

## Literary Maxim as a Catalyst in Cultural Edification

Rahul Sharma

English Literature, Research Scholar

Devi Ahilya University

Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India

rahulsharma040868@gmail.com

### Abstract

The role of literature in the formation of culture is an oft repeated and much discussed topic of interest in any civilized world. In spite of that, very seldom we realize the sanctity and validity of this discourse. It is a grim reality that the modern world looks at odds with its cultural concerns and subsequently it alienates itself from the framework of responsibility, which is an utter disregard for a developing culture. Being a preliminary branch of art, literature serves a dual role in the scheme of things for the cultural development. On the other hand, it is an outcome of cultural progression, because the literary treasure of any social group is a part of its culture. On the other hand literature provides all the necessary ingredients for the formation of a culture – complex, that is an aggregate of cultural ethos. Mathew Arnold described art as a “criticism of life”. This view was an extension of Aristotle’s belief that art depends upon the imitation of nature. There was however some other scholars like Oscar Wilde, who believed that life itself imitates art. Both these theories are interesting and vital in understanding the concerns of literature as a work of art in the construction and preservation of culture. At the same time we have to formulate a canon for delineating the cultural concerns of literature. The topic of this research paper is an attempt to draw our attention toward this fundamental issue, that relates the human society to a larger canvass of its designated ideals.

An observant mind can easily discern and demarcate the subtle web of relationship between literature and culture. As a work of art literature constitutes the main fray of any cultural edifice as it provides the cardinal tenets of goodwill and social conduct for furtherance of a developing culture, at the same time getting influenced by this process. In other words one can say that the delicate balance of the relationship between literature and culture hinges upon this two way traffic. The grandiose work of literary stalwarts like Dickens, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Hardy, Shakespeare and others had enabled the human society to advance in the right direction by formulating a road-map for future generations. With the help of cross cultural undercurrents depicted in the masterpieces written by these well-known authors, we have been able to discern and understand the proper methodology of human behavior from immemorial. Since the wonderful representation of mankind with all its tumults and torrid currents was a testimony of a 'felt life'. The pathos, the trials and tribulations of literary characters have made us realize the worth of life and its gradual march in the direction of civilized world. It is not an unrealized fact that the cumulative effect of all the literary geniuses and their work has given us a necessary framework of ideas for the building up of cultural milieu. The sad reality though is that more often than not, the role of literature in the formation of the civil society is not only neglected but sometimes even left in oblivion. Humanity is indebted to its cultural precedents, of which literature is a constituent part. At the same time literature cannot obliterate its larger role as a catalyst in the edification of cultural constructs. The cultural concerns of literature are varied and diversified, but the primary concern of any work of art resides in its capability to boast or bolster the normative features of its surrounding reality.

**Keywords:** Literary maxim, Cultural criticism, Philistinism, Culture studies, Cultural imperialism, Negritude, Black feminism, Eco feminism, Cultural consciousness, Catalyst, Edification.

Without any iota of doubt, it can be said with perfect vitality and poise that literature of any society lays down one of the most important foundation stone of its cultural edifice. The national character is built upon the basis of cultural constituents, of which literature forms a pivotal part. If we look at the history of English literature, the significance of its influence upon the formation of British culture is quite evident. The Anglo-Saxon and subsequent Norman invasion of England resulted in the dynamic flux of events in the English society at large. Almost all the prevalent ideals and customs of British culture were then transformed according to the gradual development of English language. This could be possible point of departure at the outset for a discourse based upon the cultural concerns of literature, since this mega event of history is a testimony of the grand role that literature plays in the making of a nation and its culture. Art and culture are not only interdependent, but are invariably tied to each other with such delicate thread that the loss or decay of one element invariably results in the deformation of the other. Literature is a part of artistic enterprise, works as an unseen yet prominent background for the sustenance of a developing culture. A literary maxim is something that decides and directs the due course of a culture in a right way. We are not using a term in an aphoristic manner but as a leitmotif of driving force for the development and furtherance of cultural progress. In absence of which, a developing culture might remain grooved as a monolith, rather than taking shape in a diversified and intellectually nourished society. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes a maxim in following words:

*A proposition, often barely distinguishable from an aphorism and closely related to a pithy succinct statement which contains a precept or general truth about human nature and human conduct.*

