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Reading Fiction and Poetry: A Path to Establish Peace in Society

Research Paper

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Abstract

This paper studies the significance of reading fiction and poetry and explores the role of arts and literature as a catalyst for establishing peace in society. As all the literary pursuits focus on finding a greater kind of harmony than the existing one that paves to a greater peace in society, the purpose of this study is to show the relationship between literature and the health of society. This study is a narrative research and follows descriptive-cum analytical method. The textual references are given and analysed as evidence to support the argument that literature - the fiction and poetry have power to open minds, create empathy and transform lives. The researchers would explore and show how and why fiction and poetry matter in the contemporary world. It is found "if a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays" as Ezra Pound opines in his *ABC's of Reading* (1934). This study definitely answers the question regarding correlation between literature and peace of society. Further studies are needed to establish and expose subtle relationship and develop positive measures in this arena.

Keywords: Reading fiction and poetry, empathy, society, peace

It would not be wrong if it is stated that there is durable association between literature and the health of society. Literature not only cultivates our imaginative faculty; it also gives the ability to feel empathy for people we have never meet. In a recent lecture on reading, reprinted in the *The Guardian*, novelist Neil Gaiman argues that our future depends on allowing children to read whatever they want. Specifically, he argues that children "should read fiction– any fiction, not just the fiction adults want children to read" (Gaiman, 2013). Indeed, the ability to fuse and analyse non-fiction is an important skill, but reading fiction, according to Gaiman, fosters long-term skills, like 'Empathy' and empathy is a tool for bonding people into groups, for letting us to function as more than self-obsessed individuals. Reading literature brings a significant change and the researcher wants to show in this paper what the act of reading fiction and poetry do. What and why it is good for our society.

Gaiman states that fiction has two uses. Firstly, it is a gateway drug to reading. This drive to know what happens next, to want to turn the page, the need to keep going, even if it's hard, because someone's in trouble and you have to know how it's all going to end … that's a very real drive. And it forces you to learn new words, to think new thoughts, to keep going. To

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discover that reading is pleasurable. Once you learn that, you're on the road to reading everything. And reading is key. There were noises made briefly, a few years ago, about the idea that we were living in a post-literate world, in which the ability to make sense out of written words was somehow redundant, but those days are gone: words are more important than they ever were: we navigate the world with words, and as the world slips onto the web, we need to follow, to communicate and to comprehend what we are reading. People who cannot understand each other cannot exchange ideas, cannot communicate, and translation programs only go so far (Gaiman, 2013).

When people watch TV or see a film, they are watching at things happening to other persons. Prose fiction is something that build up only from 26 symbols/ letters and a handful of punctuation marks, and the reader, using her/his imagination, create a world and people it and look out through the eyes of others. S/he gets to feel things, visit places and worlds they would never otherwise know. They learn that everyone else out there is a 'Me', as well. They are being someone else, and when they return to their own world, they are going to some extent changed persons, since:

> Fiction can show you a different world. It can take you somewhere you've never been. Once you've visited other worlds, like those who ate fairy fruit, you can never be entirely content with the world that you grew up in. Discontent is a good thing: discontented people can modify and improve their worlds, leave them better, leave them different (Gaiman, 2013).

The important point to note about Gaiman's argument is his claim that reading fiction brings us closer to the truth than other forms of reading. By reading fiction young readers learn more about the world around them than reading non-fiction. Non-fiction is often ordinary, streamlined. Gaiman asserts that "fiction is the lie that tells the truth, after all" (Gaiman, 2013). Fiction affects our outlook on our lives and the people we see every day as it bears both the historical and poetic truth as well as creates amplitudes for the reader.

The people, who read fiction are visionary and can change the society. In 2007, novelist Gaiman came to know from a Chinese official that hitherto the Chinese were brilliant at making different complex things if other people brought them the plans and projects, "But they did not innovate and they did not invent. They did not imagine. So, they sent a delegation to the US, to Apple, to Microsoft, to Google, and they asked the people there who were inventing the future about themselves. And they found that all of them had read science fiction when they were boys or girls" (quoted in Gaiman, 2013). It is a clear proof that literature can take us somewhere that we have never been. People can discover totally a different world. Once they have visited those other worlds, one can never be totally content with the earth that s/he grew up in. This discontentment is a good thing because dissatisfied and desirous people can transform their society into a healthier one.

Literature opens a door and gives knowledge about our world and our predicament, gives the armaments and gives the shield as well. According to Eric Schmidt of Google, every two days now the human race creates as much information as we did from the dawn of civilisation until 2003, "There was 5 Exabytes of information created between the dawn of civilization through 2003, but that much information is now created every two days, and the pace is increasing" (Griffiths, 2012). Now, it is necessary to direct this bulk of information for finding the object we actually require to establish peace in the society, largely, in the world.

