

WHAT IS PROGRESSIVE LITERATURE?

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to define progressive literature as it has often been defined merely associating it with leftist ideology. My study aims at justifying my point that progressiveness of a literary text is not to be measured on the basis of who has created it, but on the basis of the theme it has carried, and form of expression it has adopted. It would not be mistaken to argue that ideology of a person affects his/her literary creation. It is also true to say that progressive sentiment doesn't generate in the mind of a non-progressive person. At the same time, it would be equally mistaken to argue that everyone who is non-Marxist is non-progressive.

Talking about contribution in human life and society, modernist and postmodernist texts are mostly less progressive in nature. Modernist and postmodernist literary writings don't energize human beings to move for progress and to fight against troubles. Progressive writings need to uncover pains, troubles and misdeeds existing in human life and society, and should empower human beings to overcome them with struggle. A good literature speaks for change opposing numerous hindrances that are likely to appear on the way to progress. Making the people realizes their power and potentiality, and enabling them to utilize them is the responsibility of a good literature.

KEYWORDS: *Progressive, Aesthetics, Marxism, Ideology, Reality, Modernism, Postmodernism, Literature*

INTRODUCTION

Simply defining, literature is an artistic expression of imagination and feelings through the medium of language. It is generally believed that literature is the product of human imagination with the purpose to enable and expose the emotional as well as the intellectual faculties of mind. Its primary aim is to satisfy human psyche sowing the seed of beauty and pleasure within it. In this sense, literature is something that is concerned with emotional, intellectual and aesthetic realm of human beings.

One very obvious reality of literature is that its definition has been changed remarkably with the change of time and situation. The way medieval writer's defined literature is quite different from the way renaissance scholars defined it. Romanticist's defined literature differently than modernists defined it. William Wordsworth defined poetry as 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' while T S Eliot defined it as 'an escape from emotion.' Some scholars consider literature to be an art expressed through words to satisfy our aesthetic sense. For them literature is primarily an instrument to generate beauty, and to provide pleasure for the human mind. Some, on the other hand, argue that literature doesn't merely have an aesthetic value; rather it has some kind of social, political, cultural and historical representations and responsibilities.

Literature and Its Aesthetic

In late 19th century, some literary writers and critics including Oscar Wilde strongly advocated for aesthetic value of literature under the campaign of 'art for art's sake' movement. This movement highlighted the aspects of beauty and pleasure in any literary text, rather than its contribution to society. For the scholars of this movement, the major concern of an artist is to create beauty in the text so that the readers could enjoy while reading it. T S Eliot also advocated for this movement arguing that literature is not to express personal emotions of the author, and there is no necessity that it needs to expose social occurrences. This kind of scholarly debate is going on till date regarding whether art is for art's sake or it is for life's sake.

Many scholars disagree with the argument that literature is solely an imaginative product of the author, and they also disagree that literature is merely for aesthetic purpose. Every literary text has a strong bond with society, and it is an outcome of integrity between social reality and imaginative potentiality of the creator. Human feelings, desires, expectations and ideologies can never be ahistorical and unsocial; they are all products of society. That's why, human imagination and ideological creations does not go beyond social, political, cultural and historical influences. Every literary creator expresses some kind of reality in his/her writings. Balzac considers literature as 'profound grasp of reality' and 'imaginative integrity' in to it (Davies, 2006, p. 141). As every literature carries certain ideology in it, its major responsibility is to unmask the prevailing contents of society on something. Georg Lukacs (1992), a famous Marxist critic, opines that there needs to be 'unity between artistic and political representation' in literature (p. 907). Writing is not merely a recreational doodling; it is a productive and purposive activity, relational in its ends, and constrained by the conditional possibilities of a particular social situation and historical movement.

Progressive Literature

When we talk about progressive literature, it is often considered to be leftist kind of thought. After Marxism became an influential socio-political theory, intellectuals of various sectors set their positive eyes on it, and they considered themselves as progressive. It challenged previously existing capitalistic and feudalistic notions of ideology. Those intellectuals who advocated for the socialist transformation of society started to be called progressive, no matter whether they involved in politics or not. Regarding the case of literature there is also an organization named 'Progressive Writer's Association' in many countries of the world under which writers of Marxist ideology are united. The writer who is Marxist in ideology and is involved in that association is defined as the progressive writer and his/her writings as progressive literature.

There may arise a question why Marxist writers are considered to be progressive and their writings as progressive writings. The answer might be that a Marxist always speaks for rights and justice of human beings. Rejecting inequality and discrimination, a Marxist writer defends for social justice and economic equality. S/he expresses the voices for radical transformation of social behavior, and for the rights of poor and powerless people since the majority of the people in society are working class people and they are deprived of justice, equality and opportunity in present capitalistic society. Similarly, a Marxist literary writer always gives voice to those whose voices are unheard; gives power to those who are always powerless. In such situation, the ideology of a Marxist scholar is progressive in nature who shares a progressive ideology.

