Is Literature the Mirror of Society?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze and discuss the implication of the statement ‘Literature is the mirror of society’ which we use and come across frequently. When analyzed deftly we find the statement is not as simple as it appears on the face value and even if it is taken in a metaphorical sense, in which it is used, cannot escape the issues and questions that it entails. There are many questions that need to be answered — Does literature reflect society as it is? Does it have no power of imagination? Does it play no role in the formulation of the guiding principles of the society? How does it differ from history, sociology, political science? What is the relationship between literature and society? An attempt is made here to discuss the pros and cons of the statement. Shakespeare in Hamlet holds the view that the purpose of literature is “to hold the mirror upto nature”. Here the word nature indicates the broad spectrum of human nature.
That literature is the reflection of the society is a fact that has been widely acknowledged. It is indeed true that literature reflects the attitude and perception of the society – its virtues and vices and in its corrective measures literature mirrors the vices of the society with a view to make the society realize its mistakes and make amendments. Literature also projects the virtues in the society by means of imitating human action with a view to instruct people and to appeal to them to emulate them so that virtue may prevail. In literature we come across stories to portray human life and action through the agency of some characters who, by their words and deeds convey certain message for the purpose of instruction, information and delight. It is impossible to find a work of literature that excludes the attitudes, morale and values of the society since no writer is immune to the forces and happenings that surround him. Every writer is a part and parcel of the society to which he belongs and neither he writes in a vacuum nor does he write for his own pleasure. He is the man endowed with ‘more than usual organic sensibility’, perceives the world in an extraordinary way and shares his perception with his fellow beings. In this way literature records the real life events from the society and converts these mundane activities into fiction and presents them to the society as a mirror in which people may look at their own images and make amends wherever necessary.

But at the same time we must keep in view Aristotle’s concept of literary imitation when he says:

It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen... The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose.... The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen... The world of poetry, it is said, presents not facts but fiction: such things have never happened; such things have never lived.... Not real but a higher reality, what ought to be not what is. (167-68)

Thus literature is not only a reflection of the society but also serves a beacon light which guide people to find the right path.

In order to understand well how literature reflects the society it is necessary to observe the relationship between literature and society. There are several examples of the attempts to describe and define the influence of society on literature and to assess the position and the role of literature is particularly cultivated and professed by those who had a specific social philosophy to advance. Generally the relationship between literature and society is
discussed in the light of the statement given by De Bonold that “Literature is an expression of society”. This statement is as problematic and ambiguous as the statement. “Literature is the mirror of society”. If we assume that literature mirrors the prevailing social life ‘correctly’ this is false that literature depicts some social reality and at the time to say that literature mirrors life as it is, even more ambiguous. No doubt a writer inevitably expresses his perception, experience and conception of life but it would be untrue to say that he expresses the whole life or even the whole life of a given time completely and exhaustively. Is it possible? Even the most representative writer of a given time can not express a complete picture of his time and society because it would lead to the idea that a writer conveys the truth and necessarily the historical and the social truths. In fact literature is really not a reflection of the world as it is but an effort to transcend these facts to arrive at the real fact.

The question how far literature is determined by or dependent on the society is one which ultimately takes us one way or another, to the writer and his milieu, the influence of literature on society and the vice versa. We are not interested here to discuss the influence of the milieu on the mind of the writer. It is a fact beyond doubt that the writer is not only influenced by society but he also influences it. Literature not merely influences life but also shapes it. If we trace the origin of every revolution for the betterment of the human world we find that literature had not only prepared the field for revolution but also sowed the seeds of revolution. The slogan for French revolution – ‘Liberty, Equality and Fraternity’ has its roots in the literature. The process of democratization in the human history had been initiated by literature. Thus, literature is not the follower of tradition rather it is a pioneer, a torch bearer that shows the path to the society. Literature is the brain of humanity and it records and preserves the experience, knowledge, idea, for human race. It is ‘the criticism of life’ to use Mathew Arnold’s words and Socrates long ago warned that ‘un-criticised life is not worth living’. It is literature that offers the chance to arrive at the point to understand the true meaning and worth of life.

Having said that now we can clearly see that the statement that ‘literature is the mirror of society’ is misleading. It seems to be based on the central perspective for sociological approach to literature in which the study of literature is directed towards getting information about society. The metaphor of literature mirroring the society leads unintentionally to a simple mimetic theory of literature in which literary works transparently and unambiguously document the society. In fact, however, literature is a construct of language; its experience is
symbolic and suggestive rather than direct.

To conclude it can be said that literature is standing on the verge of everything, away from everything and its own self. It creates the most convincing world as it is based on the ideal rather than the real. It is not only the mirror of the society but it acts like a prism in which diverse attitudes, experiences and thoughts of human world get refracted and can be perceived by the readers clearly.
Works Cited