



Understanding feminist issues by reading Daniyal Mueenuddin's "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders" in a prose class

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Abstract

The teaching of English literary works in a foreign language context remains a textual-oriented activity. Students were required to comprehend the linguistic and thematic features of the texts. However, more often than not, students were not aware of the real sociocultural, economic, and political conditions from which the text was based because they focused more on understanding the textual contents of the text. In Indonesia where English was still considered as a foreign language, the phenomenon was common. This paper examined the results of a contextual approach given to students when discussing a literary text. The contextual approach was implemented in three stages: pre-reading activities; reading, discussing, and analyzing the text by paying attention to its linguistic features and plot; and connecting the text with real-life situations. The study involved 31 English Literature students at Universitas Negeri Semarang from the third semester. The text discussed was a short story titled "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders" which contained feminist issues. The researchers also used questionnaires and observed the students' activities during the three stages to enrich the data. The results revealed that the approach helped the students to understand feminist issues more comprehensively. They were able to relate the circumstances depicted in the story with the real sociocultural, economic, and political conditions of the society where the story was based. The results also suggested that the method was effective in developing the students' literacy skills.

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INTRODUCTION

The current challenge of teaching students in the English Literature study program in Indonesia was that most of them were not aware of the local, national, and international sociocultural, political, and economic issues. Lecturers would face the problem whenever they initiated discussion on the issues. This might be related to the lower score of reading literacy of Indonesian students measured by OECD in 2018 through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)(OECD, 2019). The required average score was 500 and Indonesia was far below it. The test involved questions that emphasized high-order thinking skills. The results suggested that Indonesian pupils had low skills in analytical problem-solving.

According to Katoningsih (2019), one of the reasons for the low skills in reading literacy was that most students had low interest in reading. For the students of the English Literature study program, reading was a crucial skill and activity. Limited exposure to reading activity would limit them from accessing the knowledge since almost all subjects in the study program required intensive reading. Literary products as the main source of analysis, thus, needed to be used as a tool to ignite the reading skills of the students. A strategy must be applied in the reading process so that the students would feel involved and active in the entire reading process. Contextualizing the story that they read with reality was the method chosen for this study.

Literary products could be a powerful resource for readers who want to experience the world through the perspectives of people with various backgrounds. To be able to see from the perspectives of others, readers need to have background knowledge that would help them explore the interpretive meanings comprehensively. It will make students go beyond the literal words on the pages found in literary texts. Interpretation involves reasoning skills which include the ability to draw conclusions from the text and other knowledge. They can be beliefs; sociocultural, political, and economic systems; or literary theories that can help the analysis process (Sosa et al, 2016).

In order to gain a full comprehension of issues presented in a literary work, readers must have a background or contextual knowledge in order to get the individual and social benefits of the activity (Williams & Williams, 2023). To read Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, readers need to know that women in India are still considered second-class society who constantly receive unfair treatment and oppression. In texts that are based on political events, the need for knowledge scaffolding is essential. To read *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, for instance, readers must have political schemata which makes them understand that the novel is not merely a beast fable. With ample knowledge, readers will be able to draw an interpretation that does not stray too far from the main issue brought by the literary product.

For this study, the researchers chose a short story that contained feminist issues to be introduced to the students. *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (henceforth IOROW) is a story among a collection of short stories with the same title by Daniyal Mueenuddin. The story revolves around the life of Husna who works in the household of K. K. Harouni, an aging wealthy landowner. Born in an old and respectable family who have long lost their heyday, Husna is longing for the same comfortable life she has not experienced. She succeeded in winning K. K. Harouni's attention and won an unshakeable position in the household as a mistress. The situation changed when he died and the family members refused to have her in the house. The story is set in Pakistan during the 1980s when feudal power was facing its waning era. As Indonesia and Pakistan have a high number of Muslim populations, this study tried to see how Indonesian students responded to the lives of Muslim women in Pakistan through literature. The popular cultural interpretation of Islam suggests that patriarchal values are inseparable from Islamic teachings, to a point where it becomes the inherent identity of Islamic identity (Alexander & Welzel, 2010). Part of the study asked the readers to respond whether the interpretation was true or not as found in the short story.

