

Religion and Literature: A Broad Perspective

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Abstract

Religion and Literature spring from the same fundamental sources. Religion is the relation which man bears to ultimate being. It is concerned with the substance which lies behind phenomena, and also with the duty which man owes to this being, universal and eternal. Literature, in all its final analysis, represents the same fundamental relationship: It seeks to explain, to justify, to reconcile, to interpret and even to comfort and to console. The Homeric poems are pervaded with the religious atmosphere of wonder, of obedience to the eternal and of the recognition of interest of God in human affairs.

Keywords: Religion, Fundamental, Phenomena, Universal, Eternal, Comfort, Console, Obedience, Homeric, Pervaded, Reconcile, Chirstionity.

Introduction

Religion and literature are formed by the same forces. They both make a constant appeal to life. This paper tries to illustrate the role of religion in literature.

Religion and literature both assume the presence and orderly use of reason; they accept the strength of the human emotions of love, fear, curiosity, reverence and they both presume and accept the categorical imperative of the conscience and freedom and force of the will of man. The great themes of religion and literature are similar and are vital. Paradise Lost describes how christial religion influenced the writing of literature. Milton (1667) narrates the fall of man in the garden of Eden, the epic poem explains the fall of man.

Religion teaches us to lead our life and to move on the right path. It teaches us morality. Religion provides ample matters for literature and literature uplifts religion. Both are inseparable from each other. In English literature much has been written on religion. In fourteenth century some evils or deviation crept in Christianity and Chaucer has graphically depicted it in "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" Through the character of the priestess (Prioress) he has shown how religious class people are violating the rules laid down for them. The prioress renders all her emotions on the animals while humans are suffering and ignored. In a satirical tone he beautifully writes:

As for her sympathies and tender feelings,
She was so charitably solicitous
She used to weep if she but saw a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.¹

Whenever there is a decline in religious poets and authors warn us and reminds us of the importance of religion in our life.

A great Victorian poet Mathew Arnold mourns the loss of religious faith in the society in his poem "Dover Beach". He writes that religion is like an ocean which guards the earth from all sides. It is like an ornament which increases the beauty and glory of the world. Without religion condition of the people is like the naked pebbles which strike with each other and create an uproar. Religion guards, guides and protects us. In its lack people are confused and misguided. Arnold writes :

The sea of faith
Was once too at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.²



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Again he describes the condition of people in absence of religious faith which is like confused soldiers full of ignorance. And this world has become a battle field where everyone is confused and fighting with others:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
Where ignorant armies clash by night.³

John Milton who has lost his eye-sight has not lost his faith in God. He has firm faith in the justice of God. After losing his eye-sight the poet does not utter a single word against God. He says :

His state is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post over land ocea without rest;
They also serve who only stand wait.⁴

Philip Larkin, an English poet, is worried to see the condition of the present world where people are lacking in religious faith. He is concerned about the future of the Church because now-a-days people visit the Church only on particular occasions like marriage, divorce or celebration of birth ceremonies. The poet fears that a day will come when there will be no one to go in the Church and perhaps these monuments will be the haunts of spirits or they will be converted in museums.

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort or other will go on
In games, in riddle, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress,
sky.⁵

At present man has become scientific minded and ventures to question the ways of God. He is trying to examine God's creation. This approach of man is severely criticized by Alexander Pop in his poem "Essay on Man"

Know then thyself; presume not
God to scan
Proper study of mankind is man.⁶

When we start behaving skeptically it is the poets and authors who bring us back from the height of confusion to right track of religion. These days materialism is growing fast. Everyone is hankering after money and is devoid of spirituality and morality. Thus the role of literature becomes more important in such an atmosphere where all of us need to be guided properly. In the present scenerio there are so many things which divert us from morality and confuse us. Religion plays very vital role in dispelling the darkness of ignorance from our mind. People are getting depressed and frustrated in such an atmosphere which is full of hustle and bustle. Religious teachings and preachings sooth and heal our minds and we are in repose and this is done only through literature. Religion has a healing power also which bring us from turmoil to peace.

Literature plays a very significant role in the development of spirituality and morality. While we go through Ramayana we come to know about the evil and good. It teaches us to lead our life morally in every field. Whether it is the matter of marital relation or the duty of a king to his subjects, everything is tough to us by Ramayana. Ram leaves his wife Seeta for the satisfaction of his subject, but here, a question arises "What about Seeta's, a women's dignity?" No doubt Seeta's self respect, her chastify is hurt when she is asked by Ram to give "Agni – Pareeksha", but here it establishes the principle of renunciation of self- pleasure of a king for his subjects.

If we think of the role of a brother we can't ignore Laxman who sacrifices all his happiness for his elder brother and leaves the palace and goes to 'Van' with Ram.

Wordsworth is also quoteworthy. His poetry is full of spiritualism. He look upon nature as a deity and worships it. He emphasizes that nature can teach us about morality more than all the sages of the world, he says :

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man
Of moral evil and of good
Than all the sages can⁷

Again to talk about John Milton, a puritan who belives so firmly in the justice of God that he professes that God does justice to everyone. A poet who becomes blind at the age of about 42, has no complaints against God. He is only worried to think that he can not serve God due to his blindness, so he will be rebucked by Him on doom's day, but altimatley he finds solace in the thought that:

God does not need either man's work
Or his own gift: His state is kingly
Thousand at his bidding speed
Post over land and ocean
Without rest: Who best bear his
Mild yoke: They serve him best
They also serve who only stand and wait.⁸

Wordsworth believes that God is present in every object of nature. All the objects of nature, howsoever trivial it may be, it is not insignificant because it is the symbol of eternity.

Numerous stories are written about great men. No doubt when we go through them , we learn lessons of morality. Now-a-days there is a wave of materialism every where. In such a materialistic atmosphere morality can be developed only through literature. Literature inculcates many virtues within us and teaches us to refrain from evils.

End Notes

1. *Geoffrey caucer : Prologue to the Casterbury Tales, 1387.P.02*
2. *Arnold Mathew : Dover Beach, 1867.P.01*
3. *Ibid*
4. *Milton John : On His Blindness, 1655. P.01*
5. *Larking Philip : Church Going, 1955, P.02, The Less Deceived, 1955*
6. *Pope Alexender : Essay on Man, 1734. P.02*
7. *Wordsworth William: The Table Turned published in Lyrical Ballads, 1798.*
8. *MiltonJohn: On His Blindness, 1655.P.01*