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LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

- BOTH SIDES OF A COIN

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ABSTRACT

Literature is the reflection of society and a form of art. Literature certainly reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the evils of the society with a view to making the society realize its fault and make compensation. It also projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate. The study of English literature allows people to develop new ideas and new way of thinking about the world. In literature, we find stories designed to portray human life and action through some characters who, by their words, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment. It is unfeasible to find a work of literature that eliminates the approaches, morale and values of the society, since no writer has been brought up completely unexposed to the world around him. What writers of literature do is to convey the real-life events in their society into fiction and present it to the society as a mirror with which people can look at themselves and make amends where necessary. It is capable of bringing about different emotions and a general sense of "Spiritual" well-being.

Keywords: Literature, Democratic Principle French Revolution, Reflection, Metaphor

Introduction

The quest to find out a definition for "literature" is a road that is much travelled, though the point of arrival, if ever reached, is rarely satisfactory. Most attempted definitions are broad and indistinct, and they inevitably change over time. In fact, the only thing that is certain about defining literature is that the definition will change. Concepts of what is literature change over time as well. What may be considered normal and not laudable of comment in one time period may be considered literary genius in another. Early reviews of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* in 1847 were less than impressive; however, *Wuthering Heights* is now considered one of the greatest literary achievements of all time. The same can be said for Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851).

A literary man is as much a product of his society as his art is product of his own reaction to life. Even the greatest of artists is sometimes a conscious, sometimes an unconscious exponent of his time-spirit. The time-spirit is the total outcome, the quintessential accretion of all the political, social, religious and scientific changes of a particular age. The historical aspect of literature therefore, minor or unimportant though it may be for aesthetic purpose, cannot be totally ignored. Thus literature reflects his zeitgeist or the Time-Spirit. No writer can run away influence of his age. Literature always expresses the thoughts and sentiments of human mind which are closely connected with and conditioned by the age. The influence of the age on the human

mind is due to the fact that the latter is constantly influenced by the spirit of the age and reacts to it brightly and vigorously.

The indication of the age depends on the quality of the mind in which it is reflected. If a work of literature is to be adjudicated by the quality of this reflection, it is evident that it depends on the quality and nature of the reflecting mind. Literature means something that is written for refreshing and inspiring the mind. It records the thoughts and feelings of great minds. It attracts in two ways—through its matter and through its way. The matter must be such that those who read it are interested in some way. The way must be such as will be pleasing to the reader and adds to his fund of knowledge.

We live in a society. There are relations and interrelation between men who live in the society. We like to hear about our fellow men that live in society, their opinions and feelings, their likes and dislikes. In nature, if we have the power of language to express the feelings, we are well on the way to creating literature. In other words, the subject matter of literature is society in some form or the other.

The poet expresses his feeling and we who read his poetry are interested and feel at one with him and ourselves. After all, society is this link of fellowship between man and man through communication that the poet or writer seeks. If literature expresses social sympathies, naturally it is bound to exercise some positive influence on our mind and attitude. Society reacts to literature in a living way. An inspiring poem creates general influence on society. It rouses our feelings and enthusiasm for welfare. Literature has two roles, an active, engaging role and a passive, reflective role. The active role represents the very action of reading. This role is a significant part of an individual's development. From reading an individual forms ideas and concepts about the world in which they live. These ideas and concepts form together into an ideology of sort. From this ideology stems individual motivation, action, and engagement. The second function is distinguishable from the first in that it is a thing observed, rather than a thing done. The reflective role of literature is to illustrate society the history of ideologies, of thought and of action. It allows the individual to understand how a society functioned and why it functioned that way.

Literature is made out of the wisdom of life. No doubt, the realistic artist brings to a focus the oddities and cruder aspects of life overmuch. But to know life fully, not only the bright side but also the seedy and dark side of life is to be known. Thus, society creates literature. It may be described as the mirror of the society. But the quality and nature of the reflection depends upon the writer's attitude of mind, whether he is progressive in his outlook or reactionary.

Influence of the Writer

It is an admitted fact that if the work of a writer merely reflects the spirit of his times, it cannot be great literature. It is a very useful piece of valuable material for the sociologist and the historian. It is entirely devoid of the virtue of permanence and universality. The literature of the Greeks may not appeal to an Indian or a German mind if its historical factor is taken into consideration. Similarly, Shakespeare may not be regarded a great dramatist, if he simply and purely reflects the Elizabethan period.

The spirit of literature lies in the individual approach of the author, his personality which will dominate over other influences. Undoubtedly, the author is shaped by the spirit of his age, but he has also got the capabilities to mould his period. A great man of letters is the creature as well as creator of the age in which he exists. Thus we talk of the age of Shakespeare, the age of Dryden, the age of Pope, the age of Wordsworth, the age of Bernard Shaw and so on. For example, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, was a great challenge to the age of cynicism, low morals and satirical literature. This mighty book does not reveal the time-spirit of his age. Milton revolted rather than expressed the spirit of his times. Similarly, in spite of all the atmosphere of heroism, noble ideals, and love of song and drama, the Elizabethan age could not produce another Shakespeare.

There is this element of objectivity in our appreciation of the beautiful. Tolstoy, in his famous book *What is Art*, defines art and literature as the communication of emotion. When we tell a story, compose a song or paint a picture with the object of communicating to others an emotion, we have ourselves felt, that is Art, Art leaps to the Olympian height of great art when the emotion is fresh and springs from a fresh and vivid attitude to the world. The beauty of a work of art, according to Tolstoy, should be assessed entirely by reference to the verdict of the greatest number of men. Thus a democratic principle was applied to the field of art criticism because Tolstoy took beauty not be objective and inherent in works of art. Beauty is a quality of

the result produced by works of art on those who are brought into contact with them. It is a mere subjective experience; works of art and literature simply produce a sense of the beautiful in the people who view it. And as Muller pointed out fifteen years ago, Sociologists in the United States have paid little attention to literature and Art. They have focused on the instrumental aspects of social life primarily.

