

LITERATURE AS THE MIRROR OF SOCIETY: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

There is no doubt and denying the fact that literature is the direct off-shoot of the society. It is a manifestation of society in varied hues and colours. It is also a well-known fact that a writer is the product of his or her own age. He reflects the contemporary milieu in his or her writings. An author's imagination is shaped by the environment in which he or she lives. In this way, literature is closely related to society.

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It is a well-known fact that seen minutely and keenly, a body of literature is the part of the entire culture of society. The characteristics traits that differentiate the literature of one group from that of another derive from the characteristics traits of that group. The themes and problems of that group evolve from group activities and group situations existing in the society. Its significance is embodied in the context to which it expresses and enriches the totality of culture. In that sense, literature is an inseparable part of entire culture tied by tissue of connections with every other element in the culture.

The literature of a particular period reflects the contemporary set-up of the time-period and society in which it was written. If we go through Elizabethan literature, we come to know about the temperament of people of this age through the works produced by different authors. In the works of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, we find an authentic and honest portrayal of Renaissance spirit through the people living in that society.

Through the character of Doctor Faustus by Marlowe, we perceive boundless ambitions of Elizabethan coupled with their passion to soar high to search for something high. The literature of Restoration period is an exploration of immorality and obscenity rampant in the society. The Neo-classical literature is imbued with the spirit of realism which is the focal point of the works of Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollet.

Romantic literature presents beautifully the spirit of liberalism and freedom after long period of society dominated by rules and principles. Love for nature, supernaturalism and past are some of the key-features of Romantic literature that distinguishes it from Neo-classical period. The Romantic poets-William Wordsworth, John Keats and P.B. Shelley and Lord Byron have very beautifully expressed the spirit of Romantic age. In their works, we can find the romantic spirit that was dominating the whole society.

Contrary to the Romantic literature, the Victorian literature is an honest enterprise of materialistic values that the society of the time was ardently following. In their works, Matthew Arnold, Alfred Tennyson and Charles Dickens have portrayed beautifully the materialistic tendencies followed by society. So, the literature of this period reflects various ills and abuses prevalent in the society due to materialism.

The literature of modern period mirrors a society dominated by two great incidents- World War First and World War Second. How people were left alienated and isolated because of these two world wars is the crux of writings of many novelists and poets. Many war poets including Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brook and Robert Grave, in their literature, have

delineated a very vivid and graphic picture of society affected by war. The destruction and devastation caused by war coupled with the reaction of people is the subject-matter of their poetry.

The poems, *Christ and the Soldier* by Siegfried Sassoon, *Strange Meeting* by Wilfred Owen, *Aristocrats* by Keith Douglas, *Requiem for the Croppies* by Seamus Heaney, and *Platform One* by Ted Hughes are some literary pieces which demonstrate the picture of contemporary society torn by war.

In this way, we find how different genres-poetry, fiction, prose and drama are powerful means to throw ample light on the contemporary society. Literature is also, no doubt, a means of recording, preserving and transmitting knowledge and entertainment.

Literature is not only a means through which the traditions are followed and transmitted to subsequent generations, but it also acts as a torch-bearer that shows the path to the society. Literature is, in fact, the brain of humanity which records, preserves the experiences, knowledge, ideas for human race. Matthew Arnold rightly asserts the fact that literature is the criticism of life, but on the other hand, critics like Socrates have long ago warned that life without criticism is not worth living. It is through literature that offers the opportunity to arrive at the real meaning and importance of life.

In nutshell, literature is reflection of society.

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