

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Literature as an Artefact of Jouissance, Sempiternity, and Reflection: A Diachronic Study

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Article History: Submitted-15/03/2017, Revised-07/04/2017, Accepted-24/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

Abstract:

Literature is one of the timeless and charismatic artefacts of the human culture. It is characterised by foreverness, fantasy, imagination, pleasure, and its orgasmic flavour. Literature never loses its sheen and message. The message and motif of the works of Literature transcend time and *mise-en-scene*. The works of Literature are always addressed by their perpetuity and uninterrupted existence. Literary works never become banal and threadbare. They have a natural tendency to remain fresh and appealing. Literature is such kind of intellectual and imaginative effluence that is sonorous to speak, sagacious to read, and sempiternal to keep. The present paper attempts to show through a diachronic study how Literature is characterised by its intemporality and newness. Further, this paper highlights how Literature written in the antiquity is still a fresh and sumptuous feast for the coeval readers; besides this, the paper underscores the delectation and delight that have always remained the insignias of Literature. In addition to this, the paper shows how Literature acts as an artefact of societal reflection.

Keywords: Literature, Timeless, Orgasmic, Sheen, Transcends Perpetuity, Delectation, Insignias, Newness.

Literature is as old as human language, and as new as tomorrow's sunrise

- Ronald Carter and John McRae [1]

Defining Literature is not only a cumbersome task but also a somewhat hopeless and vexing endeavour, for Literature is so many things at a time that it defies definition. Roland Barthes, a renowned critic, is right when he says: Literature is a question minus the answer¹. We cannot limit the significance of Literature by imprisoning it in single sentence definitions and fancy phrases. Literature need not be defined. It defines itself when we read it. Such is the beauty of Literature. Literature is one of the bewitching effluences of human imagination. Being the product of human imagination, it always takes readers to a never-never land with the help of poetic imagery, and lovely content. Literature is a land of utopia and fantasy. Helen Keller says: Literature is my Utopia. Here i am not disenfranchised [3] Literature has

[1] *The Routledge History of English Literature*

[2] See <https://www.brainyquote.com//>

always been strongly tinged with two mesmerising and spell-binding characteristics namely, an everlasting pleasure and universal relevance. Literature of every language and nationality is distinctly and exceptionally reflective, pleasant, and long-lasting. The works written by the literary big-wigs of different nationalities and languages like Dante, Homer, Geoffrey Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Ghalib, Amir Khusro, Rumi, Firdausi, Saadi, Jaami, Goethe, and others are still pristine and are read with a new enthusiasm and fervour. Their works are still relevant and entertain us with the same intensity with which they used to amuse and entertain the readers of those times. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Spenser's *Faery Queen*, Homer's *Iliad*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Marlow's *Dr. Faustus*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Firdausi's *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*), Ghalib's *Letters*, Sir Iqbal's *Javaid Nama*, *Iblis ki Majlisi Shura*, Rumi's *Masnavi* etc although the writings of the yore, are still fresh and firm in providing pleasure and intellectual sagacity to the contemporary readers. Spenser's *Faery Queen* takes us to the imaginary world. Likewise the works of the different litterateurs mentioned above enlighten and entertain us with different themes and techniques. The main quality of any literary work whether written, oral, or visual is that, it interprets itself differently at different points of time. It is this quality of Literature that sustains it and maintains its newness. I fully concur here with a great American literary figure Ezra Pound who says, "Literature is news that stays news (qtd. in *Beginning Theory* p.17). Really literature is always news. It never gets stale nor loses its reader--pleasing appeal.

There are many things that help Literature to get going. The first thing in my estimation that is an elixir for Literature is its use of literary language or what we call figures of speech. The multifarious figures of speech like metaphor, simile, personification, pun, tension, etc. lend a fresh lease of life to literary works. These figures of speech have an inherent charisma and differentia in amplifying the effectiveness, pleasure, and importance of Literature. These figures adorn the literary works. They are an icing on the cake of Literature. The Metaphorical use of language enhances the literary magnetism of any piece of work. The language of Literature diametrically differs from the literal and ordinary language. It is because of this fact that the Russian Formalist critic Roman Jakobson defines Literature as, "an organised violence committed on the ordinary speech" [4]. The language of Literature is uncouthly attractive and captivating. It is artistic in style and aesthetic in sense. It is the use of the best words in the best order that makes any piece of Literature the product of eternity and *Jouissance*. The Language of Literature is highly accommodating and malleable. Ronald Carter and John McRae maintain that:

