
Literature and Society: Intersections and Influences

¹**Mr. Daryaba Krishna Imade**

Research Scholar,

Shri. Shivaji Mahavidyalaya, Barshi

²**Dr. Ashok B. Kadam**

Shri. Shivaji Mahavidyalaya, Barshi

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Abstract:

Literature is transformative. It reflects the world by depicting a mirror, which repeats the social values, norms, and conflicts in society. It is also a catalyst for social change. Literature and society are interdependent, and this study explores the nexus between both. Literature is an important mirror in which society examines itself and influences the attitudes and ideologies of individuals. As society changes, so does literature. It responds to new matters and international issues. Literature is frequently a response to the social, political, and cultural climate in which it is contextualized, and in turn, it influences public discourse. Through narrative techniques, character development, and thematic exploration, literature offers insight into the lived experiences of individuals in myriad communities. It always reveals struggles with class, race, gender, and identity. Through an exploration of key literature and the real world they illuminate, the reader comes to understand the mutuality between literature and the world to which it belongs.

Keywords: social justice, colonialism, gender inequality, political activism, caste system, etc.

Introduction:

The medium of class, gender, and race in social issues has always been powerful. In most cases, critique and literature serve this purpose nicely. Writers have used the tools of storytelling, poetry, drama, and many other types of literature. They used it to present the injustices and inequalities endured by individuals and entire communities to the world. Literary works depict the realities of oppressed people. They compel grasping the pre-existing power structures that allow disparity to exist. Class, gender, and racial discourses are embedded in literature as writers try to trace the subversive relations of privilege and oppression in social systems. Likewise, literature has always had a significant link with political movements, serving as a mirror and an advocate for social action. Through their works, writers have actively participated in and shaped major political movements such as abolition, feminism, and civil rights. Eminent writers like Charles Dickens, Toni Morrison,

and Virginia Woolf have presented a discourse with the aim of countering or rectifying social injustices.

Literature has the ability to surpass its chronological boundaries, wield influence over the coming generations, and be a foundation for social change. For as long as writers have existed, they challenged social norms, fought against corruption, and dreamed of a better contemporary world. They have incorporated movements for civil rights, gender equality, and climate change into their visions. This study seeks to emphasize that literature, in all its forms, is not only an epiphenomenon associated with the social order in which it was produced but rather is a process that transforms this order; this process is centered on both the time period and the society that it's attempting to narrate. Thus, this research aims to understand how literature aims to shift and portray class, gender, and race issues within societies. Furthermore, it acknowledges and supports the nature of political activism that seeks to promote equality and justice.

1. Literature as a Reflection of Social Issues:

Class, gender inclusivity and racial discrimination are some of the most common issues discussed in the literature as they define the individual as well as the society. Authors through characters, plot and settings address such issues in all their literary pieces and interrogate the environments they live in.

1.1. Social Class:

Social class is a major theme in several works of literature. Writers always intended to focus on class divisions, which influence the individual's possibilities and attendant behaviors. *Great Expectations* is no exception since it also deals with class issues. It is a classic English novel written by Charles Dickens. The protagonist, Pip, has a great expectation of transforming from a lower class to wealth. Dickens criticizes Pip's fixation on outgrowing his working-class background and his aversion to his previous modest status while illustrating the great internalization of class discrimination. The great characters of Joe as the blacksmith are shown by Dickens with the intention of proving that the working class is teeming with moral people. He tried to focus on the thing that is nice and moral and has nothing to do with what part of society you are situated in.

Class is arguably the most significant theme in this tale of Jay Gatsby, alongside the critique of the American Dream. In *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gatsby portrays a rags-to-riches story where he successfully climbs up the economic ladder just to win over Daisy Buchanan, who belongs to a wealthy elite family. However, the author harshly criticizes the concept of the American Dream while portraying Gatsby's love story. Despite accumulating tons of wealth, Jay could never truly assimilate into the established high class due to his background. The same theme is also present in *The Grapes of Wrath* alongside several different elements. The novel shines a light on the Joad family's move to California from Oklahoma during the Great Depression. It once again allows the readers and academics to peek into the struggles faced by the working class. John portrays the injustice migrant workers faced during the movement and the stark differences in the economy that existed during those times. The novel offers a glimpse into how class division and a gap in wealth

impact social justice, with the rich continuing to enjoy their status while the lower class struggle for mere existence.