This definition could be enlarged for the purpose of setting up an agenda for discourse on culture and its inseparable relationship with art and literature. Instead of applying this term in a literal way, one can use it figuratively to denote the crux of this discourse for the purpose of evaluating and describing the subject matter. A literary maxim is something, that is coined and promulgated by various authors at various places and in different times with multiple vigor for the purpose of establishing a civilized world. This could in other words be described as ‘the voice of an age’ or ‘the voice of a race’ or entire mankind reflected and super scribed in its literature. For example a well-known event happened in post war Europe. When some of the prominent writers like Jacques Barzun, W.H.Auden and Lionel Trilling joined their hands together to form the editorial board of the Reader Subscription Book Club. With this venture a unique blend of art and culture was floated and promoted in the Western society. These three authors and well known critics formulated a quintessential road map for the cultural concerns of British and American literature. Jacques writes about this event with pride and demeanor in these words:

*What emerges from this sketch of our inclinations is the principle of what Trilling was the first to call “cultural criticism”, that is, criticism inspired by whatever is relevant to the work. Its genesis, form and meaning have roots in the culture where it appears, and it is also unique through its authors own uniqueness. To us, none of this was new. We were cultural inclusiveness. And here Mathew Arnold properly enters again. It was he who said “The man of culture is the true apostles of equality. They have a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best ideas of their time”.*

The Mid Century club established by Auden, Jacques and Trilling was disbanded in 1963, but its legacy proved out to be a turning point in the modern history of cultural criticism. After a long gap of indifference shown by authors in this regard, a new fillip was given to notion of culture in English literature. It was very monumental work of Mathew Arnold, whose book

Culture and Anarchy literally floated the idea of preparing a role model for cultural concerns of literature. He was the first writer and critic, who with the help of his well-known Touchstone method of criticism, not only laid down the foundation of contemporary literary criticism, but also proposed a canon, for bridging the gap between art and civilization. He suggested the need for a critic to propagate noble ideas in the society so that the ordinary man may rise above from his petty concerns, to which he gave the name Philistinism, and consequently contribute to the larger process of cultural edification. The cultural role of a literary critic was first formulated by Arnold as he emphasized upon the need of intellectual development of humanity. Man cannot remain lodged forever in the dire straits of his daily requirements; rather he should strive hard in the direction of his cultural improvement as well. For this purpose, literature might serve the role of a lighthouse or beacon by providing essential norms of good conduct before the society. This is what he termed as the Touchstone of literary criticism. World literature is replete with the examples of a cultural legacy, which took shape because of the intense concern shown by various authors to improve the life of individual and the society. Noted scholar William J. Long in his book titled *English Literature* mentions the ideas proposed by Mathew Arnold for the betterment of cultural ethos under the scrutiny of literature:

*Culture and Anarchy contains most of the terms – culture, sweetness and light, Barbarian, Philistine, Hebraism and many others which are now associated with Arnold's work and influence. The term "Barbarian" refers to the aristocratic classes, whom Arnold thought to be essentially crude in soul. "Philistine" refers to the middle classes, - narrow minded and self-satisfied people, according to Arnold whom he satirizes with the idea opening their minds to new ideas. "Hebraism" is Arnold's term for moral education. Carlyle has emphasized the Hebraic or moral element in life, and Arnold undertook to preach the Hellenic or intellectual element, which welcomes new ideas and delights in the arts that*

*reflect the beauty of world. "The uppermost idea with Hellenism," he says "is to see things as they are; the uppermost ideas with Hebraism is conduct and obedience." With great clearness, sometimes with great force, and always with a play of humor and raillery aimed at the "Philistines". Arnold pleads for both these elements in life which together aim at 'culture', that is at oral and intellectual perfection (550-51).*

T.S.Eliot also supported the views suggested by Mathew Arnold for the significance of literature in building up of a culture, although he otherwise differed from his method of literary criticism. In his well-known work Tradition and Individual Talent, Eliot defined the role of a critic to remain indifferent to personal choices or affiliations shown by an author but at the same time he supported the need of cultural edification under the framework of a long held tradition. Literature always contributes to the functioning of a cultural mass or system by earmarking its trends and traditional concerns. Focusing upon this reality, some new terms such as 'culture imperialism' and 'culture studies' have been promulgated in the domain of discourse during last few decades. Cultural imperialism is a term coined by Raymond Williams, who rejected the Marxist notion of Base/Structure model of culture suggesting the dominance of ideology over all the forms of art including literature. Instead of becoming a tool for some political objective, literature should remain loyal to its cultural code of conduct. The significance of which depends upon its unbiased, non-partisan, objective representation of truth. Culture studies are relatively a new phenomenon in the literary discourse. *Dictionary of Critical Theory* defines this term in these words:

