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PLACE-THOUGHT INTERRELATEDNESS IN LITERARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Cognitive Poetics, an interdisciplinary approach, combining linguistics and psychology intended to illuminate the study of literary reading is a flourishing, unexplored area of critical enquiry. Cognitive approach to literature focus not on the content of the literary text but aims at a better understanding of the basic cognitive processes which are made manifest in the readers 'decoding of the content. This approach focusses on the intermediary process between stimuli and response with the assumption that our thought processes affect the way in which we behave. It is obvious that environment also influences individual's perception and behavior. In this paper I have tried to investigate the relationship between individual and environment on psychological terms by analyzing a short story " Laburnum for My Head" by the famous writer and Sahitya Academy award –winner Temsula Ao. I have attempted to explore the impact of environmental stimuli on the activities of the main character of this story Lentina. Laburnum flowers provide an environmental cue, activating her overarching goals and affecting her cognitive processes. She desires to have laburnum bushes in her garden that stimulates her cognitive skills and her activities and responses are the result of her thought processes finally ending up in achieving her desired goal.

Key words: Cognitive Process, Perception, Environmental cue, Goals.

INTRODUCTION

In Literature, Man –Nature relationship has a long ancestry and the vast corpus of literary texts reflect the interplay of man and nature. There are many ways in which this dynamic relationship determine man's thought and activities. New and emerging trends in literary criticism exploring the role of landscape and environment in our thought process is gaining momentum. The sense of place as a marker and maker of identities is crucial in understanding the complex and myriad ways in which human thought process develops. Some attributes and properties of physical environment can affect psychological processes. In other words, psychological process can be directly linked to

environmental stimuli. When an individual receives information from external environment or from perception, it produces psychological responses which results in action. Our goals and personal plans are much affected by the way we acquire and store knowledge of places. Physical environment impacts cognition and action. In fact, individual choices are affected by certain cognitive factors like previous experiences, decision rules distinct goals etc.

The short story *Laburnum for my Head* by Temsula Ao is a simple yet powerful story sketching human condition. The story begins with a description of the cemetery of a sleepy little town. The vast expanse of the old cemetery, dotted with human vanities is adorned by the humble Indian

Laburnum bush. The first time it surprised the visitors but repeated occurrence of this blossom in a place where man attempts to create make believe permanence, it stands out as incongruity. Nature has intruded wherever possible and out staged granite edifices which display human conceit.

The main character in this story, Lentina desires to have Laburnum bush in her garden. She attributes humility to these flowers with their head hanging earthwards. When her attempts to bring this wild beauty into her garden ended in disaster three times she was hopeless but the sight of these flowers on highways and in gardens inspires and activates her thoughts. Her husband and friends consider her intense desire as a kind of unhealthy fetish for laburnum flowers. When her husband died unexpectedly some impulse urged her to join the group of men accompanying her husband on his last journey. While standing at the cemetery amidst the assortment of headstone she ruminates on man's puny attempt to defy death by erecting memorials to bring the dead back to life. Then she makes a crucial decision.

"Lentina decided that she did not want any such attempt at immortality when her time came, and at that thought she experienced an epiphanic sensation: why not have a laburnum tree planted on her grave ,one which would live on over her remains instead of a silly headstone? This way, even her lifelong wish to have such a tree close to her would be fulfilled."(4)Quite excitedly she hurries back home. When we focus attention on a particular aspect of this character's behavior, she has an urge or wish to carry out a simple action and the intrinsic satisfaction she gets is associated with her personal interstate self –regulatory mechanism she adopts is self-efficacy or belief in her capacity to properly channelize all her efforts and different ways and course of action to achieve her desired goal. Now her thinking is oriented towards the ways to accomplish her desire. First of all she thinks of having a confidant and Babu her driver is assigned that task. Then she visits cemetery and after a long survey of the place chooses a secluded spot to be her final resting place. Next she arranges with Babu that the Town Committee gives written commitment on this affair. But she is in a dilemma

whether to reveal her identity by signing the request to be submitted to the Town Committee for plot acquisition or to devise another ploy .This situation forces her to think about her late husband's suggestion to buy inconspicuous land but with future prospects. This as a cue she revisits cemetery and starts thinking about buying a piece of land to achieve her goal. But with the intervention of Fate she is able to buy a piece of land without violating existing norms for such acquisition. As per her wish Babu plants laburnum on the piece of land she has earmarked for herself. After a few years of waiting her long cherished wish gets fulfilled as the laburnum plant produces a sprig bearing a few blossoms. By that time Lentina though fatigued by old age goes out for an occasional ride and she is excited to watch the blossoms. Then she embraces solitude and on the fifth day of this self-imposed isolation, she passes away quietly.

Human behavior which takes place in a context is guided by goals which are activated by certain stimuli or environmental cues. These cues have the power to influence goals and behavior.Siegiwart Lindenberg in an article titled "*How Cues in the Environment Affect Normative Behavior*", identifies, "Visceral cues (i.e. Very attractive or unattractive aspects in an environment) that create affective reactions and increase the salience of one or more basic needs easily strengthen the hedonic goal, thereby making people automatically more impatient and ready to act on impulse. (p 126)

In the story, *Laburnum for my Head* we can see how environmental cue affects the main character's behavior. Here laburnum blossoms are the environmental cue that triggers an affective reaction in the character. It is also noteworthy that this powerful environmental cue creates a pro environmental behavior with adherence to social norms. Goals get activated by the power of cues and affect cognitive factors. Having a laburnum is the high level or overarching goal which overpowers Lentina and influences her cognitive processes. Her behavior is appropriate, conforming to every social norm and she skillfully exploits all resources available to her in achieving her goal. There are three goals viz. Normative goal, Gain goal and

Hedonic goal. Siegwart Lindenberg further remarks, in his article titled *"How Cues in the Environment Affect Normative Behavior"*, that,

"Together these three goals cover the most important aspects of human functioning: need fulfillment (hedonic), acquiring and maintaining the means for need fulfillment (gain) and fitting into the social context (normative)" (p 121). So when we analyse the character Lentina, we can see these three goals framing her functions in a specific situation. 'Laburnum for her head' is her hedonic goal for which she should have gain goal which ought not to weaken her normative goal.

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