
The Impact of Literature

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Abstract

Literature is an artistic expression of “the best that is known and thought in the world”. It may be defined as literature is the record of man’s ideals and realities, his aspirations and inspirations, his success and failure, his needs and passions, his impulse and duty, his experience and reflections. Literature deals chiefly with the primary passions and emotion -love and hate, joy and grief, fear and trust, which are an inherent part of human existence and essential component of human nature. Literature is the reaction of the soul to life and nature. It owes its origin to deep emotions and feelings of human personality. The author is a member of human society and has his being in the midst of people who have respect for values in life. Literature is for society. Its values are also for society. An author while gratifying his aesthetic sense has to keep in view the values of life. Literature cannot be divorced from morality. Literature and values are inseparable and this paper is an attempt to present that.

Key Words: Literature, value, emotions, feelings, Fundamental, significance, vision, observation.

Literature emerges directly from life. It satisfies life’s fundamental carvings for Truth, Goodness and Beauty. A scientist wants to find out the truth, a preacher devotes his life to discover and disseminate, an artist curves for beauty but a litterateur’s effort is to combine all the three offices. It is literature that provides food for the intellectual, emotional, imaginative and aesthetic of man’s life and acquires a deep and lasting human significance. What George Eliot says about art is more pertinent to define literature, “it is the nearest thing to life; it is the mode of simplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.” Literature provides us a platform to establish contact with the mighty and sublime minds that have broadened the limits of human experience with their fresh vision and keen power of observation.

Literature records verbal expressions in books- books which are the chosen depositaries of fine human thoughts, the subtle opinions, the lofty aspirations and mighty intellects; like wondrous mirrors that have caught and fixed the lively and bright images of those noble souls that have left this mortal world; like magic lyres whose masters bequeathed them to the world, and which yet, of themselves, ring with forgotten music, while the hands that touched their chords have crumbled into dust. Literary books are like the garnerers in which are stored the knowledge brought by the toil and study – the gorgeous dreams of the poet, the maxims of the philosopher, the skilful delineations of the observer, the histories of mighty deeds, the wonders of distant lands, the records of precious facts- the messages which the wise and the good sent to the world, laden with treasures for every mental want, and precepts for every duty.

“A great book” says Hudson “is born of the brain and heart of the author. He has put himself into the pages, they partake of life, and instinct with his individuality.” Milton says, “A great book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured on purpose to life beyond life.”

Now the question arises whether every book is the life-blood of a master spirit and if every book is literature. Obviously the answer is in negative. Definitely every book cannot reach to the serene heights of literature. Millions of books are published every year but a few are treasured in the history of literature. W.J. Long has compared literature to a river in flood, which gradually purifies itself in two ways- the mud settles down to the bottom and the scum rises to the top. There are at least two qualities which can be labelled as the tests of literature – one is universality of interest and another is artistic style. These two qualities of literature distinguish it from other written works of man.

For all practical purposes it may be said that literature is composed of all those books only, which, in the first place, provide aesthetic pleasure to the vast majority of men, and in the second place, deals with general human interest. The piece of literature is different from a specialised treatise of Astrology, Politics, Economics or Philosophy etc. in as much as it appeals not to a particular class of readers but to men and women as men and women. The object of the

treatise is only to impart knowledge; one ideal end of a piece of literature is to impart pleasure and satisfaction.

De Quincey has beautifully created the distinction in dividing literature into two broad forms. “There is, first, the literature of knowledge; and second, the literature of power. The function of first is –to teach; and the function of second is –to move: the first is a rudder; the second, an oar or a sail. The first speaks to mere discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always through affection of pleasure and sympathy.”

What does one learn from *Paradise Lost*? The answer may be nothing at all. What does one learn from a cookery-book? The answer may be – something new- something that one did not know before. But can the cookery book be equated with that divine poem? What we owe to Milton is not knowledge but power. His divine poem does not teach us anything but it exercises a profound influence upon our feeling and emotions.

“All steps of knowledge,” says De Quincey “from first to last, carry you further on the same plane, but could never raise you one foot above your ancient level of earth: whereas the very first step in power is a flight-is an ascending movement into another element where earth is forgotten.”

Hudson says, “We care for literature on account of its deep and lasting significance. A great book grows directly out of life; in reading it, we are brought in large, close and fresh relations with life, and that fact lays final explanation of its power. Literature is that vital records of what men have seen in their life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about these aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interests for all of us. It is thus fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language.”

