



LITERATURE BEYOND TIME AND PLACE

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Literature, generally speaking, is an expression that is achieved through language. The word is used in at least two different ways: Many times it simply means anything that is written or considering the above concept, any expression achieved through language. Then, railway time tables, account books and catalogues may also be regarded as 'literature'. In this broad sense, as R. J. Rees writes, an account of a football match or an advertisement for soap powder is as much literature as the 'Dialogues' of Plato or the novels of Graham Greene.

R.J. Rees further clarifies that literature is writing which expresses and communicates thoughts, feelings and attitudes; yet, says Rees, it is not literature in the sense we use the word, as it lacks one of the qualities that make serious literature – the quality of "permanence".¹ Rees also tries to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' literature. He points out certain qualities which good literature should have; i.e. i) Psychological truth or holding a mirror up to nature; ii) Originality iii) craftsmanship; and iv) a consciousness of moral values.

As Matthew Arnold has said; 'Poetry is a mirror (criticism) of life.'²It should hold a mirror up to nature. The poet, dramatist or novelist should depict the feeling or idea which we at once recognize as being, actually or potentially, a part of our own experience. For example, the feeling expressed in a sonnet by Michael Drayton, written in sixteenth century. The poet expresses the feeling almost experienced by most of us- quarreling and parting in anger from some dear one – injured feeling- yet, even at the moment of parting, that one little word or the sign of love from the other person would be enough to soften us and reconcile: 'Since There Is No Help' –

Since there is no help, come let us kiss and part-

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Nay, I have done, you get no more of me;
And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart,
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.
Shake hands forever, cancel all our vows,
And when we meet at any time again,

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Be it not seen in either of our brows,

That we one jot of former love retain.³

But something more than good literature, we are here concerned here actually with, is universal literature. Here, also the quality of permanence is the most required feature. Most of the literature produced before us in our world is mediocre, some is bad, some is good, and a very, very, little is great. As Bacon has said in his essay 'Of studies': "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested".⁴ As he further clarifies that very few books (rarer literature) have the universal appeal. So they should be read wholly. Bacon himself can be considered a writer of extra-ordinary literature, with his epigrammatic and aphoristic style. Some of his epigrams stood the taste of time and place and remembered even after more than four hundred years. As in a single statement he describes the use of studies; which is concerned with all the people, irrespective of time and place- "Studies serve for delight, for ornament and for ability."⁵

Some modern writers talk about disposable art-i.e. literature intended to be destroyed and forgotten. However, most writers want their work to last for future generation. Literature with universal appeal aims at immortality; both of the writer and his subject. Shakespeare elaborates it in his Sonnet No. XVIII, addressed to the mysterious young-friend:

.... But thy eternal summer shall not fade

.....

When in eternal lines to time thou growest:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.⁶

But most writers fail to achieve it, even if they long for immortality. There were plenty of good dramatists at the time of Shakespeare but except by a few scholars and researchers most of them have been forgotten. So the great writers are rather rare and rare, still are the ones having universal appeal in their literature. There is a verse in Bhagwad Gita:

ManushyanamSahastreshuKaschityatatiSiddhaye!

YatatamapiSiddhanamKaschit mam vettitatvataha!!⁷

The same is true about the writers, as the above verse indicates- out of thousands among men only one reaches to perfection, and those who are perfect, there is seldom any one to reach the peak. The works like The Bhagwad Gita, The Ramayan, The Illiad, The Bible and The

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Mahabharat are some striking examples of universality and the years of their lasting value and power clearly indicates it.

Therefore, the literature which affects, entertains, preaches or teaches, or serves the uses mentioned by Bacon to all people, at any time, place, situation, etc. with vigorous impact may be regarded as universal literature or the literature with the phenomenon of universality. The dictionary of literary terms explains it as follows:

“Universality is the quality in a work of art which enables it to transcend the limits of particular situation, place, time, person, and incident in such a way that it may be of interest, pleasure and profit (in the non-commercial sense) to all people at anytime in any place. As it was expressed in the treatise ‘On the Sublime’- lofty and true greatness in art pleases all men in all ages. The writer who aspires to universality and behavior concerns himself with, primarily, aspects of human nature and behavior which seldom or never changes.”⁸ It also gives the term QUOD Semper and QUOD Ubique (L. which always and which everywhere). This remains the
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hallmark of great literature in time and place. It applies the taste of eternity, ubiquity and consensus.

There are many such striking examples of universal literature in different languages of different countries. Matthew Arnold suggests them as the touchstone for his comparative method of criticism and judge the literature on this basis: For e.g., Hamlet's dying request to Horatio-

“If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breathe in pain, To tell my story.”⁹

As Arnold says “Indeed as there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent,lines of great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry.....”⁹. He prescribes the lines from great masters (classics) from Paradise Lost –

“And courage never to submit or yield
And what is else not to be overcome.....”¹⁰

And the single, but the perfect single line from *Virgin*, according to Arnold:

“In *La-suavolontade e nostra pace.*” [In his will, is our peace].

We may find the examples of such great literature from Indian masters also, e.g. ‘The song of India’ is really universal in the sense and the way it deals with the salute of the poet to the great land showing integrity in diversity-

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Heart of mine, awake in this holy place of pilgrimage

In this land of India on the shore of vast humanity.

Here do I stand..... to salute man divine

And sing his praise in many a gladsome paen.¹¹

The intensity and the sublimity of the feeling which can be experienced universally in “ChhelliPrarthana” by Meghani which was recited in the court-

“Hajarovarsha-nijuniamarivedanao

Kalejachiratikampavati am bhaykathao

----- samarpan tare kadam pyara prabhu-o.”¹²

The same great thought and feeling is expressed by Botadkar, an old Gujarati poet, in his most celebrated and sublime poem depicting woman in her eternal mother form with ever flowing and overflowing affection.

MEETHA MADHU NE MEETHA MEHULA RE LOL

ETHI MITHI TE MORI MAT RE,

JANANI NI JOD SAKHI NAHI JADE RE LOL...¹³

[Sweet is the honey, and sweet is the rain, the sweeter though is my mother. There is no equal to my mother, my dear, she is the idol of godly love.]

Such literature really transcends any boundaries of time and place and worthy of being considered as universal literature.

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