

A CRITIQUE ON THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERATURE AND SOCIETY; SOME EXCLUSIVE OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract

Literature and society have a close mutual kinship since the beginning. What occurs in society is replicated in literature and what is written in literature sometimes shows its shades of effect in the human society. A literary piece always takes up its ingredients from the social surrounding in which it is produced. Literature is produced on the basis of what has happened or what is happening in human society. So and also it can also focus on how it should happen in human society. Even literature affects society also. The reader sometimes takes literature as real and not fictitious. A reader tries to follow the great heroes and their virtues in the real life. The words and acts of even fictitious characters are taken real. That way it may either be useful, even sometimes harmful to human society. In the midst of all, one thing catches one's attention that both literature and society have individual roles and responsibility for their reciprocal progress; even it is a sole accountability of the writers to be genuine and authentic and honest in their literary creations so that the adverse impressions of literature on human society can be avoided.

The present paper is a gentle exertion to present an authentic critique on the reciprocal kinship between literature and society with the support of some of exclusive observations.

Key Words: *Reciprocal, Relationship, Literature, Society*

Introduction:

Society is comprised of human beings. Literature is composed by human beings. 'Human' is at the center of both society and literature. Both literature and society are inter-related. Both have mutual relationship like cause and effect. What occurs in society is echoed in literature. Society is a constant source of content for literature. A literary piece always takes up its ingredients from the social surrounding in which it is produced. Literature has the power and the responsibility to express the realities of contemporary society. Social realities that include good and evil are reflected in literature. One of the chief functions of literature is to promote the good qualities of society and to discourage the evils of it. Virtues are rewarded and vices

are punished in literature as Aristotle defines what he calls *Poetic Justice*. Even literature affects society also. An inexperienced reader sometimes takes literature as real and not fictitious. A reader tries to follow the great heroes and their virtues in real life. Through reading, he comes to know the difference between the good and the evil in life. *Poetic Justice* affects deeply in the mind and heart of a reader so it can be understood that the society is shaped also according to the imaginary ideals of literature being read. Finally, literature and society are not independent rather both are interdependent and both have a kind of close reciprocal kinship. Both literature and society have individual roles and responsibility for their mutual progress.

Society Affects Literature:

Literature is a medium of expression for the human experiences, sentiments, emotions and imagination. Pleasures, pangs and predicaments of human life are expressed in literature. Along with the social realities, the mental and emotional realities of human mind and heart, which are experienced in the social environment, are given full expression in a piece of literature. So the relation between literature and society becomes very complex and multifaceted. Literature is not a mere expression of social realities; rather it is something more than that. Though literature reflects society, it sometimes does not reflect what it actually is. Along with how it is, it also reflects how it should be or how it can be. So, literature is not always a social history rather it is a social utopia. So it can be understood that literature represents society but does not fully reflect it. It showcases something about society and not everything about society. The author lives in society. He is highly influenced by what he witnesses or experiences in society. When he creates a piece of literature, he may add to literary creation, his own experiences and impressions of life. Such experiences and expressions do not necessarily reflect the contemporary society in which he lives. It is a well observed fact that world is how one sees it. As an individual, one can have certain preconceptions and biases towards the society one lives in. Such experiences may become catalysts for the creation of literature. Moreover, one's family background, educational and intellectual background and the political, religious, economical background of the society, can affect his creation of literature. So and also one's bend towards a political, religious and economical philosophy prevalent in his/her time can lay considerable impressions on one's literary creation. So the individualistic impressions can play a critical role for the production of literature. As for illustration, Jonathan Swift says, "I heartily hate and detest an animal called man". Now under such personal impressions and experiences of life, how can, his political and social satires be evaluated as a reflection or representation of contemporary English society of his time? Here, the concept that literature mirrors society is proved half true. Literature may reflect society partly and not fully. The contemporary social situations can stimulate the feelings and sentiments of an author to write, but a piece of literature, as a final output, is always a unique one, which does not necessary become a mere a copy of any

contemporary situation. Geoffrey Chaucer's work *The Canterbury Tales*, helps us to know the 14th century English society with its social, political and religious conditions, condition of women, trade and commerce, about the lower class community, with their manners and much more, but one should not forget that it is a piece of literature. The society in *Canterbury Tales* is not necessarily a complete replica of the actual society of the time. Chaucer would have written the work utilizing his personal observations and experiences of life. This can be true with Milton's *Paradise Lost* also. The view and opinions presented in the epic can be influenced by his being promoter of the political faction called The Whigs. Finally, the contemporary society can be a base or a canvas for the creation of a piece of literature but society cannot necessarily be as it is in literature and literature cannot necessarily be as the contemporary society is in which it is produced.

