

Enhancing the cognizance of Literature: A Touchstone Analysis

Dr.Gunjan Detha, (Research Scholar, Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur)

Article Received: 02/6/2022,

Article Accepted: 07/06/2022,

Published online: 08/07/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.7.01

Abstract: The paper explores Literature in the light of the contemporary scenario. Literature has played a significant role in any global crisis across ages; its impact on the masses during the times that changed the course of the world has been curious. The purpose weighs more than entertainment in adverse times. The paper attempts to decipher how Literature is a treasure of marvels that guides us through tough times and feeds our sinking spirits that strengthen our psyche to sail through the chaos. Particular reference to Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekanand.

Keywords: Life- spirit, Literature, inspiration, pandemic, psyche

"That is part of the beauty of all Literature. You discover that your longings are universal, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong." — F. Scott Fitzgerald. (Graham, 260). When the catastrophe is universal, there certainly is a universal reaction to it both physically and psychologically, and it demands a universal approach to cater to and resolve. In such situations, we experience a specific halt in the ongoing development of any field of study. Instead, it becomes a primary objective to survive amidst the matters of mortal fear and be a silver lining in the dark clouds of despair. Literature acts as a filter that drains the impurities from our intellect and nourishes it with wisdom.

Regardless of science or art, practical or theoretical, and philosophical or social, any field of knowledge has certain elements that form its structure for study and paves the path for emerging trends from time to time. Over time, the impact of the world's happenings in different ages influenced all subjects and determined much about the homo-sapiens present, past, and future. Today, the global crisis of the Covid -19 pandemic has left us in a void of uncertainties; it has become all the more necessary to recalibrate the essence of our past experiences and kindle our hope for a better tomorrow. Where medical science and technological advancements are playing their traditional roles in fighting this war for human survival, the part of arts and Literature is;to sustain the sanity in our lives.As **Rabindranath Tagore** beautifully expresses:

*"Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers,
but to be fearless in facing them.*

Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain but for the heart to conquer it." (Tagore, 215)

Literature liberates man from the fear of reality that stares at life and the grip of time that seems still. It is only in tough times like these; that our wisdom becomes gloomy in the shadow of how just in a fraction of time, all that was running smoothly starts to fall, new unfathomable challenges stare in the face, and a horrific outcome awaits in our mind. It seems to question whether or not the human race has advanced towards a brighter future or has it opened gates to such global horrors that seem to cast a mass threat to life. Such a line of thoughts is genuine in adverse times like these, and Literature is indeed a bench of solace to clear the mind filled with such fog and unite with the sublime.

From times immemorial, the purpose of Literature has remained to restore, revive and rejuvenate the *Joie de verve* of life. In sync with the celebration of the bounties of nature, emotions, and life events, Literature is a medium that has constantly given a platform to the tears and fears of humanity, thus saving us from drowning ourselves in our miseries and unanswered queries. The cosmos of themes and characters in Literature over the ages suggests the limitless human imagination and the complexities of our thoughts that we often otherwise fail to express in the absence of a medium like Literature. Our adventures and experiences get reflected in Literature. Literature helps sustain values, provides solace and sensitivity, and uplifts the soul.

"The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the earth's dust in numberless grass blades and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers."(33) These pearls of wisdom from the master craftsman Tagore unite us to every creation of nature and enhance our existence from an individual to a link in the chain of life. Survival in this competitive – materialistic world often deprives our creative intellect, making us more prone to depression and negativity. Literature provides us with the limitless possibilities of existence. It breathes the freshness of a new dimension and discovers the untrodden pathways of human imaginations. It takes life from negativity to positivity; it individualizes, unites; it ties and liberates. In a state of mind, when we feel gloomy and find it hard to express our inner turmoil, the conflicting thoughts inside us keep piling up and hamper our judgments of life. The imagination and hope of a better tomorrow is not just a motivational thought but nutrition to our will to strive against the odds and feed the hunger of indomitable life. Swami Vivekananda states, *"We are responsible for what we are, and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in the future can be produced by our present actions, so we have to know how to act."* (Vivekananda, 25)

