



Cultural Context: A Comparative Study of Raymond Carver's Cathedral and Ebrahim Golestan's the Stream and the Wall and the Thirst

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Abstract. Both Raymond Carver and Ebrahim Golestan are widely acknowledged as writers who pay special attention to the form and language of their writings. This study starts with these two general characteristics of Carver's and Golestan's writings in order to search for the overt and covert features of prose in Raymond Carver's Cathedral and Ebrahim Golestan's The Stream and the Wall and the Thirst. The paper necessarily does its best to perform some kind of comparison between the two works of Carver and Golestan. Following a formal linguistic approach, the research traces one aspect of macro-level, cultural context, and tries to show some major manifestations of it in the stories of the two selected fictions. The research undertakes to find out whether these short story collections might act as architectures with similar cultural contexts. Reading Carver (1981) and Golestan (1351/1972) for the issue of cultural context, it can be concluded that although they both give a considerable attention to the structure of their stories as if they are building solid architectures out of carefully chosen linguistic units, they reflect different cultural beliefs and customs.

Keywords: Comparative Analysis, Macro-level, Cultural Context, Raymond Carver, Ebrahim Golestan

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper studies one aspect of "macro-level" of Raymond Carver's *Cathedral* and Ebrahim Golestan's *the Stream and the Wall and the Thirst*. Since "there are other aspects of meaning that depend more on context and the communicative intentions of speakers" (Yule, 2006, p.112), this study does not limit itself to consider only the conceptual meaning and relationships between words. Once it was believed that everything happens in the realm of language and the sentence was the great example of the function of language. But there came a time when the extra-linguistic elements like social context or cultural context became significant changing our understanding of language. Therefore, now we can distinguish between micro- and macro-levels with the help of this new knowledge.

Structuralism believes that literature is a "self-enclosed system of rules that is composed of language" (Bressler, 2007, p.109). Structuralists seek the system of rules that convey the meaning of a text because for them how a text means rather than what it means is at the center of their methodology (ibid., p.110). Since they are primarily interested in the system of rules governing texts, they emphasize form and structure, not the content of a text. For them, "form is content; meaning is the structure which generates it" (Green & LeBihan, 1996, p.59). Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker state that:

It would be a mistake to identify 'literature' and 'language'. It is true that literature uses language as its medium, but this does not mean that the structure of literature is identical with the structure of language... structuralists agree that literature has a

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special relationship with language: it draws attention to the very nature and specific properties of language. (2005, p.67)

Seeking the system of codes can be done by structural linguistics since "the proper object of linguistic study is the system which underlies any particular human signifying practice" (ibid., p.63). It means that we examine a specific piece of writing to discover its system of rules or grammar. A practical method to achieve such a goal is linguistic criticism since as expressed in Wales's definition, it refers "to the application of linguistic theory and ideas to literature for the purpose of analysis and interpretation" (cited in Green & LeBihan, 1996, p.3). Green and LeBihan (ibid., p.7) declare that the linguistic units comprising a sentence can be seen "ranking from the smallest to the largest." They bring the sequence of phoneme, morpheme, word, groups, clause, and sentence to support their claim. However, there are elements which function beyond sentences and draw the attention to texts. Two significant notions in structural linguistics are micro-level of the text which ends up to syntax, and macro-level which goes beyond the sentence to embrace all other textual and extra-linguistic elements that somehow affect the text. At the micro-level, the focus is on the small units making the text a whole while at the macro-level, it is on the broader outlooks.