A literary language goes through a great adventures and experiments. Forms and genres take shape: the comedy and the tragedy, the ode and the epic, the novel and the dramatic poem, blank verse, *verse libre*, stream of consciousness. (xvii)

Apart from containing a special language, Literature embodies various other elements. The words of an American critic Lionel Trilling are highly relevant to quote here. Trilling says, "Literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of

variousness, possibility, complexity and unity². Since Literature is the mirror of society, it does so in the best possible way. Literature has an inherent oomph in depicting and picturizing the human life in the words of truth and beauty. Literature is the expression of human life in the magnetic and pellucid words. Apart from being the product of pleasure, literature buttresses ideology. The words of Ronald Carter and John McRae are highly germane to quote here who say: “Literature can give comfort and consolation (as religious literature often does), can illuminate and mirror our problems, and can affirm and reinforce social, political and ideological standpoints.”(3). Literature is of different categories. It may be a literature of entertainment or the literature of propaganda. But both kinds of literatures contain what in a literary phrase we call “mesmerism and message”. Thomas De Quincy, the famous English essayist, categorises literature into: Literature of Power and Literature of Knowledge. Literature of power has a tendency to last for all the ages. Literature of knowledge is self-explanatory.

Literature written in the antiquity and Literature written in its aftermath is overly pleasing and captivating. If the antique or classical Literature pleases us with the ornate language, dexterous narrative style, and by its tantalising story interest, the Literature of the contemporary times or what we call Modern Literature has a *jene Sais quoi* to entertain us with the newfangled techniques of postmodern hyper-reality, post-colonial ideological content, science fiction and virtual themes. One more quality of Literature is that, it presents itself through different genres and mediums. We have a genre of novel, genre of drama, genre of poetry, genre of epic, genre of ballad, genre of sonnet, genre of essay, etc. These different genres have their individual efficacy to teach and delight the readers simultaneously; hence the beauty and pleasure of Literature.

Literature has a tendency to please and displease the readers. But there is a covert *repertoire* of orgasmic pleasure in its overt displeasure. Roland Barthes one of the kingpin Poststructuralist critics in his seminal book, *The Pleasure of the Text*(1973) categorised literary texts in two groups: *Writerly Texts*(Scriptable) and *Readerly Texts* (Lisible).The *Writerly texts* are those texts that command a full concentration and intellectual agility on the part of the reader because the composition and unity of the *Writerly texts* always gets re-established and re-fashioned by its reconstruction, the codes that form and constantly slide around within the text. These *Writerly texts* provide what Roland Barthes calls *Jouissance* to the reader. The *Readerly texts* on the other hand are reader friendly, that is, reader easily follows the message. In *Readerly text*, the reader needs not be intellectually smart. He or she can in a passive manner fathom the message of the text. The *Readerly texts* give readers what Barthes terms as *Plaisir*. In his book, *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (2010), Pramod K. Nayar differentiates between the *Readerly* and *Writerly* texts in the following simple words:

A *readerly text* is one that explains, explicates, and describes everything. It controls meaning and the reader is a mere passive recipient of meaning. A

[3] See IZquotes.Com

[4] https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2116.Lionel_Trilling

writerly text, on the other hand, is one where the reader has an active role to play. The text teases, hides, offers clues to the reader to decode. (37)

The works of Literature that belong to pre- modern era can be called as the *Readerly texts* and the literary works of Modernism, Post-Modernism, Post-Structuralism, and Post-Colonialism are absolutely the *Writerly texts*. The literary works like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* etc are *Readerly texts* because while gleaning through these works a reader easily fathoms the message. The literary works like Becket's *Waiting for Godot* and others are *Writerly texts* because one needs to make an active effort to get to the point while gleaning through these works. Why one needs to be alert while perusing the works of these periods is because they employ umpteen perspectives and techniques, and literary innovations. If for example, one is to read T.S Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) or *Love song of J.Alfred Prufrock* one cannot read them on a comfortable arm-chair. They are not everybody's cup of tea. One needs to be fully conversant about the whole corpus of mythology. Not only that, one must have a full understanding of both Modernism and Postmodernism. Why so? Because they are the crazy-quilt of the techniques of both Modernism and Postmodernism. Literary Postmodernism has blessed us with the plethora of works that are literally brain-teasing but at the same time pleasing. The works of Luigi Pirandello, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Becket, Harold Pinter and others, are really literary banquets. Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1964), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and Becket's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) etc, offer a whole range of Jouissance and intellectualistic food to the readers.

