

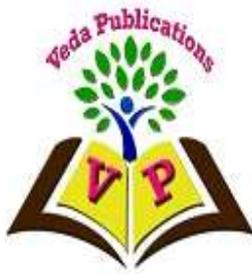


SOCIO CULTURAL IMPACT ON DECODING MESSAGES: FROM LITERATURE TO COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT



Communication barriers and miscommunication is a common phenomenon in a heterogeneous society. Globalization has converged varied culture groups complementing the social environment of communication. Hence the process of communication depends on cultural and social climate. The paper focuses on trajectories of decoding messages pertaining to psychological, social, and cultural background. Encoding, decoding and feedback are the major ingredients of communication. Communication is successful only when the message is decoded properly by the receiver. Communication process becomes complex in multicultural environment when the sender and the receiver from different culture groups happen to communicate with each other. Thus on some occasions cultural differences impede mutual understanding. The paper cites suitable examples to illumine the variants of interpretation of messages leading to complexities and perplexities. The paper also widely discusses how a message is decoded and recoded based on the interpretation of a message. The paper pegs Shakespeare's play *Othello* and the renowned Tamil novelist Rajam Krishnan's novel *Verukku Neer* (Water for the roots) and attempts to analyze the socio cultural impact on the psyche of a person.

Keywords: *Culture, Decoding, Feedback, Message, Communication.*

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INTRODUCTION

Churchill once observed, "The United States and Britain are two great nations divided by a common language." Churchill's quip is an ironic reminder of the challenge of cross-communication that even when two people speak in the same language, cultural differences can impede mutual understanding. From literature to communication wrong interpretation of messages lead to misunderstanding which many a time mars the peace and harmony of the society. The process of communication blends verbal and non verbal ingredients. Messages are decoded and recoded based on the inferences pertaining to psychological and socio cultural environment.

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For instance, the play *Othello* depicts the impact of misunderstanding and miscommunication where the assumptions are made based on the determinants of the environment. These determinants influence the psyche of a person. The environment is conditioned by external components which sometimes consciously manipulate humans. There exists a tacit link between the manipulator and environment which becomes more eloquent than verbal communication. Iago in the play *Othello* sows the seeds of suspicion on Othello against Desdemona and he is able to succeed to a greater extent when Othello kills his fair wife suspecting her chastity. Iago exploits the xenophobic attitude of Desdemona's father towards mixed race.

He thus weaves a vicious web,

IAGO:

Call up her father,
Rouse him. Make after him, poison his delight,
Proclaim him in the streets; incense her kinsmen,
And, though he in a fertile climate dwell,
Plague him with flies. Though that his joy be joy,
Yet throw such changes of vexation on 't
As it may lose some color. (1.1.74-80)

Poison, plague, vexation are the most disparaging terms that may corrupt the psyche of a listener. Both verbal and non verbal components are used to debauch Othello's psyche. Othello, the recipient of Iago's manipulations falls into the trap as

envisaged. Othello asks Iago for *Ocular Proof* and Iago first sows the seeds of suspicion through Brabantio to taint Desdemona's character when Brabantio warns Othello, "She has deceived her father, and may thee" (1.2.289). The seed suspicion on Desdemona further disseminated through ocular proof orchestrated by Iago when he stealthily points out to Othello that Cassio has been wiping his beard with a handkerchief printed with strawberry. Othello replies caustically that it has been his gift given to his wife Desdemona. The web of suspicion has been surreptitiously weaved around Othello to such an extent that he murders his wife thinking that she is unfaithful to him. The inferences he derive complements the situation which is consciously constructed by Iago. The motif of the entire play is pivoted on Othello's inferences on Desdemona. Inferences are one of the major sources of decoding.

INFERENCES

Inferences are steps for reasoning and deriving logical conclusion from premises known to the decoder. Inferences are closely associated to the psychological climate of the receiver. And the psychology of a person is bombarded by various environmental factors through which he/she has travelled. The conclusions derived through inferences may be correct or incorrect. An incorrect conclusion is known as fallacy. The fallacy of judgment of Othello on his wife's character is the motif of the play. Messages are decoded based on the psychology of a person who succumbs easily to circumstantial evidence. A strong mind with trust and integrity cannot be easily thwarted but a character like Othello who had already suffered from humiliation further fueled by Iago to a greater extent that he murders his beautiful wife. Othello's older years, his lack of *gentility*, and his status as foreigner propel him to suspect Desdemona's chastity. Othello is the play that transcends time and place. Even today a suspicious husband is a great threat to his wife. Messages are decoded based on socio cultural environment. Hence, Othello easily falls prey to Iago's malice. The play reverberates with cross cultural tensions. The English being proud of their fair complexion demeans the dark by derogatory terms. The play



depicts the mindset of the English during the Elizabethan age. Though Shakespeare has been criticized for racism, the play does project the positive side of Othello when he has been transformed from an intimidating moor to a respected soldier and nobleman. English society disapproves the wedding of Othello and Desdemona as they perceive their marriage as an act *against all rules of nature*. (act 1.3, line 102). Shakespeare implicitly accentuates the fact that one should not judge a person by their appearance. But consciously fabricated situation may blur the truth enslaving people to negative emotions.