Raymond Carver and Ebrahim Golestan give a special significance to language and form. According to Poushne (1390/2011, p.83), for Golestan, language is one of the basic elements of the structure of stories with a significant position in the fictive architecture. Hoghughi (1998/1377, p.130) believes that Golestan, known as a modernist stylist writer because of his tendency toward rhythmic prose and attention to structure of texts, creates structural stories with the help of his knowledge of classic literature. Golestan himself declares that "I don't want to amuse. I want to build a volume and a pressed space with a somehow complete relation among its elements" (cited in Mirabedini, 2008/1387, p.452). On the other hand, we have Raymond Carver saying that:

[The word] had better be the right ones, with the punctuation in the right places so that they can best say what they are meant to say. If the words are heavy with the writer's own unbridled emotions, or if they are imprecise and inaccurate for some other reason- if the words are in any way blurred- the reader's eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be achieved. (1989b, pp.24-25)

2. MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

It is declared that in the same way that the grammar of a language is, on one level, a description of rules "for the generation of sentences in a given language, a grammar of the text will account (theoretically) for the generation of texts in a given genre" (Green & LeBihan, 1996, p.61). There are three 'core' levels of "meaning, word-order and related phenomena, and sound... further principles of organization are usually proposed", (Fowler, 1996, p.5). The structure above the sentence, the highest unit of syntax, is one of these. He says that "this is the domain of text-grammar, which is concerned with the linking of sentences to one another, with the sequencing of sentences in coherent extended discourse, with the distribution of information, themes, argument, story, etc., through a whole text" (ibid., p.5). According to Green and LeBihan:

One of the early enterprises of structuralists was the attempt to describe the 'grammar' of literature ... In its highest and most self-defeating aspect, structuralism saw literature as a whole structured like a language; but this was an extremely optimistic project, and of little use when attempting to account for individual texts. Structuralism at its most optimistic macro-level wished to find the 'grammar' of literature. (1996, p.57)

Keith Johnson and Helen Johnson (1999, p.208) state that macro- and micro-linguistics are "broad terms" referring to "two major types of linguistics." Focus of this article is on studying macro-level in the selected short story collections. Macro-linguistics "covers sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and other related disciplines. In sociolinguistics ... macrosociolinguistics involves language planning and sociology of language" (ibid.). Bussman says that macro-linguistics is:

Scientific investigation of language in the broadest sense, i.e. in the context of all related disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and philosophy. A central subdiscipline of macro-linguistics is microlinguistics, linguistics in the narrow sense, which deals with the description and explanation of a language system. (1996, p.714)

The macro-level analysis, as put forward by Green and LeBihan (1996, p.61), "seeks to find underlying principles in a vast range of possible and actual texts. The macro-level analysis sees the individual text as analogous to the sentence." According to Schiffrin et al. (2001, p.354), "power, prominence, and inequality between social groups are typically terms that belong to a macrolevel of analysis." Ogden (2002, n.p.) declares that discourse is "used to refer to meanings at the more macro level." Renkema (2004, p.94) states that macro-structure is "the global meaning of discourse." He believes that there are three macro rules for the formation of macro structures: 'deletion rule' which eliminates propositions not relevant for interpretation of other propositions, 'generalization rule' which generalizes specific propositions, and 'construction rule' by which a proposition can be made from other propositions (ibid., pp.94-96).

3. CULTURAL CONTEXT

Cultural context is one of the contexts which need to be considered in the analysis of a literary text on its macro-level of study; that is, traditions, beliefs, customs, etc. of a particular culture in which that fiction is created. Such things show themselves mostly in the content of the stories or the characters' personalities and views. Here, we just focus on some of these elements to show the significance of such analysis.

According to Bethea (2006, p.2), some scholars believe in a major shift in sensibility in Raymond Carver's *Cathedral*, for example, Ewing Campbell utters "truncations vanishes; where once the narrative halted in emotional tumult, the story continues, and equilibrium is restored. Despair becomes redemption; the alienated are reconciled." John Alton claims that the tone of *Cathedral* "seems more optimistic" while Arthur Brown asserts that Carver "leaves[s] behind the themes of dissociation and alienation"(ibid., p.2). Saltzman has declared that "beyond the slow wash of hopelessness throughout Carver's fiction, [...] are those moments of fortitude and affirmation that surface in *Cathedral* and provide some positive, even sentimental, texturing that counters the savage attenuation of character, description and outlook" (cited in Wirag, 2006, p.2).

