

# Literature: A Study of Social Reformation

## Abstract

Literature reflects society and society gives birth to literature. Since the genesis of man's existence came into being, literature has become the voice of man. English literature is such history that integrated each segment of society in one unit. Literature constitutes culture cults, living standard, demography, rituals and practices of society. The literary world is a gamut of collective inherent thoughts that not only enriches the general masses but suggests certain corrective measure too. There is no landmark demarcation within periods of literature. It is written documentation that keeps record the main events of particular eras. It also embeds in human minds which passes from one generation to another orally or written. Similarly In English society literature projects the aspiration, weakness and development of English civilization. The intellectuals who took initiative for expanding literary world made road for other seekers. Those novice seekers writers were generally monks, friars, priests and reformists. Moreover the descriptions of Discoveries, inventions, journeys to other land and life threatening sea-voyages enhanced the production works. The notable works like Nennius "The History of Britons" one such book that gave broad description of country politics and literary to other land this kaleidoscope history inspired many writers to write fruitful work of such type. After this era, the time had ripened for scripting the big momentous works. These works were Caedmon, Beowulf, and Cynewulf and so on, the description of enchanting remote world which exists somewhere gives the glimpse of human societies which render human to grow mentally. Literature has never been scripted till some likeminded writer realised the value of writing. They came forward and took up the work of recording historical facts and creating social consciousness. The present paper will discuss the role of Chaucer, William Shakespeare and John Milton in creating social awareness among masses for bringing huge reformation in society.

**Keywords:** Renaissance, Reformation, Revolution, Authorship, Biblical, Motif, Repository.

## Introduction

The literary works became a prominent vehicle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. These works contained repository of thoughts and philosophies. The ritual of scripting things carried forward by many writers like John Gower, John Wycliff etc. John Gower was a minor poet stood for landlord section and described the fear peasantry felt in wake of imminent revolution. Gower wrote in three languages. He proved his mastery in all spoken languages of those times. Only Vox Clamatis is exceptional one which he wrote in English. English became more enriched when one poem named "The Vision concerning pier the plowman" published, its authorship is anonymous some researched claimed it was scripted by William Langland. This poem laid stress on moral edification and purification of human's soul. Some researchers made this poem "didactic poem because the poem is concerned with religious reform"(25)<sup>1</sup>. John Wycliff next comes in rank. He was neither a poet nor a writer but he sensitized English masses about religious freedom, his followers were known by the name of 'Lollard'. The thought of reformation germinated a seed of revolution in his mind and he gave shape to it by translating Latin Bible into vernacular. He did the work of translation on honorary basis and he got rigorous imprisonment by translating Bible. Wycliff had done the exemplary work that foreshadowed the Bible translation in the latter centuries. Besides proselytize writing, popular poetry Ballad had emerged with pristine glory. The Ballad had originated in this 14th century. The Ballad is simple and colloquial, love is the theme sometimes love and chivalry are prime themes in to this kind of

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poetry. Apart from these developments the printing press was invented. William Caxton introduced it and made use of it in translations in older text.

#### **Aim of the Study**

In this paper the study is done on literature and how literature is a vehicle of social reforms. It is always looked literature is a written documentation on any era.

In the middle of 14th century Drama came up with new commitments it was not continuation of Roman Drams that was oblivion by Romans because of its vulgarity. In England drama put into use by priest, monks, clergies on a moveable stage. The stage was set up within the premises of church or monasteries were based on Christian tradition called liturgical plays. These plays performed in four cycles. The cycles are Chester cycle, Wakefield cycle, Coventry cycle and York cycles. After becoming a popular stream drama developed into four types. These are Miracle plays, Mystery plays, Morality plays and Interludes. Miracle plays dealt with the lives of saints, Mystery plays were based on Biblical themes, Morality plays taught the contrast between right and wrong. Interludes drove its themes for both the miracles and mysteries play. Actually these plays were developed out of "intertextuality"<sup>(50)</sup><sup>2</sup>. The language used in dramas was purely Latin but when drama came out of churches edifices English became its language. The peculiar part of drama was that the female were prohibited to take part in plays the female roles were acted by male after wearing female costumes. The motifs of these plays were only to cultivate goodness in man and instruct him to spend his life like a true Christian.

