

Literature and Society

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Abstract. The history of literature dates back to the dawn of human civilization. The societies were formed by the human beings with objectives of fulfilling the human needs and aspirations. Setting aside which came first- literature or society- the aim of this paper is to depict the picture of literature in society and vice-versa. Both have remained inseparable from each other, for literature can not sustain without society and likewise the society too, can not be unnoticed in literary pieces in one way or another. That literature is the mirror of the society in which it has been written is an established fact. It mirrors the evils of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. It also reflects the virtues and good values in the society for people to emulate. We can not find a single piece of literature which does not portray the attitudes, morale and values of the society because not a single writer remains completely unexposed to the world around him/her. Literary writers transport the real life events of their society into their works and put before society as a mirror so that people can look at themselves. Thus, literature not only reflects the society but also presents itself as a corrective mirror.

Key words: Literature; French Revolution; reflection; metaphor.

As a literary man/woman is the product of his/her society so is his/her art a product of his/her own experience of life. Even the greatest artists are sometimes a conscious and sometime unconscious exponents of their time-spirit. The time-spirit is the total outcome, quintessential accretion of all the political, religious and scientific changes that take place in a particular age. The historical aspect of literature therefore, whether it may be minor or unimportant for aesthetic purpose, can not totally be ignored. Thus, literature reflects the zeitgeist or the time-spirit.

Not a single literary writer can escape the influence of his/her age. Every man, as told Goethe, is the citizen of his age as well as of his country. Joseph Ernest Renan, the famous French philosopher, historian and writer, remarked that One belongs to one's century and race even when one reacts to one's century and race. Thus, literature always expresses the thoughts and sentiments of human mind which are closely connected with and conditioned by the age. The human mind is constantly influenced by the spirit of the age and reacts to it vividly and vigorously.

The reflection of the age in literature depends on the quality of the mind behind it. If a work of literature is to be evaluated on the standard of this reflection it is apparent that it depends on the quality and nature of the reflecting mind. Literature means something that is written for refreshing and inspiring the mind. Feelings and

thoughts of great minds are recorded by literature. Literature attracts in two way - through its matter and through its manner. The matter must be such that those who go through it get interested in some way or the other. And the manner must be such as will be pleasing to us and adds to our fund of knowledge.

We live in a society. This is a fact that there are relations and interrelations between human beings who live in the society. And we like to know the thoughts and feelings, likes and dislikes of our fellow beings who live in the society. Naturally, if we have the power of language to express the feelings, we are well on the way to creating literature. Thus, we can say that society is the subject matter of literature in some way or the other. A poet expresses his/her feelings and we who read his/her poetry get interested and feel ourselves at tune with the poet. After all, society is this bond of fellowship between man and man through the communication that a poet or writer seeks. If literature represents social sympathies, it, naturally, is bound to exercise some positive influences on our mind and attitude. Society reacts to literature in a living way.

P.B. Shelley, one of the younger generation romantic poets, has called poets an unacknowledged legislators of mankind. We know that the function of a legislator is to lay down a law, a settled course of action that society may follow. Poetry and literature, generally, do this in a quiet and unobtrusive manner. Novels are said to have changed the directions of the human mind and set in motion movements that have changed our ways of life. Thus, it may be said that the influence of literature on society is felt directly or indirectly. Miss Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was directly responsible for a movement against slavery in literature and society in USA of those times. The novels of Charles Dickens had an indirect effect in creating in society a feeling for regulating, removing social wrongs calling for necessary reforms. Sarat Chandra's novels have gone a long way in breaking conservatism as regards women in our society. It is, thus, obvious that if we are interested in literature its influence is bound to move us amply.

Literature is made out of the lore of life. No doubt the realistic artists focus on the oddities and crude aspects of life overmuch. But to know life fully it is quite necessary to know not only the bright side but also the seamy and dark side of life. In this way society creates literature. But it is also to be noted, "the quality and nature of literature depends upon the writer's attitude of mind, whether he is progressive in his outlook or reactionary. (Albrecht, 425)

Sometimes we notice that many charges are labeled against literature as well as society. A literary writing is banned or attempted to be banned because an opposite section of society finds it reflecting beliefs and norms against that society. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* and M F Hossain's paintings are some of the glaring examples to provide testimony to such charges.

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Literature is sometimes also marginalized or vehemently opposed because of another form of language it is written by and which is different from what people have been using. In Europe, the literature written in native languages had received marginalized position in comparison to Greek and Latin until the native languages were widely used by the writers and accepted by the people after the Renaissance. Bacon's essays, first written in Latin and then rewritten in English, exemplify the fact.