Hence it is essential to know that what we think today will determine what we will be left to believe tomorrow. We must find sources that strengthen our wisdom, and Literature holds immense possibilities. It is a pandemic, so the gloom is universal, and the thought of expressing the pain is dominated by the idea that everybody is suffering. So, it becomes difficult to eliminate oneself from the world and ponder upon one's deteriorating mental health. We

must gather ourselves and surround ourselves with as many things and thoughts that not only cleanse our deteriorating peace of mind but also provide us with a knowledge of how to move ahead. We must let go of things we cannot change and focus on what is affecting our future. To understand the beauty of this thought in a literary expression, it's apt to quote from *William Wordsworth's Ode: Intimations of Immortality*:

*“What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now forever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not; instead, we find
Strength in what remains behind.”* (Wordsworth, 44)

The universality in such poetic expression is evident. It goes without saying that in an hour of despair when the heart grieves to be understood and heard, a fine work of Literature is always soothing. Where it has the power to bring you to tears, it has the healing power to mend even the most sensitive wounds of life. It won't be an exaggeration to say that; Science saves us from death, and Literature keeps us from life. It is inevitable to sink in such dark times, but Literature can be our boat to the bank of this river of despair. It not only deviates our mind from the mundane air but also points our focus towards hope and contentment. We relate to the writer's expression and think about our life prospects.

Restoring humanity, Literature has guided us through our creative evolution and fed our artistic fervor, which sustains our ability to conquer life as it comes. Acceptance and indomitable will the central themes in Literature created with empathy for life and our surroundings. Every genre of Literature is a collage of *emotions recollected in tranquillity*. Literature has been a medium of love-hate, hope- despair, and romance- violence. From Chaucer to Shakespeare, Keats to T.S. Eliot, and Jane Austin to Khaled Hosseini, we can grow with Literature and explore the times they represent. The works of such literary marvels are not just legendary documents of expression but are also invitations into a new world of the best and worst of humanity. A stroll through some of the Literature with a pandemic background will give us a better insight into its influence.

Premchand's Edgar is one of the most acclaimed short stories. It is a moving tale of the five-year-old Hamid and his grandmother Amina, direly poor, both struggling for even their daily meals. Hamid lost his parents to *Naija* (Cholera) last year—even today, extremely virulent; Cholera continues to kill thousands globally every year. Where the background of the tale hints at the aftermath of the spread of a fatal disease and the impact on the poor, the story develops as an anecdote about child psychology and the indomitable spirit of life. Hamid, as a child, stands as an emblem of affection and wisdom and inspires the readers never to quit, act wisely, and always fly on the wings of hope.

Where Premchand's *Edgar* is a short story with just a mention of a fatal disease; *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a novel that substantially explores Cholera with a literary outlook. It is a work of multiple folds highlighting love, life, health, and sickness. The protagonist is Florentino Ariza, who has spent fifty years of his life in the memory of his unfulfilled love with Fermina. The silent vigil of Florentino's unrequited love for half a century is broken when he meets Fermina and her husband, Dr. Juvenal Urbino. Set in a South American community, the novel spans from the 1870s to the early 1930s, shadowed by civil wars and plagues. Dr. Juvenal's life is consumed with his passion for eradicating Cholera, the disease that killed his father. The condition is interwoven with love and life; to quote an artistic expression from the text;

"his examination revealed that he had no fever, no pain anywhere and that his only concrete feeling was an urgent desire to die. All that was needed was shrewd questioning...to conclude once again that the symptoms of love were the same as those of Cholera."(Marquez, 62)

A Journal of the Plague Year by Daniel Defoe is a vivid, realistic account of the plague. It focuses on the physical as well as psychological drain of the masses amidst a pandemic. The book's narrator, H. F., a saddler, gives a statistical and moving narrative about the London plague in 1665. The book provides a detailed analysis of the horrors of the plague and the spiritual journey of the narrator along. Written in the first-person narrative, it gives an insight into the gradually glooming state of mind in an extreme pandemic situation. To quote from the text; *Many Consciences were awakened; many hard Hearts melted into Tears; many a penitent Confession was made of Crimes long concealed...* (Defoe, 31)

Apart from giving the statistical data, government discrepancies, and a picturesque account of the mundane life in the pandemic, Defoe unravels the changing psychology of people around. One of the observations his protagonist, H.F., makes is that with the horrors of the plague returning to London, there was also a positive awakening in many people, as they were becoming aware of their shortcomings and sins. He writes that the people became more religiously tolerant and flexible during the plague and focused on purifying their souls regardless of being a critique of the religious preaching. After being under the lingering shadow of death for so long, the people sought forgiveness for their past sins. H.F. believed this spiritual awakening was a moral and humane response to the plague. Though it all proved momentary, as with the subsiding epidemic, this change also subsided, and many Londoners returned to their previous corrupt and critical lifestyles. Thus '*A journal of the plague year*' is a very informative account of the plague that hit London and gives the readers an insight into the human psychology during such times.

