

Athens Institute for Education and Research

ATINER



ATINER's Conference Paper Series

LIT2012-0304

**Literature;
A Bridge to Identity**

Parastoo Salavati

**Chief of English Literature Faculty of Sanandaj Payam-
E -Noor University**

**Department of Literature and Humanities. Payame Nooor
University
Iran**

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research.
All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the
source is fully acknowledged.

ISSN 2241-2891
15/11/2012

An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

Salavati, P. (2012) **“Literature; A Bridge to Identity”** Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: LIT2012-0304.

Literature; A Bridge to Identity

Parastoo Salavati

Chief of English Literature Faculty of Sanandaj Payam-E-Noor University

Department of Literature and Humanities. Payame Noor University Iran

Abstract

This article traces the relation between language, culture and identity. It focuses on language as the medium for communication among human beings and manifestation of identity. It then relates culture to identity. The study describes how one acquires new identities while using the languages that are spoken in wider scopes, such as national and international languages. A national language unifies people of a country, bestowing them national identity so that they are considered as a part of that nation or country. Likewise an international language presents people with international identity, what that is considered as a unifying agent in the global village. English as an international language, and a unifying element, connects the people all over the world through literature.

The literature of any culture can play a fundamental part in forming and creating identity because it contains the history, values, and identity of that culture. Literature which is a manifestation of people's life and identity connect the people all over the world through an international language and create a coherent unit.

Keywords: language, culture, identity, literature, international language

Contact Information of Corresponding author:

Introduction

If one looks back hundreds years ago to search for any innovation and invention and that how they came to existence and developed, s/he very soon finds out that through language man has been able to teach and transfer his knowledge to others through ages.

Language is among the important factors that shapes the identity of each individual. Who a person is and how s/he is characterized in others' viewpoints, can be revealed by language. From the first words a neonate tries to imitate from what s/he hears in her/ his surrounding, her/his identity is going to be shaped. When a person speaks an ethnic language, s/he has adopted that ethnic identity. In the same way, when s/he speaks and uses a national or official language of a country, s/he tries to communicate and be considered as a part of that nation or country. In this way, international languages, which are spoken by numerous people all over the world, give the speakers international identity and unity. They gather people like the members of a family and bestow them coherence and harmony. Among the other ways, literature written in these international languages is considered as one of the best tools to unify people all over the world and make them acquainted with one another's conditions.

Since literature is the reflection of life, it portrays the life of people, their manners and attitudes. On the other hand, the medium of written literature is words. So what an author writes reveals her/ his own identity and that of the characters s/he creates in her/ his works because the characters' identity is shown through the language the author uses. In this way, the author depicts ethnic, national or international identity according to the diction and language s/he chooses for her/ his narrative and her/ his characters.

People, no matter where they live, can be informed about the other people's identity through the books written in international languages in which those people play roles. When a vision of people's lives is portrayed in literature, other people are informed about what makes their identity; their customs, lives, habits, rules, sufferings and happiness.

The Study

Although all social animals communicate with each other in their own specific ways, developing a system of communication more than a set of prearranged signals is only attributed to human beings and it is considered as one of the privileges of human beings over the other animals. While the origin of human language is incomprehensible, we know that our ancestors were speaking thousands years ago, though with a smaller vocabulary and a simpler grammar than we are familiar with today. From those days man began to express his ideas and feelings through language. In this way language cannot be considered just as 'a structural and formal system of symbols governed by grammatical rules combining particular signs with particular meanings' (Wikipedia), but it has always been used as a deliberate means of interaction that enables people to cooperate and to convey their ideas and communicate with others. It 'is the place where actual and possible forms of social

organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, (and our identity) is constructed' (Weedon, 1997:21).

Language is fundamental to human activities; it is the development of the basic and also the most developed form of communication between human beings, and in a society. In this way, communication through language is among the most common and the most important ways. By using language, communication is truly close and meaningful, and complex ideas are transmitted with clarity and understood without any ambiguity.

While Language is the primary and most sophisticated means of interaction between people, it is a medium to reveal cultural identity. As every language has a system of sounds, words, and sentences that can adequately communicate the content of culture, it reflects our culture and even our thought processes. Language has not been produced in isolation. It has no independent existence: it exists in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its user (Crystal, 1997). Through the centuries, there has always been relation between language and culture. This mutual relation between language and culture, i.e. the interaction of language and culture has long been a settled issue thanks to the writings of prominent philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1980; 1999), Saussure (1966), Foucault (1994), Dilthey (1989), Von Humboldt (1876), Adorno (1993), Davidson (1999), Quine (1980) and Chomsky (1968) (Genc and Bada, 2005).