All the members of society, free and chained, have obligation to have daydream and make the dream happen collectively. We must exercise the power to make the people and society happy. It is common belief that nobody can change anything and that the society is all powerful and individual self is like a drop of water in a sea. But the reality is, individuals have the

capability to change the world. Individuals can build the present and future over and over through imagination and real endeavours. As social being, men have commitment to make the society beautiful, not to leave the world coarser than they got it. So, people must act to preserve peace and harmony. This is a matter of humanity.

Once Albert Einstein was asked how one could make one's children intelligent. His reply was both unpretentious and judicious. "If you want your children to be intelligent, let them read fairy tales". Folklorist and literary scholar Jack Zipes further transform Einstein's alleged aphorism in into a charming short fable in the introduction to his 1979 book *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*:

> Once upon a time the famous physicist Albert Einstein was confronted by an overly concerned woman who sought advice on how to raise her small son to become a successful scientist. In particular she wanted to know what kinds of books she should read to her son.
> "Fairy Tales," Einstein responded without hesitation.
> "Fine, but what else should I read to him after that?" the mother asked.
> "More fairy tales," Einstein stated.
> "And after that?"
> "Even more fairy tales," replied the great scientist, and he waved his pipe like a wizard pronouncing a happy end to a long adventure (quoted in Brainpickings, 2014).

So, Einstein's such fairy-tale maxim asserts the inevitability of studying liberal arts and humanities. Understanding the value of reading and imagining Dr. Einstein also persisted that creative imagination is the essential element in the intellectual equipment of the true scientist, and that fairy tales are the childhood stimulus to this quality. Poetry also does the same. Moreover, reading fiction and poetry one can travel through time as time becomes visible in literature whether it is peaceful or troublesome. Poet's powerful call for a more beautiful and just world resonate with all. Poetry, like water, is for everyone and saves our life. As Ashim Kumar Das opines in his *Jhanjhya O Punarutthan* that poetry save us, at least for the time being, from this dark and fey existence of human being (Das, 2011). All the greatest poets of all time know this to be true.

Horace put the matter to rest when he suggested, as Parini notes in his book *Why Poetry Matters*, "that poetry is useful because it can both teach and delight at the same time and therefore has utilitarian value." He touches on Longinus, Dante, Sydney and Eliot among others to arrive at his first assertion on why poetry matters: "Poetry extends the boundaries of thought by extending the boundaries of expression itself … At its best, poetry is a language adequate to our experience" (quoted in Slate, 2008). Parini further asserts, in chapter four, that metaphor and poetry matter because the concentration of its metaphorical energy expands our ability to make new links and test their limits: "Poetry teaches us how far to go", and in chapter five, "Tradition and Originality," makes a case for poetry as a force of continuity, a constant return to original sources and basic humanity. There is a place where poetry, politics, society and morality meet, but it will essentially be a sector of complexity and considerable distinction. Although this is a knotty and sometimes argumentative topic, Parini seems to have an unshakable belief in poetry as an essential gallery of voices addressing injustice, poverty, and violence. Whether discussing Edmund Spenser or other poets, his position is commanding even in its generalisations. Poetry asks readers to imagine what has happened and to imagine what might follow from certain actions.

Poetry has relationship to both the physical and metaphysical world. John Elder believes that "A broad awareness of culture and poetry is useful to a person in the same way that his or her natural responsiveness is enhanced by knowing the basic principles of ecology" (quoted in

Slate, 2008). Whereas Sri Aurobindo, in *The Future Poetry*, asserts about the ample of poetry from physical to metaphysical world: "[…] Poetry arrives at the indication of infinite meanings beyond the finite intellectual meaning the word carries. It expresses not only the life-soul of man as did the primitive word, not only the ideas of his intelligence for which speech now usually serves, but the experience, the vision, the ideas, as we may say, of the higher and wider soul in him. Making them real to our life-soul as well as present to our intellect, it opens to us by the word the doors of the Spirit" (Aurobindo, 2000).

Poetry's impulse to use metaphor, to discover resemblance, is not for the sake of making comparisons, nor is it to diminish the particularity of any event; it is to discover those correspondences of which the sum total would be proof of the indivisible totality of existence. Poetry offers a healing balm, by reassembling living memory, using metaphor to reunify what has been disjointed, and re-voicing the traditional stream of expression. Besides, poetry offers criticism of life, consolation and shelter, as Matthew Arnold declares in his *The Study of Poetry*:

> "In poetry, as a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time goes on and other helps fail, its consolation and stay." (Enright & Chikera, 2009).

Actually, literature is a tool to aid us discovering our thoughts, manners, predetermined notions and in a greater way to comprehend what it means to be human. Joseph Curry, former English Teacher, declares that "[…] literature represents a living body of work that speaks to humans of all ages about concepts that are of importance to understanding the condition of humans in relationship to the ever shifting social mores of a given society at some point in that societies routine life. This will of necessity change depending on various socioeconomic circumstances, and the morality of a given society" (Curry, 2018). He argues that all societies have a variety of myths, oral and/or written, held in various degrees of esteem by a given population. In this regard, he adds that "Myth by its very nature is a fundamental part of all literature, […] which often tells of man's relationship to nature as well as to society in general. Many myths are found in one form or another throughout world culture. Some have termed this the 'collective unconscious', which refers to the many myths that exist among societies that have had no contact with each other. Some common themes include love, hate, wealth, power, sex, greed, life, death religion, and morality. These concerns often form the highest themes of literature" (Curry, 2018). Literature, in general helps us realize what it means to be a part of mankind in the universe.

