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Exploring Human Rights in the New Literatures in English: Select Propositions

by
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Literature has enormous power to bring change, and many authors, with the passage of time, have understood the importance of inspiring their readers for becoming the agents of change as their moral duty. Thinking from this point of view, Literature becomes a social enterprise which drives change, and motivates people towards taking action. The role of literature is not simply aesthetic and utilitarian, implicitly it has, and should have an expose for sensitizing the masses on for the cause of humanity, and inspiring them always for good deeds towards making this world a beautiful place to live in. The role of literature as being the agent of social change has been clearly put by Jean-Paul Sartre. He argues in *What is Literature? or Literature and Existentialism (Qu'est ce que la littérature?)*² that it is the moral duty of intellectuals, as well as the ordinary citizen, to take a stand in face of political conflicts, and especially those in their region. Thus, literature becomes a tool which provides a dual action: first as a mirror to the oppressor, and second, as a guide and inspiration to the oppressed. It is through literature that the oppressed minorities gain recognition in society.

The present paper is an attempt towards exploring the new literatures in English from the perspectives of human rights and social concern New literatures in English is a postcolonial product which came in vogue in the 1960's, and since then, till date it is offering newer trajectories to the literary ideals. Discarding the sole aesthetic role of literary entrepreneurship, the practitioners of new literatures focus on the motif of art for life's sake. New Literatures in English has shown a visible newness which always caters to continuity and concern. It is a code which gives an opportunity for the global and local issues for coming together on a common platform. It casts a re-look at ethnicity, history, language, socio-cultural contexts, political upheavals, gender issues etc., and presents fresh insight and discourses in a postcolonial context. Its major forte is engaging reality. Many texts




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from new literatures in English have made an ideological critique of society adding to a new discussion to literary and critical representation. A large number of texts in the New Literatures in English attempt to determine how literature can work for the sake of life in the contemporary contexts where every human science is being questioned from the angle of its utility. In the works under new literatures in English we find a corollary of indigenous idioms and bare social reality put into a unique package. The texts of new literature in English believe in repudiating old ideas, and setting a new pattern. These works have given direct opportunities to the readers for a real action. Social commitment is, in fact, an unwritten contract that is signed between the readers to the creation in the process of reading, and holds the reader's freedom to act.

The development of new literatures in English has moved through the phase of imitation, resistance and identity formation. In recent times, identity politics has got its prominence in the discourse of political philosophy. It signifies the political activities and theorizing founded in the shared experience(s) of injustice(s) of a social group. Historically, the social groups that had acquired political and economic dominance have enjoyed the privilege over cultural production and others have got mere silence. The middle class has played, later on, a seminal role in molding the nationalist struggles. It has got enormous involvement in the production of literary writings. It is obviously the ideals and aspirations of the dominant groups and their worldview acceptance or rejection which is reflected in such literatures. With the advent of print culture, the literary and cultural forms of the oppressed social groups such as the Blacks, the Dalits, the Adivasis, women, transgender, old age people, children and the minorities have got marginalized while the literary elite has succeeded in establishing their social experience and their literary

products in their various forms as literature. However, with the intensified struggles of these submerged groups, a new literary consciousness has emerged which has coincided with the emergence of a new class from these sections. The new consciousness has produced a new genre of literature different from the so called mainstream literature. Wole Soyinka, an African writer, has said about the role of an African writer, "the African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past. Of course, the past exists now, this moment, it is co-existent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence, and it is vitally dependent on the sensibility that recalls it."³ Ngugi wa Thiang'o comment takes the point further:


I believe the African novelist, the African writer... must be committed on the side of majority (as indeed he was during the anti-colonial struggle) whose silent and violent

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clamour for change is rocking the continent. By diving into himself, deep into the collective consciousness of his people, he can seek the root, the trend in the revolutionary struggle. He has already done something in restoring the African character to his history, to his past. But in a capitalist society, the past has a romantic glamour: gazing at it...is often a means to escaping the present. It is only a socialist context that a look at yesterday can be meaningful in illuminating today and tomorrow. Whatever his ideological persuasion, this is the African writer's task.⁴

The new literature resists the hegemony on the one hand, and on the other, it questions the existing human rights violations seriously. Literature can cultivate a better understanding of Human Rights through critical evaluation of characters, analysis of scenarios, and examination of diverse historical voices. Human Rights are broadly divided under three categories; the first generation rights, the second generation rights, and the third generation rights. The First Generation Rights include civil and political rights that were preferred generally in Europe and the United States of America. The Second Generation Rights include economic, social and cultural rights and the Third Generation Rights comprise wider socio cultural spectrum including the right to truth, right to development, right to defining and or renaming identity, and right to clean environment, right to human solidarity and peace. It is from the third generation of human rights that we look for the concern of literature. Different texts of new literatures in English have associated with the aspects of human rights from the angle of characterization, locale, and portrayal of certain historical events that have shaped human history. The events like Civil Rights Movements in the U.S.A., Dalit movement in India and the portrayal of the feminist movements across the continents find places in many literary texts. We can, therefore, easily confer that literature is a good vehicle of carrying the values and patterns of human rights; both explicitly and implicitly.

With the proposition established above, we can explore the texts like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Om Prakash Balmiki's *Joothan*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiang'o's *Petals of Blood*, George Ryga's *Ecstasy of Rita Joe* and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Sally Morgan's *My Place* and many more for their association with social issues. These works have enriched the understanding of masses on the understanding of the relationship between literature and human rights, suggesting that the literature has acted as a cultural surrogate for the execution of the plans of law. The above mentioned and many other works have prepared

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cartography of human dignity, equality and brotherhood among human being. If we focus on the concept of teaching and spreading sensitization on human rights, the lines from the Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO makes apt sense, "since wars begin in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed."⁵ Here comes the role of literature. In the contemporary

times where postmodernism has brought in the issue of plurality, and we have ample room and ear for the rights of one and all, wider sensitization on human rights issues is the need of hour. When we blend it with literature, it can easily touch the heart of the masses for a long lasting impact.