Literature and ideology are closely associated with each other. It is generally believed that the ideology that the

writer carries is reflected in literary creation. Those who are influenced by Marxist ideology are progressive in nature. They believe that change is possible and human struggle can bring changes in life and society. Such kind of progressive thought of the writers definitely affects their literary creation. But regarding the relation between literature and ideology, there has always been debated; either a literary text expresses ideology, or it produces ideology. Some scholars argue that literary texts express ideology, and progressive ideology can be expressed only by Marxist intellectuals. Some scholars, on the other hand, believe that literary texts produce ideology. Terry Eagleton believes “The literary text is not the ‘expression’ of ideology, nor is ideology the ‘expression’ of social class. The text rather, is a certain production of ideology” (qtd. in Green, 1996, p. 128).

Although I can’t deny the fact that ideology affects in the production of literary text, I personally agree more with Eagleton. It’s not sure that the person who is poor does necessarily carry proletarian ideology, and the one who is rich is always occupied with bourgeois ideology. Similarly, a literary text can also have power to change the society and human mind. Sometimes it helps to generate certain belief and opinion in the mind of readers, and sometimes it also causes for the change of belief. In this regard, the word ‘progressive’ may not necessarily be associated merely with leftist politics. Progressiveness of literature is concerned with how the writing directs our society; how human relations are presented; how much it advocates for change and development; how much it energizes human beings to fight against troubles, and what kind of change it creates in the mind of readers. It is not always concerned with which political ideology s/he favours in general. Progressiveness in literature is seen in his/ her form and style of expression which rejects false traditional assumptions, and applies new kind of approaches. When Charles Darwin published the book *The Origin of Species* in 1859, his radical ideas regarding the origin of living creatures were highly progressive. The theses that Darwin proposed in his book were: “all existing vegetable and animal forms were descended from earlier, more primitive forms by way of a biological evolution” and every “evolution was the result of natural selection” (Gaarder, 1995, p. 339). These theses of Darwin’s book constructed a great threat upon Christianity which had strong belief that each living being had been created separately at a time by the God. The view of Darwin that plants and animals had evolved from some few primitive species protested Christian philosophy and received massive refutations from theologians.

Change and development is natural phenomenon in every aspect of human life. Along with such changes, human aspirations and expectations also get changed. The major responsibility of a good literary text is to catch and represent the changed aspirations of human beings. Georg Lukacs tells that ‘there can be no literature without at least the appearance of change and development.’ A progressive writer raises voice against ‘status quo;’ represents the true aspirations and expectations of common people; and energises them to move ahead for gaining such expectations. The idea that Rousseau expressed in his essay ‘The Social Contract’ in 1762 was progressive because it expressed revolutionary idea rejecting ‘status quo’, and it truly represented common aspirations of the citizens of his society. When he rejected traditional ruling system and proposed democratic system of electing rulers, it became not only radical and surprising for traditional rulers; rather the same text could become the Bible for French Revolution. We may not feel it to be more progressive today, but before 250 years it was a powerful thunder to call the government of kings as arbitrary and to tell the citizens that they had right to alter the rulers. “An arbitrary government can be legitimate only on condition that each successive generation of subjects is free either to accept or to reject it, and if this is so, then the government will no longer be arbitrary” (Rousseau, 2008, p. 87).

Literature on Modernist and Postmodernist Ideology

After the rise of Marxism as literary criticism, literature started to be defined as the reflection of social reality. For Marxism, literature carries the conflicts existing among people in society, and literary creation cannot be dissociated with social issues. At the same time, some critics argue that literature has its own world of aesthetics, and no literature can play the role of mirror to reflect social reality. Similarly, there is also an argument that directing human beliefs, guiding them towards idealism, and expecting some kind of progressive and optimistic resolution are sometimes baseless and unreal in literature.

Keeping the later belief into consideration, modernist and postmodernist ideologies have directed literary writings toward the expression of pessimism and pathos. The ideology of modernism and postmodernism aim at revealing human feelings and sentiments reserved in the unconscious which are primarily full of sadness, seclusion and seduction. Most of the modernist and postmodernist texts express lamentation, frustration, hopelessness and escape from problem with very little advocacy for change and development. For these texts, a human being is not capable enough for causing progress in own life and society. Chris Snipp (2006) believes “Modernism is a literature of mourning, forever lamenting the profound and tragic loss of the golden age of unity and belonging” (p. 410). If we see the writings of T S Eliot, a notable modernist writer, we find mostly the lamentation and mourning for what has been lost lacking any progressive direction for future. The following line of “The Waste Land” shows how much fragmented and paralyzed a human situation is:

Son of Man

You cannot say, or guess for what you know only

A heap of broken images (qtd. in Carter, 2001, p. 340).