Such literary works give us a touchstone to collate the current corona virus pandemic with the historical outbreaks of plague and Cholera. Reading such literary accounts helps us unite with humanity across ages, and we can relate our spiritual turmoil with similar historical encounters. The pandemics that have hit human and literary evolution don't just link the

monstrously powerful germs or viruses that caused them but also the emotions they triggered. Our fears find a hook in these works, and our spirit of life is ignited again, which helps us move ahead. Masters like Defoe and Camus take the readers to dive deep into something under the surface of politics and data taking us closer to the essential human condition. It helps ease our discontent with our surroundings, political scenario, and mutual upheavals. To quote Alberto Manguel;

"Books may not change our suffering, books may not protect us from evil, books may not tell us what is good or beautiful, and they will certainly not shield us from the common fate of the grave. But books grant us myriad possibilities: the possibility of change and illumination."(Manguel, 231)

Pandemic literature analyses the reasons for the rage against the managing authorities, the conflict with fate, and the pain of physical suffering. It helps us find the meaning of life beyond the quarantine zone. As the narrator of Albert Camus's, *The Plague* observes, as the disease recks the town of Oran in French Algeria, there is an *"element of abstraction and unreality in misfortune. But when an abstraction starts to kill you, you have to get to work on it."*(Camus,69) Camus examines a revolutionary idea and a practical approach; when juxtaposed with a seemingly fatal disease, the capriciousness of infection, and the enormity of illness, it is the time to realize that we don't own this world. We should take a break from our self-obsessed lives, look around the environmental catastrophes we have led this earth to, and act accordingly. If a cold virus can destroy human civilization at this pace, it certainly holds more power than all the armies on the planet. A disease is not a theory or a figure of speech; it is hauntingly something that kills you without consideration. And Literature tries to impart a bit of that consideration that we fail to take seriously.

*"We reap what we sow. We are the makers of our fate.
None else has the blame; none has the praise.
The wind is blowing; those vessels whose sails are unfurled
catch it and go forward on their way, but those whose
sails are furled do not see the wind. Is that the fault of
the wind?..... We make our destiny."*(Vivekananda, 388)

We are absorbed so much in the systems we have created along with our evolution that we often forget that life on this planet originated out of the laws of nature and not by our social and materialistic fabrics. The crux of the Literature on pandemics is the laws of nature, which are universal, and we should flow with them. We have grown up listening to the anecdotes from the plague that hit our country in the early twentieth century and swiped millions off the globe and the famine of 1899 that witnessed women wearing kilos of gold jewellery die of thirst and hunger. Such literary expressions warn us against our casual attitude towards the hazards we have brought upon our planet. In times like these, when the world is falling apart, these works inspire us to be more responsible, selfless, and human. Telling a story has always been a universally appealing vogue of conveying motifs and themes. Diseases make us drift

away from this world, and Literature keeps us at pace with this drifting and falling back in place. So now, we must look after each other, maintain our distance, relax our minds, and sanitize our hands.

Looking after our health and following the new precautions to be safe against Covid 19 is one of today's calls. It has become arduous for the government and medical authorities to make the public aware of the benefits of following the safety measures against the pandemic to stay safe. Making the masses understand the importance of staying indoors, maintaining distance, wearing masks in public places, washing hands, and monitoring the health symptoms is one of the major concerns of all nations across the globe. Health is also discussed in Literature through multiple genres. In his visionary and illuminating collection of essays, Francis Bacon has touched upon the varied themes. His essay *Of Regiment of Health* is a brief account of the importance of good health and how to attain it. Bacon elaborates;

