



# The Sociological Approach to Literature: A Brief Study

Dr. Kiran Sharma

Associate Professor of English, Govt. P.G. College for Women, Rohtak, Haryana, India

The sociological approach "examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received", exploring the relationship between the artist and society. As such, sociological critics argue that literary works should not be isolated from the social context in which they are embedded. The study of literature with the discipline of sociology, integrates a concern for meaning and the unique properties inherent in literary texts, reflecting the economics, attitude, moral and religion of the society that produced the texts. Each society, interconnected and independent, yet distinct and diverse is influenced by the literature, for there are innumerable instances exemplifying the co-relation of life and literature. The impact of literature is influential on man's behaviour and outlook, moreover, governing the minds of the populace as proved in the realms of the history.

Further, sociological approach to literature, takes into account, the author's social origin and the socio-cultural background in which he is born and brought up. It is an attempt to relate the author with the social surroundings, because the social surroundings affect the author's sensibility and goes on in the making of the literary creation by that author. Sociological criticism is a next step to historical criticism. It assumes a close relationship between society and literature. Sociological criticism considers the writers and their literature as direct products of the sociological forces in the history of the period. Therefore, sociological critics believe that sociological conditions of Elizabethan England produced Shakespeare and Shakespearean drama. According to sociological criticism, the writer is not a free agent, inspiration is nothing but an illusion or it may be only a different name for sociological forces giving birth to an idea in the writer's mind. Literature represent life and life is in large measure, a social reality. Attempts are made to describe and define the influence of society on literature and to prescribe and judge the position of literature in society. Literature studied as a reflection of the spirit of the age creates a new spirit for us. Undoubtedly, the author is shaped by the spirit of his age, but he has also got the capabilities to mould his period. A great man of letters is the creature as well as the creator of the age in which he exists. Thus, we talk of the age of Shakespeare, the age of Dryden, the age of Pope, the age of Wordsworth, the age of Bernard Shaw and so on. Chaucer is the representative poet of the 14th century. His masterpiece The Canterbury Tales reveals the political, economic and social conditions of the time. This poem has the true colour and aroma of the 14<sup>th</sup> century England. Chaucer lived in an age which was epoch-making in social, religious and political and economic fields. He is the most comprehensive soul, and he takes a full view of the wide and variegated life of his times. Chaucer as a realist, presents us in The Canterbury Tales, the pulsating life of the common people. His pilgrims like their actual counterparts in 14<sup>th</sup> century England, seldom care for, to refer to political events of their day. They are blissfully ignorant about these events. Chaucer's pilgrims talk of "their purse, their love affairs or their private feuds". Their vision is confined to the occurrences within their parish. This is the typical vision of the common people, which is realistically presented by Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales.

Likewise, the romantic poets have also presented the sordid realities of life in their poems. In "Ode to a Nightingale", Keats presents a sordid picture of life:

Here, where men sit and hear each other's groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre thin and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs;  
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

Then, Shelley in the same vein depicts that misfortunes of life have crushed him. He is bleeding on the thorns of life helplessly. He wishes that he were a leaf, a wave, a cloud, so that the West Wind could lift him. He makes a pathetic appeal, to the West Wind to come to his help :

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!



I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed !

Robert Lynd beautifully expresses the idea when he says there are critics who hold that it is enough to say that art offers us an escape from life. Art, however, offers us not only an escape from life, but an escape in to life, and the first escape is of importance only if it leads to the latter. Literature, as it is an escape in to life, prepares us to suffer as will as endure 'life's little ironies'. It prepares us to face the odds of life cheerfully and manfully.

The function of literature is, therefore, not to create only the specialised persons and their problems, but to deal with humanity at large. T.S. Eliot once said that, "a great poet in writing of himself writes his age", and to none is this remark more applicable than to Eliot himself. His "The Waste Land" has been called the epic of the modern age, presenting as it does a panorama of the futility and anarchy that is contemporary civilization. People are governed by selfish and self-seeking motives. Money values prevail, there is gross materialism and spiritual sterility. In the words of Elizabeth Drew, his early poems show, "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Eliot's sensibility is so acute that he is able to capture the very rhythms of modern life, as in the following:

At the violet hour when the eyes and back  
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits  
Like a taxi throbbing, waiting.

