

"Poetry" in *Flamingo*: Ideological and Political Dimensions

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Abstract

The present paper studies the poetry section of the textbook *Flamingo* prescribed in +2 under Central Board of School Education and its reading and understanding by its teachers and students as an ideological exercise. The book has been designed and prescribed in the present times and at a particular level of study hence it results in a particular understanding of the life and issues in the various specific contexts. As no author is entirely free to write (as his/her writing is also determined by various factors), no reader is entirely free to interpret. Hence an attempt has been made in this paper to analyze the ideological and political dimensions of the selection, reading, and interpretation of the poems. Further, it explores the impact of these poems on the students as readers. The study reveals that how the selection of poems is determined. It generates and perpetuates specific socio-cultural understanding and some of the poems serve a particular purpose. It has been tried to examine that where are the gaps, silences, contradictions and continuities in a specific discourse prevailing in the poetry, and what may be the possible ideological and political results of it.

Key Words: Poetry, Ideological, Polemical, Interpretation.

The section titled "Poetry" includes the six poems "My Mother at Sixty" by Kamala Das, "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" by Stephen Spender, "Keeping Quite" by Pablo Neruda, "A Thing of Beauty" by John Keats, "A Roadside Stand" by Robert Frost and "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" by Adrienne Rich. All the poets selected for this section belong to the modern age except John Keats who was a romantic. The modern age is the age of capitalism and the reflection of modern/capitalist lifestyle is evident in these poems.

Most of the poems construct discourse on the basis of emotions not on any rationality. The idealism prevails. Only few of the poems touch serious socio-cultural or political issues but only at the surface level as the poets do not try to examine and expose the socio-cultural politics behind the issues. The poems which seem apolitical serve a political purpose directly or indirectly. The selection of the poems for the anthology indicates that the editors do not wish to give revolutionary understanding of the human life. They choose only those poems which are emotional (as emotions appeal more to the teenagers). The poems depict the issues, discuss them, but do not provide the multi-dimensional political consciousness to contextualize them. Thus, the reading of the poetry becomes merely an emotional appeal to the students and it leads to the perpetuation of the prevailing surface level understanding and ideology. According to Althusser, ideology constructs an imaginary relationship between the human being and the real life conditions.

In "My Mother at Sixty-Six" Kamala Das gives a very emotional picture of love with her mother. She does not want to be separated from her. She idealises her relationship with the lady. She gets disturbed on the advancing age of her mother. She feels insecure because her mother is too old to survive. It constructs an ideal image of a mother, of love between a mother and a daughter. Thus, the reader flows in emotions with the poem. The theme is the ideal love between the mother and daughter. It makes the student more sensitive and ideal. The poetess is an upper class observer as she talks of airport and an old age mother in an ideal way. It does not develop a rational understanding on the human relationships; rather over-sensitivity prevails all around which further constructs ideal images, such as love, mother, daughter, and human relationships. It does not examine the real process of human life. The childhood fear of the poetess goes on with her in adulthood also and she passes it to the reader through this poem.

The poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" by Stephen Spender is merely the interpretation of the worst conditions of the schoolroom in a slum. It reminds the famous saying of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels They add that "philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it" (617). No doubt, Spender depicts the real life conditions of the poor students at an elementary school in a slum, but, it also remains only an emotional record of a serious problem of our society. If we apply the words of Karl Marx again, it depicts the conditions as they are but one needs to develop revolutionary understanding of the conditions of life which is missing in the poem. Spender writes:

Far far from gusty waves these children's faces.
Life rootless weeds, the hair to torn round their pallor:
The tall girl with her weighed down head. The paper-
seeming boy, with rat's eyes. The stunted, unlucky heir
Of twisted bones, reciting a father's gnarled disease,
His lesson, from his desk.

This is the depiction of the condition of children at the elementary school in a slum. It only generates the feelings of sympathy but the reader is not able to get a hint how to examine this situation or who is responsible for it. Only an emotional appeal is perpetuated rather than political consciousness. As there is no one to love these slum children, they also dislike everyone. The lack of love and care forces them to do the crimes like stealing. The poet finds that they are not even allowed to dream for the world outside the slums. As a poet, Spender's position is not revolutionary as he requests to the authorities to allow these children to go out of the slum. Thus, the poem consciously or unconsciously generates an idea that the worst living condition of these children is perhaps natural or God given. It is said that the solution of this problem lies in the request to the authority. This idea ceases to the rational understanding of the reader about the unequal place of these children in our society. The reader is also given an ideal way of requests to improve the lives of these children. The tone and way of presenting the life of slum children is clearly from the point of view of an upper class person. Actually, this kind of presentation, interpretation and understanding of the poem is nothing more than the perpetuation of the present living condition.