Language has always been strongly interwoven with culture and identity, who or what a person or thing is. Changes in culture have influenced language and at the same time language has developed with the development of culture representing social behavior and human emotions and activities found in the latter one. So it is both influenced by culture and has great effects on culture. Language is a medium for transmitting and internalizing culture. Every language develops based on the needs of specific people with common cultural features in a particular place and particular period of time. As well as other important factors such as race or ethnicity, nationality, social class, etc. language determines our identity, the 'who we are'. In the other words we establish our identity through our use of language because language is related to region, nationality, age, gender, class, education and other factors from which identity emerges. Identity, Thornborrow declares, 'whether on an individual, social, or institutional level, is something that we are constantly building and negotiating throughout our lives through our interaction with others' (2004), the interaction whose primary medium is language.

From the first meaningful words an infant tries to utter, his/her ethnic identity is going to shape. It is the beginning of actual making of language, where individuality lives. In addition to ethnicity, clothing, and behavior, the way that one talks and the language that s/he uses plays an important role in displaying her/his identity. In the same way the number of languages that s/he speaks and her/his accent can indicate regional origin, social class and to some extent, the kind of education s/he has. In this way 'Language is a central feature of human identity. When we hear someone speak, we immediately

make guesses about gender, education level, age, profession, and place of origin. Beyond this individual matter, a language is a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity. (Spolsky, 1999, p. 181) The work of the sociologist Goffman has been influential in showing that the self is constructed entirely through discourse, making our language choices of paramount importance to our identity construction. In fact, he states that personal identity is defined by how others identify us, not how we identify ourselves (1963).

Like speaking, writing is a device for communication whose medium is words and language, written language. It is, as Sriratana believes, ‘composed of three factors: the message, the sender and the receiver’. Writing is among factors that can convey culture especially if it is used in literary texts. Literary text is not ‘a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning’ (Sriratana), but it is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture (Barthes 146). It reveals culture and identity by the use of narration.

One of the significant fields in which language (in both oral and written forms) as a manifestation of identity displays its presence is literature. Literature can play a fundamental part in forming and creating an understanding of identity. Literature is a search for who we are, for our roots. Long before written literature, there lived story tellers who told the tales of man’s life and his struggles at the end of the day to entertain people. These oral tales originated from people’s lives, their habits, their ideas and customs. The literature of our ancestors reveals realities about their experiences and their interpretations of life. What have remained from those days are accounts of life experience, the way people lived and their culture and identity. As MacLean asserts, ‘The literature of any culture, whether it be in written or oral form, contains the history, values, and mores of that culture. The themes of our literature reflect our values, the things that are important to us’. (1998)

Studying literature can be considered as an evolution; an evolutionary process at the end of which the individual transforms greatly. Such mental and intellectual transformation could be observed in the change of the individuals’ attitudes towards life in general. Literature in each country and region reflects the culture, the way the people of that specific zone live and think. It reveals the conventions, traditions, social and political views of the people and as Sriratana declares, it ‘can be one of the imagined contrivances which bring together a community’. Accordingly when one studies the literature of specific people, s/he will be familiar not only with the language but also with the culture and tradition of theirs.

Like other branches of knowledge, literature becomes, as Gates remarks, one of the ‘sites for contest and negotiation, self-fashioning and refashioning’ (1993, 11). In this way Language as the medium of expression in literature, depicts not only the identity of the writer but also that of the characters playing role in a fictional work of art. The writer’s or poet’s origin, dwelling place, language, conditions of life, experiences that construct her/his identity are reflected in her/his work. S/he celebrates the place from which he draws his own identity - town, district, region....(Bauman)

According to the region in which one is born, s/he acquires a kind of cultural identity. This cultural identity as Rønning believes ‘often refers to feelings of belonging [...] as a result of geographical and social mobility’. She then describes cultural identity as ‘the result of a process whereby individuals or groups evaluate consciously or subconsciously their own situation in society, and attempt to establish a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence which enables them to accept their own place in life and society’ (1998).

