

The Influence of Cultural Context on Literary Interpretation

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Abstract—Literary text is like a gem that glows the light which surrounds it, revealing its own intricate inner structure. Literary text can glow powerfully if it is truly great, even in the somewhat dim yet balanced light of an ordinary thoughtful reader reading it from his or her own narrow perspective. This article discusses the intricate relationship between cultural context and the interpretation of literature. It also explores the profound impact of cultural elements such as social conditions, historical events, and cultural perspectives on the way readers engage with and understand literary texts. The study aims at throwing a light on how these social conditions and values, historical events, and cultural perspectives serve as influential components that both writers and readers contribute to the interpretative process. This exploration emphasises the dynamic interplay between the cultural backdrop of a literary work and the lenses through which readers perceive and interpret it.

Additionally, the article highlights the globalized nature of literature in the contemporary world, where diverse cultural perspectives enrich and shape interpretations, fostering a deeper understanding of the stories that contribute to our shared human experience.

Index Terms— Literary interpretation, Historical events, Cultural perspectives, social conditions, Intertextuality.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of literature, the written word serves as a vessel that carries within it the echoes of the society and culture from which it emerges. The interpretation of literary works is not solely confined to the words on the page; rather, it is intricately entwined with the cultural context in which these words find expression. This article delves into the fascinating interplay between cultural context and the interpretation of literature, examining how the societal, historical, and cultural milieu shapes the meanings we ascribe to narratives. As we embark on this exploration, we peel

back the layers that envelope the written word, revealing the profound influence that cultural context exerts on the nuanced art of literary interpretation. From societal norms and historical events to the diverse perspectives that readers bring to the table, this study seeks to unravel the complex dynamics that underscore the way we perceive and engage with literature in the rich tapestry of human culture.

II. UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Cultural understanding is a whole other level of helpful, especially if the literature has been translated from another language, phrases, colloquialisms, they all can make the literature take on new meaning and nuance that had previously been misunderstood or overlooked. Without cultural understanding the author's entire point can be missed completely.

To appreciate the impact of cultural context, one must recognize the intricate layers that compose it. Cultural context encompasses the historical, social, political, and economic factors that mould the worldview of both the author and the reader. For instance, a text written during a time of social upheaval may carry different connotations than one produced during a period of stability.

Nayantara Sahgal in her fictional work, *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), presents the problem of political tension and violence originating from Chandigarh, the common capital of the two states- the Punjab and Haryana, yet the novel reflects Nayantara Sahgal 's human spirit in a traditional culture milieu and its characteristic response of freedom to meet the challenges of change. The novel deals with the political upheaval in Punjab in the post-independence period.

III. SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND VALUES

Literature is a mirror reflecting social conditions and values. The cultural context of a work often determines the accepted behaviours, traditions, and beliefs portrayed within it. By examining these elements, readers gain insight into the author's commentary on the society in which they lived. Conversely, readers bring their own cultural background to the interpretation, shaping the lens through which they perceive the narrative.

Sahgal advocates the socio-political changes of a time, which demanded a reorientation of values. A nation cannot survive without accepting this truth. In order to make her socio-political consciousness voracious and explicit, she made its shape prefixed with a dramatic personae; it is only after an analysis of this galaxy of characters that socio-political consciousness can be comprehended with its utmost perfection.

Sahgal gives a sensitive account of the sufferings of a married woman in Indian society. She portrays the agonized experiences of a divorced middle-aged woman, Simrit, in *The Day in Shadow*. Her marriage with Som, an industrialist, turns out to be a disaster. In this novel Sahgal narrates her own experiences after divorce. We can see her biographical elements attest to the fact that in this novel she fantasizes what she missed in her real life. Simrit has a fixed image of Som in her unconscious and makes it a point to read sinister meanings into what to Som seem the most innocent of his actions and words. She was utterly unprepared to face the challenges of shared living during her adolescent years. Her 'Scholarly' father and 'unworldly mother' who had a tendency to withdraw from anything that was outside the orthodox Brahmanical principles could have hardly helped her to develop a realistic perspective in her life.

A Time to be Happy seeks to alter the age-old myth of female servitude being perpetuated by male hegemony which ironically borders on the marginalization of a woman's social sphere of existence. The novel reveals the sinister forces which are responsible for creating the crisis in a woman's identity. In the novel, Sahgal depicts the hooliganism and disorder in the educational institutions to show that a woman has no place in a patriarchal set up. Thus, she has shown the reality of a woman's position in society.

This novel is a fictional enactment of the growth of a young, westernized and wealthy Indian against the back-drop of India's struggle for independence on the one hand and the smug nonchalance of the British Indian officers and their wives as well as their Indian admirers on the other. It is also on a different level, a submerged saga of Indian national movements with its inevitable and indelible impression upon the minds of countless comfortable upper middle-class Indians, spanning a period of about one and half decade. The novel is an imaginative recapitulation of things past with a somewhat ambiguous attitude towards the present.

IV. HISTORICAL EVENTS AS CATALYSTS

The historical backdrop against which a literary work is set can profoundly influence its interpretation. Authors often draw inspiration from or react against significant events, embedding layers of meaning within their narratives. World wars, revolutions, freedom movements, partitions and social movements can serve as catalysts for story narration, influencing the themes and perspectives depicted in literature. Readers, in turn, interpret these narratives in the context of their own historical awareness.