Carver's characters whose "culture consists mainly of television and drinking" generally belong to working class who are busy with the simplest life issues such as drink, work, and relationship (Scofield, 1994, p.244). He portrays three cultural practices, as put forward by Kennedy (1995, p.210), which are somehow representative of the contemporary life working against the formation of relationships whether personal or communal. The most obvious of these which is also an "authorial obsession" is the chronic drinking that has already caused destructions of relationships with the accompaniment of deceit and alienation in "Chef's House", "Where I'm Calling From", and "Careful" (ibid.). As Shuman (2002, p.255) states, Carver's characters "unable to find engaging work, meaningful relationships, or fulfilling lives ... drift, drink, and struggle to understand why they do what they do and what they want." It is often the sign of the effects of failure and despair on his characters who believe that they have nothing to

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lose and seek refuge in drinking to forget their pain. Carver writes about this issue from the point of view of a person who has experienced its suffering and understands the impulse that drive the alcoholic because the most significant influence on his work, besides academic and familial ones, was his drinking (Carson, 2000, n.p.). For example, his "Where I'm Calling From" is narrated from the view of an alcoholic who is at a rehab clinic to quit drinking for the second time and focuses mostly on J.P.'s life that was much affected by his drinking. He does not talk much about his own life and the few things he says reflects his present situation which was somehow developed out of his drinking habits. In "Chef's House", a separated couple is reunited due to the man's ask for help from his ex-wife to quit drinking. At first, the new place makes them close again and Wes does great in being sober but when Chef asks for his place things seem to collapse. Besides the stories related to drunk people, there are ones which include drinking as a part of daily life. For instance, the man of "Preservation" starts random drinking after being unemployed and desperate of finding a job or the narrator of "Cathedral" fills in his solitude with alcohol. The second source of malaise, as expressed by Kennedy (1995, pp.210-211), is associated with "the great American myth that going to west, or simply somewhere else, may open up a new life" as in "Vitamins" in which the desperate characters go to Portland which seem like a land of opportunities. Even though all "postmodern places" in the end might be the same as Donna in "Vitamins" suspects, the real life is elsewhere for Carver's characters and works against the experience of community (ibid.). The third cultural practice which is the sign of postmodern sickness reveals itself in the television watching which provides "an escape from conversation, a distraction from the process of getting acquainted" (ibid., p.211). According to Kennedy:

As Bella and his associates acutely observe, television is not merely a symptom of our contemporary "culture of separation": it contributes to alienation...Television moreover encourages withdrawal by creating the mere illusion of human connection and community- the electronic "host" is always happy to "see" the unseen viewer, who thus joins other viewers- while undermining actual relationships and obtaining participation in real communal activities. Television may indeed figure as the comprehensive sign of postmodern life in its flattening of experience into meaningless, illusory images as it sucks human energy out of passive viewers. (ibid.)

Characters of *Cathedral* generally suffer from their inability to communicate with other people and spend most of their time in front of TV instead of making conversations to ease their loneliness. For example, in "Preservation", Sandy's husband sits on a couch watching television while drinking and there is not much dialogue between them. In "Feathers", a TV is on when Jack and Fran arrive at Bud's house and they leave it on to fill in the uncomfortable silences and to have something to talk about. The presence of television is more touchable in "Cathedral" where the narrator stays up late watching TV and asks Robert to do so when they are alone and have nothing to talk about. These cultural practices show their effects in the ailing or broken marriages which, as Nesset (1991, p.304) states, "indicate an ailing sense of self as well."

In addition to these, there are some traditions and beliefs stated in this collection. For example, in "Feather", Bud brings cigarettes to work when his baby is born which is one of the various options of sharing one's happiness with other people. Another tradition happening in this story is taking homemade bread to Bud's house which is part of Western culture since they take something as a present when going to someone's house for the first time. There is also the presence of beliefs of their culture in *Cathedral* like the issues of luck and karma. For instance, talking on the phone with Carlyle in "Fever", Eileen talks of karma; that is, the action which causes the cycle of cause and effect, "*Next she wanted to talk about his head and his karma. She'd looked into his karma*" (p.165). In "The Bridle" or "Where I'm Calling From", luck is

frequently mentioned as if it is an important part of the characters' lives determining their destiny.