Most of the stories in *IOROW* highlight the mistreatment of Pakistani women by the members of society (Tanvir & Amir, 2017). It is estimated that every year, about 80% of Pakistani women become victims of domestic violence in the form of honor killings, acid attacks, and marital rape (Bhattacharya, 2014). They are prone to violence and oppression because patriarchal values are deeply ingrained in the country's norms and beliefs (Ali et al, 2023). As an author and journalist, Mueenuddin presents women from various stages of life and social stratification with their own struggles through captivating storytelling.

Women in the story, in this case represented by Husna, are stereotyped as weak subjects who rely on the kindness of men to survive. Women are not trusted and given opportunities to be decision-makers in a wider societal context. This is one among various forms of oppression

experienced by Pakistani women. However, readers also witness each female character's survival mechanism through unconventional ways which can be seen as a form of strength in the male-dominated society. It is true that women still experience various kinds of marginalization worldwide. However, by contextualization of the reading process, their experiences must not be seen from a homogenous perspective only and the way we empower them must also consider local hierarchies and gendered subjectivities (Khurshid & Saba, 2017).

Referring to the backgrounds mentioned in the previous part, this study aimed to find out whether or not a contextualized reading strategy would help the students understand the story comprehensively. This aim was a response as well as an endeavor to find a solution to the low reading interest and ability among English Literature students in Indonesia.

Previous studies on Mueenuddin's works have been conducted by several researchers. Tanvir & Amir (2017) have applied a deconstructive approach to one of Mueenuddin's short stories "Saleema". The findings suggested that the main character Saleema was not as weak and oppressed as she was perceived to be. The study has revealed the unreliable binary oppositions that have been tried to be established in the story. The second study by Ali et al (2023) attempted to examine the construction of gender identity in a short story titled "Saleema" using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. It revealed that Pakistani women who live in a patriarchal society frequently encountered mistreatment and restrictions because their roles were defined by men.

Mudure (2021) mentioned in her research that *IOWOW* was significant for contemporary world literature because Mueenuddin used his background origins as a Pakistani-American to talk back to the world which contributed to shaping his personality. He used it to define his position in a world where Islamophobia still remained. Therefore, Islam became an inseparable element in his writings. Hai (2014) also highlighted the contemporariness of Mueenuddin's works by examining how the figure of female domestic servants became central rather than marginal. His strategy was able to shift the readers' ways of seeing the subjects and issues portrayed in his works.

A different approach in examining Mueenuddin's works was probably done by Sadaf (2014) who focused more on Pakistani masculinity caught in between the waning colonial power, the rise of corruption, and confusion about identity issues. Referring to all previous studies, none of them discussed the works as a possible means to enhance students' understanding of feminist issues. Positioning the works in the pedagogical lens would prove that the works could be interpreted in various ways.

To conduct this study, the researchers employed a contextual approach. Contextualization has been defined in numerous ways. As basic skills, it was defined as an instructional approach that creates connections between the teaching of language skills and instruction in a particular subject area (Perin, 2011). One example is when a reading subject was taught with direct reference to current historical or political issues. Many terms have been used to refer to the contextual approach, such as contextual teaching and learning, integrative curriculum, and content-area literacy.

METHODS

Participants

The participants of the study were 31 students from the English Literature Study Program at Universitas Negeri Semarang. The participants were randomly selected from their respective populations. They belonged to the same class. They enrolled in a Prose class and all of them were from the 3rd semester. Before enrolling in the Prose course, they were required to pass the Introduction to Literature course. The subject was compulsory. The participants consisted of 7 male students and 24 female students. Their ages varied from 18 to 21 years old. Their English proficiency also varied, ranging from intermediate to advanced levels.