Discrimination pertaining to race, caste and class is a common despicable phenomenon in and around the world. These discriminations create stratification in a society. Messages are encoded, decoded and recoded based on the social structure. Othello is the play that illumines repercussions of racial discrimination. India is a multilingual society where castes play a dominant role. Caste discrimination is one of the social evils tend to marginalize a particular section of a society. Great thinkers, writers and social workers fight for equality. Rajam Krishnan, a renowned writer of Tamil Nadu widely discusses social issues in her novels. *The Hindu*, one of the widely read newspapers in Tamil Nadu observes, "While she never identified herself a feminist, her short stories were mostly women-centric, addressing issues that no one spoke of in her time." Her novels focus on the marginalized section of people and unveil the complexities of life meted out by them owing to caste discrimination.

Verukku Neer is a novel penned by Rajam Krishnan exploring Post Colonial India duly taking cognizance of the western influence in the Indian society. The novelist keenly observes the changes that occur in Indian society after independence. Yamuna, the protagonist of the novel, being imbibed with *Gandhian* principles struggles to adjust in the materialistic society where western ideologies are adhered blindly. She marries Durai, an engineer from tribal community. Though Durai is well educated, he suffers from complex. He once buys imported China silk saree for her but she rejects his gift. He decodes the situation in the canvas of caste discrimination. He

firmly affirms that since Yamuna is from upper caste is impertinent to him. The gulf between them widens. When Durai visits Yamuna's uncle's house, caste discrimination is more evident when he is asked to sit in the *veranda* of the house and served water in a cup kept separately for *others*. These *others* are none but the marginalized section of people. Yamuna apologizes to Durai and tries pacifying him. But Durai's mind gets infected with such social discrimination that prevails in India therefore he fails to understand Yamuna's virtues.

Further interpretation can be derived through non verbal communication. India is placed in high context culture where messages are implicitly conveyed. By offering water in a cup of low quality implicitly confirms that the receiver is not treated equally. These types of cultural politics certainly affect the psyche of the recipient.

Reading between the lines is one of the major aspects of decoding. In verbal communication connotation and denotation are the two requisites that help decoding messages. Denotation gives literal meaning to a word that is explicit and straight forward. But connotation is associated to different layers of meaning. The process of reading between the lines is active in connotative words. Though the encoder and decoder happen to communicate in a common language, many a time communication barriers arises owing to varied cultural and traditional background.

Erin Meyer in her book *The Culture Map* expounds the theory of decoding messages in high and low context cultures. India and china are placed in high context culture where messages are conveyed implicitly. The process of reading between the lines is very important in high context culture. United States, Germany are placed in low context culture. Messages are conveyed explicitly in a simple and straight forward manner. Erin Meyer recalls her interview with Pablo Diaz, a Spanish executive working for a Chinese textile company for fifteen years who shares his experience in China, "In China, the message up front is not necessarily the real message. My Chinese colleagues would drop hints and I wouldn't pick them up. When thinking it over I would realize that I had missed something important" (Meyer, 48-49). Decoding messages in high context culture is a



complex process and one has to be conversant with the cultural behavior of the locals.

CONCLUSION

Stratification in the society prevails all over the world. Though great philosophers and thinkers try to eliminate the hierarchical structure of a society, it is a herculean task as both the encoder and decoder of communication are highly influenced by social and cultural environment. Othello fails to realize the sublimity of Desdemona as his mind is loaded with preconceived notions. He decodes and recodes the messages based on his past experience. Durai, in *Verrukku Neer* (water for the roots) represents the oppressed class fails to understand his wife's good qualities. The parochial attitude of people fuels bias and prejudice in the society resulting in racial and communal violence. Encoding and decoding messages are closely associated with nature and culture of people. Hence one has to be conversant with culture and practice of a society. Literature illumines trajectories of communication variants which prevail in a society. Literature and communication complements each other educating the readers to understand the cultural environment of a contemporary society and its subsequent impact on encoding and decoding messages across culture and tradition of a society. The literary works referred in the paper lucidly reveals the fact that many a time people are enslaved by situations irrespective of caste, culture and creed.

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