The same things happen in Golestan's *The Stream and the Wall and the Thirst* in which some of the beliefs, traditions, and customs of Persian culture have been reflected. In "Love of Green Years"¹, we see one of the popular Iranian beliefs which is consulting Hafez's *The Divan*, a book of poetry. This is one of the important books for Iranians who mostly have a copy of it at their houses and use it in some of their traditions like Norooz, Yalda, etc. when family members gather together to celebrate a custom or when they want to make a decision. Here, the narrator consults it to see how their relationship would end up, how she feels for her, etc. It is another function of this book which is a favorable one to young lovers, "*I consulted my fortune more than once with Hafez*"² (p.16). The story also shows the negative outlook of that society towards the relationships of boys and girls because when their love letters are revealed, their family and school interfere to separate them threatening them by punishments. Even the sexual activity between male and female was not accepted unless they were married. Therefore, they dated and had sex in private away from the eyes of the society. For example, the narrator surprises a girl kissing a soldier in an empty alley and takes advantage of her by threatening to disgrace her in public. Another common tradition in Iran which is different from that of Western countries is the marriage of cousins as in "*And when one day a letter arrived and announced the news of her marrying her cousin, I wished her happiness and blessing*"³ (p.27). Believing in the destiny which is beyond the control of mankind is another belief in Iran as in "*She said 'human is not the master of his destiny'*"⁴ (p.43) which shows how they surrender to the conditions of their lives by relating them to their destiny. A tradition when someone wants to travel is using Quran, a holy book in Islam, to accompany him with God's protection in his journey as in "*He said 'Prepare Quran and mirror. Go get Halqe Yassin.'*"⁵ (p.52). The traveler bends a little bit and passes three times under Quran which is held by a person lower than his height.

In "*Esmat's Journey*"⁶, the significance of holy shrines is shown in the Persian tradition because they are visited when a person wants to repent from the bad things he or she has done to start a new life or when someone wholeheartedly wants something, he or she goes to such places and asks for them from the higher powers. Here, *Esmat* who is tired of her life comes to a holy shrine to repent from being a prostitute who is not a respectable person in Iran. Here, a preacher offers her a job of concubine that does not seem much different from her old life in the eyes of common readers but in Islam they are not the same. This Islamic tradition is followed in Iran as well and is referred to as religious service. Vows (*nazr*) and alms (*sadaghe*) as mentioned in the preacher's speech "*Well! then, give vows. For yourself, your kids. Give alms*"⁷ (p.74) are two other Islamic traditions popular in Iran. They are done when someone prays when in trouble and does them when his or her prayers are answered. In addition to it, alms are given to protect oneself or one's family from evil.

In "*My Neighbor's Dead Parrot*"⁸, giving money as a tip to people who help get a job done is another common tradition in Iran. For example, it is mostly done at hospitals to make the nurses pay more attention to one's patient or when a fellowman makes the process of a work faster than it would have been if it was carried out in its usual procedure. Here, the narrator gives the doorman some money to give to the policeman for accompanying him and his neighbor at the hospital where the neighbor is revived.

¹ "عشق سالهای سبز" (1972/1351, p. 9),

² روزی چند بار با حافظ فال میگیرفتم.

³ و هنگامیکه روزی نامه ای رسید و خبر وصلت او به پسر عمه اش را رساند من برای او خوشی و برکت آرزو کردم.

⁴ گفت "سرنوشت آدم دس خودش که نیس."

⁵ گفت "آئینه قرآن آماده بکن. حلقه یاسین و دار بیار."

⁶ "سفر عصمت" (1972/1351, p. 69)

⁷ "ده! خوب، نذر کن. برای خودت، بچه هات، صدقه ای بده."