It is literature that prepares us to suffer as well as endure ‘life’s little ironies’. It helps to feel the vehement anguished cry of a Lear tottering on the verge of madness, or the agony of a Sita whose whole life is a long saga of struggle and suffering. Literature prepares us to face the odds of life cheerfully. It widens our experience of life by revealing those aspects of life which

commonly remain hidden from our view. We see a small fraction of life which exists around us and understand even that part of life imperfectly because our vision is limited and powers are small. In literature we see and understand life more fully. “Literature,” says Hudson, “makes us partakers in a life larger, richer, and more varied than we ourselves can ever know of our own individual knowledge: and it does this, not only because it opens up new fields of experiences and new lines of thoughts and speculations, but also, and even more notable because it carries us beyond the pinched and meagre humanity of our everyday round of existence into contact with those fresh, strong and magnetic personalities who have embodied themselves in the world’s greatest books.”

Actually it is literature that makes a subtle difference between intelligence and wisdom. We generally confused with these two seeming similar words – wisdom and intelligence. But there is a difference. Intelligence is about skill technique and know-how, but the wisdom is connected with philosophy, ethics and spiritual cultivation. We can say that intelligence concentrates on methodology but wisdom on principle. Intelligence deal primarily with tangible material things we see and touch whereas wisdom is related to intangible subjects such as courage, devotion, faithfulness, patience, etc. Intelligence is to the brain as wisdom to the mind; intelligence is to the body of a person while wisdom to soul. Intelligence is to be used, wisdom is to be attained. Experiments by the man on various things are in the fields of intelligence, but experiences by the man of spiritual and moral dimensions belong to the realm of wisdom. Intelligence is only a tool that is to be used not only for good purpose but also for evil design.

Stalin once called writers “the engineers of human souls”. The literary artists are shouldered with the responsibility of remoulding and making the people wise for whom they write. To quote Rolland, “The first and paramount duty of the artist is to be true to his inner call and urge-sleeplessly: he must above all keep the lump burning in the shrine of inner perception and must create whenever his demon goads him to. This done, his surplus time and energy may be devoted to the betterment of social conditions, as Goethe did.”

Literature teaches us living not existing. A human being who merely exists and a human being who truly lives are two different things. Perhaps the example of a comparison between a

house and a home can illustrate this point more vividly. The house represents existence, the home living. The one who exists will be very interested in and concerned with the various aspects of the house, such as exquisite furniture, latest model of kitchen equipments and the like. The one, who lives however, is devoted to the good life of home. He is a kind, thoughtful husband, a loving and responsible father who teaches his children good manners and imparts a real sense of responsibility. Literature lays emphasis on good living rather than on comfortable existence.

In the same way literature promotes joy not fun. Fun is morally indifferent and spiritually empty. Joy is morally intrinsic and spiritually inherent. Fun is predominantly affiliated with excitement whereas joy is always associated with peace. Fun and excitement conspire together just as peace and joy go hand in hand. The characteristics of joy are peace, contentment and serenity. Fun is sought as an end but joy is always a consequence. Fun is only momentary satisfaction and it links not with either universal purposes or everlasting value while joy is forever integrated with truth and goodness. That is why Keats writes: “A thing of beauty is joy forever.”

Literature should not be a vehicle of conscious propaganda. It is true that tastes in literature change; they change in fact with exceptional violence and speed. Every generation, and at least the more excitable element in every generation, conscientiously stones the prophets of its fathers. But even then underneath all these, changes of fashion there are some permanent values which with some slight and temporary divagation remain somewhere at the heart of all ages.

Literature is a sacred instrument and through its use we can combat the forces of ignorance and prejudice and foster national unity and world communion. Literature must voice the past, reflect the present and mould the future. Inspired language helps readers to develop a human. It gives liberal outlook. It enables us to understand life and helps to plan sensibly for the future. To think life with literature is to deprive it of all its boons of culture and perennial source of joy. It is to crush the finer sensibilities of human heart and soul and make life dull and dreary.

The function of literature is twofold. It purports to record our highest efforts at understanding and meaning of life and unites the world of mankind by showing the commonality of ideals and the community of ideas that are one and same in all mankind. Its function is unification. In that lies the secret of its appeal to the highest as well as lowest of our race, it appeals to the human side of all of us irrespective of national or geographical limits of our earth. Human nature is one and the same in its fundamental likes and dislikes and hence literature giving expression to this community of ideas, performs the divine function of intensifying our consciousness of human unity, of giving scope and meaning to our scattered experience and making life more beautiful by pointing out its harmony in its diversity. It is this universal appeal of literature that makes it the proudest possession of our race.

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