

Literature and Humanistic Values: The Roots Are as Important as Wings

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“Science can grow but Literature is perennially alive” -*Northrop Frye*

Knowledge comes to us through different sources. Literature is one of these sources. The aim of this brief article is to explore the role of literature in enabling us to acquire knowledge and also in inculcating humanistic values.

Literature is an integral part of human civilization. Hence its origin goes back to the origin of human culture. The early man expressed himself through speech and narration. These forms of compositions are termed oral narratives. Though they are considered less prestigious than written compositions, they are significant bodies of narratives because they contain some of our important sources of knowledge and these are significant components of our culture and civilisation. For instance, these narratives are in the forms of songs, myths, legends, tales and they deal with important domains such as epics, history, law, politics and religion. Needless to say, the Vedas were in the oral form. That is the reason why they were called shruthis meaning they were meant to be heard.

Literature as a written form succeeds oral narratives. The early man used to inscribe on rocks to communicate. Later he wrote on leaves and on the bark of trees. In India we note that a number of important texts were written on palm leaves. The printing press in the 16th Century facilitated rapid production of literary works.

Literature, now in its broad sense includes anything that is written. In the narrow sense, it usually denotes works which belong to the major genre: epic, drama, lyric, novel, short story, ode etc. It is said that literature has superior qualities that is well above the ordinary run of written works. It is the patterning of words, sentence structures and particulars that make literary texts different from that of a non-literary text. The language of a literary text has various levels of meaning whereas non-literary texts do not have different meanings. Ezra Pound says that great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. According to JRR Tolkien “a great writer of literature may be the great operator of function of language”. Coleridge asserts that literature is the best words in their best order. A literary text enables the reader imagine, go beyond the text in order to understand the concept and form whereas the language of non-literary text has readymade quality which does not allow the reader to go beyond it. Here everything is mentioned clearly. The language of literary texts has a connotative thrust. The word also has added meaning apart from its symbolic meaning. The language of a non-literary text has only denotative power. It has only one meaning. Literary texts have non-logical discourse and are subjective, non-literary texts have logical discourse. These are only a few instances of difference between the two text-types.

Though there are different views on the definition of literature, it is true that literature is intimately linked with human lives. Man is the centre of all literary activities. Even the religious texts which are meant for spiritual experience are for the well-being of human beings. Alexander Pope rightly said “the proper study of mankind is man”. The saint poet Chandidas also said:

“Listen, O brother
Man is the greatest truth.
Nothing beyond.”

Literature leads man from darkness to light. Man becomes conscious of his environment through literature. Literature also helps him achieve the four objectives of life—Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha. Literary works not only delights but also instructs us to be good human beings—to be compassionate, kind and righteous. The first verse that finds place in the Ramayana just came out from Valmiki’s mouth out of compassion:

*Ma nishada pratistha twamagama saswat sama
Yat krauncha mihunadeka mabadhi kama mohitam*

We also learn the message of tolerance and sacrifice from literature. The Oriya saint poet Bhima Bhoi said: “Who can tolerate the scene of unlimited sorrow and agony of living beings. Let my life languish in hell but the world must be saved”. The messages of great literary works have been noble virtues such as love, brotherhood and peace. The saint poet Rihani says:

“Now, mosques and churches – even a Kaba stone,
Korans and Bibles – even a matyr’s bone-
All these and more my heart can tolerate
For my religion is love, and love alone.”

Safdar Hasmi, a poet of our soil was disturbed by religious intolerance and violence and gave the message of love and unity. He said:

“Mandir, Masjid, Gurudwar ne bant diya bhagwan ko
Jamin banto, sagar banto mat manto insan ko.”
“People are divided according to the places of worship.

Divide the earth, the ocean if you want,
But don't divide humans."

A good literary text teaches good human values. We learn from Shakespear's *Macbeth* that to be over-ambitious for power can be suicidal whereas from Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea* we learn that we should make consistent efforts to reach our destination. Literature can encompass a number of disciplines such as history, customs and moral behaviour. Hence it has been given preference over others subjects. Aristotle argued that poetry is more philosophical and higher in scale than history because it "tends to represent ethical and universal values based on probability. There is an Arabian saying 'alshir diwan alanab'. The true register and history of Arabs is found in their poetry.

Literature fulfils the requirement of telling and talking, dialogue and communication, vital to the present age. In this age there is enough networking of communication, but there is a lack of communication among human beings. There is distrust and misunderstanding. Literature can play a vital role in bridging this gap. It has been found that literature has played significant role in changing the psyche of human beings. Gandhiji wrote for social change to bring peace and understanding. His writings inspired our countrymen to love the downtrodden. Thus literature plays the role of upholder of human values. Pure literature always nurtures moral values and ethics. Writers like Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Banabhatta, wrote to protect and preserve the values of life. Rabindranath Tagore, Sharat Chandra, Munshi Premchand, Uma Shankar Joshi, Pannalal Patel, Anantha Murthy, Gopinath Mohanty, Shivarama Karanath and others created literature for social awakening. Their writings worked as an instrument for social change. They raised voices against a number of social problems such as freedom of women, sati system, caste discrimination, child marriage and so on.

Literature has lasting impact and shapes one's mind. Abraham Lincoln read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a young boy and found slavery to be an inhuman system and made up his mind to work towards its abolition. Victor Hugo's *Les Miserable* inspired for a great revolution like the French Revolution. Mahatma Gandhi witnessed the play *Sharavan Kumar* and accepted the lesson of service to his family and from *Satyabadi Harischandra* he learned that Truth is God. Truth and Non-violence were the mantras for Gandhiji throughout his life and through them, he could achieve impossible things. In this age, we are becoming individualistic in our ideals and also intolerant towards others. The message from great literary works therefore become more pertinent to us. The youth of our country should take inspiration from these works and strive for love, peace and brotherhood.

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