"Renaissance"<sup>(739)</sup><sup>3</sup> came when dark ages had lost their youthful existence; it was rebirth of learning and discoveries. As renaissance was struggling to establish itself, the reformation appeared with pomp and show. The Renaissance was to reawaken the soul of man from deep slumber and reformation tried to reform man from his maladroit life. Few writer rose to the occasion they introduced the attributions of both Renaissance and reformation in their works. Thomas More was one of those writers who arouse inquisition in man to discover hidden mysteries of universe. He was the prose writer he wrote a work in it he talked about a country that lied somewhere called Utopia. This imaginary land gave the definition of golden age which people hoped to have in England with the coming of catalytic Renaissance and reformation. Chaucer was the initiator, biophile, revealed his age entirely in his works. Along with the realistic poetry he wrote lyric poems as well. Whichever work was produced their main objective was to bring transformation in society and introduced those values that facilities to get rid of social disparities. Basically the literature of the century described the struggling of good and evils where good remain winner and apostasy has to be brought on the Godly path. The magus opus works of Chaucer taught nothing but criticising society which always back up tribulations and righteousness remained hushed up. He was poet of narrative poetry. In this works he narrated prevalent myths, journeys and folklores. The

themes he picked up for his poetry were too inapt whereas those themes were meant for fictions. It is believed if the novel was the popular culture of the age Chaucer could be novelist instead of poet as he was a good narrator. He showed his skill of recounting incidence in the prologue of "Canterbury Tales" where he exposed society from the top to bottom. Even he did not lag behind in throwing tantrums on fair sexes. He laughed over follies and showed how fair sexes presented themselves hypocritically in society. Through his works Chaucer engendered the feeling of nationalism in society and endeavoured to nurture values in individuals.

Spencer was the prime poet of pre-Elizabethan time. He produced romantic poetry and poems on satires wherein he presented exquisite world of fairies and exposed the follies of human at the same time. He was thorough court poet. Having found such a talent in Spencer Queen began to admire him and provided him pension till his death. His most celebrated work of that regime was "Faery Queen" it was centred upon moral virtues and explication of amorous obscenity. He had planned to write 24 books on it but he completed only six. The faery Queen is his famous verse; it is also one of his important pieces of poetry from the point of allegorical representation. Spencer penned down his poetry into new verses form called Spenserian stanza (310)<sup>4</sup>. It is Spencer love of poetry that conferred him the title of poet's poet. Spencer and Chaucer are avante grante in their periods but both of them are pole apart in scripting poetry. Chaucer was the champion of human civilization. He painted every aspect of society. Spencer believes in imagination. His imagination reign was too large and beautiful. In this ethereal world he stays with the kings and queens. Spencer is being known by his poetic creation but one prose work that is extraordinarily inspiring called "View of the state of Ireland" impressed upon the reader to such a degree that commoners took him their saviour. This literary work recorded the plight of Ireland's citizens who were bearing the brunt of natural as well as man -made calamities like famine, hunger and oppression. The periods that came between 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries made prominent alliterative verse, Ballad, Pastoral romance, realistic romances and varied versification.

In that era chronicle plays appeared, these plays acted on the notable events of the current times. Although some writer improvised it with the imaginative and realistic events yet their main attraction was on actual affairs only. Christopher Marlowe was the major dramatist who incorporated the traits of reformation, renaissance and Elizabethan age in his stories. By interweaving all the qualities he developed arguments in stories to expose the discrepancies in human's persona. He particularly explored the individualism in any being. "Tamberline" was his first play explicitly described the hunger for money, Second play. Dr. Faustus wherein he again depicted an unfulfilled dream of psycho doctor Faustus, Dr.Faustus has a desire to enrich himself with unlimited knowledge by the study of necromancy. Edward the second, like his previous play reproduced lust. Through the medium of these plays Marlowe

criticised those practises which were in vague in the 16<sup>th</sup> century English society. Dr.Faustus who is intellectual, entrepreneur, wanted to earn money and he got things done by indulging in very dreadful means. He sold his soul to devil for enjoying his life, even for acquiring his endless pleasure he kept his religion at stake. Marlowe made the character of Dr. Faustus to lacerate the abnormality in human personality which has encrusted in everyone's mind it suddenly cropped up when a man saw temptation. Dr.Faustus had an ulterior aim of attaining unlimited power over universe by dint of knowledge but he misused his knowledge he became victim of circumstances and got not any chance to repent. Dr. Faustus was typically a man of Renaissance as he wanted more and more learning. As days rolled by in his life he took notice of his calamities and wanted to come under the shadow of god but it was too late for him to do it and lost his soul in perpetual suffering. Although Marlowe rationalized the drama domain but he did not take the drama at the zenith as it was taken by William Shakespeare. Shakespeare came in England when Marlowe was the star dramatist and he joined his acting troupe. It is believed he acted in his one or two plays before picking up playwriting as a career. Greene, contemporary of Shakespeare pointed out the entry of dramatist like this "there is an upstart crow beautified with our feathers that with that his tiger's heart wrapt in a player's hide"<sup>5</sup> (411). Unlike Marlowe he wrote tragedies, comedies, tragic-comic, melodrama and dramatic romance in span of twenty four years that had been started from 1593 continued till 1613.