Literature, not only simplifies the concept of human rights for a layman's understanding, and tells us how to apply that onto the system of society, but also gives an insight into the interdisciplinary studies of these interrelated disciplines. It can be asserted that human rights and literature, although being quite different subjects, wisely associate themselves as far as information, theories, and pedagogies are concerned. Literary works are rich resources for examining the issues of Human rights, and in a way these two disciplines look complementary to each other. They have the prospects of exposing the issues of human rights on the literary representations of the marginal and downtrodden. The subaltern narratives and alternative aesthetics are quite evident trajectories to be traced upon from this view point.


Although the relationship between human rights and literature is rich in quantity, effect and tradition, no full length authentic documentation is still found. Very few works are available in the field of literature and law in general, and literature and human rights in particular. At global level, Elizabeth Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore's edited volume *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature*⁶ suggests the scope of associating literary theories and discourse of human rights. It gives us authentic clues for making sense of literature through the windows of human rights by presenting a kaleidoscopic version of shared concern of humanity on the issues of rights, trauma, ethics, subjectivity and human rights violations in colonial contexts. Joseph R. Slaughter's *The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law* (2007)² traces of international laws as shown through the reading of the select novels from the world literature. Barring a few articles, no book length work is discernible at national level in the field concerned.



This is the need of hour to undertaking the researches in the field of literature and human rights from interdisciplinary perspectives. Such researches shall certainly contribute to the field of knowledge in such a way which shall be an authentic interdisciplinary document in the field of human rights and literature (with a focus on Civil rights, Gender rights, Disabled rights, Dalit and Tribal rights, Environmental rights with a focus on the right to land and displacement issues, Child rights, the rights of Senior Citizens, Minorities, Refugees and many more of these kinds. Further such kind of works shall set no political stance but strive to make a document which would, later on, inspire the scholars and students towards their responsibility of making contribution for critical examination of their individual rights and the rights of others. Every society should become egalitarian when the voices of all its citizens are not only heard, but incorporated into its policies and decisions. Such areas of work shall create interdisciplinary documents that would persuade the readers to expand their understanding and knowledge on the topics of human rights and their violations, thereby inviting them to take social action. Literature promotes values of human rights directly or indirectly. It aims at transforming the impact of the reading experience into a motivation for social action. So the acquired value on human rights shall be significant in bringing the humanity on right path, in the modern context. According to educational theorist Kohlberg, students are beginning to move from evaluating the world through a concern for others' opinion to a concern for ethical principles that meet society's need. This is a dramatic shift in the development, and it is important to give students the information and critical thinking tools to make such transitions easier.⁸

Many contemporary researches and my own observation in teaching show that in the current phase of time, the students have become more sensitive towards finding ways for the well being of human race and finding certain authentic and sustainable means for establishing an amiable and peaceful socio-cultural set up. If the education becomes a vehicle to change and theoretical knowledge connotes behavioral paradigm for the welfare of humanity at large. it appears quite

natural that a learner shall develop rational idea if inequality and justice are inculcated in the education at every step. In this way, the students/readers shall make their personality having an aura of virtues for treating others as they want to be treated. In the light of the above, it can be said that human rights are the most sublime rights of the human being. This simply takes the existence of human being beyond the narrow bonds of race class gender, sect, colour and nationality, but going by the age old adage that a man is born free but everywhere he is enchained, we can say that human right is very similar to moral education. Literature having a few exceptions always speaks the language of love.

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Literature makes human being a better human, and beautifies the surroundings. Sensitizing human rights through literature can make the learners understand the reciprocal impacts of their actions. It would also promote a sense of mutual respect and tolerance among the learners. In the contemporary world wherein the rat race for grabbing more and more is one of the indicators of development, and the human race is shrinking into boundaries of urban tribes where many novel violence(s) are making the headlines, sensitization of the masses on the issue of human rights is the need of hour. Engaging human rights with literature can prove panacea for many a social evil.

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² JEAN PAUL SARTRE, WHAT IS LITERATURE? (London, Methuen) (1950).

³ WOLE SOYINKA, ART, DIALOGUE AND OUTRAGE; ESSAYS ON LITERATURE AND CULTURE 18-19 (London: Methuen, 1988) (1993).

⁴ NGUGI WA THIANG'O. 46. HOMECOMING: ESSAYS ON AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURE, CULTURE AND POLITICS. 46 (New York: Lawrence Hill (1972).

⁵ 'Preamble' to the *Constitution of UNESCO* (Sept. 20, 2015). http://www.graines-de-paix.org/en/layout/set/print/outils_de_paix/documents_de_reference/preambule_a_la_constitution_de_l_unesco_16_nov_1945.

⁶ ELIZABETH GOLDBERG & ALEXANDRA SCHULTHEIS MOORE. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND LITERATURE. (Routledge) (2011).

⁷ JOSEPH R. SLAUGHTER. THE WORLD NOVEL, NARRATIVE FORM AND INTERNATIONAL LAW (Fordham Univ Press) (2007).

⁸ EGGEN, P & KAUCHAK, D. EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: WINDOWS ON THE CLASSROOM 96 (3rd Ed. 1994) (New Jersey: Prentice Hall).

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