1.2. Gender:

Gender roles and expectations are often deeply ingrained in society and are powerfully critiqued in literature. In *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, the author contends that women have been historically denied access to the intellectual and creative spaces reserved for men. Woolf argues that women's ability to write and contribute meaningfully to literature has been hindered by a lack of financial independence and societal constraints. She uses the metaphor of a **"room of one's own"** to call for the creation of spaces where women can freely explore their creativity and intellect unimpeded by male authority. In *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, gender inequality is portrayed in an extreme dystopian society where women's roles are strictly controlled. Offred, the protagonist, is stripped of her identity and autonomy, serving as a **"handmaid"** whose sole purpose is reproduction. Atwood critiques the subjugation of women by showing the horrifying consequences of a theocratic society where women are reduced to mere vessels for childbirth. The novel serves as a warning against the erosion of women's rights and autonomy, demonstrating how gender inequality can lead to systemic oppression.

The title character in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* defies Victorian gender expectations by claiming her autonomy and self-determination. Jane defies the traditional expectations placed on women in the 19th century throughout the book, especially when it comes to her refusal to get married for practical or economic reasons. She rejects the conventional, subservient role in marriage, as evidenced by her relationship with Mr. Rochester, which develops out of respect for one another. Even in the face of gendered social norms, Brontë promotes the value of equality and self-respect in relationships through Jane.

1.3. Race:

Another significant social issue that is explored in literature is race, which is a reflection of both the past and contemporary struggles for equality. The painful legacy of slavery and its continuing impact on Afro-American identity are examined in Toni Morrison's book *Beloved*. The protagonist, Sethe, is plagued by the spirit of her deceased child. *Beloved* represents the irreversible agony of slavery. Morrison's depiction of race and memory shows how the effects of slavery endure in the Afro-American community.

The protagonist's journey in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* also represents the marginalization and loneliness that Afro-Americans face in a segregated society. The book's unidentified narrator highlights the psychological and societal repercussions of racism. The narrator fought to define himself in a society that only saw him through the lens of race. Symbolic language is used to denounce the dehumanizing effects of racial prejudice, such as the narrator's **"invisible"** status.

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the trial of Tom Robinson, a black man wrongfully convicted of raping a white woman. It illustrates the issue of race. The book criticizes the racial biases that were prevalent in Southern society and the legal system in the

1930s. Lee emphasizes children's innocence and capacity to see past racial prejudice through Scout Finch's point of view. The trial and its aftermath, however, reveal the systemic prejudice that shapes the administration of justice in the American South. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, is a young, impoverished Afro-American man caught in a cycle of racial oppression and poverty in Chicago. The story examines the psychological effects of systemic racism as Bigger's actions are influenced by the social forces that keep him in a life of violence and hopelessness. The socioeconomic structure that denies Afro-Americans opportunity and commits them to a life of disenfranchisement is criticized in the book.

2. The Relationship between Literature and Political Movements in Indian English Literature:

There has been a dynamic and significant relationship between literature and political movements. It has always shaped nations' political cultures. Literature frequently reflects the political atmosphere. Literature also encourages activism and political developments. India's complex literary-political relationship dates back centuries, particularly to the colonial era and the political upheavals that followed independence. Authors have long challenged authority, pushed for change, and offered commentary on society's concerns through their works. The socio-political battles of the age are reflected in Indian English literature, which has been a solid medium for addressing topics of nationalism, gender, caste, class, and colonialism.

2.1. The Use of Literature in Political Conflict:

In India, literature was used as a weapon in the fight for independence for almost 150 years of colonial rule. People were inspired by literature to overcome colonial power, fight for nationalistic sentiments, and unite in their cause. A famous example of this was Rabindranath Tagore, the first Indian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Tagore's first book of poems, *Gitanjali*, was published in 1910. It captured the concepts of nationalist sentiment and the need for self-reliance. Tagore's writings conveyed a message of spiritual and national renewal via a rejection of colonial occupation and a determination to discover strength inside one's own homeland. **Jana-Gana-Mana** is one of his well-known patriotic melodies. It is currently the Indian National Anthem and symbolizes solidarity.

A well-known Indian author in English, Mulk Raj Anand, also depicted political movements in his writings. His most notable work is *Coolie* (1936). Munoo, an innocent young child, is the subject of the book's plot. He is subjected to oppression by the British colonial rule regime. Workers' oppression and the alleged socioeconomic disparities that existed throughout colonialism are throughout the story. Scholars are critically prompted to consider the exploitation of working-class and impoverished populations through Anand's empathetic depiction of these groups. It highlights the need for social reform.

Ismat Chughtai's writings were quite influential in Indian politics. He wrote in Urdu language. Social conventions and gender inequity were questioned in her short stories, such as *Lihaaf* (1942). Strongly opposing the status quo, Chughtai raised awareness of the intersections of gender and politics in India. His writings were particularly in regard to

women's rights and freedom.

