

UNDERSTANDING ART: TEXT, TECHNIQUE AND CONTEXT

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Abstract:

The paper provides an illustrative understanding of art as the technique of prolonging the act of perception. The technique creates an aesthetic interest within the text and makes it artistic. An attempt shall be made to apply this formalistic understanding of art on select Kashmir related texts in poetry and novel. Moreover, the paper will look into the context of the selected texts. Doing so would bring to surface the literary and artistic ambivalence of the text, its technique and the context.

Keywords: Art, Context, Kashmir, Poetry, Technique, Text.

In his essay ‘Art as Technique’, Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian formalist, talks about the process of ‘Habituation’, he says that it devours the sensation of life. In our life “we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” (Shklovsky 49). Therefore, life loses its sensation and becomes meaningless. The sensation and appreciation of beauty, for example the scenic beauty of Kashmir, tourists seem to appreciate it more than the native Kashmiris. That is so because locals have been habituated with the landscape of the valley. Seeing it daily, they seem to have lost the sensation of the scenic beauty and forgot about the freshness of the air. A local guide or a horseman in Pahalgam, being habituated with the scenery of the place, may not feel captivated about it as much as a tourist on the horseback will do. When we read an artistic piece, for example, a poem by Mahjoor who is known as the ‘Wordsworth of Kashmir’, we get to see the lost sensation and beauty of the Valley back in the perception of the poet. In his poem, ‘I Offer You My Life’, rendered into English by Hameeda Nayeem, Mahjoor sings:

The flower buds are amazed to see

The sunset fire and the morning dew

Dusk’s falling shadows and the effulgence of dawn

My nest on the topmost branch

Was set ablaze by lightening at night

The gardener watched this fine illumination (Raina 27)

The poem evokes our senses and we could feel the freshness of the ‘morning dew’ and experience the sensation of the ‘sunset fire’. Contextualising the poem to his times, Mahjoor seems to be alluding to the post independence political turmoil in Kashmir. The wonderful fire of the sunset is followed by the terrible fire of ‘lightening’ that has set his home ablaze. The helpless state of affairs is such that the ‘gardener’ could not do anything; he remained silent and watched the ‘nest’ gutted down in fire. He seemed to have enjoyed the devastating fire as a sight of illumination.

What do an artist (poet, novelist or a painter) do that he/she brings the lost sensation of life back in the form of his/her text (a poem, novel or a painting)? The artist prolongs the act of perception in such a way that his/her art itself becomes an experiential act of perceiving; perceiving things in the artistic entirety of the text. The artist could see things as if he/she sees them for the first time. The poet and the painter give a creative and innovative order to the words and colors in such a way that they capture the freshness and the sensation of the things. Therefore, art becomes the way of using words and colors in the best possible order. It gives order to the disorder and creates a world of its own. The readers of a poem or the viewers of a painting find the sensation and the freshness captured in the piece of an art as something they knew but could not have expressed themselves. It is the super-sensitive power of the poet and the painter that they perceive extraordinariness of ordinary things and capture that in their work. They express things the way they have never been expressed before. There is a feeling of known context but an unknown and new technique that catches the attention of the audience, reader and the viewer. The talent of the artist lies in merging fact with fiction and creating a balance.

Robert Frost’s ‘Birches’ is the best example of how the poet mingles imagination with observation, and idealism with realism. “From reverie, the poet moves to reflection and concludes that life is ultimately all about ‘poise’, an ‘act of balancing’ and reconciling contraries” (Want et al. 10). Another example of artistic excellence is Frost’s ‘Mending Wall’¹ where the poet merges the two contrary opinions together. He begins his poem with the statement that he observes something mysterious that ‘doesn’t love a wall’ However, the poet’s neighbor has a contrary opinion, he keeps repeating: ‘Good fences makes good neighbors’. ‘*Why* do they make good neighbors?’ asks the poet. In rural areas, we generally keep fences so that cows do not trespass each other property. However, the poet and his

¹ For the full poem, see Want et al, pp. 6-7.

