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Research Article



Exploring the Significance of Literature: A Humanistic Perspective

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Abstract

This essay critically focuses on the functions of literature in understanding the complexities of human life and society, perceiving cultural values, and evoking aesthetic relish from a literary humanistic approach. It is an attempt to answer two questions: why we should read literature? What are the functions of literature? Basically, literature is a form of art that has multidimensional functions to portray human life and human experience with its artistic

pattern and organization that affects the readers in a certain way not only to rethink and feel about others and themselves but also to establish and change their worldviews whether subjective or objective. Though literature offers an alternative world view, it is not limited to ideas or thoughts, as it can reflect on any subjects. The prime object of literature is to depict human life, to delight, and teach humankind through its artistic principles and aesthetic effects and universal appeal – the use of literary language and imagination and affected readers. Literature has humanistic, aesthetic, and psychological roles in the presentation of human nature, wisdom, humanity, morality, resilience, aesthetic pleasure, inner consciousness, and self-restraint. Finally, the value of literature is immense as it a site from where one can write for the change of a dominant ideology by providing an alternative one and enrich himself or herself with wisdom, self-esteem, and inner consciousness.

Keywords: Literature, Society, Human Life and Values, Aesthetic Sensibility, Humanity, Empowerment, Structure, Culture

Introduction

Etymologically, the term literature derives from the Latin word “*litteratura*,” meaning writing, grammar, and learning. Over the ages, through transformation and by extension, the term comes to be identified as a sort of aesthetic or creative or imaginative writing with plausible aesthetic and cultural values. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren in *Theory of Literature* (1949) argue that “it seems, however, best to consider as literature only works in which the aesthetic function is dominant” (15). As an imaginative writing, literature refers to the works of poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction. Its main function is aesthetic pleasure and moral teaching by an appeal of its aesthetic elements-diction, subject-matter, characters, and style. It appeals to the mind of the reader for the depths of revealing the complexities of human life, society, culture and history through its artistic medium. It is replete with certain aspects of human life, feelings, thoughts, problems, and solution. In doing so, literary language is different from everyday language. While the former is connotative, emotive and semiotic, the latter is denotative, practical and referential in its expression. Literature is the language of imagination, consciousness, association, emotion, perception, verbal structure, and contemplation. Its language abounds in paradox, ambiguity, metaphor, allegory, and imagery.

Basically, literature has certain distinguishing traits-imitation, artistic creation, convention, and innovation, sincerity, fictionality, organism, typicality, generality, particularity, probable, decorum, thought, and imagination. The authors create a fictitious world through the medium of the emotive and suggestive language of imagination and of the artistic conventions of organization, expression, presentation, and stimulation. One can express his or her feelings, thoughts, and assumptions through literature that are the embodiment of life produced and presented for the ages. Cognitive value of literature especially in fiction and drama lies in the portrayal of inner life, motivation, perception, and realization of characters. The principle function of literature is to make readers perceive what they see and imagine what they already know. Literature has power to disclose humanistic appeal and higher truth remaining for all ages, and these are apparent in the great works of literature, for instance, *The Iliad*, *Macbeth*,

Hamlet, Paradise Lost, The Divine Comedy, Crime and Punishment, War and Peace, Gulliver's Travels, Pride and Prejudice, Ulysses, The Mahabharata, and Prometheus Unbound.

Literature exhibits the values of high truth, beauty, and morality. Its humanistic appeal is immense as it represents the wholeness of human society and life. Literature is a repository of a nation's common cultural heritage and tradition and of work of art. For many critics and writers, its value lies in the representation and preservation of a nation's culture. It is claimed to fulfill a nationalistic role through written texts. For instance, English, Indian, American, African or Canadian literature. F.R. Leavis and Matthew Arnold are two notable liberal humanist critics who believe in human nature that great literary works express. To them, great literature is timeless and essentially the refinement of human life; it is preoccupied with cultural values that are constant and fixed in human nature. The purpose of literature is for the development of the individual and society. Their liberal humanist approach to literature focuses mostly on morality, social life, responsibility of the author for the health of self and society, and non-theoretical and non-political practice. In this sense, literary works are detached from socio-cultural, political, historical, ideological, and biographical contexts as they are self-sufficient in containing their own meaning within themselves. Such firm stance is clear in Leavis' rejection of those writers who attempt to politicize literature and influence their critical views and practices. In his influential book *The Great Tradition* (1948), Leavis praises the great novelists including Jane Austen, George Eliot, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James for their significant contributions to literature: "the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life" (2). Therefore, the values of literature are the demonstrations of higher truth, higher seriousness, aesthetic seriousness, instructiveness, human nature, reality, human perception, human empathy, impersonality, and artistic freedom and standards in its sincerity and objectivity contained within itself.