William Hudson in his *An Outline History of English Literature* (1961) quotes Rene Wellek and Austin Warren for their *Theory of Literature* (1949) on the relation between literature and society as;

The relation between literature and society is usually discussed by starting with the phrase, derived from De Bonald, that 'literature is an expression of society. But what does this axiom mean? If it assumes that literature at any given time, mirrors the current social situation 'correctly' it is false; It is commonplace, trite, and vogue if it means only that literature depicts some aspects of social reality. To say that literature mirrors or expresses life is even more ambiguous. A writer inevitably expresses his experiences and total conception of life; but would be manifestly untrue to say that an author should express the life of his own time fully, that he should be 'representative' of his age and society. Besides, of course, the terms 'fully' and 'representative' require much interpretation: in most social criticism they seem to mean that an author should be aware of specific social situations, e.g. of the plight of the proletariat, or even that he should share a specific attitude and ideology of the critic.

A sociological study of literature can bring to the surface, some of the realistic elements of the contemporary society. Such an investigation may inform something about the society of the time in which the author lived but it would not be fair enough to take it as a real picture of society. It can be understood as a realistic picture of society. The two different terms *real* and *realistic* have to be interpreted like the other two words *history* and *historical*. *Real* means *how it is actually* whereas *realistic* means *alike, or real like but not necessarily real* as *history* means *how it was actually in the past*, whereas *historical* means *based on history not necessarily history itself*. A piece of literature is a work of art and it should be read and understood as a work of art and not more than that. After all, it is a creation of the creator's

mind. One can collect some of the realistic outlines of the time, while reading even *Mahabharata*, but the entire *Mahabharata* cannot be considered as a history sequence of the ancient Indian society of the time. The imaginations and exaggerations make it very grand to make it the world's biggest epic poetry. It reflects certain glimpses of the time but it cannot be taken as a history document. Same can be the case with *Ramayana* or any other epic poetry or a book of the World Literature. The objective of literary creation can be different from time to time and person to person and situation to situation. It seems that Shakespeare wrote most of his plays to be performed on the stage. The statement would not be overruled if one considers Shakespeare as a professional play writer. What he created was a part of his profession. He might not have the intention in his mind to make his dramas master pieces to the world literature. He might not have a sense in his mind that his creations would be studied in most of the universities of the world in coming centuries. And he might not have created them with that intention. His creation might have been the demand of the time. His writing would be highly influenced by the taste and demand of the audience from Royal Box to Groundlings. He wrote most of the plays based on the historical events. Resources reflect that he was very much near and dear to the royal family. So the literature produced by him depicts the upper class or aristocratic class of the Elizabethan society. On the contrary, his contemporary Ben Jonson mostly touched the common people of the society. His plays like *Everyman in his Humour*, *Everyman out of his Humour*, *Volpone* or *The Fox*, *The Silent Woman* and *The Alchemist* are best examples of it. He has depicted the common people of the Elizabethan middle class in his plays. That way, one can understand that a literary creation is highly influenced by the individualistic impressions of the contemporary situations of the times.

Thus, while understanding the relation between literature and society, it can never be underestimated that a creator of literary piece creates an assumed picture of society with his observations, experiences and imagination. Some kind of outline social realism can be extracted out from the deeper study of a piece of literature but it should not be considered as a mere replica of the social set-up of the time.

Literature Affects Society:

As society affects literature so does literature to society. The effects can be constructive or damaging also. The life picture which is created in literature is not always real. It may not be what it is, but it may also be what it should be. It can be ideal and not real. A writer does not sometimes agree to what is happening in society, so he criticizes, satirizes or parodies it in a literary work of art. A reader reads it and shapes his understanding about what is good and what is bad in life. He can shape his thinking that the social set up which is satirized in a literary work is not to be practiced or promoted in life. The virtues are rewarded and vices are punished in literature. So poetic justice shapes a kind of understanding of a reader, what to do and not to do in life. Reading *Othello*, one should understand that jealousy or faithlessness

can be one of the chief causes for the devastation of one's conjugal life. Though the words and actions of Iago of *Othello*, Satan of *Paradise Lost* or Faustus of *Doctor Faustus* may be tempting or appealing, even one must scare to practice it in real life and that can be the real message of said pieces of literature. One should understand the significance of optimism in life reading *The Old man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemmingway. The aristocratic dogmas satirized in *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope and in *Way of the World* by William Congreve are not to be practiced in society. Here, the ultimate function of literature *to instruct and to entertain* in the words of R. J. Rees, is justified. Literature has a power and responsibility for the improvement of some of the contemporary unhealthy situations prevalent in society.

