

Social Commitment in Writing

Prof. Dr. Shreedhar Gautam¹

Professor of English, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Abstract

Whether literature should include or exclude politics as its subject matter is a question over which opinions would widely differ. However, in this article an endeavor has been made to highlight the literature written from the point of view of the socialist consciousness. A number of representative writers' works are referred to as examples to show how they tried to connect literature with the contemporary events. The article concludes that literature while not fully socialist but sufficiently critical of class society will reveal important truths about the society and, thus, contribute to the freeing of the human consciousness from the limitations which class society has imposed on it.

Key words: *social, commitment, art, consciousness, politics, realism, and romanticism.*

The distinct mark of serious writers is found reflected in their objectives of writing. They write not for the sake of mere writing, but to arouse human emotions and awareness about the social condition they live in. They do not write just to get published, but they write because they have some sincere issues which they want to share with a large audience in society. Such writers belong to the school of art for social purpose. They reject the theory that art and literature are meant only to create beautiful or entertaining works, to please people and the artist themselves. They use their art for social purpose.

However, their works are characterized as propaganda by the writers who belong to the school of art for 'art's sake'. They argue that if art and literature are used to propagate social ideas, they become propaganda. One of the proponents of this view, T.S. Eliot, was a great force in literary circles. His critical theories were the guiding lamps to the writers. But he minimized the importance of writing or appreciating a literary work of any kind, outside the work itself--religion, politics, even in the most empirical sense, the experience which supplies its subject matter. Rather he made deliberate attempts through his creative and critical writings to disentangle literature from social or political consciousness.

1 Prof. Gautam is associated with Patan Multipal Campus, Lalitpur, Nepal.

Literature should serve people

The other theory is that art and literature should serve the people, and help them in their struggle for a better life, by arousing emotions against oppression and injustice. Proponents of this school include Defoe, Fielding and George Eliot in English literature. They all three adopt a point of view deeply critical of British bourgeois society. Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and John Steinbeck in American literature; Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert and Victor Hugo in French; Goethe and Schiller in German; Tolstoy, Gogol and Dostoevsky in Russian are other examples. It does not mean that all of them were essentially Marxist writers like Terry Eagleton, Christopher Caudwell and Maxim Gorky, but they have contributed to exposing the evils inherent in the social structures of their time. They are honest writers, and they have many insights and attitudes highly inconvenient to the ruling class.

There have been great artists and writers in both schools. Shakespeare and Kalidas can be classified as playwrights of the 'art for art's sake' school. Their plays serve no social purpose beyond providing entertainment and an understanding of human impulses and motivations. Shakespeare was basically a realist, but had no intention to reform society or combat social evils. Yet, he is an artist of the highest rank.

G B Shaw wrote with a social purpose – to combat social evils and reform society. His plays represent a powerful denunciation of social injustices and evils. Dickens' novels attack the social evils in England. For example, if *Hard Times* of Dickens is an attack on individualist economics, *A Tale of Two Cities* deals with the social and political conditions of Paris and London during the French revolution. Art critics often regard the two basic trends or tendencies as realism and romanticism. The truthful, undistorted, depiction of people and their social conditions is realism. In romanticism, the emphasis is on flights of imagination, passion and emotional intensity.

Passive & active realism

Realism and romanticism can be either passive or active. Passive realism usually aims to depict reality truthfully, without preaching anything. The novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot and the Bronte Sisters are examples in this regard. In this sense, they are socially neutral. However, sometimes passive realism preaches fatalism, passivity, non-resistance to evil, suffering and humility.

Dickens, Victor Hugo, and Gorky belong to the school of active realists. They oppose fatalism, passivity and non-resistance to evil, and inspire people to fight social evils. The strength of passive realism lay in its exposure of human motivations and social evils, and its weakness in its lack of positive principles or ideals. With its truthful approach to reality, it concentrates on describing the visible and real, but shows no way out. It criticizes everything but asserted nothing. It often views man from a fatalistic point of view, as a passive product of his surroundings, helpless and incapable of changing social conditions.