Another question which strikes our mind most is - does literature mirror only the events taking place in a society ? Do the events taking place in one's personal life not become a catalytic agent in literary creations? In India, Adi Kavi Valmiki composed his first poetry only when he saw something happening which ought not to happen. Once while taking bath and performing his religious rituals on the bank of river Tamsa, he saw a female Krounch lamenting at the killing of her male partner. His heart was so much deeply overwhelmed with grief that he could not bear it and spontaneously uttered a few lines in the form of poetry :

Oh! Ill-fated Hunter, by which reason you have
killed the male bird of the couple when it is in his
lustful passion and thereby you will get an
everlasting reputation for ages to come. (Valmiki II)

Here, poetry, one of the forms of literature, comes out naturally and without any deliberation immediately after the event takes place. The poetry of Wordsworth is based on memory. He thinks of the past events and comes under the impression of the past with a high degree of emotions and feelings. For him, as he himself says in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility"(Internet). In all such and many other cases literary creativity emerges from the acts and events in one's personal life and nature.

However, the poet sometimes becomes so much imaginative that he/she thinks of the events to be followed by his/her literary compositions and in some cases it happens true. This is only because of high level of imaginative excellence of a writer that whatever he/she thinks, though possibly unreal, is reflected in his/her creations. One is free to label charges against him/her of writing his/her works largely based on his/her fancy and personal hallucination. His/her observations are more psychic than real. But as an individual he/she is also a part of society he/she lives in.

This is now a widely acknowledged and established fact that if the creation of a writer merely mirrors his times, it can not be considered as great literature. It may be a very useful piece of valuable material for sociologists and historians. But it is entirely devoid of the virtue of permanence and universality. Greek literature

may not appeal to an Indian or a German mind, only its historical factor is taken into account. Similarly, Shakespeare may not be regarded a great dramatist if he simply and purely reflects only the Elizabethan period.

The essence of literature lies in the individual approach of the writer, his persona which will dominate over other influences. No doubt, we shape the writers by the spirit of their age but they also keep the qualities to mould their period. Great men of letters are the creatures as well as creators of an age in which they exist. That is why we talk the age of Chaucer, the age of Shakespeare, the age of Milton, the age of Dryden, the age of Pope, the age of Wordsworth, the age of G.B. 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 great book does not only reflect the time-spirit of the age but it is a revolt rather than only an expression of the spirit of Milton's times. Similarly, in spite of all the atmosphere of heroism, noble ideals, love songs and dramas, the Elizabethan period could not produce another Shakespeare.

The function of literature is different from that of history. Literature is the revelation of beauty. Beauty is the expression of emotion and all such expressions without any exceptions are beautiful. Santayana defines beauty as 'value-positive, intrinsic and objectified'. We may explain this in less technical language as pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing. Aesthetic pleasure is different from pleasure in general on accounts of its objectification. A psychological aesthetician, M. Porena, defines the 'beautiful' as "that which pleases the mind as an objective value, i.e. without any apparent reference to ourselves as the source of feeling" (Porena 3)

The French Revolution brought to Europe the hope of political freedom and social reconstruction. Though this hope was dashed with Napoleon's emergence at the centre stage of power, its place was taken by the enthusiasm of the struggle of the countries against old regimes. Wordsworth was deeply saturated with the dogmas of the French Revolution. "The Prelude" analyses and communicates Wordsworth's political inclinations. His republican sympathies were stirred by the French Revolution which were strengthened by his visit to France.

Wordsworth and Coleridge were very close friends. Like Wordsworth, Coleridge too went through a phase of revolutionary ardour. All his political characteristics were deeply affected by his age. The French Revolution disillusioned him and he diverted his attention to spiritual idealism which provided him mental satisfaction. The daring of personal inspiration and a fresh-created language came to him at the same time and this is the hour when his social zeal, his hopes for mankind, freed from the hope of any immediate realization, are transformed into a spiritual idealism. Though Byron did not reflect the French Revolution in his work

yet he imbibed the revolutionary aspirations which were cherished by Wordsworth and Coleridge and then later on rejected by them due to the violence of the Reign of Terror. Byron excelled most other poets of England in his being one of the supreme poets of revolution and liberty. Shelley also became the most melodious singer of the Revolution and the poet of revolutionary idealism. He probed into the wings of Godwinian philosophy. He was essentially the poet of the future. His passionate love of liberty, his loathing for intolerance, his impatience of control for self and others, his vivid logical sincerity combined to make him the Quixotic champion of extreme options.

Literature, as a whole, develops and changes from generation to generation. It is dynamic, not static. It clearly suggests that each age has its own particular point of interest and its own particular way of thinking and feeling about things. Therefore, the literature it produces is governed by certain prevailing tastes. But these tastes are not everlasting. The tastes of one age are “sure to differ and are often found to differ from those of another”(Shah 25-32). We all know that there was no public to enjoy the same kind of poetry in Pope’s days as in Spenser’s, or in Swift’s days as in Wordsworth’s. In Spenser’s days there was unlimited enthusiasm for “The Faerie Queene”, in Pope’s for “Essays on Man”, in Scott’s for the “Lady of the Lake”.

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

If one looks at the history of society, one will find that the nature of different societies has gone through 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, “the scientists have not remained stubborn with their norms and values, the reflections of which can be found in different forms of literature”. (Legouis 49)

Interest in the relationship between literature and society is hardly a new phenomenon. We still read and refer to the ancient Greeks in this regard. In *The Republic*, for example, Plato presages both Mme. De Stael’s treatise of 1800 which was the first to discuss cross-national differences in literature, and later notions of literary reflection with his idea of imitation. What is new, however, is the relative

legitimacy of the study of literature within the discipline of Sociology. This is due both to the increasing interest in culture in Sociology after years of marginalization and to the increasing influence of cultural studies on Sociology throughout the academy.