This cultural identity is manifested in both oral and literary works of a particular region. Literature can play a fundamental role in the formation of social identity, including national, ethnic, and religious identities. The words that the writer and, most importantly, the poet try to shape (to mould) are rooted in the sources of our identity, in my case in the Greek sources (Peonides). And as languages differ from one region to another, there exists different cultures even in one country. According to Bauman

‘language is the essence of a people’s national (or ethnic) identity and that the best and highest use of language in the expression of an authentic national culture lies in the verbal art of folksong and poetry, existing now only as a distressed remnant of a vanishing past that must be recuperated if the nation is to preserve itself (Bauman and Briggs, 1999).

Except for the ethnic language and culture, in every country a kind of national or official language is used as a means to unify and connect the members of nation together. Regardless of different regions and different languages and accents, this official language considers the people as a whole. Through national language people acquire a new belonging, a new identity while keeping their own, an identity which is both ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, a national identity and identity as a sense of belonging (Phan, 2008). National identity is a ‘mater of becoming rather than being’ (Hall, 1997). The core identity is considered as a stable platform that they are able to form their multiple identities on (Phan, 2008). Phan sees changing and the root of identity construction are both important and adds that although it may undergo ceaseless transformation, it always remains the core, the root, the sense of belonging to national and cultural values. National literature, especially that in the form of myths, legends and historical narratives, can be regarded as an imagined entity which binds people together as an imagined community, not only as a place where communal consciousness is contrived, but also as an exposé of the very process of such formulation, of the notion that collective identity can be deemed a constructed concept (Sriratana). By depicting the lives of the local people in literary works, people learn about their community, its limitations and boundaries, its situation when it is a part of the crowd, more than in any clear-cut documentary account concerning their own people. The national literary work, written in national language, while portraying the life and culture of specific region, allows the other members of the nation to become familiar with that region and its cultural identity.

On the other hand, it may deal with the common problems of people disregarding their living regions. According to Peonides 'every country, through its culture, its art and its literature expresses its own identity. And it's this identity which gives the bouquet of the world's cultures its particular flavor and diversity.'

What brings coherence to the people all over the world is an international language, a unifying language that can be used by all the residents of the world. Globalization is probably the most significant trend in the world during the 20th century whose effects are evident in altering economy, politics, culture and language to global entities. English is among the dominant languages that has become the global language. It is the most studied language all over the world and is far more worldwide in its distribution than all other spoken languages. It is not restricted to English speaking countries and colonies. It is an official language in 52 countries as well as many small colonies and territories. In addition, many people (about 1/4 to 1/3 of the people) in the world understand and speak English to some degree.

Whether the reasons of the distribution of this language, as Graddol (1997) believes, are thanks to 'the colonial expansion of Britain which resulted in settlements of English speakers in many parts of the world, or U.S.'s role in the 20th century that 'has helped ensure that the language is not only at the forefront of scientific and technical knowledge, but also leads consumer culture (14), English is nowadays global language. Learning this language is compulsory in schools and universities in many countries. It plays a significant role in media and popular culture and has become the most useful language to learn for international travel, diplomacy, commerce, education, research, science, technology, sport, music and electronic communication (particularly on the Internet) and many other fields.

Nowadays many ethnic literary works are translated into English so that far more people become familiar with a specific zone and the cultural identity of its inhabitants. In the same way many English literary works are translated to other languages. Consequently people wherever they are, can be informed about literature, culture and identity of other people all over the globe. As literature is a reflection of life and cultural identity, through reading literary works people become familiar both with the authors and the characters in fictional works.

Since one of the functions of literature has been to depict and analyze different cultural identities, society and social and political problems, reading literary works informs the readers of those problems of the people who live in different areas facing them. Accordingly, it can be considered as a link between people all over the world.

It was through literature that the symphony of infantile tales appeared to be the most pleasant ones in childhood. While enjoying the stories of The Red Riding Hood, Gulliver, The Snow White, ... we tried to justify the atmosphere and characters based on our own childish imaginations so that we could understand them fully. Later on, we felt the sufferings of the black people through Wright's 'Long Black Song' and the different phases of love

through the maze of The Arabian Nights and Hafez's Divan (collection of poems). It was through Hardy's fiction that we, as readers, became familiar with the local color he used in his novels. We understood that each literary work (fiction or poetry) reflects a culture and each culture describes an identity which an author as an individual living in society reveals in her/his works.

