

CULTURE- A RE-READING THROUGH LITERATURE

Fr. Kuriakose M.A., M.Phil.

Lecturer, Dept. of English

Pazhassiraja College, Pulpally
Wayanad, Kerala

Abstract

Language is not a neutral medium for the formation of meanings and knowledge about an independent object world existing outside of language. It is constitutive of those very meanings and knowledge. That is language gives meaning to material objects and social practices that are brought into view by language and made intelligible to us. Cultures in their widest sense may differ as languages differ. Despite the advances made by research in the spheres of the intercultural and the multicultural, language teaching is still operating on a relatively narrow conception of both language and culture. The Language continues to be taught as a fixed system of formal structures and universal speech functions, a neutral medium for the transmission of cultural knowledge. Culture is incorporated into the literature to the extent it reinforces and enriches through the discourses. In practice, teachers teach literature and culture, or culture in language, but not language as culture. The theoretical framework proposes here for teaching culture through language suspends the traditional dichotomy between the universal and the particular in language teaching. It embraces the particular, not to be consumed by it, but as a platform for dialogue and as a common struggle to realign differences. Thus, this study explores the transmission of culture through language and literature.

Introduction

Language is not a neutral medium for the formation of meanings and knowledge about an independent object world existing outside of language. It is constitutive of those very meanings and knowledge. That is language gives meaning to material objects and social practices that are brought into view by language and made intelligible to us. Cultures in their widest sense may differ as languages differ. Despite the advances made by research in the

spheres of the intercultural and the multicultural, language teaching is still operating on a relatively narrow conception of both language and culture. The Language continues to be taught as a fixed system of formal structures and universal speech functions, a neutral medium for the transmission of cultural knowledge. Culture is incorporated into the literature to the extent it reinforces and enriches through the discourses.

This paper is an attempt to provide an overview of the relationship between the study of language and the study of culture. It tries to present how the language carries culture through literature and transmits to the society. By quoting three poems it presents the poets urge to original culture and criticising the inherent culture to reform it for a better future.

Culture

Culture is defined by anthropologists in a variety of ways. The definition usually includes some notion of shared values, beliefs, expectations, customs, jargon, and rituals. As Hall puts it, 'By culture here I mean the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society. I also mean the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root and helped to shape popular life' (Hall, 1996c:439). Culture is concerned with questions of shared social meanings which make sense of the world. However meanings are not simply floating out there, but are generated through signs, notably by the language. Language is the set of common sounds and symbols by which individual communicate. Societies may include a number of cultures and languages.

Structures of language

Language is the most powerful way in communication world. It improves the quality of life and shows how people from different places live and think. According to Larson language is defined as "a complex set of skewed relationships between meaning and form." Gao says that "language is a product of the thought and behaviour of a society." Because of sociability of human being, language is one of the vital factors that influence human life progress. And Language is formed from cultural fragments and used to describe its culture completely. Not only language and culture link together, but also act as a significant feature in intercommunication. So language is a vital factor in cultural interaction. As Language is a cultural component it can be described as a cultural communicating system which is used by people of a particular country to convey their purposes?

Language and culture

Culture is what brings us together as human beings, as social creatures. Culture gradually converts to personality; and all personalities, all together, form culture. Culture

cannot be formed by itself. The most sensible feature of culture is that it is formed unwarily i.e. the process is invisible. Change in culture is completely unobservable and nonmaterial. Therefore, the cultures change overly through time and at the same time they change all aspects of a society. Due to its complex nature, the word culture is very difficult to define. The concept of culture is something that everybody implicitly understands, but nobody can define precisely. Hinkel believed that there are 'as many definitions of culture as there are fields of inquiry into human societies, groups, systems, behaviours and activities.' In its broadcast, meaning, culture is a 'humanly created environment for all our thoughts and actions.' 'Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture.'

None of these cultures are complete by themselves; however, all cultures are linked together and they complement one another. Different cultures work together following the merely same goals, but may have different interpretations. Each culture is evaluated by its literary works of art. Cultural studies try to give voice to the culture of marginalized people, study of mass culture an ideological imposition; dwells in the tension between the analysts desire to analyze culture as a set of codes and practices that a lineate people from theirs in it. As cultures cannot be translated, so it is difficult to know how one can be familiar with all cultures in one region. Those regions that are nearby are closer in cultural conventions. Their impact on each other, share and transfer norms more easily than those those are too far from each other.

Literature and culture

Roberts (2010) defines literature as compositions that tell stories, dramatize situations, express emotions, and analyse and advocate ideas. The Scribner Literature Series (1989) comparative literature to a great number of windows through which readers can see different parts of the world. Among its many functions, literature links readers to the broader cultural world of the society in which they live. Culture is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour. Every society has its own particular culture. This culture is identified through language.

Kramsch identifies three ways how language and culture are bound together. First, language expresses cultural reality. That is, people express facts and ideas with words, but also reflect their attitudes. Second, language embodies cultural reality. Here, people give meaning to their experience through the means of communication. Thirdly, language symbolizes the cultural reality that is; people view their language as a symbol of their social identity. These can be explained through literature as follows.

