



Global vs. Local Identity Conundrum in Modern English Poetry

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Abstract

Good literature has global appeal. It speaks to readers across the boundaries of cultures, borders and beliefs. Thus, good literature allows its author and readers to don global identity. However, it is also true that literature and art are rooted in a place and in time, i.e. the global appeal of the literature is carried by characters, expressions and settings, which invariably have a limited locus of location and era. Thus, the global nature of literature is ironically engrained in the local nature of the literary work.

The dichotomy between the local entrenchment of literary work and its global appeal can lead to a conundrum of the identity that the literary work dons, and the identity it tends to project for itself, leading to a dilemma for the author composing the work and confusion for the reader comprehending it. For instance, the Indian poet Toru Dutt (1856-1877) wrote in English and French, appealing the European readers. However, her poems, for example 'Our Casuarina Tree', can pose a conundrum to feel empathy for the diction, images and stream of consciousness, for not only European readers but also Indian readers, because of the autobiographical nature and Indian setting of the poems.

What is the nature of this conundrum? How does it manifest in literature? Can the local and global identities be reconciled? This paper takes a look at these questions about the conundrum of local and global identity that lies in the poems of some British and Indian poets.

Key Words: Globalization. Local Identity, Reader. Poems, Indian



Paper

Oxford Dictionary defines a conundrum as a confusing problem or problem that is difficult to solve. Merriam-Webster describes conundrum as an intricate and difficult problem. As a literary device, conundrum specifically implies a riddle whose answer is a pun. Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland is full of examples of conundrums of this sort. In this paper, I consider conundrum to mean the general situation with confusion and sometimes contradiction.

In prose, the conundrum is an important plot device to move the story forward. And why not? Without contradictions and difficult-to-resolve situations, a piece of prose becomes a mere commentary on everyday life. Thus, an author may consciously impose situations with confusion and seemingly irresolvable problems. However, there are various occasions when a conundrum may arise for the reader due to the identity, situation, setting, context, language etc of the author. On the other hand, an author can also feel a conundrum regarding the target audience, choosing a traditional theme etc.

For Instance, feminism is an important aspect of literary production and cultural dialogue today. However, the significance and import of feminism varies racially and culturally. Whereas a European woman fights to get equal treatment in the workplace and in society under the aegis of feminism, an Indian woman still struggles, first to be born, then to get an education, then to survive in society and afterwards to lead a dignified life in the inherently paternalistic Indian society Hence, from the point of view of an Indian reader or writer it is difficult to understand the nuances of European feminism encoded in the continental literature. The Another Woman'. by Imtiaz Dharker, displays the struggle of Indian women and towards the end exposes the monster of killing of brides for dowry. For the poet, it is a conundrum to encode the dark realities and very local facts or turn them into general emotions that are understandable for global readers. For example:

"This Morning she bought green 'methi
in the market, Choosing the freshest bunch
Picked up a white radish, and imagined the crunch it would make
between her teeth, the sweet sharp taste,
then put it aside, thinking it
an extravagance..."

Another Woman, Imtiaz Dharker



The beginning of the poem, with choosing the freshest bunch of green 'methi' and the feeling of the crunch of the white radish, are important parts to establish the characteristics of the everyday lives of an Indian homemaker woman. Once the Indianness and household-ness have been well-established, the rest of the imagery flows flawlessly. For the poet, it is important to establish these hinges on which the rest of the poem builds up. But these hinges are very local in colour and typical of a socio-economic stratum of Indian society. A reader who is not well-versed with the banal things like 'methi' and radish would not be set into the groove for the more abstract things that come later in the poem. Not only the banal but more abstract things may have local limitations. Thus, even if a reader is familiar with the 'methi' and radish. but if a reader is not familiar with the situation of women in at least some parts of Indian society, it would be difficult for them to understand that the struggle for the woman in that poem is not even to be treated equally, but to be treated with some respect and dignity for life. For example, for a British reader, it's a contextual conundrum to understand how and why a girl is set on fire for dowry.

In literature, the characters make us emotionally intelligent because it is characters that we can empathize with. Thus, empathy is the core element and an important objective of literature. Characters, however, are limited by time and setting. They are associated with a culture, they wear a certain mannerism, speak a certain language and exist in a certain era. Because of this local limitation, an author may face a conundrum in reaching out to his/her readers across time and space to garner empathy for his/her characters. The problem may seem acute in the masterpieces of the authors that have global appeal. For example, Thomas Stearns Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) is one of the most popular works of poetry of the Modern Era. It deals with the decadence and downfall of Western Civilization. This poem deals with a variety of images, references, and myths that span across the world cultures. For a reader, with interpretative roots seated in oriental literary tradition, it would be difficult to understand vegetation myth or Epigraph that is in Greek and Latin language. For example, Eliot writes.

"I have seen with my own eyes the Sybil hanging in a jar and when the boys asked her "What do you want?" She answered "I want to die"

An appreciation and comprehension of this piece of poetry requires one to know about Sybil that she was a prophetic old woman of Greek Mythology) and that she was granted immortality by Apollo but she forgot to ask for youth.