Discussion

Literature is perceived to be the sources of aesthetic pleasure, humanistic knowledge, and aesthetic, moral and democratic values. Its aesthetic value is expressed through language, diction, decorum, and style. It is the medium through which we perceive the world and know the things anew. It teaches the general principles of life and higher truth. Its immense effect is perceived as it expresses the core of humanity through centuries. Literary experience reveals how knowledge arises out of the understanding of the world expressed in its artistic structure and sincerity. Its power through the faculty of imagination stimulates readers' feelings, emotions, and pleasing. It compels readers to feel and know about the contexts in which it is written. Its inherent value is an intrinsic aspect of wisdom and insight into epistemological principles. It fosters not only critical reading of a text but also critical methods of understanding, examination, explanation, interpretation, argument, perception, structure, assumption, and evaluation of a text.

Horace's *Ars Poetica* (*Art of Poetry*) demonstrates the aesthetic approach to poetry that is "at once delighting and instructing the reader" (479). For him literature especially poetry should be instructive, helpful, benefitting, pleasing, teaching and high ideals for the representation of "*utile dulci*" or mimetic reality (478). The primary goals of literature are the giving of moral instruction and pleasure to the reader. Similar assumption is made in Aristotle's *Poetics* which defines poetry as a creative imitation of human life and stresses its purposes of aesthetic

pleasure and teaching. For Aristotle, the function of literature discussed in his *Poetics* is “catharsis” meaning the release of emotions of the spectators of literary works at the end of their aesthetic experiences.

In *An Apology for Poetry*, the Renaissance poet and critic, Philip Sidney continues Horace’s and Aristotle’s principles of moral teaching and usefulness embedded in a work of literature that the poet aims at evoking in the reader through his artistic effects that are to “be so good as to teach goodness, and delight the learners of it” (27). Sydney writes that poetry is:

“directed to the highest end of the mistress-knowledge, by the Greeks called *architektonike*, which stands, as I think, in the knowledge of a man’s self, in the ethic and polite consideration, with the end of well-doing, and not of well-knowing only; . . . So that the ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action, those skills that most serve to bring forth that have a most just little to be princes over all the rest; wherein, if we can show, the poet is worthy to have it before any other competitors.” (12)

Dr. Samuel Johnson and John Dryden continue Horace and Sidney’s principles in relation to the purpose and function of literature. In Dryden’s words, literature presents “*a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind*” (original emphasis 55).

A poet has an ability to represent social reality and the world through his artistic work which evokes aesthetic sense of pleasure from for readers. He can identify his own thoughts, emotions, and expressions with ordinary peoples. Its general object is pleasure and knowledge installed in the work which the poet produces to explore the complexities of human life and nature in their ordinary lives. A poet’s work is preoccupied with the values of aesthetic beauty, pleasure, highest wisdom, delight, virtue, loveliness, moral consciousness, change and modes of time, place, people, and circumstance. “Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed” for its enhancement of liberty and perfection of human life and society (Shelley 237). It is not only useful, but also essential, in improving morality and enlarging humanity.

Novel is a distinctive form of literature. It is a work of imagination, aesthetic beauty, make-believe world, and human interactions. It represents multiple socio-cultural, economic, political and ethical reality, and different viewpoints. It makes sense of reality, records human life, and exercises resistance, freedom, liberty and change through its aesthetic practice. Being a work of literature, it is concerned with imagination, artistic presentation, and aesthetic pleasure in terms of narrative of people and their activities that shape it taken from the social reality. The usefulness of the novel lies in touching the varying nature of human life, evoking seriousness, and providing the ways of being alive with all consciousness, knowledge, emotions, imperfection, and change in life and society. One’s perceptions of life, society, and the world from literary works help in shaping one’s self and identity. Life and work of art are not detached from each other. Literature is a site of creativity, creative power, and a hope of change and an epitome of resistance and liberation. It enhances our senses of resilience and liberty and cultural sensibility. Literature is a way of identifying the ground from the bottom, intervening in social reality to perceive the complexity and coexistence of human life and in socio-political development, raising people’s consciousness, directing them achieving liberal sensibility, capturing the spirit of wisdom and emancipation, understanding of oneself and others, promoting the life, and serving the people.

