UNIT 2 LITERATURE AND POLITICS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to focus on the relationship between literature and politics, literature and reality, the creative process and the relationship between literature and ideology. All this is of theoretical significance for the study of A Grain of Wheat.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Literature and politics may appear to be—to some they definitely do—two aspects of human experience which are on the very face of it, irreconcilable. While literature is considered to represent one of the highest forms of the development of aesthetic sensibility of a society, politics is considered to be the playfield of the cunning and the low. To the advocates of such views it may, therefore, appear blasphemous to even put the two words—'literature' and 'politics'—close to each other. Hence, it is not very surprising to come across advice generally given to writers by some fellow scribes and also by certain sections of the society at large to not only shun politics in real life but also to hold a position of strict political neutrality in their writings. According to these self-styled well-wishers of writers, writing should be for writing's own sake.

2.2 LITERATURE—NATURE AND FUNCTIONS

However, a closer look at the nature and functions of literature will highlight the fact that such a position of irreconcilability of literature and politics is not only untenable but is also highly undesirable. A piece of literature representing one of the highest forms of development of human sensibility is a social phenomenon. It is written by someone, for someone to read and is meant to convey something. It is therefore a deliberate act of social communication. And as for its author, he too is a social being—member of a certain class—who is conditioned by the historical and politico-economic circumstances of his times. Therefore, events in the history of a society—
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great or small—cannot but be a source of inspiration to its writers. Any serious work of literature, created as it is within the framework of existing social relations, is not only a living document of the contemporary happenings but also of the historical processes underlying them.

2.2.1 Literature and Truth

Literature develops along with life as writers try to meet the challenge of their time, tell the readers the truth—their truth—about the world. Current events as also about themselves and voices: their concern about the future—a truth without which mankind cannot advance. The great epics and tragedies of ancient Greece, rich in variety, lofty in thought and universal in comprehension as they are, also reflect the ancient Greek civilization. In fact, we learn from them as much, if not more, about the Greek society of the times. The great Renaissance that swept through Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, too had its counterparts in the fields of fine arts and literature, producing such giants like Leonardo da Vinci, Dante, Michaelangelo and Shakespeare. Blake Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley owe so much to the French Revolution. Balzac believed that to be productive one needed only to study the French society which should be “the historian, I only its amanuensis.” For this, he won the highest praise from Engels who said that one could learn more about the French society from him “than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians of the period together.” Marx had earlier paid a similar tribute to the major English novelists of the nineteenth century whose “eloquent and graphic portrayals of the world have revealed more political and social truths than all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together.” An artist, therefore, concerns himself with what Chinua Achebe has called “the most burning questions of the day.”

2.2.2 Literature and Society

“The relationship between art and society”, as a prominent literary theorist puts it, “cannot be ignored, for art itself is a social phenomenon. First, because the artist, however unique his primary experience might be, is a social being; second, because his work, however deeply marked by his primary experience and however unique and unrepeatable its objectification or form might be, is always a bridge, a connecting link between the artist and other members of society; third, because a work of art affects people—it contributes to the reaffirmation or devaluation of their ideas, goals or values—and is a social force which has its emotional or ideological weight. Shakes or moves people. No body remains the same after having been deeply moved by a true work of art.”

But what is it in a piece of literature that makes it exert this Ancient Mariner-like influence on its readers who, like the wedding guest, do not remain the same even after a chance acquaintance with it? It is the depiction of the social facts—the reality of the times—and the manner in which they are depicted that enables a writer to leave such an indelible impression on the psyche of not only individual readers but the entire community as well.

2.2.3 Literature and Reality

What, however, is this reality that a writer must contend with and reflect in his writings? Reality refers to, firstly, the knowledge of life’s development in general and secondly to its concrete phenomena at a given time. The first is essential because knowledge of life is the main source from which a work of literature draws its strength and its writer his power of conviction. The second refers to the historically relative understanding of the truth at the moment when a particular literary product comes into being. In order to reflect this reality in his works, a writer, therefore, captures the essential features of the epoch’s great events—their strength as well as weaknesses. Tolstoy, for instance, is great because of the “depth and impressiveness
with which the epoch is described,” (Scherbina, 1974:20) and “the truthfulness with which he rendered the contradictions and the ruthless breaking up of the old established order that took place in post-reform Russia”. The portrayal of reality, in other words, involves highlighting the important problems of the people and new aspects of life.

Creating a piece of realistic literature, however, does not mean merely bringing direct recollections of the external world into the work in a mechanistic manner, for to do so will be to write a piece of history, and literature and history, though having much in common, are two distinct disciplines. A writer, unlike a historian, is not obliged to consider the whole range of facts pertaining to a given event or phenomenon. He can afford to concentrate on a single fact, a single event, a single life. The roles of the writer and the historian can be distinguished from each other’s on the lines suggested by Aristotle for a distinction between history and poetry:

Historians and poets do not differ in the fact that the latter writes in verse, the former in prose .... The difference lies rather in the fact that one reports what actually happened, the other what could happen. Thus poetry is more philosophical than history, for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.