W B Yeats, another modernist writer, has also expressed a gloomy future to the readers instead of arousing any sign of optimism. The last two lines of his poem “The Second Coming” go in this way:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (qtd. in Carter, 2001, p. 342).

The characters in the dramas of Samuel Beckett are so powerless and absurd that they can make no any progress in their life. There is no any development in events and characters, and there is no hope of better future. He “pushes his characters to the limits of solitude, non-communication and hopelessness. Yet they all survive and any thoughts of suicide are dispelled.”(Carter, 2001, p. 420) Beckett’s drama “Endgame” begins with the expression “finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished” (2001, p. 825). The characters in this text are so powerless and paralyzed that they can’t move, and can’t do anything creative, nor they can fight against trouble.

Can we escape from the projection of reality in a literary text? It is a question that often causes the wage of war between realists and modernists/postmodernists. Actually representation of reality is the heart of literature either in fragmented form or in negative scene. Realists speak for the representation of reality in totality while modernists and postmodernists insist on the depiction of fragmented reality in literary writings. Francois Lyotard, a postmodern thinker, states that most of the modern and postmodern writers allow the presentation of something that is unpreventable. There is an attempt to make unpreventable task perceptible to others which itself is obscure and unrealist kind of insist. Lyotard

says "...it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (2005, p. 314).

A utopian dream is one of the basic realities for human living. Every human mind dreams of a situation in life where there is no any torture and trouble at all. So, the expectation of such ideal consequences in literary writings should also be considered to be an attempt for representing reality. The reason people believe in the God and go for prayer is because theology has created a utopia that a human being has been searching for from the time immemorial. One of the reasons people are impressed by Marxist ideology is because it has dreamt of a situation in which no human being will have the sense of frustration and fragmentation. Most of the modernist and postmodernist writings lack the seed of utopia to sow in the mind of a frustrated individual. Terry Eagleton, in his book *After Theory*, claims that "postmodern cultural theory has little to say about ultimate values and the big topics such as morality, metaphysics, love, biology, religion, revolution, evil, death, sufferings, essences, and universal foundations" (qtd in Zimmermann, 2013, p. 802).

The text that only spreads pessimism and disillusionment rather than spreading power to face challenge can't have positive contribution in the society. Modernist and postmodernist texts have paralyzed human potentiality. It's real that there are lots of troubles and discriminations in human life, but human beings are also capable enough to manage them with positive solution. A text that only leads toward the sea of fear and frustration without any glimpse of positive solution and strength of hope can't be a progressive text. Literature is to give voice to those who are voiceless, and to provide strength to those who are powerless. As working class people are always oppressed and are deprived of identity, it's the role of literary writers to represent the ideology of oppressed people. According to Fredrich Engels, literature should have "the rebellious reaction of the working class against the oppressive medium which surrounds them, attempts ... at recovering their status as human beings" (qtd. in Davies, 2006, p. 144).

Some scholars like Theodor Adorno fear that modern capitalism and its technological advancement is leading us to the world which excludes the vitality of human creativity. Production of mass culture by modern science and technology is a deception for Adorno as it commercializes art and makes it a commodity. In modern capitalism "even radical innovators are confronted with the fact that, by working in any artistic medium in an age in which technology permits large scale, rapid dissemination of art, they are in many respects determined by what has already been done before by other artists"(Bowie, 2006, p. 195). Adorno points out that there is lack of creativity and progressive sentiment in modern literature as there is perennial danger of repetition of what are already familiar. In contrast to the view of Adorno, Walter Benjamin advocates for the utilization of modern technology for the promotion of art and literature. For Benjamin use of modern technology for mass production of art and literature is not only imitative; rather it is creative, too. It can have positive and creative impact especially on working class people. "Benjamin claimed that new forms of art, including some forms of Hollywood film, are capable of having an active effect on the political thinking of the working class, of a kind which is excluded by autonomous art from the great bourgeois tradition."(Bowie, 2006, p. 193). Although it has been much talked in the postmodern era about the demise of Marxism along with the death of ideology and the end of history, many theorists during 'post theory' period have strongly argued that Marxism as theory does never die as it advocates for progressive reformation.