Postmodernist literary movement has proliferated a number of literary techniques that simultaneously provide us with pleasure and widen our mental- horizon about the world. Post-modern literary genres like Metafiction, Magical Realism, and Historiographic Metafiction are the genres to conjure with. Magic realist novels like Rushdie's *Midnights Children* (1981), John Fowls *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) are the postmodern literary banquets. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) dextrously depicts the historical events of India. This makes it a mirror of society. It juxtaposes fact and fiction very skilfully. Which makes it a postmodern novel? It not only enlightens the readers but also enthuses them with its narrative style, magical realistic technique, and its engaging story interest. Likewise John Fowls, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is a postmodern novel with difference. It is a *piece de resistance* of postmodern literature. It employs number of stylistic techniques to highlight its thematic interest. It is considered as the meeting point of many themes and techniques. If on the one hand it speaks for feminine issues, on the other hand it also incorporates the theme of science and religion. It employs a range of techniques. It makes a profuse use of intertextuality. The main interest of the novel lies in its multiple endings. So we can say that as a work of literature, it not only mesmerises us with its story interest but also serves as a piece of societal reflection. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) is also a postmodern novel with uncouth postmodern techniques. It belongs to a particular postmodern literary genre called "Hysterical Realism". It is a literary technique that blends eerie atmosphere with social phenomenon. The novel deals with the theme of immigration, theme of fundamentalism, theme of racism, theme

of assimilation and what not. So this novel serves as an artefact of entertainment and at the same time plays the role of social mirror.

Every literary work reflects the social setup of its period. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* clearly shows the manners, attitudes, inclinations, and affectations of different classes. Literary works belonging to Elizabethan period project the inclinations of elite people. Literature of the eighteenth century or what we call as the Literature of Restoration depicts the manners, humours and habits of the people of that time. Literature is a social phenomenon and it reflects society in the best possible way. Literature preserves the culture of the people. It pictures the humanization of its people. It is for this reason that the German philosopher Goethe says, "Literature is the humanization of the whole world" (qtd. in *English Literature its History and its significance* p.7). Literature of a nation is not only an object of imagination and pleasure but also an entity that emphatically reflects the mores and taboos of the nation to which it belongs. Literature is a soft as well as a solid index that mirrors the lives of the people living in societies in an outright stance. Literature dons many masks to project the society. Literature always works with the principle of indirection. This principle of indirection enhances the efficacy and significance. Literature influences readers in an indirect way. The literary works that are overt and direct in conveying the message are of little interest and modicum significance. It is because of this that an all-time Romantic poet John Keats maintains: We distrust literature that has a palpable design upon us (qtd. in *Beginning Theory*.p.18)

Literature has an inherent tendency to remain fresh and entertaining forever. Literary works of the past take new births in the hands of the readers of different ages. In a sentence we can say: Literature is not of one age but of all the ages. The message and theme of literary works transcend time, place, and period. They serve as a means of societal reflection. Literature paints the lives of the people in the words of imagination and beauty. The language and diction of the works of Literature present familiar and common things of life in a new and different manner. In a Formalistic phrase, we can say that literary language defamiliarises every common and quotidian thing. Hence we can say: Literature explains common things and extrapolates new ones. Literature is an art of an exceptional style and station.

According to William J. Long:

Literature is the expression of life in words of truth and beauty; it is the written record of man's spirit, of his thoughts, emotions, aspirations; it is the history, and the only history, of the human soul. It is characterised by its artistic, its suggestive, and its permanent qualities. Its two tests are its universal interest and its personal style. Its object, aside from the delight it gives us, is to know man ... (8-9)

Hence a diachronic study of Literature reveals that Literature is an epitome of eternity, enthusiasm, illumination, and social reflection. In conclusion, we can say that Literature is ever entertaining, everlasting, and ever enlightening.

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