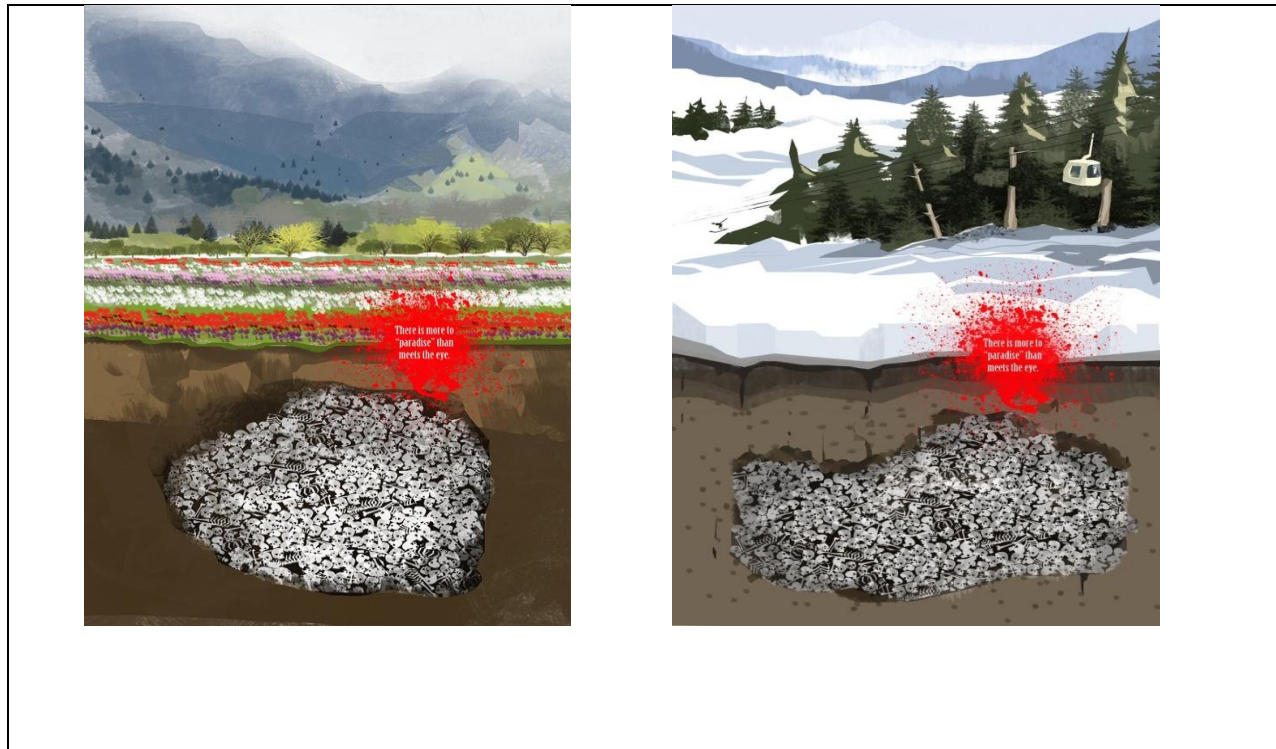
neighbor did not have any animals as such. Emphasizing the word ‘why’, Frost creates a curiosity among his readers to seek an answer for the question: Why do the fences make good neighbors. One could decipher the answer from the poem itself. The walls and the borders could be seen as the human barriers that divide and create animosity among people. However, the stone wall in the poem becomes a meeting place for the two neighbors. They were already divided by their properties. The poet has an apple orchard and his neighbor has a pine orchard. They remain busy with their respective fruit orchards. It is only the ‘spring’ time when they meet to mend the wall between them. Therefore, the mending of wall provides them an opportunity to talk and share ideas. They work together and repair the wall. The poem thus concludes with the line, ‘Good fences make good neighbors’.

The artists give a best possible expression to things, feelings, and emotions. They prolong the process of perception and capture the mystery and beauty of things. The abrupt opening in Frost’s poem: ‘Something there is that does love a wall’ is a reference to the mystery of nature that it swells the ground and ‘spills the upper boulders’ of the wall down. He makes the natural phenomenon of sun rays swelling the frozen ground and causing cracks in the wall, look mysterious. The artists likewise make things ‘unfamiliar’ so that the things could be perceived (better) artistically. As Viktor Shklovsky has observed, “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the act of perception is an end in itself and must be prolonged”, he adds, “*Art is a way of experiencing the making of an object; the object itself is not important*” (50).