2.2. Post-Independence Indian Literature and Political Movements:

Indian English literature continued to pay close attention to the political situation of the country after independence. As caste, class, and religious violence came to the forefront, the focus shifted from colonial and postcolonial struggle to forging a new type of postcolonial identity. For example, a new area of interest in Indian literature has emerged for years as a result of the fierce politics in India to maintain a sizable majority of people from many demographics unified.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was published in 1981. It is one of the most renowned pieces of post-independence literature. It explores the political and social turmoil that followed India's division and independence by fusing historical fiction with magical realism. The book criticizes the political climate following independence, pointing out the new Indian state's historical revisionism and power concentration. The main character, Saleem Sinai, was born on the first day of Indian independence, and throughout his life, a mirror reflects the country's political unrest and changes.

The 1997 book *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is a superb example of political and social criticism of Kerala. The caste structure is also questioned in the book, as is the legacy of colonialism that India left behind after gaining its independence. Caste system tensions and the effects of colonialism are two examples of larger socio-political themes that are reflected in the personal tales of the characters. She explores the psychological harm caused by the colonists' authority, as well as systemic racism and classism, in the dual protagonists, Ammu and Velutha. Roy's post-alienated writings, such as *Field Notes on Democracy* (2002), focused on political action and addressed the issue of marginalized communities' oppression and political exploitation.

Prominent Indian poet and author Kamala Das was another influential individual who blended political and personal aspects. She challenged women's traditional duties and highlighted the predicament of women in a patriarchal society in her poetry and autobiographical works. Kamala Das touches on the larger topic of women's liberty in her autobiography, *My Story* (1976), where she describes her personal problems inside the traditional marriage. In tackling women's issues in India, her work was groundbreaking, bringing up issues such as female sexuality, societal expectations, and the right to self-expression.

2.3. The Role of Literature in Contemporary Political Movements:

Indian English literature continues to play a crucial role in current political discussions by illuminating socioeconomic struggles, political disputes, and national discussions in contemporary India. The literature on India's ongoing battles with caste-based violence, religious intolerance, and official repression serves as a prime example. Arundhati Roy's later writings, such as *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014), critique the growing influence of global capitalism on Indian politics, the degradation of democratic rights, and the marginalization of indigenous people. Her study focuses on how political authority and

economic policies can be used to exploit weaker groups, particularly in light of corporate power's ascent in India.

Political concerns are addressed in the writings of contemporary authors such as Shashi Tharoor and Chetan Bhagat. Indian political and social growth in the post-liberalization age is covered in Tharoor's 2007 book *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone. The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008) by Chetan Bhagat, on the other hand, explores issues of religious conflict, youth disillusionment, and the intricacies of post-independence identity in India. It focuses on the difficulties that the younger generation has in a society that is changing quickly. In a postcolonial setting, works such as Pankaj Mishra's 2004 book *An End to Suffering* offer a thoughtful analysis of India's political development. Mishra examines the conflict between tradition and modernity in Indian politics by emphasizing the country's quest for self-discovery following its liberation from colonial domination.

Conclusion:

In India, literature has served as both a mirror and a catalyst for societal change. Indian English literature has depicted the oppressive systems of racism and casteism, as well as gender inequality and class differences, through characters, situations, and narratives. Some authors, like Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, and Kamala Das, have incorporated social criticism into their novels by addressing issues such as racial oppression, gender discrimination, and class exploitation. This has caused readers and academics to reflect on long-standing beliefs and inequalities. Literature has long served as a powerful window into society, capturing its complexities, conflicts, and changes.

As a form of expression, literature is profoundly impacted by social issues like race, gender, and class. It provides a sophisticated examination of how these elements influence societal structures and individual lives. From the class struggles in books like *Great Expectations* and *The Grapes of Wrath* to the gender critique in books like *A Room of One's Own* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, literature provides a window into the biases and injustices ingrained in societal structures. Similarly, racial themes have been forcefully represented in works such as *Beloved* and *Invisible Man*, where writers question social conventions and expectations while exposing the profound wounds of racial prejudice.

It is undeniable that political movements and literature are related. Literature has always played a crucial role in political activism, whether it was during colonial rule, the post-independence era, or modern political movements. Literary works by Indian authors Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, and Arundhati Roy have been used to criticize the political system and motivate social change. In the end, literature serves as both a catalyst for social and political change and a mirror of societal ills. It is a vital instrument for reflecting on and influencing the world around us because it causes consciousness to grow, stimulates discussion, and inspires action. Literature has given people a platform to express their political views, challenge power, promote national consciousness, and demand justice.

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