

Impact of Covid-19 on English Literature: A Vision

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Abstract- After 1918, the year 2020 is a turning point from where a new light in English literature may be visualised. On the basis of the continuity in English literature, we can draw a sketch of forthcoming literature after the thundering effect of the Covid-19. The world has faced many devastating events, and these events have played an important role in turning literature to a new direction. Going through various phases of English literature, the paper attempts to analyse, how man and his thinking about life kept on changing with time and what kind of relationships with God and Nature has man been contriving throughout from time to time according to his needs. With a variety of historical facts, the paper may be treated as an indication to forthcoming sensibility in our literary society swaying through COVID-19.

Keywords- COVID-19, Theocentric, Homocentric, Machiavelli, Scripture. Materialistic, Spiritual

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature sustains history. Ever since the existence of Literature, the narratives of environmental crisis (pandemic) have strongly affected the human nature and his philosophical spontaneity towards dealing with the intense human mental and emotional responses, yielding to various literary transformations. This paper is a psychoanalytical reaction towards the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have a long history of English literature; we can draw a sketch of forthcoming literature after the thundering effect of the Covid-19. The world has faced many devastating events, and these events have played an important role in turning literature to a new direction. The historical facts in the paper are exact indications to the forthcoming sensibility in our literature. As far as the beginning of English literature is concerned, the period is marked as the Age of Chaucer, but the Renaissance as its literal meaning suggests, with its awakening and revival of knowledge,

plants a seed that somehow with changing time factors has been showing its effect till the First World War. The Renaissance is basically known for revival of interest in Ancient Greek and Roman literature and learning. It came in England via Italy and to some extent, France. The Renaissance of Italy had a great impact on England. Because, it carried not only the works of Plato, Aristotle, Homer and Virgil but also the Italian poets and philosophers of the 14th and 15th centuries like Ariosto, Petrarch, Tasso and Machiavelli who themselves had written under the impact of the ancient masters [1]. Due to this reason, a new creed of humanism in the form of seed arrived with the renaissance in England which taught us that the universe was not as the middle ages had believed, theocentric but homocentric.

This homocentric seed with its new generation is sowed in society and the literary figures of the time harvested the crop in the form of literary works. Much, emphasis came to be laid upon man, human life, the material world and man's activity in this world.

II. LITERARY OUTLOOK: PAST AND PRESENT

It is a fact that Spenser was also a true child of English Renaissance, but he did not emphasise the homocentric belief in his writings. Christopher Marlowe with this belief established a new belief for dramatic endeavour—“Character is destiny”. Marlowe in his every play tried to establish this form in different perspectives. He in his play *Tamburlaine* showed man's desire for supreme power. Tamburlaine, a man of strong decision and action, who, was born as a poor shepherd, raises his courage with his brilliant use of words, to marry the most beautiful woman in the world, the divine Zenocrate. By force of arms and power of will, the great warrior overthrows one after another, the established hereditary rulers of the world. From this

point, we can mark the desire of man against the established systems in the society. The main ingredients of this new spirit are individualism and worldliness but in the original form of Renaissance, these traits are not found. Machiavelli's forceful writings encouraged man to disregard all ethical and conventional moral principles to achieve the end by any means fair or foul.

John Milton belonged to the age where no discussion about man and God was allowed but only man, kingship and frivolous society were discussed. Milton with a courageous attempt wrote an epic *Paradise Lost* in which his private spirit in the form of Renaissance and Reformation are reflected. In his *Paradise Lost*, he took a topic—To “justify the ways of God to men” (Line-25) [2]. Here a question may arise—why did Milton choose a topic in which a justification regarding God is needed? To my mind, due to the prevailing spirit, he could not escape from the position of man in the eyes of the people of the time. The reason of ‘the fall of man’ be marked in the classical works – man’s disobedience. On the other hand, all artists of the age had stopped uttering the renaissance spirit. They just chose the ways that the ancient classics had opted. Dryden and Pope were pioneers of the way. They tried to opt the mode but slightly slipped being by-product of the time. Dryden in his *Mac Flecknoe* starts like the ancient classical artists:

All human things are subject to decay and when Fate summons, monarchs must obey. (Line 1-2; 54) [3].