Research instruments and data collection techniques

The whole activity consisted of three stages. The first stage was pre-reading activities. In this stage, students were divided into several groups and required to discuss the concept of the patriarchal system in general. They needed to compare their initial knowledge regarding the topics to the members of their group and summed it up in a presentation that lasted for about 7 minutes. The students were free to choose any information that they thought essential to be incorporated into the presentation. All the activities were conducted in the first and second weeks. The second stage consisted of reading, discussing, and analyzing. The students were divided into several groups consisting of three or four students. They were asked to read *IOWOW*. The lecturer gave the students

several questions to help them understand the story easier. They discussed and analyzed their findings together with the group members. Each group presented the results of the discussion and the rest of the groups were invited to give responses. The stage mainly discussed and analyzed relevant quotations from the story which also included the discussion of linguistic features. It lasted for two weeks. In the last stage, the students were asked to connect the story with real life. They worked individually. The results of their work were presented in the form of an essay. The two previous stages were used to prepare the students with basic knowledge of the issues they were about to analyze.

The questionnaires were given at the end of the activities to check the responses of the students. They were not required to write down their names to ensure the objectivity of their answers. The questionnaires consisted of five questions that were related to the three stages the students have gone through and had five scales: 1) strongly disagree; 2) disagree; 3) neutral; 4) agree; and 5) strongly agree. Besides examining the results of the questionnaires, the researchers also observed the students' responses and activities during meetings to enrich the discussion and point of view. The researchers would take notes on several responses from the students that contributed to the process of discussion and interpretation.

Data analysis technique

The data obtained from the questionnaires were presented in a table that contained the number of students who responded to the statements with scales. The number would be made into percentage. The data obtained from the observation were compared. Even though the data looked varied, they contained keywords that could represent the students' highlighted concerns when responding to a certain case. The researchers also checked the essays and analyzed how far the two previous stages contributed to formulating the opinions of the students on the feminist issues portrayed in the story and in general. The combination of results among the three stages became the basic findings to determine whether the treatment given to the students was effective or not to increase their understanding level of the feminist issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-reading activities

In the first stage, students were divided into 8 groups. Each group needed to find the definition of patriarchy and how it was inserted into cultural or societal norms and values. They also needed to find examples of patriarchal values or practices in their surroundings or those practiced worldwide. The results were presented and discussed together by the whole class. In the preparation session prior to the presentation, the students did not have any difficulty to formulate the definition of the term. However, the definitions they presented were mostly statements they found on the internet. The time allocation for discussion in each group was varied, but the time was relatively less than 15 minutes. After the discussion, most groups would rather divide the responsibilities among the members of the group. In a group that consisted of 4 students, one student would be in charge of summing up the final definition and the rest were looking for examples of patriarchal values and practices.

When the students were asked about the strategy, most of them answered that it was time-efficient. They could focus on the task they were assigned. If they formulated the final definition together, it would take a longer time because they needed to confirm with each member. Some students also mentioned how they needed to catch up with other tasks from other subjects. Among 8 groups involved in the discussion session, there was only one group that formulated the final definition together. When asked why they chose to discuss the definition first instead of delegating one member to be in charge of it, one member of the group mentioned that he just followed the lecturer's instructions. He also said that it did not waste their time because he felt that he had a chance to present and argue the results of his findings in front of his friends. He thought it made him more confident in speaking English because he saw that his friends were also struggling.

Comparing the results of the definitions formulated by all groups, the group who decided to have a discussion had a longer and more comprehensive definition as the result. Below is the definition of the group:

Patriarchy is a social system and strategy that gives men power to control every aspect of societal life while women are excluded from the decision-making process. It is usually

internalized in cultural and social norms and values in a very careful and subtle way to a certain point where society accepts it naturally without questioning it.

Ideas about the exclusion of women as decision-makers and the subtle internalization of patriarchal values have not been mentioned by the other groups. It proved that longer time allocation for discussion could result in a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The time allocation should be incorporated with an effective strategy of discussion. As the discussion had a further purpose to make the students more aware of the sociocultural, economic, and political situations in their surroundings and worldwide, the discussion results suggested that the method was effective in initiating the curiosity and activeness of the subjects. Klofstad (2015) mentioned that exposure to political discussion during the college years led to a higher level of political participation while still in college and years after that.