The poem *Night of the Scorpion* by Nissim Ezekiel discusses the inherent differences between traditional cultures and the modern world. The poem opens in with a clear, first

person statement: 'I remember the night my mother/was stung by a scorpion.' This emotionless opening immediately creates the impression that the person is reliable and honest and fills the events which follow with a sense of factual reality. By giving the criticism of the superstitions and eccentricities of the villagers' poet represents his original culture. In his description of the scorpion, Ezekiel uses the word 'flash' which uses lightning as a metaphor for the scorpion's sting and scorpion is personified as the devil ('diabolic'). All of this combines to emphasize the evil intent behind the scorpion's actions. Ezekiel leaves us in no doubt at all that the scorpion intended to cause pain and was not simply acting instinctively. The simile which the poet uses to describe the villagers is clearly showing the critical attitude of him

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times.

This anthropomorphism dehumanizes the villagers, making them sound ignorant and foolish. This is further emphasized by the onomatopoeic 'buzzed' which makes their prayers sound mindless and shallow. This critical tone continues through the following lines and it demonstrates the poet's cynicism at their culture. This culminates in the smug corruption of the traditional Christian blessing in line 31, 'The peace of understanding on each face.' The final stanza represents a return to the rationalism of the opening. Here, the villagers and the father have been overcome by religious fervour in trying to ease the pain of the sting and the mother demonstrates a more existentialist attitude in her final statement.

Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children.

There is a clear link to 'Blessing' in this final quotation as it represents a character (or indeed culture) whose religious order is based on gratitude for the small things in life. It describes a culture and its beliefs in detail. The only difference is that, where most poems are very proud and fond of their original culture, here, Ezekiel seems deeply critical of it. It may be compared the way island man longs for his original culture. The poet presents a particular culture in *Island Man*.

The poem *Island Man* is about a man dreaming of his true home in the Caribbean and then waking up to find himself living a dreary, dull life in London. This poem compares his Caribbean culture to his dull London life. *Night of the Scorpion* is about a small, tightly knit community who are brought even closer by the tragedy of a scorpion stinging a woman in the dead of night. This poem shows a culture of an Indian tribe and how they use their culture to deal with a tragedy. *Island Man* is about somebody's culture being distant from them and taken away, whereas *Night of the Scorpion* is about a culture that is alive, and it also shows

the importance of having a home, a family and a culture.

Grace Nichols uses a metaphor 'the sun surfacing defiantly' as a direct comparison to the Caribbean. Showing in his dream the Caribbean is so wonderful and clearly where his culture is, but when waking up to a dreary London he realises where his culture still lies. Whoever Nissim Ezekiel uses a simile to describe the lack of individuality in the tribe's culture, they are all very much the same 'like swarms of flies'. Both poets use something different to put across the culture in their poems.

Nichols uses a spread out layout, which also lacks punctuation. This shows the effect that the man's dreamy state has upon him. The lack of punctuation creates a broken up flow to put across his dream like states as he slowly wakes up to his reality. Also the layout of the sentences could represent the waves on a beach back in the Caribbean. In comparison Ezekiel uses one continuous stanza to show the panic, rush and fear of the situation. However at the end the continuous stanza breaks off into one last small stanza, this shows that the panic is over and the tribe can relax which comes through the structure.

Conclusion

Language is used to maintain and convey culture and culture gradually converts to personality; and all personalities, all together, form culture. Culture cannot form by itself. Language and culture are intertwined to such an extent that one cannot survive without the other. Language deals with literature and transmits the culture of the society. That is language conveys culture through literature. The Literature discusses the values, traditions and practices with language and these discourses are transmitted to educate, remind or nurture the society. Even though language is a neutral medium and never formulates any meanings, it plays an important role with the literature and conveys the culture.

References

- Adams, P., Heaton, B, and Howarth, P., (eds.) *Socio-Cultural Issues in English for Academic Purposes*. London: Macmillan Publishers.1991. Print.
- C. Kramsch. *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998. Print.
- N. Chomsky, B. Pateman. *Chomsky on Anarchism*. AK Press. 2005, pp. 113. Print.
- G.Yule. *The study of language*. Cambridge University Press. 1996, pp.216-218. Print.
- C. Geertz. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1988. Print.
- C. Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books. 1973.
- L.M. Larson. *Meaning-Based Translation*. University Press of America. 1998.
- F. Gao. *Language is Culture - On Intercultural Communication*. J. Language Linguistics, 2006 5(1), 58-67.
- E. Hinkel. *Culture in second language teaching and learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1999.
- M. N. Srinivas. *Social Change in Modern India*. New Delhi: Allied Publisher. 1966.
- <http://oldpoetry.com/column/show/148>. Web.
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english/poemscult>. Web.
- <http://allpoetry.com/poem/8592075-Night-of-the-Scorpion-by-Nissim-Ezekiel>. Web.
- <http://forum.letssingit.com/topic/65303/island-man-by-grace-nichols/1>. Web.