But in the next couplet, he carries the spirit of the age which came out from the battle of Tories and Whigs or of the King and the Parliament. That’s why, *Mac Flecknoe* though having grand style of writing is still called a lampoon. On other hand, Pope uplifts himself by choosing the wider perspective of writings than Dryden’s. Yet both proved themselves to be the pioneers of the Neo- classical or Augustan Age. They follow the footprints of ancient classicists in this way. As the classicists were associated with great cities like Athens, Rome and Alexandria, the English classicists proclaimed London and Edinburgh as modern counterparts of the ancient cities. But the romantics shunned the city and shifted their interest in the village.

There is one point to be noted that romantics failed to find solace in Christianity. Some of them even celebrated the glorious excesses of Hell. Blake always contemplates the traditional religious training and his views sometimes were thought to be treasonable. Shelley was expelled from Oxford for co-authoring a provocative pamphlet – *The Necessity of Atheism*. Byron was forced into exile because of his allegedly wild and immoral private life.

The difference between the traditional belief and the belief of the romantics is as ‘direct and general’ and ‘indirect and personal’. For romantics, there were their personal search for the spiritual and in the search, they used two faculties – feelings and imagination and evoked personal and emotional responses with a connection to nature. They could not travel directly to God but indirectly through nature. Nature is a beautiful creation of God. Spiritual connection may be searched out in Blake’s the best-known poem ‘The Lamb’ from his *Songs of Innocence* in which he states:

For He calls Himself a lamb
He is meek, and He is mild
He became a little child
I a child and thou a lamb
We are called by His name. (L-14-18; 89) [4]

And in his *Songs of Experiences*, the innocent lamb is replaced by the experienced tiger. In ‘The Lamb’, the world is in harmony with its ‘Maker’ but in ‘The Tiger’, there is no recurring answer. According to Blake, the element of God is properly associated with the innocent mind of a child but whenever they get worldly knowledge automatically, the element of God in the form of innocence is completely brushed out. That’s why, the narrator in ‘The Tyger’ is wondering at the creator:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? (L-1-4; 91)

Here Blake seems to warn man— Don’t get too close to the tiger in the shape of experiences or the manly

world or the world of knowledge, which was the 'forbidden fruit of the tree'; otherwise you will get burnt.

Like Blake, Wordsworth, too, in his *Ode-Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* regards the child as the single source of true wisdom and truth. As infants, we have some memory of Heaven but as we grow, we lose the connection with God:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (L-66; 105)
And again, he states:
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.
(L-84-85; 106) [5]

These beliefs had also been carried by the Victorians, but science overlapped them. Therefore, the great spiritual and the scientific belief mingled into their art and a new dimension arose which Tennyson handled towards a better direction – the direction was in the mode of 'Compromise' between faith and doubt. In the period, the conflict between science and religion became intense and widespread. Tennyson refused to neither abandon his faith in God, nor reject science, but tried to maintain a balance between the two by acknowledging the scientific discoveries and at the same time maintaining his religious faith. In *In Memoriam*, he extends life in a way that death is not the end of life, but believes strongly in the immortality of the soul. He accepts that the end of earthly life is just the beginning of an eternal life:

Let science prove we are, and then
What matters Science unto men,
At least to me? I would not stay.
Let him, the wiser man who springs
Hereafter, up from childhood shape
His action like the greater ape,
But I was born to other things.
(Section 121, Lines 6-12) [6]

In the concluding stanza of the poem, Tennyson ends his journey of the compromise that God is the source of hope and peace for all of mankind:

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,

And one far-off define event,
To which the whole creation moves.
(Section 133, Lines 141-144)