Literature is helpful in the midst of a chaotic world as it responds to the problems. It offers a socio-cultural vision that is of timeless—applying to all ages. It has power to provide universal humanity that is a matter of continuance of cause, effect, change, development, and health. About the relevance of literature in today's world, Northrop Frye points out that "literature's world is a concrete human world of immediate experience," extending from the depth of love to death, from heaven to hell, from prosperity to adversity (12-3). Studying literature enriches the reader's mind and soul as he identifies himself with characters and their emotions and circumstances which he experiences and enjoys during reading. This helps the reader perceive reality and general truth and know human life in a creative way. Literary reading is a way of cultural-emotional development and language skill. It compels the reader to think about the phenomenon around them and to use reason to make sound judgement. It acts as a guide for the understanding of life and the world in one frame. It teaches us to be a healthy man of wisdom, to comprehend the perspective of another, and to empathize with people of another time, space, race, and class. Great works of literature have power to shape a nation's cultural value and social vision. For instance, Homer's epic *Odyssey* represents the spirits of adventure, loyalty, honour, free will, and glory – all the embodiment of cultural values held by the ancient Greeks. *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are the products of the heroic age and they reflect on the historical, cultural, and spiritual conditions of that time. *Moby Dick*, *Walden*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Huckleberry Finn* largely reflect on American socio-cultural life, history, geography, politics, religion, and ethics. Shakespeare's plays are full of human imagination and touch the core humanity and stand for all ages. The socio-cultural, political and economic conditions of the Victorian Age are demonstrated by Charles Dickens in his novels. George Orwell's *1984* displays the aspects of totalitarian state and the tyranny of humankind by creating a literal environment of allegorical representation. Feminist literature focuses on the issues of gender stereotype and the subordinate position of women in society, literature and other institutions and on the possible ways of achieving and promoting empowerment, equality, rights and freedom. Marxist literature reveals how economic factor, class division, and ideology govern all social, cultural and political institutions and historical reality under these conditions an individual's identity is created and realized. Modern literature mainly focuses on the inner consciousness of the characters, alienated and isolated city life, new sensibility of the time, and on the negative consequences of city, technology, industry, machinery, capitalism, war, mass communication, and nihilism. Postmodern literature is characterized by the absurdity of human life, individual subjectivity, self-parody, fluid identity, and self-determination, metafictional narrative, unrealistic and improbable plots and self-referential style, existentialism and on the destabilization of essence and authenticity. Postcolonial literature is a systematic response to the colonialist assumptions made through European literary texts about the non-European people and their cultures. Its aims are to give voice to the people who are directly and indirectly affected by the European colonization process, to dismantle the colonial discourses of power hierarchy, race division, cultural superiority, subordination, and dehumanization of non-European people, to use both indigenous and Western literary traditions, to destabilize the dominant European literary tradition, and to forge one's hybridized cultural identity as one is caught between two worlds-between the ideas of the East and the West because of the cross-

cultural encounter between the colonizer and the colonized and the East and the West and of the dissemination of colonial culture and language by the colonizers across the world.

Studying literature offers opportunities for us to take a fictional journey into the creative worlds of the writers and into the feelings and thoughts of the characters whom we can imagine as ourselves as we see people in real life. Literature improves our faculty to live, reflect upon, think, contemplate, interact with, and question. It helps us not only to know ourselves but also others. It functions as a mirror to the complexities of society, human nature, and culture.

From a phenomenological perspective, reading literary texts becomes an experience of raising consciousness and a way of convergence of text and reader. It helps the reader to create the hidden meaning, make an assumption, realize aesthetic value of a text, and rewrite the world objectively. It stimulates the reader's creative participation, anticipation, and imagination in constructing meaning and perceiving human life and reality. Wolfgang Iser observes that "the literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader. It is the coming together of text and imagination" (215). Similar claim is held by Frye: "Literature speaks the language of the imagination, and the study of literature is supposed to train and improve the imagination" (72). Literary language improves the reader's command of language. Literary imagination converges the text and the reader and stimulates the reader's critical understanding of the world – helping him or her unearth the hidden facts and create an imaginative, fictional world in his or her own way. It helps one to understand himself or herself and the world, to express himself or herself, to question dominant ideology, and to distinguish between good and wrong.

