

Literature as the Foundation of Life and its Values

Dr. Poonam Nigam Sahay

Associate Professor, Department of English, Ranchi Women's College, Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

Abstract — All of us know the importance and value of good literature in our lives. Right from the stories told by our grandmothers to the great education we receive later in life, literature plays a significant part all throughout. It influences us and makes us understand the ways of life. Narratives, in particular, inspire empathy and lend a whole new perspectives to us and that of others too. This also works with the morals induced within us – either directly or by implied means. When one reads literature, one gains insight, knowledge and wisdom, refining our emotions in the process too. In fact, literature is life manifested in myriad forms. Snippets of life are recorded in a script or audio or video – whatever the manner of preserving. We read, hear or see it accordingly to connect with the slice of humanity in it and this in turn, again strengthens our mind, providing immeasurable growth, leading to abilities of thinking beyond the traditional gamut, what one could term as “outside the box”. In this manner, literature is a reflection of reality, becoming a product of art when distanced and seen objectively and a window to an ideology. This paper seeks to throw light on the importance of literature and how it imparts human values, thus making it very necessary to be incorporated in each and every syllabus of almost every major stream, whether humanities, social sciences, engineering, management or sciences. The study involves a mixed-methods research design involving student and teacher interviews, avid recipients, questionnaires and lesson observations. The results were quite heartening, suggesting a positive response. The paper concludes by discussing the potential and outreach of literature to every study as well as the minds of its avid recipients, of any age-group, class or creed.

Keywords — *Stories; Life; Perspective; Ideology; Window.*

1. Introduction

All of us have at one time or the other been told wonderful stories by our grandmothers. I would exhort you to go back to those days and feel the effect that those stories had on your mind and just how transported you felt to a different, wondrous realm of fairies, witches, gnomes, pixies and what not. We lived in a world of utopia then, hankering after our grandmothers to give us more and more, waiting endlessly for the time when she would be free to feed our fancies. And then, when the great moment came, we listened with mouths wide open, ears cocked up, eyes mesmerised in amazement, taking in everything one by one, with baited breath as to what more was to be revealed. Those were golden times, and I would like you to now consider in retrospect the impact which that great ritual, the art of storytelling and the lovely tales told had on your mind, soul and integrity. That was the great power of literature. It enwrapped your body, soul and mind into one cohesive whole, giving you lessons of all kinds, helping you to face situations of every kind and that too, courageously and in an upright manner. One almost lived and died everyday. Such was the charisma of the stories told.

2. Literature Survey

The first thing to question is what is literature? The answer is that literature is life. It grows out of life, spins tales about life and is a mirror of life itself. Broadly speaking, “literature” is used to describe anything from

creative writing to more technical or scientific or medical works, but that which refers to the works of the creative faculty, like the dramas, poems, essays, travelogues, etc. are deemed to be the literature we’re talking about really. Just look at what the great writers have to say about literature:

- “What is wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote, and brings to birth in us also the creative impulse” says E. M. Forster.¹
- “Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart.” Salman Rushdie.²
- “Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose” says Oscar Wilde.³
- “Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides, and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.” says C. S. Lewis.⁴
- “Great Literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree” upholds Ezra Pound.⁵

Each of these definitions brings out the intricate qualities that exist in literature. We would say that Forster, Rushdie, Wilde, Lewis and Pound, to name and cite only a few, are all correct in their definitions about literature. Literature does embody all those characteristics that they talk about and so much more. An attempt at defining is

only to express its very essence but cannot capture the entire whole. Speaking objectively, literature is beyond definition simply. One cannot just sum it up in words. That would amount to capturing the vast oceans into a small bowl. It is essentially more than what we see and perceive.

Literature existed long before the human phenomena came into existence. There are stories about the gods, the skies, the depths and the universe. When man came, he wrote or engraved on leaves, trees, stones and in the caves. That is the pre-historic era. We find this immeasurably magnificent gift of literature from ancient times when human beings splendidly expressed themselves through oral or written literature. The necessity to document made them preserve the precious interactions by various means such as theatre, cinema, paintings, etc.