But Browning, in his poem, *Pippa's Song* showed his full faith in God's justice by saying:

God's in His heaven,
All's right with the world! [7]

After the Victorians, there was a change in the pinpointed area and the responsibility for the change goes to the First World War. Hope of the faith became ashes. The focus was on experimentation and newness, abandonment of the fixed point of view, driven by restlessness, with regard to the traditional structures of the early period. Materialism spread all over. W. B. Yeats in his 'The Second Coming' presents the scenario of his own age in the perspective of eternity and hopes that after this decadence, a new civilisation is about to be born:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The Falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (99-100)

On the other hand, T S Eliot, too, described his own age in his poem *Gerontion* in order to compare to the war. Now, he is in a decayed house. It is not decaying, it's already decayed as if, its life is entirely over. In the second stanza of the poem, there are many symbols which can be linked to the political/religious atmosphere and the past poetic sensibilities of the poet:

Signs are taken for wonders, 'We would see a sign!'
The word within a word, unable to speak a word, (31)
[8]

T. S. Eliot believed that there is only one substance in the universe at this time – that is matter. Therefore, people of the time were influenced by the materialistic approach. They rejected the spiritual and devoted themselves exclusively to satisfy their physical, mental, and financial needs. Yet T. S. Eliot's belief in Christianity is reflected in *The Waste Land*:

There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (51) [9]

T. S. Eliot also presented the materialistic situation from where no ray of hope in terms of spiritual thoughts be created:

Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. (51)

T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats both were the representative poets of modern sensibility and both raised the real picture of the time by their poetic endeavours. Modern literature has faced two great wars and accordingly the great artists handled these situations by their own genius. As far as English literature is concerned, it faced many movements, plagues and two destructive wars and now it is facing a new disaster in the form of Covid-19 and the artists or the readers are not in a position to say whether its effect will lead to positive or negative directions. Therefore, on the basis of past literature and my vision, the following discussion may be concluded in the form of the forthcoming English literature.

III. LITERATURE TODAY: TECHNOLOGY VS CULTURE

English literature till date is in a position to tell us that it has greatly been influenced by the development of the sciences, the controversies aroused in religion and the various notions of culture. In other words, culture, science and religion played a vital role in the emergence of literature. It may also be marked that the spirit or the sensibility of the age fused with the said influential objects in the formation of literature. Therefore, we must examine these perspectives in this particular situation first, before telling about the forthcoming literature.

In this period, it may, firmly be said that science particularly in the field of medicine has

achieved a height which could not be imagined earlier. America and Italy, where Covid-19 pandemic climbed its peak in the earlier stage, are the top-most countries of the world in respect of having best medical facilities. Yet they could not handle this pandemic in proper way. The whole world is crying and not in a position to say about the cure of the pandemic. Science is nothing at this juncture. Once again, this belief shall penetrate in the mind of the artist and a new sensibility regarding science may be felt.

The next influential component is religion. Before the pandemic people in general had a tendency to run to the houses of God – temples, mosques, churches – whenever they were disturbed or disappointed for some reason or the other. But the pandemic has set aside all these activities and has upset the belief that God (for prayer) exists only in His houses built for Him by men. Now, that all the gates of all the temples, mosques and churches are shut, the personal approach to religion has turned into a general belief in the eternal, as He is the only Saviour. Only one religion stands that we are human beings and that life is in the hands of God. Personal approach in the particular religion now turns into the general belief in the eternal.