In terms of examples of the patriarchal system, most students took circumstances from their daily lives or cases and news that happened in Indonesia. Some of the examples were also worldwide phenomena, such as gender inequality in the workplace and domestic abuse. Even though gender inequality in Indonesia was less than in most Muslim-majority nations, women's economic participation is relatively low in comparison with the country's development (Cameron, 2023). With COVID-19, women have been adversely more affected compared to men (Fisseha et al, 2021). The students might witness closely the phenomena in their surroundings. Relating it to the definition, they could be more analytical in seeing inequality cases and did not simplify them as a matter of choices.

The top three cases the students often mentioned were daughters not permitted by their families to pursue higher education, the gender pay gap, and female migrant workers whose husbands took advantage of their money and cheated. Some of the cases had local characteristics while some could be found worldwide. The examples and explanations suggested their understanding of the term.

Understanding the story

The students were reading, discussing, and analyzing the story in the second stage. At this stage, they were still working in a group. To help the students, the lecturers provided several questions whose answers could help them comprehend the text. These were the questions: 1) what was the setting of time and place of the story; 2) why did Husna flirt with K. K. Harouni; and 3) what happened at the end of the story. After discussing the answers to the questions, they presented their results and compared them with the other groups' results.

All groups had relatively similar answers. What needed to be highlighted during the presentation was that the answers led the students to a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the situations portrayed in the story. Some students, for instance, were wondering why the society allowed the practice of adultery while the society portrayed in the story was predominantly Muslim. When the question was directed to the whole class, a student raised his hand to answer. The student said that even though the society was mostly Muslim, their daily norms and values were highly influenced by non-Islamic traditional norms. Adultery was tolerated because the one who did it was the landlord who had power. The lives of the servants were dependent on the kindness of the powerful patriarch, K. K. Harouni. He then further gave statements taken from the story which could prove his arguments.

Related to question number two, most groups answered that Husna was a greedy person because she used all means to fulfill her dream. She did not care if the way that she chose might hurt or harm others. One student mentioned that by being a mistress of K. K. Harouni, she harmed not only the landlord's entire family who unanimously believed that the landlord's action tainted the family's dignity, but also the trust and respect of the servants. She went by saying,

Even though Mr. Harouni was known (for) having premarital and extramarital relationships with several women, it mostly happened before he separated from his wife and got old. In his current position as an old man, he needed to establish himself as a respectable gentleman and focus on the afterlife instead of having a relationship with a much younger woman.

Interestingly, another student responded that the audience should also place themselves in the position of the landlord who lived far from his family members. He showed the quotations which

mentioned how the daughters rarely visited his father. He was mostly accompanied by his friends who also rarely came. When people were old, they needed company. Husna was there and she needed economic support from the landlord. It was a mutualistic relationship. Therefore, it should not be seen as a mistake.

The response ignited the debate in class. Some students raised their hands and offered their perspectives on seeing the case. The discussion went actively and lively. The activity gave them an image of the complexity of life in the socioeconomic context. Besides provoking curiosity, more meeting time could be spent on higher-order analytic activities rather than listening to the presentations by the lecturers (Trudeau, 2005). Active participation in class could also improve oral communication skills (Dallimore et al, 2008). Without the discussion forum, the students would not be able to practice and sharpen their argumentative speaking skills.

The students generally stated that the story was relatively easy in terms of vocabulary and grammar use. They found difficulties when encountering cultural words like “*begum, kurta, and dupatta*”. As a part of comprehending the story, the students were encouraged by the lecturers to find out the meanings of words they were unfamiliar with. When finishing the second stage, the students were expected to be able to get an understanding at least of the plot and main topics so that it would be easier for them to get the whole context of the story.