Growth and Progress in Literature

Literature as a whole grows and changes from generation to generation. It is not static but dynamic. It means that each age has its own particular point of interest and its own particular way of thinking and feeling about things. So the literature which it produces is governed by certain prevailing tastes. These tastes last for a time only. The tastes of one age are sure to differ and often are found to differ enormously from those of another. We all know that there was no public to enjoy the same kind of poetry in Pope's day as in Spenser's, or in Scott's day as in Pope's. In Spenser's day, there was boundless enthusiasm for *The Faerie Queene*; in Pope's for the *Essays of Man*; in Scott's for the *Lady of the Lake*.

Thus, for example, one of the principal forces behind the English literature of the Elizabethan era was the immense enthusiasm for the Greek and Latin classics which had come with what we call the Renaissance. Our writers and readers alike were under the powerful spell of Italian literature during the same period, under that of French literature at the end of seventeenth century, under that of German Literature a hundred years later. The Reformation, Puritanism, and The French Revolution, the enormous progress of science during the nineteenth century: it is enough to mention these to show the intimate connection between the story of literature and general history.

Relationship between Literature and Society

We all know that literature mirrors society. What happens in a society is reflected in literary works in one form or another. The literal meaning of literature is the art of written work in different forms, such as, poetry, plays, stories, prose, fiction, etc. It may also consist of texts based on information as well as imagination.

A society is a group of people related to each other through their continuous and uninterrupted relations. It is also a group of likeminded people largely governed by their own norms and values. Human society, it is observed, is characterized by the patterns of relationship between individuals who share cultures, traditions, beliefs and values, etc.

If one looks at the history of society, one will find that the nature of different societies has gone through changes from the Palaeolithic period to the present age of Information Technology. The people's living style, faiths, beliefs, cultures, etc., have never remained uniformly consistent. With the passage of time, owing to changes taking place in environment and with emergence of new technologies, we observe that the societies have not remained stubborn with regards to their norms and values, the reflections of which can be found in different forms of literature.

Kalidas, a great poet ever born in Indian history, is first afraid of the uncertain attitude of the people, but then pleads his own points of views that provide us union of the old and the new. In *Malavikamitam*, his first play, the poet shows his humility and becomes uncertain whether people would accept his play. Therefore, in the beginning of the play, he pleads, —Every old poem is not good because it is old; nor is every new poem to be blamed because it is new; sound critics, after critical examination, choose one or the other, the blockade must have his judgment, guided by the knowledge of his neighbours.

Different societies have used and are still using different languages for the fulfillment of individuals and societies' aspirations. Sometime it is noticed that many charges are labelled against literature as well as society. A literary writing is banned because an opposite section of society finds it mirroring beliefs and norms against that society. The examples of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Taslima Nasrin's *Lazza* provide testimony to such charges.

Inter-Relation of Individual Personality and National Interests

Literature has a national as well as a personal character and interest. Literature can be observed from age to age and its various transformations. It is not only an account of work done by a number of separate writers, but it is also an account of great body of literature which in its totality is to be regarded as the production of the genius of the people. Everything that for good or evil has entered into the making of our

nation's life has also entered into the texture of its literature. Ordinary English history is English nation's biography and its literature is its autobiography. As we survey the history of English literature through all its transformations, we are brought into direct and living contact with the motive forces of the inner life of each successive generation and learn at first-hand how it looks at life and what it thought about it, what were the things in which it was most interested and by which it was most willing to be amused, by what passions it was most deeply stirred, by what standards of conduct and of taste it was governed, and what types of character it deemed most worthy of its admiration. Thus, literature is the revelation of the progressive mind as well as the spirit of the people.

Reflection Theory

Traditionally, the central perspective for sociologists studying literature has been the use of literature as information about society. To a much lesser degree, traditional work has focused on the effect of literature in shaping and creating social action. The former approach, the idea that literature can be "read" as information about social behaviour and values, is generally referred to as reflection theory. Literary texts have been variously described as reflecting the "economics, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, and religion" of the society that produced the texts.

Most people are familiar with an at least implicit reflection perspective from journalistic social commentary. Unfortunately, "reflection" is a metaphor, not a theory. The basic idea behind reflection, that the social context of a cultural work affects the cultural work, is obvious and fundamental to a sociological study of literature. But the metaphor of reflection is misleading. Reflection assumes a simple mimetic theory of literature in which literary works transparently and unproblematically document the social world for the reader. In fact, however, literature is a construct of language; its experience is symbolic and mediating rather than direct. Convincing research arguing for literary evidence of social patterns now requires the careful specification of how and why certain social patterns are incorporated in literature while others are not.

Conclusion

Literature is only one of the many channels in which the energy of an age discharges itself; in its political movements, religious thought, philosophical speculation, art, we have the same energy overflowing into other forms of expression.

The study of English literature, for example, will thus take us out into the broad field of English history, by which we mean the history of English politics and society, manners and customs, culture and learning, and philosophy and religion. However varied the characteristics which make up the sum-total of the life of a period, these, like the qualities which unite in an individual, are not, as Taine puts it merely juxtaposed|| they are interrelated and interdependent.

Our aim must therefore be to correlate the literature of any age to all the other important aspects of the national activity of the: time. Thus it is very essential to know the characteristics of the age in which the writer lives. A writer is not an isolated fact but the product of the age in which he lives and works. His picture of life is pervaded with the influence of his age. Thus literature is simply a mirror of life, a reproduction and obviously a social document.

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