Knowing the historical context of a work of literature allows us to notice symbolism and meaning behind things that we would not otherwise be able to grasp. It also lends credence to non-fiction, stories that people wrote about events while they were happening are the most honest form of history, we have access to. Especially in times and areas where press was non-existent or controlled in some way. If it is fiction, then it still may pertain to events occurring at the time and thus it is very helpful. We need to understand that common attitudes may have differed when the text was written.

We can see many examples from literary world, like *Huckleberry Finn* has a black character who was regularly referred to by a term that's all but forbidden today. Most of the characters who used it weren't as good as him in terms of morals, work ethic and common decency, but that was the point.

Mark Twain used the common language of his time while questioning many of the assumptions (that a black man was a lesser being than white ones) of his time. And he wrote with such wit and intelligence that he created a classic.

The language Twain used with such cleverness has gotten Huckleberry Finn banned, often these days by people who are missing his point.

Not all books with questionable attitudes or language will have similar merit, but others may. They're still worth reading despite statements or behaviour that don't go over well today.

V. CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES IN SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY

Symbols and imagery in literature often carry cultural significance that extends beyond the immediate narrative. A simple object or gesture may hold deeper meaning rooted in cultural traditions, rituals, or mythology. Understanding these cultural references is essential for a comprehensive interpretation of the text. Readers from different cultural backgrounds may perceive these symbols in varied ways, enriching the diversity of interpretations.

Literature's ability to shape societal values lies in promoting cultural identity and collective memory. Literature preserves historical events, folklore, traditions, and societal dynamics offering a historical perspective while reinforcing societal values.

In Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart," the narrative captures the life of the Igbo people before European colonisation, reflecting their cultural identity.

In "This time of morning", Sahgal explores the place of a woman in Indian Society before marriage. Through the character of Nita, Sahgal seems to be exposing conventional narrow-minded Indian society, where the parents choose life partners: the parents arrange for the two young souls to live happily ever after. Sahgal strongly attacks the social convention and names this kind of marriage "just organized rape."

The novel reveals that a traditional mother wants her daughter to be a 'good girl' and 'properly married'. Sahgal also reveals in This time of Morning how before marriage women are brought up strictly according to the traditional codes. The moment a girl reaches adolescence, she is reminded of her femininity. She is prevented from developing her individuality. She is constantly reminded by her mother that a girl is destined for man and the one who gets the most masculine attention is the luckiest one. Sahgal insists that woman needs to throw off much of his conditioning and learn assertiveness, self-confidence etc.

Thus, we see her art as a more mature medium of communication as well as a more satisfying process of illumination of the experience of life with all its stresses and strains in the highly- sophisticated society in Delhi. Her fictional concern for values in an age of impermanence is of vital and fundamental importance. The value that she offers consistently and profoundly significantly is Freedom as a necessary pre-requisite for all human achievement. Separateness, aloneness, alienation and agitation are the various modes of individual experience that enable her principal characters to realize Freedom in its various manifestations.

VI. DIVERSE INTERPRETATIONS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

In an era of globalization, literature transcends borders, reaching readers from diverse cultural backgrounds. This interconnectedness introduces a fascinating dynamic where the same text can be interpreted through various cultural lenses. Literary works become bridges between cultures, fostering a shared understanding while celebrating the richness of diverse perspectives.

VII. CONCLUSION

In the intricate dance between words and cultural context, we find the essence of literary interpretation a dynamic interplay that transcends the boundaries of time, space, and individual perspective. This exploration into the influence of cultural context on literary interpretation has unveiled the layers of meaning woven into the fabric of narratives, revealing the profound impact of societal norms, historical events, and diverse cultural perspectives.

As we navigate the realms of literature, it becomes evident that each work is a product of its time, echoing the sentiments, struggles, and triumphs of the society in which it was birthed. Societal norms, acting as silent orchestrators, shape the behaviours, values, and traditions portrayed within the written word, guiding readers through the cultural landscape embedded in the text.

Historical events, serving as pivotal markers in the timeline of human existence, infuse literature with a richness of context. Authors draw inspiration from or react against these events, leaving imprints that

resonate across generations. Readers, in turn, engage with these narratives through the lens of their own historical awareness, breathing life into stories that bridge the past and present.

Cultural perspectives add a kaleidoscopic dimension to literary interpretation. Symbols, imagery, and subtle nuances take on diverse meanings, creating a tapestry of understanding woven from the threads of varied cultural backgrounds. In a globalized world, literature becomes a conduit for shared experiences and diverse viewpoints, fostering a deeper appreciation for the richness that cultural diversity brings to the interpretative process.

In conclusion, the influence of cultural context on literary interpretation is a profound journey through the human experience. As we interpret and reinterpret the written word, we recognize that the beauty of literature lies not just in the eloquence of language but in its ability to transcend cultural barriers, offering readers a passport to diverse worlds of thought and imagination. Through this exploration, we gain a deeper understanding of our shared humanity, realizing that every interpretation is a unique reflection of the intricate interplay between the timeless art of storytelling and the ever-evolving kaleidoscope of culture.

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