Contextualizing the story

After finishing the second stage, the students were asked to write an essay about *IOROW*. The essay should contain their interpretation of the female character Husna and the relationships between women and men in general as portrayed in the story. The lecturers provided several questions that could guide them. These were the questions: 1) describe Husna’s characters; 2) do you think Husna is the victim of the social system, why?; and 3) how is the relationship between men and women portrayed in the background setting where the story is based? After understanding the whole plot of the story and background information on patriarchy, the students were expected to be able to give their interpretation of the feminist issues portrayed in the story.

The students mostly mentioned how Husna was a victim of the social and cultural system in Pakistan. Some students successfully related Husna’s life to poverty which struck her family. Even though her family used to be well respected and rich, their current condition hampered them to be considered in a higher societal system. One student said, “*The social system does not favor people in the lower classes. It makes it difficult for the members of the lower class to choose the path in their life*”. The students understood that Husna’s choice to be the mistress was her final solution to free herself from poverty.

A student mentioned, “*Husna is not attractive physically. In a society where women are seen as second-class citizens, they will be mostly taken advantage of by the more dominant groups*”. The more dominant group here was the men. Husna understood that as a woman, her educated background or skill would not take her anywhere. In a society where men were the decision-makers, women were expected to follow certain rules set by the society. A female student mentioned the decision to make Husna as a mistress was also made by the man. “*It was Husna who tried to lure the boss, but it was still the boss who finally made decisions whether he wanted to be with Husna or not.*” The situation demonstrated how men could dominate women, especially those in vulnerable positions. It suggested how social power dynamics affected relationships between men and women and determined how their relationships were structured in society.

Several students highlighted Pakistan as a patriarchal society with limited education access for women. One student wrote:

The lack of female education negatively impacts employment and the economy. Only a few work in the public sector, most of them work in the domestic sector. Parents in Pakistan often forbid their daughters from pursuing higher education due to the cultural practice of the bride's family providing a dowry to the groom at the time of marriage. When a woman marries a man of lower social status, it can be seen as her fulfilling his needs. Husna's parents exert pressure on her to get married despite her reluctance, showcasing the continued prevalence of matrimony in Pakistan.

The majority of the students in their essays stated that education played an important part in improving the lives of society. Three students gave Malala Yousafzai’s case as an example of how

difficult it was for women to get access to education. Husna as a representative of a working-class woman was educated but she was not capable of maximizing her potential. Tamim (2013) argued that working-class women in Pakistan remained marginalized because they were forced to accept the reinforced sense of low self-worth and ability.

A female student also suspected that the reason why all of the Harouni daughters chose to live far from their father was a representation of the limited freedom these women had. Their father's house was a representation of the old values and norms that were controlling and that they wanted to get rid of. For them, leaving the main house meant embracing their freedom. When Sarwat, one of the daughters, came home and showed her disagreement and resentment toward her father's mistress, she still had no power to stop it. Her father, or men in general, was the decision-maker. For Husna, on the other hand, becoming a part of the house made her closer to her dream. Two opposite conditions experienced by women from different social classes revealed that the lives of women in the country could not be completely free from the shadow of men.

Interestingly, there were around four students in their essays who mentioned that Husna was a brave character. All of these students were female. Even though the norms limited her movement, she was not hesitant to use the last possible means to achieve her dream. One student wrote *"From the religious and social point of view, what Husna did to the Harouni's family was evil. However, she also had dreams that needed to be realized. Everyone must have the right to make her own dreams come true."* Some students were aware that the condition faced by women was not easy at all. They could not completely blame a woman whose dreams were about to be crushed due to restrictions and stigma from society.

Another female student also said that Husna was educated and within an ideal situation, she could get and pursue the better life that she dreamed of. However, society would never give her the opportunities because she was not attractive physically and her family was not well enough to be included in the higher class. Whatever path Husna chose in her life would show that she was a victim of the patriarchal society.