Our ancient scriptures like the Vedas, the Great Epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha, the Puranas, the Panchatantras, Thiruvalluvar's Tirukkural – to name only a few of the wonderful creations, are full of virtues to be emulated in various spheres of life. Through ancient times, it has been seen that literature alone impacts the human world, teaching it the "follies and foibles" of the world. Everyone knows the famous tale of Rajmata Jijabai influencing the great Chahtrapati Shivaji Maharaj with the stories that she narrated to him when he was a child. The tales were particularly from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and these inspired Shivaji a great deal. All this resulted in him becoming a warrior par excellence, fighting bravely for his motherland. But above all, they made him a just, principled and compassionate human being, known for his exceptional feats and behaviour, even towards his enemies.

Talking about the global scenario, the famous Greek philosophers Plato, Socrates and Aristotle also preached about them in their various books, if only human beings would pay attention to them and adopt them. In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato underlines the importance of the human wisdom. The works of Plato, Socrates and Aristotle are replete with virtues that aim at attaining a glorified perfection of a community, a society. They are worthy of being modelled upon. Philosophy as such has always been looked up to highly and is the fountainhead of the creative impulse, which is why it is known as the mother of Humanities. Thus, it has a profound sway upon the life of the people. Flaubert's dictum "Read in order to live" gives a clear mandate on the value of literature in the complex world of today.⁶

Whether we come across "The Daffodils" by Wordsworth, "Macbeth". or "King Lear" by Shakespeare, asking for forgiveness from Cordelia – all contain priceless moral teachings within their storyline and have an untold

power, immediacy and beauty to instruct mankind in an indelible and unobtrusive manner. One would also do well to remember Matthew Arnold, who, besides being a prolific writer, poet and critic was also an Inspector of Schools.

3. Materials, Methods and Results

This research paper involves a mixed-methods research design and involved student and teacher interviews, questionnaires and lesson observations. A sample study was conducted involving around 50 students, 10 belonging to Std. VI, 10 to Std. VIII, 10 to Std. IX, 10 to Std. X and 10 to Std. XI. Robust discussions followed as a result on every perspective, with the students and teachers participating heart and soul. The results were stunning as proved in our interviews and lesson observations particularly.

The questionnaires were designed to test the aptitudes of the school-going children and covered a range of queries related to their using literature in various ways. They also questioned the need of popularising literature and its impact upon the individuals as such. The answers exhibited a great deal of independent and original thinking on the part of students especially, and they were all found to be avid lovers of literature, being intelligent and top students of their streams, be it Science, Commerce or Humanities. This was quite informative and enlightening for me and gave me a special strength in pursuing research in this oft-debated but seldom probed in area as I found after consulting some parents of this sample study group as well. Much is taken for granted on the basis of hear-say which makes the opting for literature a luke-warm proposal at the most, with no one being fully sure about the results. Hence, literature was being taken a little lightly in comparison with other streams like Science and Commerce or in comparison with other subjects like History, Economics and Political Science.

The interviews with students and teachers also brought out interesting facts about the impact of literature on their lives, after listening to stories from their mothers or grandmothers or grandfathers, or reading a story themselves, which became a turning-point in their lives. Everyone had complaints about literature being ranked quite low in comparison with other subjects on account of the "low esteem" attached to its monetary gains in terms of service or job. Many students said that they would have opted for pursuing literature only but for the bias and admonishment from their parents or also the problem of having a highly-paid career afterwards. The teachers also were vociferous in stating that the general public does rank literature quite low when it comes to the children's careers. They would rather go in for hi-fi careers of computers or

other scientific or commerce areas rather than risk their children's fates to a career in literature.

The lesson observations were however extremely enlightening as they brought in valuable perspectives from students and teachers as well. Interpretations of the same issue were varied and solutions to any problems raised were also novel and intriguing, giving rare insights into the minds of the individuals concerned. However, viewpoints differed between teachers and students, which was only normal as the teachers approached with mature minds and the children could see it from their perspectives only. Some students delighted me with their gems of wisdom in certain contexts. These interactions were really valuable for research purposes and pointed out valid and poignant areas, which need to be addressed with an urgency and earnestness.