Beware of a sudden change in any great point of diet and, if necessity enforces it, fit the rest to it. It is a secret, both in nature and state, that it is safer to change many things than one. Examine thy customs of diet, sleep, exercise, apparel, and the like... Entertain hopes; mirth rather than joy; a variety of delights, rather than surfeit of them; wonder and admiration, and therefore novelties; studies that fill the mind with splendid and illustrious objects, such as histories, fables, and contemplations of nature... I commend some diet for certain seasons, rather than frequent use of physic, except it be grown into a custom. For those diets alter the body more, and trouble it less... In sickness, respect health principally; and in health, action. Those who put their bodies to endure in health may, in most conditions, which are not very sharp, be cured only with diet and tendering.(Bacon, 138)

In the words of Oscar Wilde, "*Literature always anticipates life. It doesn't copy it but moulds it to its purpose.*" The old English classics like Homer's Iliad and Boccaccio's Decameron also have tales about pandemics and provide a catharsis over how our ancestors reacted to health crises. If historical documents illustrate the data and facts of such pandemics, Literature feeds the disturbed psychology and intellect. With each passing day in this corona virus tragedy, we consider the impact it will bring on our future; we must remember that the world we live in today has a history of much more disastrous pandemics. These texts have anecdotes in reality and fiction that give us insight into overcoming racism, xenophobia, and ableism. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) is a remarkable portrayal of the disastrous outbreak of a fatal disease that destroys even the most powerful and elite, thus giving the power centers a lesson to step out of their elitism and fight united against such universal crises.

Literature touches the individual soul with the multiple caricatures upon a single plot. The stories or actual experiences shared through Literature may not practically eradicate the spreading disease, but it indeed becomes a medium of strength, patience, and consolation. It is the didactic purpose of Literature that inspires us to stay together and fight against the odds. Even ancient Indian Literature is an excellent source of moral and spiritual awakening. *In the*

epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, and Puranas, it is not easy to separate the didactic from the narrative (Matilal 2002: 42). One of the principal themes behind the Upanishads, Panchatantra, and Hitopadeshais to lay down a framework for an ideal life, human behavior, and social structure. For this, the authors considered the most appealing literary forms; tales, fables, poetry, and proverbs. The religious flavor of the epics and Puranas has made them a household text of the masses. Even the religious texts worldwide have these integral features and must be reached out for a spiritual journey. Looking from a broad perspective, there are certain elementary cornerstones of every religion, for example, (a) the almighty God, (b) basic guiding principles for religious life, (c) mythology, and (d) folk and customary social rituals. The difference in various religions is in regards to who they worship, how they worship, the religious customs, etc... Still, the commandments like morality, mercy for all living beings, soul searching, and unity inspire us to gather together on life's journey. Poem No. 36 from Geetanjali is a divine call to the almighty beyond religion;

“Give Me Strength

This is my prayer to thee, my lord---

strike at the root of poverty in my heart.

Please give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.

Give me the power to make my love fruitful in service.

Please give me the ability never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might.

I was hoping you could give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.

And give me the strength to surrender my power to thy will with love.(Tagore, 17)

The world of Literature is immense, and it holds the seeds of human imagination, observation, experience, and experiments so much so that it can nourish the most susceptible wisdom of the human race in the direst surroundings. Literature is all about the people have felt and experienced before us. The ideologies embedded in Literature are reflective and contemplative, making Literature cathartic. These messages from the past are for us to connect with and learn and get motivated from; they try to tell us about life and beyond! We must listen and read.

References

- Bacon, Francis. The Essays Or Counsels, Civil and Moral, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Camus, Albert. The Plague, Penguin Books, 2002.
- Defoe, Daniel. A Journal of the Plague Year. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Garcia Marquez, Gabriel. Love in the Time of Cholera, Vintage International, 2003.
- Graham, Sheilah, and Gerold Frank, Beloved Infidel: The Education of a Woman, (First Edition), Henry Holt and Company, 1958.

Manguel, Alberto. *The Library at Night*, Yale University Press, 2008.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Collected Poems and Plays*, Macmillan and Company, limited, 1948.

Vivekananda, Swami. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (HP788)*. N.p., WS, 2018.

Wordsworth, William. *Wordsworth*, Cambridge University Press, 1932.