Literature – the fiction and poetry have power to open minds and transform our lives in the following ways:

a. Literature develops our understanding. It explores and uncovers paradigm. It allows us understand perspectives we've never seen before. Reading literature is like the journey of the Ancient Mariner – from the known to the unknown world. It is a journey within – a journey deep inside us. After the journey, like the Ancient Mariner we have become "a wiser man" (Coleridge, L.625).
b. Reading literature deepens our understanding of evolution. In a broader perspective, fiction allows us to observe the evolution of events, narratives, courses, even societies. It gives a bird's eye view of the world that helps its reader to have diversified points of view.
c. Looking at the world in different lights is one of the most vital things one can do in the quest of growth. Literature gives us that rare opportunity to groom one's own standard and growth.
d. Literature makes our lives rich. Because it deals with the things that make us fundamentally humane. We find the presence of passion, conflict, love, lust, fear hatred,

jealousy, and adoration in literature – the things that move us most. Literature makes us feel, and that feeling makes us rich and humane.

e. Literature creates bridges among souls. Reading literature helps us to understand other people's perspectives by allowing us observing the world through other characters' eyes that is necessary to establish peace.

All forms of art are nothing but imitation or representation, as Aristotle opines in *Poetics*, the artistic world represents us or we are represented by them in one or that way. So, while reading literature, we own the characters, even the fictitious ones, and ultimately understand them from inside. Thus, books give us insight into one another's minds. Keith Oately, a cognitive psychologist at the University of Toronto, opines "when we read about other people, we can imagine ourselves into their position and we can imagine it's like being that person. … That enables us to better understand people, better cooperate with them. People who read more fiction were better at empathy and understanding others. … Fiction allows to see ourselves in someone else" (quoted in Kaplan, 2016).

This is empathy which builds the foundation of peaceful society, nation and in greater sense a peaceful universe. Empathy is the ability to share and comprehend the sentiments of others, and empathy is imperative because it helps us understand how others are feeling as a result we can respond properly to the situation. It is typically connected with social behaviour and "there is lots of research showing that greater empathy leads to more helping behaviour" (The Conversation, 2017). Empathy comprises self-awareness, as well as difference between the self and the other. In that sense it is diverse from imitation. Empathy is also different from sympathy, which involves feeling concern for the suffering of another person and a desire to help. The most important thing fiction, poetry, or in general literature, does is to build empathy.

As arts and literature cultivate empathy, they play important roles, as catalysts, for establishing peace in society. Reading literature, viewing quality cinema and listening to music help us to refine our sensibilities and make us better and more humane. By taking us out of ourselves, art and literature make us open to and mindful of others. In 2013, psychologists Evan Kidd and Emanuele Castano ran five experiments to test whether exposure to literary fiction enhances empathy or not (quoted in The Conversation, 2017). In that research, Kidd and Castano argue literary fiction uniquely fosters the capacity to simulate the nuances of others' experience. They recommend that reading literary texts train up the neural networks that reinforce empathy, with lasting benefits.

In this cruel age of anti-poetry, anti-literature and anti-knowledge, it is imperative to form the will power for doing the positive tasks to save the society, mankind and the world itself. Else we are going to face a bleak world what Martin Niemöller (1892–1984), a prominent Lutheran pastor in Germany, depicts in the following poem – "Then They Came …":

> First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
> Because I was not a socialist. […]
> Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
> Because I was not a Jew.
> Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me (Marcuse, 2014).

Even our perpetrators take the opportunity of this collective indifference. So, all the people must be morally connected to bring collective peace in society. Otherwise, anarchy will clutch the society. Now, this is our choice to let literature guiding us or not. It only can influence us if we allow it. It is indeed about how we want it to touch our minds. Then, we can influence people and society by our actions. This is the healthy way to perceive it. We can take what society wants from literature and leave the rest. We must not take and do the things that redeem the standard of society. To raise this awareness in the collective minds only science, philosophy,

religion and other institutions are not enough rather they are incomplete without literature, especially fiction and poetry, as Arnold testifies in his *The Study of Poetry*: "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it. […] the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize 'the breath and finer spirit of knowledge' offered to us by poetry" (Enright & Chikera, 2009). Besides giving consolation and refuge, literature offers the opportunity to be connected with others like the bridges among souls, which teach us empathy, and love. And this feeling of empathy is the basis of peace and greater harmony. As reading literature, especially, fiction and poetry cultivate empathy, they pave the way to establish peace and harmony in society which is a must in this current self-centred world of war and conflict.

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