*A flourishing interdisciplinary mode of studying aspects of culture, usually defined as 'popular' culture, and cultural production in modern period. Originally pioneered mainly by Birmingham University's celebrated center for contemporary culture studies from 1964 onward and subsequently by the Open University, culture studies is now an internationally*

*recognized discipline supported by a host of journals ranging from Culture Studies, Social Text and New Formations to the most recent Parallax (launched in 1995).*

It was Raymond Williams, who gave this dictum that “culture is ordinary”. This means culture is constituted by ordinary man and not by the elite one. Therefore the primary concern for literature is to address to this ordinary man and to pose some literary ideals before him so that he can integrate himself with the growing flux of cultural formation. With the advent of mass media a new mass culture has also evolved and is trying to assert its presence through various means. One such example is the projection of the idea of negritude, which is used nowadays in the domain of critical discourse as a mean to convey the notion of racial identity in an emphatic manner. *Dictionary of Critical theory* defines this term in these words:

*French noun, now current in English, designated the Francophone Afro-Caribbean cultural movement. The word was first used by Aime’Cesaire in his great prose poem Notebook of a Return to my Native Land. It encapsulates a defiant sense of identity.*

In post-colonial world, literature has played important role in establishing an authorial voice for the subaltern societies. In the formation of durable and developed culture notions such as equality, justice and welfare cannot be neglected or overlooked since they are real cornerstones upon which the foundation of a great culture is laid down. Racial and gender equality, both are cardinal to the idea of a progressive culture. With the advent of modern feminism, literature has played constructive role in the edification of a civilized culture. New concepts such as Black Feminism, Eco Feminism, Post-colonial Feminism have evolved as discursive themes for the building for a just society. Without being subservient to any political ideology, literature can still play a significant role in the growth of a culture. Firstly by bringing down the gap between the ordinary life and canonical life of literary enterprise. One of the most respected cultural critic of last century Walter Benjamin writes in his book of literary essays titled *Illuminations*.

*For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed toward the end of the last century. With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional and local organs before the readers, an increasing numbers of readers became writers- at first occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its reader's space for "letters to the editor". Thus, the distinction between the author and the public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes more functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. In the Soviet Union work it is given a voice. To present it verbally is part of a man's ability to perform the work. Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property (231-32).*

It is obvious from the above excerpt that the need for a cultural upgrading of literature has been felt from time to time. This passage is quoted from the article titled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' written by Walter Benjamin purely for the purpose of evaluating the role of literature in a changing time. It became a topic of hot debate as it managed to raise some pertinent issues regarding the relationship between culture and literature. Another Laureate and well known French philosopher Michel Foucault addresses this subject matter much further in his famous work *Madness and Civilization* as he writes:

*The madness in which the work of art is engulfed I the space of our enterprise. It is the endless path to fulfillment; it is our mixed apostle of vocation and exegesis. This is why it's makes little difference when the first voice of madness insinuated itself into Nietzsche's pride, into Van Gog's humility. There is no madness except as the final instants of the work of art- the work endlessly drives madness, where there is a work of madness, where there is a work of art, there is no madness; and yet the madness is contemporary with the work of art, since it inaugurates the time of its truth. The moment when, together, the work of art and madness*

*are born and fulfilled is the beginning of the time when the world finds itself arraigned by that work of art and responsible before it for what it is (274).*

The most controversial conclusion derived by the one of the foremost thinker of last century gives us an inkling of thought about how society normally responds to the call of art and literature. For sometimes it may turn about in the culmination of artistic endeavor or otherwise it might go in vain. One thing is clear, that it is the might of art and literature that always save the world from the looming threat of collective failure of cultural consciousness. For this mammoth task a reasonable ideal or literary maxim must be set forth as a catalyst before the society for the purpose of cultural edification.

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