⁸ "طوطی مرده همسایه من" (1972/1351, p.88),

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"To Be or to Be a Role"⁹ is another story talking about different socio-cultural codes and beliefs. A family of four members, a lion, and a camel want to take a picture which becomes the topic of their disagreements and arguments. It can be assumed that each character represents different social groups of that time. For instance, the oldest son who is called *Se Noghte* reminds the reader of intellectuals who were against a blind follow and invite the people to have their own ideas and use their mind to analyze what they are told to do rather than to be a yes man. The oldest son is against taking a picture as a purpose of immortality because he believes that a man's ideas, beliefs, and actions make him memorable, not a simple image of his body. The mother is representative of group of people who are afraid of any sparkle of thought or emotion among people which might change them since such a transformation is not beneficial to her. The father represents the common men whose ideas and feelings have been suppressed and have no judgment call. The youngest son, *Chahar Noghte*, speaks on behalf of blind followers who would even give up their lives as a dedication to their leaders. The arguments of the story are mostly between the two brothers and the mother uses tricks to win them all. *Se Noghte* tries to get his father on his side while, like Eve, the woman of the story does her best to fool her man to not to listen to the oldest son. *Se Noghte* also criticizes people who are proud of their ancient culture and heroes who have done great things and do nothing when it is their time to make a change but continue their habits. It is interesting that a lion is embarrassed with their arguments and shouts in front of the photographer, a French speaking foreigner, who does not understand the characters and comes from a place centuries ahead of them. In this story, some of the common views of the Iranian society of that time are shown. For example, people did not approve of taking photographs, for they believed that it was against the God's will and Islam. The influence of Islamic culture and language is somehow shown in this story as in the father's speech saying "'God forbids'"¹⁰ (p.145).

In "On the Way with my Son"¹¹, Persian culture's giving credit to people's judgments about their lives, decisions, and behaviors is shown at the part where the father refuses to race with his son because of a truck passing by them saying "'What would have the driver thought when he saw an old man racing with a young kid in the middle of the road?'"¹² (p.193).

Considering the limited samples of the cultural contexts in which Carver and Golestan created their fiction, it can be seen how their different societies affected their literature. Based on the things stated, it can be concluded that Carver comes from a modern society with modern issues and problems while Golestan, though a modern writer, comes from a traditional society which has a quiet different worldview, custom, belief, etc.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the focus was more on the content of the stories of Raymond Carver's *Cathedral* and Ebrahim Golestan's *The Stream and the Wall and the Thirst*. Studying the cultural contexts of the selected works, it is indicated that a fiction can be representative of the socio-cultural codes and beliefs of the place and time in which it was written. This study considers one notion of structural linguistics to do a comparative analysis of Carver's and Golestan's selected short fictions; macro-level. Once it was believed that the only things which need to be considered in the analysis of a literary work is the text itself as if everything happens in the language but there came the time when the influence of extra-linguistic elements was understood and was taken into consideration. Therefore, two levels appeared to analyze a text both at its micro- and macro- levels.

⁹ "بودن، با نقش بودن" (1972/1351, p. 125),

¹⁰ "استغفرالله ربی و اتوب الیه"

¹¹ "با پسر رم روی راه" (1972/1351, p. 185),

¹² "مردکه شو فر چه فکر میکرد وقتی میدید به آدم خرس گنده با به بچه فسقلی مسابقه داده، میون راه؟"

Considering the macro-level in the analysis of these two short story collections, it was shown that to fully appreciate a fiction, one should not limit himself to the text and the language but pay attention to the contexts in which they were created. The approach used for this level was limited to the cultural context in which Carver's *Cathedral* and Golestan's *The Stream and the Wall and the Thirst* were born. The study reveals that the cultural context talks of the tradition, customs, beliefs, etc. of a culture which are portrayed in a literary text as if literature recounts history.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the great writers pay attention to every specific detail of their fiction from the smallest to the largest elements both at the micro- and macro- levels as if things are chosen for a specific purpose.

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