Literature as a bridge connects different cultures and identities and nationalities. It combines different cultures and make an international whole. Because the themes and subject matters of literature are universal, the feelings of sympathy and empathy and belonging are created in the addressees. In this way, they behave like the members of a unified family.

Conclusion

Throughout ages, from antiquity till now, language has always been a means of communication among people. They have always used it to transfer their ideas and feelings. Language has not only been a means of interaction, but also the expression of identity and self discovery. It has always been a way by which one reveals her/his cultural identity and personality. Every language originates from a specific zone and likewise the other elements such as ethnicity, race, and clothing, it carries the cultural identity of the people who speak in that language. The official language of every country brings a new identity to all the members of that society. It is a unifying element that cohere the citizens and form a national identity for them. In the same way an international language is considered as a unifying agent that not only connects all the residents of the world together but also brings about a new international identity by which people all over the world are considered as a whole.

Literature as a branch of art deals with words and language to convey its meaning to its addressees. As the field of literature is a subjective one, the author reveals his personal and cultural identity to others. In fictional literary works, the characters reveal their cultural identity which is familiar to the author. When an author uses an international language, her/ his identity is known to all the people who read her/ his works. In this way literature as a bridge connects her/his cultural and ethnic identity to the universal and international identity. People, wherever they are, become aware of the agony and happiness of people s/he writes about and they feel sympathy about each other like the members of a family.

References

- Barthes, Ronald. (1977). *Image, Music, Text*. Hill and Wang: New York
 Bauman, Richard. (2000). Language, Identity, Performance. International Pragmatics Association. 10:1.1-5.

- Bauman, Richard and Charles L. Briggs (1999). *Language philosophy as language ideology: John Locke and Johann Gottfried Herder*. In Paul V. Kroskrity (ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities*. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, pp. 139-204.
- Crystal, D., 1997. *The language that took over the world*. The Guardian.
- Dirlik, Arif, 2002. 'Literature/ Identity: Transnationalism, Narrative and Representation.' *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*. Taylor @ Francis. 24:209-234.
- Gates, H.L. jr. (1994). Beyond the Culture Wars: Identities in Dialogue. *Profession* 93: 6-11.
- Graddol, David, (1997). *The Future of English; A guide to forecasting the popularity of the English language in the 21th century*. The British Council. Digital edition by The English Company Ltd.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Cultural identity and diaspora*. In Woodward, K (Eds.). *Identity and difference* (pp. 51-59), London: Sage Publications.
- MacLean, Edna. (1988). 'Role of Literature as a Source of History, Values and Identity.' Paper presented at the Bilingual/Multi-Cultural Conference, February, Alaska Department of Education.
- Peonides, Elli. (1994). 'The literary identity in literature for children.' Paper presented at [Workshop 8: Literature, Identity and Discourse](http://poieinkaiprattein.org/conferences-symposiums-workshops/cultural-actions-for-europe/the-workshops/workshop-8-literature-identity-and-discourse/the-literary-identity-in-literature-for-children-by-elli-peonides/). Available at <http://poieinkaiprattein.org/conferences-symposiums-workshops/cultural-actions-for-europe/the-workshops/workshop-8-literature-identity-and-discourse/the-literary-identity-in-literature-for-children-by-elli-peonides/> [8 May 2012].
- Rønning, Anne Holden. (1997). 'A Question of Empowerment: the Black African Woman's Answer.' Proceedings from the Sixth Nordic Conference for English Studies.
- Rønning, Anne Holden. (1998). 'Literature as an Empowerment of Identity.' Norway. Available at www.ifuw.org/seminars/1998/Literature.pdf
- Phan, Le Ha. (2008). Teaching English as an International Language: Identity, Resistance and Negotiation. *Multilingual Matters*. 15:3.
- Spolsky, B. (1999). Second-language learning. In J. Fishman (Ed.), *Handbook of language and ethnic identity* (pp. 181-192). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sriratana, Verita. (2004). 'Literature and the Construction of Identity in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*.' *Language and identity. In Language, society and power*. Available at <http://st-andrews.academia.edu/VeritaSriratana/Papers/121062/> Literature_and_the_Construction_of_Identity_in_Alistair_MacLeods_No_Great_MischiefThornborrow, Joanna. [15 May 2012].
- Weedon, Chris, (1997). *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, second ed. Blackwell, Malden, MA.