Social Purpose

Passive and active realism can both serve a social purpose. But while passive realism often preaches fatalism and pessimism and the futility of trying to improve society, active realism is optimistic, characterized by solicitude and concern for the people. It inspires them to strive against their plight and improve their conditions. In Shakespeare, Balzac and Tolstoy it is difficult to see if they are romantics or realists: both trends merge. In fact, the highest art is often a combination of the two.

Romanticism

Romanticism, like realism, can be passive or active. Passive romanticism attempts to divert people from reality into a world of fantasy or illusions, or to a fruitless preoccupation with one's own inner world, with thoughts about the 'fatal riddle of life,' or dreams of love and death. Its characters may be knights, princes, demons or fairies who exist in a make-believe world. Passive romanticism hardly serves any social purpose.

Active romanticism, on the other hand, attempts to arouse man against societal evils, for example, Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound,' and Gorky's 'Song of the Stormy Petrel,' serve a social purpose. This genre rises above reality, not by ignoring it but by seeking to transform it, and regards literature as having a greater purpose than reflecting reality.

'Art for social purpose' may be expressed not always in a direct way, but also in indirect, roundabout or obscure ways, for example, through satire. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or *A Tale of a Tub*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and Voltaire's *Zadig* are some of the best examples.

Indian Experiences:

Among the Indian writers writing in English, Mulk Raj Anand, in his two famous novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, deals with the misery and wretchedness of the poor and their struggle for a better life. Almost all his subsequent novels with the exceptions mentioned above are a variant on the same theme and are intended to bring home to the reader the plight of the over-burdened peasant who is powerless to fight superstition and social convention and is baulked at every step in his aspirations for a better life. In a statement in his *Apology for Heroism* on his own evolution as an artist, Anand says:

So that whether we take the task of destroying the spurious elements of contemporary civilization or of reconstructing the future society, the creative artist occupies an important role in both spheres. And any attempt on his part to shirk responsibility is a betrayal of his own powers and the acceptance of mental and spiritual death. Above all it is the betrayal of the common humanity to which he is committed as an individual born to live in community with other individuals, a denial of all human relations, and a secession from society. (136)

Anand has all along written novels and short stories with a view to teachmen ‘to recognize the fundamental principles of human living and exercise vigilance in regard to the real enemies of freedom and socialism.’ He has been conscious of the need to ‘to help raise untouchables, the peasants, the serfs, the coolies and the other suppressed members of society, to human dignity and self-awareness in view of the abjectness, apathy and despair in which they are sunk.’

Nepali Experience:

Several Nepali writers have produced literature in Nepali and English inspired by the politics of the time. I just take the example of Laxmi Prasad Devkota whose views are notable, though he cannot be bracketed as a socialist or Marxist. In his essay titled “The Literature We Should Produce”, he has recommended to his literature brotherhood excursions into the mountains and the Terai regions, into hamlets and villages, to keep themselves in touch with the living people. He opines, like writers in China and Russia, we should go into them, live with them, work with them for a time to bring out what they have in their inner most hearts as visions and ideals. He concludes every true writer will be a school in himself, and

he who translates the life of the people into literature is greater and more potent than a well-organized university.

It is not necessary that one should be essentially a socialist or Marxist to write about common peoples conditions. For example, Leo Tolstoy was not a committed Marxist, but he stood out as a great artist in the period of serfdom. In the series of masterly works he wrote in the course of over half a century of literary activity he depicted mainly old, pre-revolutionary Russia, which even after 1861 had remained in a state of semi-serfdom; rural Russia; landlord and peasant Russia. In depicting this period in the historical life of Russia, Tolstoy was able to raise so many great problems in his works, was able to rise to such a height of artistic power, that his works occupied a place in the front rank of world fiction.