Literature and Social Responsibility

Albert Einstein, a brilliant scientist, once wrote "Man can find meaning in life, short and perilous as it is, only

through devoting himself to society” (qtd. in Dolgov, 1980, p. 13). Every individual has certain responsibility in society to lead it towards better future. The responsibility of a literary writer is to speak against injustice, against inhuman treatment, against the tyranny of power and property, and against any kind of discrimination. The responsibility of a writer is to empower the powerless people, to awaken and revolutionize them for struggle, and to spread the seed of hope overcoming every kind of misdeeds, miseries and misfortunes. Literature has a significant role to raise voice against every kind of social evils and ill practices. A good literature not only raises problems and lets people roam in the cloud of uncertainty, it also gives light to go ahead crossing the darkness of cloud and find the bright path of future. Praising the writings of Maxim Gorki, a progressive literary writer, Lukacs comments that:

Gorki points to a concrete solution in his work, that is, he shows how the revolutionary labour movement, the popular revolt, awakens an individual, matures him, encourages his inner life to bloom and imbues him with awareness, power and sensitivity. Gorki ... presents the emergent new kind of human being through whom the reader can experience directly and concretely the content of the new life (1992, p. 907).

“Nothing happens without a conscious purpose, without an intended aim” (Ermash, 1980, p. 179). Literature is a work of art, and every work of art has an intended aim to fulfill. We compose various forms of arts with various purposes. Our purposes in art are related to the issues of humanity and intellectual development of society. Ermash further says “The aim, or mission, of art is to satisfy the intellectual and social requirements of society” (p. 180). Along with the fulfillment of intellectual and social requirement, art also has the purpose of fulfilling aesthetic requirement. A work of art is not merely a social document; rather there is also the part of enjoyment. Anyway, entertaining the audience with socio-economic consciousness is the aim of every art. A literary writer transforms his/her feelings in the form of words and paints them with the colour of progressive ideals. S. Kh. Rappoport (1980) argues “Art itself participates in forming and spreading progressive ideals by revealing the urgent needs of society” (p. 135). Art is the creation of people composed to change other people. It would be my subjective opinion if I try to define the role of an artist. But it would not be false to say that an artist is a creator and s/he doesn’t transform his/her feelings merely in the form of self expression. An artist incorporates his/her aesthetic feelings with the need of society and makes it public. May be because of this reason Engels called Shelley ‘a prophet of genius’. (qtd. in Dremov, 1980, p. 252)

Change in society is natural and gradual, too. No one can stop the pace of change, and nothing remains static forever. Literature is the product of human mind which is mostly determined by our culture, social environment, economic status, educational background, level of awareness etc. These components are bound to change in the course of time, and literature is to catch the sentiment of that change. Although literature can be defined from various perspectives, and its role can be traced variously through various ideologies, the main gravity of it can be realized if it generates hope for future, feeds power to fight with miseries and sprouts sense of humanity. A few lines of the poem ‘Hellas’ by P B Shelley is worthy to cite here:

The world’s great age begins anew,
 The golden years return,
 The Earth Doth like a Snake Renew
 Her winter weeds outworn:

Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam,
Like wrecks of dissolving dream.(qtd. in Russell, 2010, p. 7)

Hope is a rope in which people swing to go across the vast sea of troubles. To hope for better future and to expect change is not a crude imagination of human species because they have been able to concretize many imaginations. Literature is a strong medium for producing ideology among the people, so it should spread the rays of positive transformation in society. In the poem ‘A Mother’s Dream’ by Gopal Prasad Rimal, the mother strongly believes that a revolutionary figure will appear as her son to wash injustice away:

He will
As comes the morning sun, dissipating light
You will see in his girdle,
A dangling sword, slivery as dew
He shall fight the evil with it!
.....
But he will come in a form
Far more extreme than snow and fire. (Rimal, 2011, p. 3)

It is said that writers reach the place where even the sun may not have reached. The horizon of literary writing is wider, and it has dynamic potentiality. Literary writers of this age may not deal simply with socio-political issues; rather the issues of ecology, digitalization, life writing, adventure writings etc. are also equally significant in literature. These issues of global concerns have to be raised in writings keeping humanity at the center. As these newly emerged advancements have borne risks and dangers for humanity, the prime responsibility of literature is to raise issues for the settlement of problems, threats and risks, and for the promotion of human value.

CONCLUSIONS

Literature has the responsibility to guide human life and society toward positive destination, and to impart positive attitude among human beings. It is a strong weapon to remove false ideologies that are dragging human consciousness to false direction. If literature doesn’t feed human psychology for constructive purpose, and only leads towards disillusionment, that can’t be called a progressive literature. Literature is multi-dimensional, and it deals with multiple issues of human relations. So we can’t draw restrictions declaring that this is the area of literature to deal with. Anyway, a good literary writing always tries to light candle in pitch darkness, and guide the travelers to the way of destination to go ahead crossing the darkness. The problem with modernist and postmodernist literary writings is that they confuse the readers regarding their destination in life, and sometimes they misguide the readers, too. Marxist ideology is definitely a progressive ideology, but every progressive literature may not necessarily follow Marxist ideology.

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