Some detrimental effects of literature are also possible in society. It depends on the reader's perspectives. What he takes and what he omits is of much significance. Reading literature, one can learn how to make love and also can learn how to seduce or deceive. Reading literature, one can understand the value of life and also learn some anti-social crimes like robbery, rapes and suicide. In his *An Outline History of English Literature (1961)*, Hudson's quoting of Welleck and Warren rightly confirms the reciprocal relationship between literature and society as:

The writer is not only influenced by society; he influences it. Art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it. People may model their lives upon the patterns of fictional heroes and heroines. They have made love, committed crimes and suicide according to the book, be it Goethe's *Sorrow of Weather* or Dumas's *Musketeers*...we can hypothesize-plausibly, no doubt, that the young are more directly and powerfully influenced by their reading than the old, that inexperienced readers take literature more naively as transcript rather than interpretation of life, that those whose books are few take them in more utter seriousness than do wide and professional readers (102).

It has been observed that some people present some of the acts, incidents and quotes of a protagonist or anti-protagonists in support to prove what they did, was right or earlier practiced by such characters. One cannot steal the clothes of bathing women in a river or a pond by repeating an act of innocence by a child Krishna of *Mahabharata*, it may consider as an act with intention if not taken it easily by similar bathing women. Of course a reader of *Mahabharata* can follow Lord Krishna furnishing clothes to Draupadi if such a hateful situation occurs to a woman around him. What Iago did to that innocent couple was absolutely wrong however impressive he speaks in support of it. Discussing about the contemporary Indian English popular fiction writer Chetan Bhagat, one can observe that he, in all of his fictions, describes a sense arousing scenes that provoke the emotions and sentiments of an average minded reader especially the sexual intercourses and taking Vodka frequently, smoking cigarettes in hostel rooms etc. An average or an inexperienced reader

would take it for granted that such is or should be the way of life. S/he may find these as the easy ways to escape from the prevailing stress and pressures in life. Here, the writer cannot have any ill-intention of spreading nuisance in society to take it as a way of life. Rather the intention can be ironical, satirical or parody to what is going on in society. But it is up to the reader's perspectives, how it is taken.

Reading a piece of literature should be considered as an absolute kind of enjoyment. It may instruct a reader with certain good manners of living life and that should be considered as an additional value. At present, T.V serials and movies have taken place of reading of literature. Many of the fictions and drama creations are adapted for making movies. Many a times, it is observed that the fictitious characters and the incidents depicted in such creations are taken as real, and the viewers try to copy them in real life. That way, they invited certain unwanted issues or problems in life. Its good if a piece of literature teaches certain values for living life but mere blind following of the same or misunderstood or misinterpreted notions from a literary piece may prove fatal both for the reader and the society as well.

Summing up:

To sum up, literature and society have a sort of reciprocal relationship. Both have considerable influence on each other. Even one should not forget that literature is not a history of society and society is not necessarily like how it is depicted in literature. A good literary piece has power and possibility to impress the human life for centuries to come. Here comes the universality of appeal. The religious books like *The Gita*, *The Bible*, *The Quran*, and the ancient books like *The Vedas* and *Upanishads*, and many other books of the World Literature have a relevance in the contemporary human society. Such books help people to learn how to live life. Such books are like at-hand manuals for living life. They shape the human society for centuries together. Along with that, many of such books still help us to know an estimated picture of the people with their customs, ethics, behavior patterns, their traditions and their ways of life even after centuries together, but a reader should not forget that it's simply a piece of literature. In the midst of all, one thing catches one's attention that both literature and society have individual roles and responsibility for their reciprocal progress; however a sole accountability should go to the writers to be genuine and authentic in their literary outcomes so that the adverse influences of literature on society may be possibly averted. Let's finally sum up the discussion slight differently interpreting a very famous quote by Sir Francis Bacon. He says, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and few to be chewed and digested."

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