Upward Edward, a minor novelist of his time, believes that a novelist's duty is to produce revolutionary fiction, a good fiction that takes the side of oppressed people:

A writer today who wishes to produce the best work that he is capable of producing, must go over to the progressive side of the class conflict. Having become a Socialist, however, he will not necessarily become a good writer. The quality of his writing will depend upon his individual talent, his ability to observe the complex detail of the real world. But unless he has in his everyday life taken the side of the workers, he cannot, no matter how talented he may be, write a good book, and cannot tell the truth about reality. (18)

Mao has spoken a lot on literature and art, and he has immensely contributed to the progressive literature. He has proven, through his writings that progressive literature has special place in modern society engulfed in vicious inequalities and injustice. To quote him:

What does lacking in understanding mean? Not understanding the language that is, not being familiar with the rich, lively language of the masses. Since many writers and artists stand aloof from the masses and lead empty lives, naturally they are unfamiliar with the language of the people. Accordingly, their works are not only insipid in language but often contain nondescript expressions of their own coining which run counter to popular usage. (72)

Mao considers all culture, all literature, and art belong to definite classes and geared to definite political lines. For him, there is no such thing as for art's sake. He means that the art that stands above classes is detached from or independent of politics.

For serious writers commitment is inherent in the act of writing. To write, for them, is to talk, and to talk is to reveal an aspect of the world, in order to change it. Literature, for them, is therefore the result of an attitude, conscious or unconscious, towards the world. The committed writer is different from others, not because he or she is involved in the world, but because he or she endeavors to acquire the most lucid, most complete awareness of being involved.

Terry Eagleton discusses the four fundamental principles of the Marxist view of literature as “first, the base and the super structure of the society, second, the relationship between the form and the content, third, the writer's commitment to the cause of the proletariat and the fourth, the author being the producer” (63). Marx's and Engels' demands on the artist include “truthfulness of depiction, a concrete historical approach to the events described and personages with live and individual traits reflecting typical aspects of the character and psychology of the class milieu to which they belong” (24).

According to Christopher Caudwell, it is the social tradition and not the literary tradition which produces great literature. Had it not been so, it would have been possible to produce great literature in dead languages like Latin and Greek with their great literary traditions. To quote him:

The tradition of art are not languages but social traditions. Literary art therefore has an essential feature the use of associations gathered in shops, market places, friendly conversations, political speeches and quarrels. It is not surprising therefore if literary art is conditioned at every step by social relations, because it is using the product of social relationships fabricated by the necessity of human co-operation. (36)

The above discussion on literature with social purpose reveals that the committed approach of the writers is the mark of the desire to take part in the battle for the human betterment. It is not so much the particular ideology which matters but the spirit in which it is taken up. This does not mean that ideologies are not important and the pragmatism is the answer. On the contrary, if commitment is not given solid

foundations, it is in danger of remaining vague and ineffectual. Committed literature may not have special theme or methods, but it is distinguished by greater realism and by the author's attitude to life. Such literature helps us make aware of our true condition and to increase our sense of responsibility.

Need of good literature

There is a demand of good art and literature today before us. We need to bridge the vacuum in artistic and literary terms. We need to discourage the trend of commercialization in literature. Many writers write not to highlight the plight of the masses, but to earn money.

Today Nepal thirsts for good literature. If someone writes about the people's real problems it will spread like wildfire. Art and literature must serve the people. Writers and artists must have genuine sympathy for the people and depict their sufferings. Like Dickens and Shaw in England, Rousseau and Voltaire in France, Thomas Paine and Walt Whitman in America, and Gorky and Tolstoy in Russia, they must inspire people to struggle for a better life, what can be really called human existence, and to create a better world, free of injustice.

Should artists and writers follow the school of 'art for art's sake' or 'art for social purpose'? What we have to consider is, which would be more beneficial to the situation of today in Nepal and elsewhere. In a poor country like Nepal, 'art for social purpose' alone can be more beneficial. Nepal faces tremendous challenges, so artists and writers must join the ranks of those struggling for a better Nepal. They must inspire through their writings, writing against oppression and injustice.

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