Shakespeare was that dramatist who never delivered sermon in his plays whatever he offered on to stage he displayed without any hiccups. Actually he was not sombre writer his plays show the optimistic side of human life. As he believed every darker cloud has a leaven. Some thinkers searched over Shakespeare and found his plays are symbolic representation of human nature. Like his play "Othello" where Othello signifies jealousy and patriarchal values. The writer endeavoured to illustrate how a husband maltreated his wife when he saw her taking, laughing with another male. This doubt got aggravation by the villain Iago. The villain Iago wanted to take revenge on Othello and by instigation him he wanted to reduce his sense of decision making. It is very unfortunate that he made Othello wife Desdemona his bait. Othello belongs to category of angry husbands who treats their wife as their moveable property. A Writer lashed over this nature of Othello by describing it like this "beneath the surface othello retains the savage passions of his Moorish blood and suspiciousness regarding female chastity common among oriental peoples"(114)<sup>6</sup>. Desdemona gives the picture of those women who idolise their husbands. The entire drama is on man-woman relationship; both are confronting the issue of maladjustment. In the end Desdemona died and Othello was in bout of madness. He lost his innocent wife and he killed her. Through this play the dramatist made appeal to the audience that husband and wife should be loyal to each other and they must

put their faith over themselves. If Othello sees the things apparently without any envious thoughts, his wife would be alive. Shakespeare depicted another part of human nature in his other play "Hamlet". The prince Hamlet is son of King of Scotland he lost his father when he was not in his kingdom he did not meet his father alive but after his murder he approached to his son in guise of soul. Hamlet wanted to catch the perpetrator but dirty politics around him did not provide him ample space to trace the real villain. For bringing to book the murderer he feigned madness and behaved as he was in great shock. Finally he sent to hell the real villains but to accomplish the work he took so many days, during the investigation sometimes he acted as he is procrastinated. Basically play does not do justice on stage because play was closet play (142).<sup>7</sup> it has little action on stage but the true play acted in the mind of Hamlet where he tried to resolve the dilemma of his life "To Be, OR Not TO Be". Moreover it is assumed that Hamlet has a problem of Oedipus Rex. Due to this dementia he lingered on and on, remains silent till end. Actually whatever takes place in play is exceptionally private and hidden from public. After displaying this play many controversies cropped up like Hamlet has incestuous love for his mother and under stress he killed his fiancé Cordilla. Hamlet describes a difficult predicament in anybody's life. Any of us want to do something but our surrounding suppress us to such a degree that everyone reluctant to take any initiatives. If the proper actions are not done at a moment the time never comes back to reverse the events. Hamlet is a play of psychology and unveils the mental impulses of human. Through this play Shakespeare suggested that man should come forward to end his conundrum like hamlet he averted things for a time being but he comes out successfully. Hamlet pretended madness under passionate love for his father. He was a dutiful child. He does what does a father except from his son. Shakespeare is not lagging behind in elucidation of parent child relationship and after the grand success of Hamlet he constructs same theme in another play called "King Lear" where two daughters of Lear bent on tormenting their father in his old age. Actually King Lear anticipated children of modern age who want their property shares only but not parents. Moreover they do not believe in staying with parents. King Lear has three daughters. The elder two Regan and Goneril have their own dreams to fulfil with the property of his father so as soon as their father decided to stay with elder daughter she escaped him and showed callousness towards him his other daughter did same when he went to stay with her, in rage he left the palace and took the shelter at hovel where he lost his sense became a mad man he regained his sense only at the end. Lear third daughter was real companion of him in his bad times. King Lear is the best example of love-hate relationship between parents and child. Through this play Shakespeare exposes the double standard of some people who just have lip sympathy for others and when their sympathy is most required they leave their loved ones in the lurch. Both the elder daughter

of Lear did like this, they showed their spurious love for father and after taking lion's share in property they turned down their older father from their homes. This play also gives the glimpse of modern society where parents are looked as unshed burden over children. Macbeth is another play which focuses on man's ambitious nature. Macbeth has an ambition; he occupied an important place in king's army. Under his passion he killed the king and tried to enthrone himself at king's place but his apple's cart were thrown when he was attacked ruthlessly by neighbouring king he lost the battle and died remorsefully. The peace was resorted to kingdom after his death. Through his character Shakespeare shows if man cannot put restrain over his ambition then the day won't be far when he himself fell in to the snare of devils dungeon. Shakespeare excelled other dramatist in creation of universal characterization. These characters have mass appeal and profanity. Legouis and Cazamian's commented on shakespeare's professionalism like this "He had no theory of literature only the desire to interest the public"(413)<sup>8</sup>. Shakespeare tried his hands in dramatic genre. He copied wit of John Lyly when he wrote "Love Labour Lost". This work which he made to act on stage appealed to cultural section of society. He also made use of humour, satire in his works. He intermingled humour, comic scenes and satire in plays while keeping in view of popular taste of his times.