Art is indeed a ‘way of experiencing the making of an object’ but we find it problematic to say that ‘the object itself is not important’. We believe that art is not just for ‘art’s sake’ it is, as it should be, for ‘life’s sake’ as well. Politics is everywhere so a work of art too has some purpose. As Salman Rushdie has observed “that works of art, even works of entertainment, do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; and that the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics, from history” (Rushdie 92). Therefore, an artistic piece cannot be dissociated from its sociopolitical and historical context. The best part of art is that it does not remain restricted to what the author might have intended, the critic can relate it to his/her own context. Pablo Neruda’s verse: ‘You can cut all the flowers but you can’t keep spring from coming’ can be appreciated in its literal sense and for its formalistic features. It sounds sweet the way Neruda expresses the idea that spring cannot be stopped by cutting the flowers. There is power in Nature and one cannot stop its cycling of seasons. As Shelley has said, ‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind’, it cannot be stopped from its coming. The spring keeps coming. Now let’s suppose a Palestinian boy, the lone survivor of the massacre where a lot of other boys were killed, posts Neruda’s verse as the status on Facebook or Twitter, it will bring out the metaphorical

meaning to the surface. The spring signifies freedom and the coming of spring becomes a metaphoric reference to the desire and hope for freedom. The cutting of flower becomes a reference to the killing of children. Therefore, Neruda gets contextualized within the Palestinian situation and his verse becomes a piece of ‘cultural resistance’.

Hence an artistic piece could be appreciated not only for its poetic but also the political aspect as well. It can be appreciated, as New Criticism and Russian Formalism would suggest, in its textual entirety as an end in itself with the symbolism and technique employed in it. However, that could not and should not stop us from locating the piece of art to a certain socio-political and historical context. This artistic duality of text and context can be elucidated in the Kashmiri English novel, Mirza Waheed’s *The Collaborator*. It is indeed artistic the way Waheed prolongs his act of perception as he writes about the war torn valley of Kashmir. ‘A terrible beauty is born’ when he juxtaposes the dead bodies and the yellow flowers together. The first chapter of the novel is titled as, ‘The Valley of Yellow Flowers’. The narrator, seeing the objects scattered around the river, observes: “These are erstwhile legs and arms and backbones and ribcages surrounded by sparkling swathes of yellow flowers all across the valley. In places they have grown in great numbers around the fallen and the decaying” bodies (Waheed 14). Artistically marvelous, this novel returns the sensation of the Valley and its terrible beauty which we are otherwise habituated to and have forgotten to perceive it with its full sensation. Waheed brings its memory back afresh. We are reminded of the turbulent times of the nineties in Kashmir. Such a piece of art and literature can never be purposeless; it suggests more than being a mere creative piece of art. Locating it to the turbulent sociopolitical and historical context of Kashmir, Waheed seems to be alluding to the discovery of the mass graves in Kashmir that he later wrote about in his article ‘Where 5,000 Graves Don’t Speak’ that came in *Outlook* in June 2012.



(Photo Credits: Naqshbandi)

Alluding to the terrible story of mass graves, cartoonist Suhail H. Naqshbandi's has created an artistic series of different seasons in Kashmir that he shared on Twitter with the caption: "There is more to paradise than meets the eye". Underneath the beautiful landscape of the Valley, Naqshbandi pictures the dead and disappeared bodies as the hidden heaps of ribcages and bones. Seeing the first photo in the above cited frame, we are reminded of a famous couplet by Mirza Ghalib:

Sab kahan Kuch lalo-o-gul mein numayaan hogain

Khaak mein kya suraten honghi ki pinhaan hogain

Kashmir's beloved poet, Agha Shahid Ali, renders the verse into English thus:

Not all, only a few –
disguised as tulips, as roses –
return from ashes.
What possibilities

has the earth forever
covered, what faces? (Ali 270)

Ali's translation of 'Ghalib's Ghazal' features in his poetry collection *Rooms Are Never Finished*. Dedicated to the war-torn Valley where he had returned with his mother's body for burial, the poetry collection can be contextualized in Kashmir. He gives a poetic expression to the miseries of his people in Kashmir. The pain of Ali's separation from his mother seems to get expressed in Ghalib's verse thus:

Let me weep, let this blood
flow from my eyes.
She is leaving. (Ali 270)

To conclude, it can be said, art is indeed 'experiencing the artfulness of an object', the object (the subject in a piece of art) is also important and for more meaning and better understanding, a text can be located not just in one but within multiple sociopolitical and historical contexts. The act of de-familiarization within a text does not conceal the signification; it creates a literary ambivalence that takes readers beyond the writer's imagination.

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