conventions; the purdah in a way, enables her to develop this kind of critical perspective, but she also knows that it is extremely limiting because it prevents her from exercising her freedom as an individual.

‘While doors keep opening inward’:

Her space is figuratively limited to her own world. The purdah restricts her vision of the world as well as her experience of life in the ordinary sense, which is available to others but not her. Central to the poem is the issue of gaze, which Dharker approaches both from the viewpoint of

the girl and from the position of those who objectify and situate her accordingly. The 'veil' or the 'purdah' serves to secure her condition or safety from prying eyes, but the fact that it is also a cultural weight that she cannot easily overwhelm is apparent here.

The line:

*"... carefully carrying what we do not own:
Between the thighs, a sense of sin."*

Is a direct curtailment of one's sexuality so much so that her own life seems to be someone else's.

In *Grace*, Dharker writes that women are not allowed to enter the mosque because they are impure. She uses the word 'defile' i.e. women are not allowed entering because they will defile the holy place.

*"A woman comes
with her eyes concealed.
She trails the month behind her.
We are defiled."*

In *A Childhood Tale*, originally written in Marathi by Urmila Pawar and translated by Jahnavi Phalkey and Keerti Ramachandra, Pawar talks about her own experience as a *dalit* child and wondered why people used to say:

"You there . . . go away . . . go far away . . . you might touch me ..."

Her mother used to make baskets and often sent her to deliver those baskets:

"... Aai would send me to deliver the baskets to people's homes. Those people would make me stand outside the door, sprinkle water on the baskets and supas before picking them up. They would drop the money onto my palm from above. Was their hand going to burn and turn black if it touched mine, I wondered? "

As a child Urmila Pawar was led to wonder what makes her the "Other" and why she was being given "the other" treatment. All the children of low caste when given this kind of treatment feel the same. They never understand the social constructs of 'caste biased-ness'.

In Premchand's short story *Shroud* "they had no fear of being called to account and no anxiety about getting a bad name. They had long ago overcome all such sentiments." This is the stark reality of the "Other" downtrodden, lower castes, they are so used to listening and abuses. Nothing matters to them; they have no "izzat" of their own because they are a part of a minority other.

Another strange ritual that the story points out is "what a bad custom it is that one who didn't have a rag to cover her body in her lifetime must have a new shroud after her death". This yet again shows the stark difference between the powerful and the powerless, where on one side there are huge funeral processes for the powerful the powerless merely struggle for a piece of cloth at the time of their or their beloved's death.

Literature provides a medium, depicts staunch realities which we otherwise in our life are not exposed to. In my paper I have tried to deal with all the genres novels, short stories, poetry and

drama. Be it any genre it cannot be separated from its context. The meaning is lost if the context is not studied along with the text. The poetry by Imtiaz Dharker is a reminder of how woman are treated in the society, even when they are in the *pardah*. Drama is to be staged and it does mirror the contemporary problems and issues of its time. It's not new. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, Galsworthy, Henrik Ibsen, and G. B. Shaw had been portraying the society in which they lived. They are known to have flooded with various problem plays. Charles Dickens in his novels had depicted all the possible social issues that the Victorian age was going through. It is through these mediums that we record history and give new interpretations to it. Till the last century literature was not taken very seriously in terms of interpretation of history. With the turn of century the historians have taken a serious note on the magnanimous literature which provides the unrecorded history and helped shape history from the subalterns' point of view. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a celebrated Urdu poet says in one of his iconic poetry, "*Mujhse pehle see mohabbat mere mehboob na maang (Don't Ask Me For That Love Again)*".

*That which then was ours, my love,
Don't ask me for that love again,
The world then was gold, burnished with light
and only because of you. That's what I had believed.
How could one weep for sorrows other than yours?
How could one have any sorrow but the one you gave?
So what were these protests, these rumors of injustice?
A glimpse of your face was evidence of springtime.
The sky, wherever I looked, was nothing but your eyes.
If you'd fall into my arms, fate would be helpless.*

*All this I'd thought, all this I'd believed.
But there were other sorrows, comforts other than love.
The rich had cast their spell on history:
Dark centuries had been embroidered on brocades and silks.
Bitter threads began to unravel before me
as I went into alleys and in open markets
saw bodies plastered with ash, bathed in blood.
I saw them sold and bought,
again and again.
This too deserves attention.
I can't help but look back
when I returned from those alleys-
What should one do?
And you still are so ravishing –
What should I do?
There are other sorrows in this world,
comforts other than love.
Don't ask me, my love, for that love again.*

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