"Keeping Quiet" by Pablo Neruda is a polemical dimension of the contemporary busy life. The modern, then post-modern lifestyle based ideology gives birth to such kind of ideas which have been presented in the poem. The title of the poem indicates the worth of calm and peaceful life in this world full of disturbances. The man, exhausted by the present living conditions, seeks peace and solace. The poem represents to the ideas of the contemporary human being who finds himself alone, dissatisfied,

confused, and disturbed in this mechanical world which has almost submitted itself to the world of hurry, the world guided by capital and technology rather than human emotions and feelings.

The poet appeals to the reader to identify human emotions and relationships. He imagines the life when we all shall keep quiet to listen to the music of life. He writes:

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines,
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

He is inviting the reader to identify ideal and emotional human being in himself.

The poem "A Roadside Stand" by American poet Robert Frost has been written with deepest sympathy and humanity. It depicts the living condition of a small farmer who puts his stand on the road to sell his produce wild berries and squash. But it is noticeable that the rich passing the road in luxurious cars do not pay attention on the stand. The poet depicts the poor living condition of the farmer in a very sympathetic way. The farmer does not want to sell his produce only but he seeks the attention of the public to consider him as a human being. It hurts him the way he is treated and ignored. He also dreams of a better life which he has seen in the movies but the new world order has denied even a life worth living.

Frost focuses on the greed of the rich which makes them to exploit the poor. He finds it unbearable to see such a condition of a human being in a so called prosperous society. He states that it hurts to the poor (and no doubt to the poet also) when these rich people stop their cars only to enquire about the police or about the gas stations. Frost wonders for some solution by which the farmers can be freed from such painful existence. Thus, the poem depicts the real life condition only at the surface level. It arouses the feelings of sympathy towards the poor people.

When selected teachers and students were inquired about their understanding of the poem they also state that it teaches them to love and care the poor village folks. The poem seems very natural and spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings towards the poor people and further regenerates the same feelings among the readers. The real living conditions can be examined at two levels: One, at the level of writing the poem; second at the time of interpreting and understanding the poem. It gives merely the emotional, sympathetic, and idealistic impression. It does not record the real socio-cultural, historical, materialistic and political reasons of the inequality prevailing in the society. The reader student reads the poem only in an ideal and innocent way. It can be observed that the poet, the teacher, and the student ignore the hidden aspects of this inequality present in the society. It is essential to study these aspects to abolish this inequality; otherwise, only sympathy can be shown towards the poor. Thus, only one idea seems to be perpetuated that this inequality is natural.

The poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" by Adrienne Rich moves around the gender based discrimination prevailing in the society. It records the marginalization of women in a male dominated society. Out of the complex relationship between a male and female she grows as a timid creature who finds an alternative life in sewing and embroidery. Although, she becomes timid in her practical life but she depicts a fearless spirit of freedom and independence in the form of tigers. She has been trained through the socio-cultural norms of the patriarchal society. The poetess argues that Mrs. Jennifer has been trained in such a way that she has internalized all the domination and she will never be free from it even after her death. Further, the poetess writes that Jennifer may lose her life in fear and timidity but her tigers

will always represent to the spirit of fearless freedom. During the survey, it has been observed that most of the teachers are not able to refer the spirit of feminism which is evident in the poem. They understand that Mrs. Jennifer cannot have everything in her life because she is still controlled with "uncle's wedding band". Practically, it is not being taught in a revolutionary way in most of the schools. Perhaps, most of the teachers are themselves under the spell of patriarchy. This poem demands a broader vision and deep study of the socio-cultural construction of gender.

During the study, it has been found that teachers generally teach this poem to their students only by summarizing it in a casual way. They do not contextualize and discuss the socio-cultural constructions of a human being. It has been found that even most of the teachers are not conscious about gender construction. While the poem must be examined and taught in such a way that one can understand the politics of gender; further, how the gender of Mrs. Jennifer is grounded in the present living conditions. It is essential to understand that what role the society, culture, economy, history, language and politics play in the construction of a gender. The poem demands a deep study of gender construction which is generally missing among the teachers teaching the poem as well as the students reading the poem. It is generally summarized as a story of a timid lady who wants to enjoy freedom which she indicates through her needle work.

In short, it can be said that there are various gaps, silences, contradictions, continuities in these poems. Further, the same elements are found in the interpretation and teaching of these poems. It is the political unconscious prevailing during the process of selection, interpretation and understanding of the poems which do not allow careful examination, complete understanding and proper contextualization of the real conditions of life. It results in the misunderstanding and false consciousness of life among the students. Some suggestions can help to make the study better that only constructive, progressive, and significant, works must be included in the syllabus so that students can gain a revolutionary understanding of life. Further, it has also been observed that the role of the teacher at this level of education is very important as students follow him/her that how the teacher interprets the work before the class. So, teacher must examine the text critically and cultivate this habit among his/her students also.

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