4. Discussion

It is pertinent for us to understand that the value of literature lies within the value of literature itself and this is what separates it from other linguistic and symbolic phenomena. Says Liisa Ahlava in her research paper entitled "Poetics of Paucity or Rhetorics of Replenishment in George Perec's A Disparition"⁷

Understanding the value of literature may lie within the core of literature itself, in what separates literature from other linguistic and symbolic phenomena. When questioning the value of literature, it is therefore fruitful to approach literature on its own terms. Through this, we can try to understand what the value of literature is, as in inextricable part of the broader, cultural, historical, social and political realm. Literature constantly comments on this realm, inciting readers to understand and affect change within it.

In fact, literature commences on this realm, that she is talking about, inviting the readers to understand and affect change within it, if necessary and feasible. It is important to explore the meaning and function of human values in it.

W. B. Yeats comments thus, "Education is not the filling of a pail, But the lighting of a fire."⁸ The same can be said of spreading human values through literature too. Education, i.e. learning has a great role to play in the development of man. It is not only the vehicle of knowledge, self-preservation and success but also provides a much-needed platform for displaying one's knowledge of conduct, strength, character and self-respect. It is not just a peripheral requirement, but a necessity in that respect. It gives the readers knowledge of the difference between right and wrong, a belief in God and the importance of hard work and dedication. It is a continuous learning experience

from people learning from success and failure as well as from leaders and followers of their choice.

If we are to impart moral education to our succeeding generations, we must help them to cultivate an understanding of the moral frameworks that exist within each civilisation and its development. This can be done successfully, only with the help of literature. Morality is not a matter of arbitrary choice or personal values and is not intellectually free-floating either. It is something to be experienced and felt, internally as well as externally, becoming a matter of one's free choice, taken consciously. It is bound with one's place in a community or tradition, one's understanding of nature and human nature, convictions about afterlife, one's experiences of the sacred and one's assumptions about what the mind can know and our understanding of what makes life meaningful.

Universities and schools should also design and offer such courses, as was the practice long time back. It was essential and should not have been done away with. It could be termed as "professional ethics" which would be more appropriate in the current scenario. Simple character-education programmes could be a little less in demand. Such courses should involve innumerable intellectual, cultural, social and ethical resources drawn from a variety of traditions and schools of thought that might be able to orient the directionless, give more motivation and health to the sound minds and also clarify things for the confused or puzzled types.

A society is made up of countless people, of various dispositions, attitudes, backgrounds and mindsets. How to help them exist peacefully in times current is really challenging, particularly in the absence of a certain code of conduct or morals. The well-being of the entire society depends on the equilibrium achieved; the harmony established thus leading to a civic and civilised existence. Literature is of immense value and umpteen blessings for mankind. Says Martha Crippen in her valuable article "The Value of Children's Literature"⁹:

"It provides students with the opportunity to respond to literature and develop their own opinions about the topic. This strengthens the cognitive developmental domain as it encourages deeper thought about literature.... Student can learn to evaluate and analyze literature, as well as summarize and hypothesize about the topic."

Martha Crippen further opines, quoting Norton:

"...literature provides an avenue for students to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultures of other people. It is crucial for children to learn these values because "developing positive attitudes toward our own culture and the cultures of others is necessary for both

social and personal and social development” (Norton, 2010, p. 3)¹⁰

Thus, we can easily infer that students not only learn to appreciate words and their power, but travel through other realms and times through the texts they read and in this process, develop multiple perspectives, besides understanding the complexity of human nature.