IV. EASTERN CULTURE: THE DOMINION

The third influential component upon literature is culture. Culture is basically connected to the Scripture of its region. Utilitarianism had emerged in the 19th century in the Western region. As far as the Eastern part of the world is concerned, it is still supposedly connected to its culture. Culture provides us the principles of living and it teaches us to lead the life not of the person in individual but of the human beings in totality. It is said that India has a great culture due to having the slogan of ‘VASUDHAIV KUTUMBAKAM’. On the other hand, the utilitarian approach assesses an action in terms of its consequences or outcome that is the net benefit and cost to all stakeholders on an individual level. It is measured in short term plan rather than in long term. This approach, to some extent, has reached all nations. T. S. Eliot also pointed out the cultural impact on Western world and India. In the part of discussion in his *The Waste Land* about the rain, where in India, the

rain causes the Ganges to overflow and on the other hand in the West, there is wasteland. The West has lost its fertility due to ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’, while the East still flourishes and has more than enough. There, in the mountain and jungles, the thunder gives wisdom:

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.
Then spoke the thunder (66) [10]

The result in the form of Covid-19 has already been admitted. In this situation, we have also seen its effect on nature due to being maintained discipline in life in the form of lock-down. Nature on its own will extend its own life. The pandemic has taught us that we have to follow the basic principles of life in the form of ‘Love to Nature’, ‘Passionate to Living beings’, ‘To maintain a balance between Science and Culture’, etc. It is being believed that these maintenances should be followed till the invention of vaccination for the cure. Therefore, these practices may create a new life-style and the artists of this age shall pin point on this venture.

After the First World War, W. B. Yeats in his poem *The Second Coming* declared:

Surely, the revelation is at hand,
Surely, the second coming is at hand. (100)

This prophecy was uttered by Yeats in the year 1920 and in this connection, it was said that this prophecy was also based on the principle that in every two thousand years, there must be a miraculous event. Therefore, it can safely be said that the miraculous event has come in the shape of Corona Virus after completing fully two thousand years since the coming of Christ. In later stage of the poem, Yeats hinted the form of the second coming as Sphinx:

When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man, (100)

The images of the *Second Coming* in the form of ‘rough beast’ might be the virus, namely Covid-19 and

as far as the completion of the 2000 years is concerned, now it is 2020:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Benthlehem to be born? (100)

W. B. Yeats has the same essence as we find in *The Bhagwat Gita* too, where Lord Krishna, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu in Hindu mythology reveals to Arjun:

“Yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata
Abhyuthanam adharmasya tadatmanam srijmayaham”

“Paritranaya sadhunam vinashaya cha tushkritam
Dharma sansthapanardhaya sambhawani yuge yuge.
(verse8)

The English rendering to these verses is:

“Whenever there is a decline in righteousness and an
increase in unrighteousness,
O Arjun, at that time I manifest myself on earth”.
“To protect the righteous, to re-establish the wicked,
and to re-establish the principles of dharma I
appear on this earth, age after age.” [11]

On the other hand, T. S. Eliot concludes the poem *The Waste Land*, in his own style. He believes in the term ‘Contemporaneity and Antiquity’. Contemporary situations are for understanding of antiquity. Antiquity is a condition of sustainability in his poetic scheme of things. His contemporary experiences cannot grow, prosper, and flourish unless it has sustainable support of the antiquity. His contemporaneity consist not only the contemporary situations but also the beliefs of the time. And his antiquity is the backbone of his poetry through which he emphasises the syllable ‘Da’. ‘Da’ formulates the three instructions – Datta, Dayadhvam and Damayata. ‘To Give’, ‘To Sympathise’ and ‘To Control’ are the elements of God and also a mantra to establish a connection with God which may provide us – “*Shantih, Shantih, Shantih*”.

V. CONCLUSION

To my mind, the forthcoming literatures shall be based on the path which can connect man to God. There may be an arrangement of line of the connection like– from God to the Scripture; from Scripture to Culture; from Culture to Society and from Society to Man, along

with the value of the nature. If this arrangement be maintained by the people, surely our artists, too, shall try to write such kind of work of art which will support also to lead the life longer without the pandemic like Corona or other viruses. Eliot's belief is also based upon *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. He does not just kick Upanishad finding rather he believes in the same pattern as stated earlier for establishing a relation to God.

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