These lines from "The Waste Land" clearly catch the unending monotony of pulsing machines. Like Baudlaire, T.S. Eliot presents in his poetry, "the torturing impact of the great modern city upon the lonely individual". He had felt the torturing impact of the great city with such intensity that he is able to pierce beneath the surface to the ugliness, the horror, and the glory of human life. He brings the present in juxtaposition with the past, shows that such suffering and horror have been the lot of humanity in the past as well, but in the past heroic struggle against heavy odds had led to regeneration, and may well do so in the present also. Thus, he has tried to convey the message that redemption and regeneration is possible through suffering; 'horror and ugliness of contemporary existence can be transformed in to 'glory', only if, the spiritually sterile, are prepared to pay the price.

Further, more, the poetry of the Victorian age is woven out of main strands of feeling and thought. One group is led by Tennyson. It is the idealistic romantic school of poetry and emphasizes emotion, imagination and sensibility. Tennyson is the representative poet of this group. He constantly endeavoured to adapt his muse to the demands of the people and is the poet of compromise par excellence. Besides, the poets, the famous novelist Charles Dickens has also portrayed the social reality in his novels. If Dickens is credited with bringing out with full intensity the seemingly purposeless and directionless movement of crowds in a city and the stunningly fragmented picture presented by the entire social scene, it is largely because his traumatic experience as a child provided an opening to him to see the metropolis of a modern industrial society as a nightmarish "unreal city" similar to that in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land". Another aspect which is significant for the purpose of his art, is that it is not just pain and fear which constituted the whole of this experience, but it also carried a strong element of resentment and anger against a social order which allowed this kind of outrage to take place. The voice of Dickens as a novelist is, therefore, that of strong protest. A closer look at the structure of the traumatic experience, reveals a contradiction and ambivalence in Dickens' attitude towards society. On the one hand, he resents and is angry against the society for giving him an unmerited harsh treatment; on the other hand he does not feel identified with the other boys placed in the same situation and feels ashamed of their company. He behaves as a 'little gentleman' who deserves a special treatment. His anger, therefore, demands a selective rectification of the wrongs done to the victims of the society. That is why we find in Dickens a simultaneous presence of an acute awareness of the wrongs perpetrated by the structure of the existing social system.

Then, another famous Indian Poet in English, Rabindranath Tagore, who was a man of versatile genius and achievements has depicted social realities in his works. His Gitanjali is a collection of devotional songs in praise of God. Along with the relationship of the individual soul and God, the relationship of the individual soul with other men, is also explored. God is with "the poor and the lowly and the lost" S.B. Mukherji writes: "The vision sweeps down upon the sordid present and dwells upon the insults to humanity in the name of caste and creed, to the humble and the lowly who are denied the sacred rights of men". Tagore castigates all religious orthodoxy :

Leave this chanting and singing and  
telling of beads! Whom dost thou  
worship in this lonely dark corner of a  
temple with doors all shut? Open  
thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!



He is there where the tiller is tilling  
the hard ground and where the path-  
maker is breaking stones. He is with  
them in sun and in shower, and his  
garment is covered with dust. Put off  
thy holy mantle and ever like him come  
down on the dusty soil!

Hence, a brief study of some literary works clearly bring out the idea that the sociological approach to literature plays a crucial role in the creation of a creative work of art. This approach is generally concerned with the effect of society upon art. The sociological forces give birth to a writer and produce literature and literature also shapes and moulds society.

#### REFERENCES

1. Laurence Shaffer, *Literary Criticism* (New Delhi: Sarup& Sons), 2001.
2. NDR Chandra, *Modern Literary Criticism: Theory and Practice* (New DellAuthor Press), 2003.
3. N.S. Nagarajan, *English Literary Criticism and Theory: An Introductory history* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan), 2006.
4. M.A.R. Habib, *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: A History* (New Delhi Wiley India Pvt. Ltd.), 2008.
5. Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: University Press), 2008.
6. Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (New Delhi: Penguin), 2012.
7. Jane Smiley, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (New Delhi: Penguin), 2011.
8. T.S. Pearce, *T.S. Eliot* (New Delhi: Acro Publisher), 1969.