A broader interest in and acceptance of cultural Sociology has meant that the types of research questions and methods common to sociological studies of literature are now more widely accepted within the field. Sociology has extended its methodological boundaries in response to both attacks on the dominance of positivism and the rising power of alternative stances suggested by post modernism. At the same time, changes in goals and sometimes the methods of studying literature sociologically have moved the area closer to what is still the mainstream of the discipline. Thus, the sociology of literature has benefitted from a twofold movement in which (1) Sociology as a discipline has become more interested in and accepting of research questions pertaining to meaning and employing qualitative methods; and (2) the sociology of literature has evolved in the direction of more mainstream sociological areas through the merging of quantitative with qualitative methods and of empirical hermeneutic research questions.

“The Rape of the Lock”, an 18th century mock-heroic poem, shows the greater bonding between Literature and Society. Here Pope shows himself emphatically as the spokesman of his age. This poem pictures the artificial tone of the age and the frivolous aspect of femininity:

Then flash'd the living lightning from her eyes,
And screams of horror rend th' affrighted skies.
Not louder shrieks to pitying Heaven are cast,
When husbands or when lap-dogs breathe their last...

(Pope III. 155-158)

We, here, see the elegance and emptiness, the meanness and the vanity, the jealousies, treacheries and intrigues of the social life of the 18th century aristocracy in its real form. The poem shows us how we become acquainted with the idleness, late-rising, and fondness for domestic pets of aristocratic ladies of the time. It also brings out the coquetry, the art, the artifice, and the “varying vanities” of the ladies of the time.

Literature, as we know, has a national as well as a personal character and interest. It can be observed from era to era and its various transformations. It does not provide only an account of work done by a number of separate authors but also an account of great body of literature which in its totality is to be regarded as the production of the genius of people. Everything that is 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 contact of 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 issues in which it was more 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. Considering the aforesaid views we can say that literature is the revelation of the progressive mind as well as the spirit of the people.

As recently as 1993 Wendy Griswold maintained that the sociology of literature was a "non-field" and "like an amoeba... lack(ing) firm structure". Certainly, the sociology of literature has been a marginal area in the discipline of Sociology. As such, it has generally failed to attract the kind of career-long commitments common to more cultural areas of the discipline. Many scholars writing on the sociology of literature see the area as a sideline and produce only a singlebook or article on the subject. This has exhibited the lack of structure in the development of the field. Even so, it is surprising just how much sociological research has been done on literature and on literature's relationship to social patterns and processes.

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. For instance, when Time magazine put the star of the television show Ally Macbell in its cover asking "Is Feminism Dead?" (1988), it assumed that a television show could be read as information on Americans' values and understanding of feminism.

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. Literary realism in particular

“effaces its own status as a sign” (Eagleton 149). Literature draws on the social world but it does so selectively, magnifying some aspects of reality, misspecifying others, and ignoring most. The reflection metaphor assumes a single and stable meaning for literary texts. Anyone who has ever argued about what a book “really” meant knows what researchers have worked hard to demonstrate – textual meaning is contingent, created by active readers with their own expectations and life experiences that act in concert with inherent textual features to produce variable meanings. (Jauss 45)

Despite repeated demonstrations of reflection’s myriad failings, idea of literature as a mirror of society still seems a fundamental way of thinking about why sociologists – and indeed many other people as well – are interested in literature. A relatively crude reflection approach remains common for teaching sociology department courses on literature, and also in certain types of journal articles whose main interest is not the sociology of literature, but the illumination of some sociological theory or observation through literary evidence. Convincing research, arguing for literary evidence for social patterns, now requires the careful specification of how and why certain social patterns are incorporated in literature while others are not.

The background behind the 2005 collection of essays published by the Italian Longo Edition is the questioning of what directions society, culture, and finally literature are taking in the third millennium. And the questions have such a broad scope that the editors Mario Buccheri, Elio Costa, and Donald Holoch decided to approach them from different angles, trying to account for different points of view and literatures, as well as for the social and economic backdrops. In fact, what comes out of their collection of essays is a general inter-connection among different fields and a cross-fertilization of disciplines which, all together, could help us search for clarifications to our initial queries.

Now to conclude, we may say that literature is only one of the many channels in which the energy of an age discharges itself; in its political movements, religious thoughts, philosophical speculations, art, and we have the same energy flowing into other forms of expressions.

The study of English Literature, for instance, will thus take us out into the wide 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 diverse the characteristics which make up the sum-total of the life of an epoch, these characteristics, like the qualities which combine in an individual, are not, as Taine puts it, merely juxtaposed but they are also inter-related and interdependent.

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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/she lives and works. His /her picture of life is pervaded with the influence of the age. Thus, literature is simply a mirror of life, a reproduction and obviously a social document.

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