Literature is a form of art that has the power to transcend our everyday experiences and engage with society on a deeper level. It is inherently subjective as every reader brings their own experience, beliefs, and values to work of literature, and as a result, every interpretation is unique. This subjectivity is both a strength and weakness of literature, as it allows for a diversity of perspectives but also makes it difficult to establish a single, objective meaning. It has social and political dimension. Literature is a way of engaging with society and of challenging the status quo. By presenting an alternative version of the world, it has the power to inspire change and promote social progress. By creating a new reality, it can transcend the limitations of our everyday lives. Literature is form of art that captures the essence of human experience and convey it through the use of language. It is a unique form of expression because it is not limited to the communication of ideas or information.

Fictional stories are not just mere stories but the reflection of human condition- human life's complex problems and conflicts. They are relevant in a changing world and bring benefits to the survival of the humankind. They enhance our abilities of empathy, sincerity, sociability, and emotional intelligence. Fiction provides the way of developing the capacity of empathy as we take part in the processes of argumentation, anticipation, imagination, and formulation which enable us to understand and take the perspective of any other human beings. Above all, it encourages us to construct a more complex and nuanced image of the world. Reading fiction impacts on the brain as it activates the human brain to be connected with the fictional world like the real social interaction with people. Therefore, reading fiction or drama activates our

brain to understand and sympathize with characters of literary works. Fictional narratives work as a training for the human mind rather than television and cinema narratives do.

Despite the emergence of television and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn that prioritize short forms of language and waste of time, a work of literature is not wholly dead. Literature may be in danger for not being in touch with the reading of literary texts as college students study the theory and criticism of literature. But a balance is needed among all kinds of theoretical approaches and the connections between the literary works and contemporary life and world. American author and critic Henry James once commented that to rescue literature's creative presence, creative power, and delight, we should prevent theory and criticism of literature from killing literature in the minds of future readers.

Edward Said upholds literature's power to reveal various modes of one's time and national cultural value: "literature was about the world, readers were in the world; the question was not whether to be but how to be, and this was best answered by carefully analyzing language's symbolic enactments of the various existential possibilities available to human beings" (139).

Literature appeals to the readers for the aesthetic elements and values it produces and presents. For the authors, it becomes a means of escapism to a world of beauty and joy from a world of death and decay. For instance, John Keats' poem *Ode to a Nightingale* offers a world of senses but not an external world. The bird persuades both the poet and the readers to the world of beauty and joy that is permanent in comparison to the world of disease and transience. The poem's message to the readers is expressed through the symbols of the bower of the bird and the transient life. The functions of both worlds are symbolic expressed in the poem's artistic patterns, conventions and representation. This reminds Oscar Wilde's claim that "all art is at once surface and symbol" (4). However, a literary work takes the readers into the fictitious world of humanity and compels them to take the perspective of the other, to understand the feelings, sufferings, thoughts and problems of other human beings, to think for themselves, to live, and to gain their own humanity. Even in tragedy the readers find aesthetic pleasure through the purification and relief of emotion because there is a combination of artistic convention and moral value in tragedy that teaches them to see the problems of their lives and to live a better life.

Despite literature's insight into life, higher truth and cultural, political, and aesthetic value, it is not free from the charge of being propagandist. Literature is not empty, but full of a set of discourses. It is in some way ideological and discursive as it leads the reader to believe the dominant ideology of the writer. There is a good connection between literature and the strategy of representation. The politics of literary representation is relation of power, discourse and ideology. In this context, in his influential book *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (1997), Jonathan Culler discusses the two main functions of literature: how it is used not only to control people but also to free, to constrain people but also to enable, to divide people but also to unite, and to dehumanize but also to humanize:

"Is literature an ideological instrument: a set of stories that seduce readers into accepting the hierarchical arrangements of society? If stories take it for granted that women must find their happiness, if at all, in marriage; if they accept class divisions as natural and explore how the virtuous serving-girl may marry a lord, they work to legitimate

contingent historical arrangements. Or is literature the place where ideology is exposed, received as something that can be questioned? Literature represents, for example, in a potentially intense and affecting way, the narrow range of options historically offered to women, and in making this visible, raises possibility of not taking it for granted. Both claims are thoroughly plausible: that literature is the vehicle of ideology, and that literature is an instrument for its undoing. . . .