One student further mentioned that K. K. Harouni should not be seen as a character who saved Husna. He was a man who took advantage of the situation. He only saw Husna as a companion who took care of him. He did not really value her even though he showered her with gifts. He used his power to show his dominance so that Husna had a reason to be obedient and follow his sayings. He wrote, *"Husna is shown as being the object of the men's authority and possessiveness in the story, which raises the possibility that women in this society may be treated like property or things."*

The researchers also asked the opinions of the students after they finished doing the three stages through a questionnaire. The questionnaires consisted of five statements that they needed to respond them by choosing one of the answers in the multiple choices. The choices ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The statements presented in the questionnaire were whether or not: 1) *IOROW* is an interesting story; 2) reading *IOROW* makes them learn feminist issues; 3) the patriarchal system in Indonesia and Pakistan are same; 4) their knowledge on feminist issues has improved; and 5) they have empathy towards women.

Table 1. Results of questionnaires

Top number is the count of students selecting the option. Bottom % is percent of the total students selecting the option.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>IOROW</i> is an interesting story	3 10%	1 3%	15 48%	10 32%	2 6%
reading <i>IOROW</i> makes you learn feminist issues	2 6%	2 6%	10 32%	16 52%	1 3%
the patriarchal system in Indonesia and Pakistan are same	18 58%	11 35%	2 6%	0 0%	0 0%

my knowledge on feminist issues has improved	0	0	2	25	4
	0%	0%	6%	80%	13%
I have empathy towards women	0	0	9	18	4
	0%	0%	29%	58%	13%

The results of the questionnaires suggested that the three stages of reading helped them comprehend the sociocultural, political, and economic issues brought by *IOROW*. One student mentioned that before the first stage, he actually did not know how to formulate the definition of patriarchy. He understood the concept but was unable to articulate it in words. Most of them also stated that the story opened their eyes to how to see the condition of women in a patriarchal system. A student mentioned that in several areas in Indonesia, girls were not allowed to pursue higher education. The story reminded her of some conservative practices in Indonesia applied to women.

All of the answers suggested that the activities provided the students with authentic reading experiences (Zimmerer et al., 2018). They were both academically and emotionally linked to the text they were reading. They felt that the reading activities were relevant in reality because the case and the actors truly existed. They felt involved when giving their opinions and suggestions.

When asked about the similarity between the patriarchal system in Indonesia and Pakistan, most of them answered that the systems were not the same. Pakistan applied more harsh treatment and punishment to women. During her research, one of the students mentioned that she found that honor killing and child marriage practices still happened in Pakistan. In Indonesia, the practices would be forbidden by laws. The ability to identify cultural differences and practices between the two countries suggested that the students implemented the transfer of skills and knowledge from different contents and contexts (Voge, 2011).

The majority of students also mentioned that they have learned to build empathy towards women. One male student said that even though the rights and opportunities between men and women in Indonesia were equal, there might be some circumstances that favored men over men. They needed to be critical and eager to question any kind of practice that they thought was suspicious. Sometimes, inequality and oppression were practiced in a very subtle way.

CONCLUSION

The PISA results in 2018 regarding the low reading literacy skills for Indonesian students needed to be considered as an alarm. If there was no real action from the related parties, the situation would get worse. At the higher education level, the low skills could already be observed by the low interest in reading and the inability of students to relate the contents of text with real-life issues. The students of the English Literature study program of Universitas Negeri Semarang were given reading activities consisting of three stages with the contextualization approach. The three stages were proven to be effective in improving the students' understanding of feminist issues brought about by the story entitled "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders". The first stage provided the students with ample basic knowledge of feminist issues. The second stage was conducted to make sure that the students understood the whole story in general. The third stage trained the students to deliver their rational arguments and defend it. The students were able to rationalize their arguments by showing proof from the story and relating it to real sociocultural, political, and economic situations. The treatments lasted longer than the usual reading activity in class. To discuss a short story like *IOROW*, which consisted of more than 20 pages, they needed around five weeks to complete all stages. However, if the activities could be routine, the students would get used to it, and the working time could be shorter.

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