But the poet does not leave the conundrum unresolved. Eliot added an extensive note at the end so the reader is not left in the lurch for the allusion used in the poem. This is not the only conundrum encoded in the poem. A contextual conundrum of sorts starts from the initial line of the poem:



"April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain."

From the point of view of an Indian reader, April is one of the most pleasant months of the year, occurring between the end of the bitter winter and the beginning of the punishing summer. For an Indian reader unfamiliar with the climate of the locale of the poem, the lines could present a contextual conundrum, as he/she is unable to understand how April can be the cruellest month. Some may consider April to be pleasant even in the Northern Hemisphere, whose setting the poem possibly describes. The days are getting longer and balmy, and the snow is melting in April in those areas. The poet himself notes the revival of the life force in the frozen soil appearing as the blooming of the lilacs. He even announces the arrival of new life with the spring rain, which must be a joyful occasion for a person experiencing the arrival of spring. And why not? The spring seems to be the mix of memory of frozen winter with the desire fuelled by spring. However, although the events all seem happy and joyous, the attitude of the poet is rather dark and doleful. For a reader, not familiar with the mindset of the poet, it will not be possible to comprehend the anomaly between the events described and the tone of description used by the poet. This brings us to the next conundrum, about the emotions 'local' to the heart of the poet, but that need to be globally comprehended by the readers. The poet uses a stream of consciousness in *The Wasteland*. From the first line until the last, it flows out of the poetic heart of Eliot and binds in words his thoughts about the world in a spectrum of poetic allusion and imagery. The characters therein emerge from different cultures, speak different languages connect eras, modern, classic and archaic. It is truly a composite world of literature bundled up in a single long narrative. Because of this, it has global appeal for which Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. The poem disregards the traditions of meter, tone and diction. It is written in four languages Greek, Latin, English, and Italian, all contained in five fragmented parts. For a non-European reader who has not studied the Industrial Revolution, colonialism, World War etc..it would be very confusing to understand the poem. Without the references, given by Eliot himself it would not be possible to decipher the poem. By providing notes, he made a great effort to resolve the conundrum, otherwise, this text would have become incomprehensible for a reader throwing a universal appeal to the winds.

The *Wasteland* is a mayhem of culture for England was the centre of world culture at that time and T. S Eliot showed the degradation of culture and values in his poem for his audience were the International audience and he showed degeneration everywhere in the world having Multi-Culturalism. Sometimes myths also create problems for a non-native reader of the context.



Tiresias is such a character in the poem The Wasteland. To understand the character of Tiresias one must know that he is a character originating from Greek Mythology, he is a blind soothsayer and emasculator. In this poem he is an important person who connects everything in the poem-

"At the violet hour, when the eyes and back

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

Like a taxi throbbing waiting,

Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives.

Old man with wrinkled female breasts...

The Wasteland. T.S Eliot

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Even Indian Mythology shown in the last section "What The Thunder Said" by Eliot through three Sanskrit words DA- Datta, DA -Dayadhvam DA- Damyata. The fable of the thunder is found in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.

Though it is a text referred to as world Literature and has universal appeal, in it these words are from the Indian Myth of Prajapati when he answered God, Men and Demon. So this poem has a conundrum of culture. language myth etc. and Eliot tried to resolve it by giving long notes after the poem.

Another famous poet and noble prize winner is Rabindranath Tagore and his collection of poems. The Gitanjali is widely read in the world. The title itself is very Indian. To understand the title one must know what Anjali (a mudra by joining both hands to offer something to God) is. The Gitanjali has a great Indian perspective of devotion to Almighty God. It is a kind of prayer and offering from a bhakta, a pious soul, to his God and creator. For Example, his poem Little Flute shows devotion:

"Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail

vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life...

Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine.

Ages pass, and still, thou pourest, and still, there is room to fill."

The Gitanjali, RabindraNath Tagore



Biographical facts of RabindraNath Tagore are of great importance to read and understand before reading Geetanjali. He had lost his father, wife and son one after the other before he wrote. Geetanjali. The collection becomes a display of not only his great pain but also a testimony of his unflinching faith in God. The pain of the bereavement and faith in God are concepts that are understood everywhere in the world. Thus, though the language and diction of the collection are very Indian, the conundrum is resolved by putting the language and diction to the service of the theme that is global and universal.

Gitanjali Tagore's other poem " Upagupta" also surpasses human emotions and shows the impermanence of youth and the necessity of love and care Dasgupta, the protagonist, is a disciple of Buddha in conversation with a dancing girl in Mathura:

Upagupta, the disciple of Buddha, lay asleep in

the dust by the city wall of Mathura.

It was a dancing girl, starred with jewels.

The young ascetic answered. "Woman.

go on your way:

When the time is ripe I will come to you...

A year has not yet passed...

"Who are you, merciful one?" asked the woman.

"The time, at last. has come to visit you, and

I am here." replied the young ascetic.

In this poem, Tagore shows the teachings of Buddha regarding compassion and dispassion For a non-Indian reader it can be a contextual conundrum for he may not know what a dancing girl does at Mathura in India, but the theme of sacrifice and Buddhism prevail universally. It shows that care, affection and attachment can conquer all kinds of conundrums.



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