We also encounter contrary claims about the relation of literature to action. Theorists have maintained that literature encourages solitary reading and reflection as they way to engage with the world and thus counters the social and political activities that might produce change. At best it encourages detachment or appreciation of complexity, and at worst passively and acceptance of what is. But on the other hand, literature has historically been seen as dangerous: it promotes the questioning of authority and social arrangements.” (38-9)

Stories are not always for promoting humanity and empowerment but dehumanization, subordination and inequality as they are told from a single perspective using a dominant discourse to shape the worldview of others and position them in a hierarchical, dehumanizing way. Stories can also break the dehumanizing aspect or dominant assumption of literature. In this way, storytelling is not always from the single, dominant perspective but from a new, counter perspective, resulting in a very different story. For instance, for postcolonial writers and critics, there would have a very different story, if it is told from the indigenous, colonized people’s perspectives but not from only the colonizer’s.

Literature is an aesthetic field and practice with words that speaks about human condition, create a literal world of complexity, and bring about change. Whether it is good or wrong with its aesthetic value and representation, literature encourages political and historical detachment and the acceptance of hegemonic ideologies, economic injustice and class divisions. It also helps the readers to engage with the world and to question the legitimacy of authority, hierarchy, injustice, and racism prevalent in a given society. In other words, it has been a special writing that deals with the problems of society and a way of producing social change by making struggles against the ills of society. For instance, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* encouraged the rebellion of black people against slavery, racism, and colonization that sparked the American Civil War. This emphasizes an author’s moral and ethical responsibility towards his or her society from the perspective of liberal humanism.

Literature retains beauty, morality, values, and cultural systems from generation to generation. Its value lies in retaining a national culture and cultural heritage. It is a repository of democratic values, seriousness, intensity, and higher truth. By reading literature, we can try to increase our resilience like the sweet results of adversity that teaches us to tolerate things. Its power is to stimulate more feelings and emotions to familiarize with the worst phenomenon by our positiveness. It has been a means of gaining familiarity with the phenomenon happening in the world. It works as a medicine that cures us from our mental stress, disorder and un-stability by creating an aesthetic world of convergence between the aesthetic knowledge and pleasure and between book and its reader, between outer and inner world and discovery and rediscovery. It helps us reduce our stress, fear, incompatibilities to understand reality, and more vividly to arouse our inner consciousness and unconscious mind. Literature is a way of entering into deep

meditation and rethinking of circumstances. It is an attempt to discover and rediscover the phenomenon. It helps us explore general principles and large truth of life. There should not only be mere reading and writing but also be transformed souls with a touch of exploring surrounding whether through the imagination or our positive feelings. This may cause our transformation, renovation if we utilize it in accordance with our appetite of diving through hardships. Literature has a universal appeal of give-and-take with which one can live and fancy. Apart from at its aesthetic level of delight, literature at thematic and functional level may work. It provides more instructions and truth bound with time and space, and sometimes it is ageless that has enduring impacts on its audience. Moreover, literature's role is much more extensive effective beyond our limitation and imagination as it opens up a possibility of changing, thinking, reevaluating, rediscovery, recreating, soothing aspect, rejuvenation, resilience and lasting impacts. Literature is above all ethical; it is the realm of moral judgement, aesthetic expression, dualism of several impressions and reasons, emotion and intellect, defamiliarization, emotional attachment, concerning with the particular and extraordinary and with the individual.

Conclusion

To sum up, the inherent goals of literature are perceived to be a repository of wisdom, a training for the mind, an instruction of moral values, an enhancement of ideal of beauty, a perception and vision of life, and a propagation of delight – all embodied in the works of great literary authors. For an individual, the purpose of literature is to live a life, to perceive oneself, and to recognize diversity through which one may come to meet each other – expressed in an artistic way. To live a life what is needed most is an ideal environment i.e. culture, and in a socio-cultural environment one can perceive himself or herself and the world through his or her study of literature that provides social vision, value, and humanity. Literature is useful in understanding the world better, assessing the path of humanity, and in recognizing one's own humanity expressed through the medium of words or language. Literary reading is truly relevant for us as it helps us to live, to know our own lives, to understand our places in the world, to include the lived experiences, to place ourselves in connection with others' experiences and humanity, to expand our thinking, to make connection between aesthetic world and real life, and to imagine and conceive the way of being a better human. The problem of literary reading in the twenty-first century is not about simply reading many books, but the quality of our reading, our interpretive competence, and how we read is important as we read a literary text. Readers can be both controlled and freed by literary narratives at the same time. It is all about how we read and our interpretive abilities work.

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