A very useful thing that develops within us while studying literature is Emotional Intelligence. Previously, I.Q. or intelligence quotient was rated to be the foremost quality but slowly, it was found that success is more dependent upon the amount of emotional intelligence one has. Research tells us that Emotional Intelligence can provide the backbone of an integrity that goes into building team spirit, productivity, strong character and more. It can certainly help in building true leaders of the world. According to Irma Ghosh:

*Literature has the potential of fostering emotional intelligence by providing vicarious emotional experiences that will shape the brain circuits for empathy and help the child gain insight into human behaviour. Literature will also promote language learning by enriching learners' vocabulary and modelling new structures. Moreover, literature can provide a motivating and low-anxiety context for language learning*¹¹.

She mentions Daniel Goleman¹² too, who defines emotional intelligence as “knowing what one’s feelings are and using that knowledge to make good decisions.” Further, he defines EQ as “empathy, which is awareness of the feelings of others, which develops as a result of experience and interaction with others”¹³.

It may be noted that Culture is one of the most important concepts in Social Sciences like Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science and Economics and had slowly made its inroads into Applied Linguistics and Second Language Learning Acquisition as well, according to Brown¹⁴. The aim of language teaching now is to linguistic abilities of the learners’ along with cultural competence as well, which when combined come across as a new term relatively, called “intercultural competence”.

The power of literature is cumulative. It builds layers into layers, promoting an understanding of a very complex nature, which cannot be unravelled in a simple fashion. One thing leads into another. It is the power of literature that makes them all come alive in front of the readers, which is why, Literature is very different from all other subjects. It requires one to participate and not be just passive. Then only can one understand it well as the heart of literature lies in its exploration of human experience, which can be very rewarding in every way.

Adapting a quote from Jay Parini¹⁵, we can say that literature is

“...like a huge river. It pours itself, exhausts itself, in the sea of our Unconscious. Having experienced it, we carry,, it inside us forever”.

References

- [1] Forster, E. M. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/E._M._Forster. Accessed 11.12.2020.
- [2] Rushdie, Salman. <https://bigother.com/2019/06/19/literature-is-where-i-go-to-explore-the-highest-and-lowest-places-in-human-society-and-in-the-human-spirit-where-i-hope-to-find-not-absolute-truth-but-the-truth-of-the-tale-of-the-imagination-of-t/>. Accessed 11.12.2020.
- [3] Wilde, Oscar. <https://www.allgreatquotes.com/literature-always-anticipates-life-it-does-not-copy-it/>. Accessed 11.12.2020.
- [4] Lewis, C. S. <https://meaningin.com/quotes/c--s--lewis/37351-literature-adds-to-reality-it-does-not-simply-des/>. Accessed 11.12.2020.
- [5] Pound, Ezra. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/ezra_pound_398432/ Accessed 11.12.2020.
- [6] Townsend, G. (2008). *Literature and Society*. In *The Cambridge Ancient History*. Vol. X. The Augustan Empire. 43 B.C. – A.D, 69. ed. Bowman, Champlin, Lintott. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 907.
- [7] Ahlava Liisa. (2012). *Poetics of Paucity or Rhetorics of Replenishment in Georges Perec's A Disparition*. in the Proceedings of the Conference on Values in Literature and the Value of Literature. held at Helsinki, Finland, 12th-14th September, 2012. p. 112.
- [8] Yeats, W. B. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/education-is-not-the-filling-of-a-pail-but-the-lighting-of-a-fire-it-s-an-inspiring-quote-but-did-wb-yeats-say-it-1.1560192/>. Accessed 11.12.2020.
- [9] Crippen, Martha. (2012). *The Value of Children's Literature*. <https://www.luther.edu/oneota-reading-journal/archive/2012/the-value-of-childrens-literature/>. Accessed 07.12.2020.
- [10] *ibid*.
- [11] Ghosh, Irma K. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242540340_Nurturing_Emotional_Intelligence_through_Literature/. Accessed. 07.12.2020.
- [12] Goleman, Daniel. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books. p. 9.
- [13] *ibid*.
- [14] Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Language Teaching*. London: Longman, Pearson Education Limited.
- [15] Parini, Jay. <https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/river-quotes/>. Accessed 11.12.2020.