On the onset of Puritanism in England theatres were shut down and dramas were banned. Not only this, the general masses are instructed to observe deep religious values in their lives. This sect influenced Milton and he produced works in vein of religion. He wrote prose on "Divorce" which he developed from his personal experience. The treatise on Divorce does not reprimand the fair sex in particular but Milton stressed upon to abolish the marriage law. Basically this prose work described the general plight of English people who are bound to law and governing bodies for nuptial ties which is serious impingement on their personal rights. Milton slapped women and called them Eve who enticed males to taste the fruit of knowledge in paradise resulting incurred God's anger over them. After gaining reputation of controversial figure of era he published *Aeropagetica*, a speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing. In this eloquent non-poetic creation he advocated the privacy in publication houses. He stressed a little censorship is necessary before making the work public but it is not mandatory that each work should be scrutinized on the name of law. Next he diverted this energy to revolution purpose and he produced work *Eikonokle*. In this work he registered his resentment on the execution of Charles 1. No sooner in England the commonwealth had come and he started writing On Biblical themes. Milton looked Shakespeare as his mentor but it was Shakespeare to whom he imitated in his works like *Camus*, a masque he took the characterization of Ariel in the *Tempest*. The theme he penetrated in this work was on morality and virtues. Milton conveyed evil forces are on rampant all the times, innocence

gets ravaged, only brave can emerge winner. So in *Camus* he generally concentrated on virtues at stake and how to save humanity from downfall. Next he turned to *Elegy*. He was in great loss as his friend Edward died in a tragic accident and felt the loss is irreparable. To cherish the memory of his friend he dedicated a poem called *Lycidas*. In this poem he evinced gloomy atmosphere of death and purposelessness of human lives that end in no time. Milton was not typical associated to the politic of tussles and strife but was witness of all such developments. In this melee he wrote some sonnets which were purely on legendary figure of the age. Having passed comments on the times Milton retreated to his private life which resulted into three major poetic projects *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. The prime work *Paradise lost* is on paradise where Angels, Satan, Eve and Satan reside. All characters are doppelgangers of real biblical counterparts. Actually through this work he presented a perpetual struggle betwixt man and Satan. Satan symbolises sin in man and his nefarious designs get victory over man again and again. He visions God in king of England. The conflict that the people of England were bearing is shown as a tussle between God and Satan. Milton did not reprimand Satan whereas he made him mighty superhuman who possessed quality of heavenly world. So while developing the story of *paradise lost* Milton had interwoven the theme of man's disobedience to God with England's people striving for acquiring their basic rights. Milton praised Satan and he portrayed his pride in Satan's pride. In *Paradise Lost* he spewed out the venomous on women. He delineated Eve in a darker light. Moreover what Milton believed Eve is the main culprit behind the façade of man's disobedience *Paradise lost* is an epic like any other epic where Titans fight for establishing humanity over the earth, in *paradise lost* man confronting with Satan for taking back his snatched *Paradise*. R. D. Trivedi praised Milton's poem *Paradise Lost* by saying "it perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure"<sup>9</sup>148).<sup>9</sup> Keeping on justifying the main issue in *Paradise lost* he started working on *paradise regained* which is not as exquisite as earlier one. Here Christ bears the temptation of Satan up to forty days and finally Satan abandoned Christ for following the path of God. *Samson Agonistes* is an autographical poem. Milton himself talked from *Samson*. This work lacked beauty, coherent and heart tendering appeal to commoners.

### **Conclusion**

The struggling progression that began with Norman Conquest and ended up with Puritan age regarded as preparation span in the history of English literature. The variegated genres promulgated during this time which motivated learner one to develop further. Like the intellectual poetry came into being, it improved and claimed a place for itself. The poets like Chaucer and Spencer had done strenuous work to bring refinement in versification. Drama derailed from older school and declared itself a separate entity. Similarly Shakespeare contributed a lot in making drama a recognisable domain. He threw out all fixed

parameter for play writing. Plays in his hands looked as it is breathing in open fresh air. He changed the definition of tragedy, comedy, melodrama and tragic-comic. Milton was the star of Puritan age. He criticised age entirely regardless of any punishment, he created Epic those modified the annals of England somewhat. After critical analysis the three important legends of respective ages, It is found they worked extensively for sensitizing people who clamoured for religious freedom, ethical education and fundamental rights. The acceptance of these three literary giants in literature or in society showed people wanted liberation and free will. John Gower wrote a line on people like this.

“The voice of people often the voice of God”.

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