2.3 LITERATURE AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

A writer sees before him the immediate, concrete reality but he does not, unlike the historian, remain on that plane for long. He moves away, going beyond the objective concreteness to what may be termed as the level of artistic concreteness. At this level of artistic concreteness, the writer creates a world of his own, a world in which through the creation of individual characters—imaginary or real, or both—he investigates the social being of man and the role of certain sections of society in history, the conflicts of their interests and the nature of their clashes and cleavages. It is through the study of those characters that a writer gives us an idea of the mentality of a people, their moral attitudes, their ideals and aspirations. It is with this intention that a Macbeth, or a Juliet, a Don Quixote or a Faust, an Okonkwo or a Gikonyo, a Lawino or a Muthoni, a Hori or a Mitro has been created. Through each one of them, the writer distills the historically significant phenomena and also reveals the links between literature and society. Each of these characters gives us a glimpse into the various stages of socio-political development and evolution of epochs. It is, therefore, by going 'beyond' that a writer rises to a universal level where a new artistic reality is born, a reality which is not very different from the objective one which delimits the range of history but which is aesthetically interpreted.

Depicting reality, therefore, is a process of creation and not of imitation. It is an act which serves as a bridge, linking the writer with the society not only at a given time but across time and social divisions. It is an act which portrays life in motion and in a perspective that through the depiction of the particular, expresses simultaneously the regular, the universal and the typical. To attain this level of realistic depiction is, however, by no means an easy task and a writer, in its pursuit, passes through various stages: at the first stage, a writer singles out and records what he believes to be most important and characteristic out of the diversity of facts and the chaos of every day life. He finds, as Gorky expected of him, “that which is of general significance in life, typical not for given day alone.” However, this preliminary stage is only a prelude to a more important second stage when a writer creates his own particular world of images, and peoples it with characters, situations and actions so that the apparent contradictions between the particular and the general, the immediate and the conceptual may be so resolved as to give an impression of an inseparable integrity. It examines individual human relationships to discover that the particular and the general merge in an organic and dynamic way. At the final stage of creation, the
impressions and image; are structured in accordance with the principles of harmony
and what Leo Tolstoy called, "sense of proportion". It is at this stage that a unity of
form and content is achieved to make the work an organic whole.

2.4 LITERATURE AND THE WRITER'S ATTITUDE

The writer's attitude plays a very crucial role in depicting this reality. In fact, no
correct evaluation of a book or a writer is possible without probing into the writer's
attitude to life because a piece of literature is not merely a dream but an act of
deliberate communication, a choice of verbal gesture for advocating a certain point of
view. In the words of Joan Rockwell, "for the student who wishes to use literature as a
key to the specific values of a period or cultural area, the point is to discover the
author's intentions." (Fact in Fiction p. 60) That is why books written on the same
theme by different authors turn out to be different in quality and value. An artist must
so create his works that they may give men happiness; not merely depict misery and
injustice but also show them the way to fight it and make the world to be more just,
more happy, more full of dreams. Since dreams—those fond hopes of future—are also
an integral part of life, a writer must talk of them too. As Wole Soyinka puts it, a
writer is not just "the recorder of the mores and experiences of his society" but also
"the voice of vision in his own time." (Peterson, 1988 p. 7) He must not shirk from
looking into the face of the future and discovering for his readers, new shoots of life,
because the future is as perfectly real as the present. "Real poetry", said Lenin, "must
always get ahead of life, if only by an hour." (Scherbina, 1974 p. 9)

Reality so depicted will be of a higher order, a new reality which will give us truths
about men in flesh and blood, living in a given society, in historically and socially
conditioned human relationships, and about the sufferings, struggles and rejoicings.

However, a number of writers as well as theorists have denied any essential or even
"desirable" links between literature and reality thereby banishing the notion of
realism from the sphere of art and literature. To take up some of their basic
objections, one of them is against realist art because it is "an art for the plebians, for
the masses, for those poor in spirit," (Scherbina, 1974 p. 36) implying thereby that
pursuit of art and literature is essentially an elitist activity. "Realists", they allege.
"are always simple observers while symbolists are always thinkers. Realists are in the
grip of concrete life, it washes over them like the surf and they see nothing behind it."
(Scherbina, 1974 p. 37)

2.5 LITERATURE AND SUBJECTIVISM

Such an attitude towards reality and its role in creation of literature leads to positions
of subjectivism which stem from a thinking that art is basically irrational and that
ideological, political and social questions are foreign to its nature. It is, above all, the
expression of an artist's isolated subjective impressions, no matter whether they
 correspond to the real image of the objective world or not. This is primarily done to
assert the seeming independence of creativity. The high priest of such a point of view
is Benidetto Croce who seeks to dissociate literature completely from history,
restricting it solely to the intuition and individuality of the writer. Croce, in fact, goes
on to deny any aesthetic progress of mankind, asserting that every individual creates
his own artistic world and that works of art and literature are in no way linked with
any tradition. An extreme position in this was, however, taken by Lipps, who said,
"The inner form of an object is always determined by me, through my inner activity.
2.5.1 Literature and Naturalism

At the other extreme of this position of subjectivism is the position of complete objectivity--of naturalism--according to the pursuers of which the only way of obtaining true impressions of life and its reality is to act as simple direct, lifeless and passive mirrors, reflecting all happenings around, without playing an active role in either organising them according to their importance or selecting them according to their relevance. The writer, they believe, is like a mobile camera, recording at random, the myriad impressions of life; and this, they again believe, is the only way of portraying reality. A natural corollary of such a position is that a writer should maintain a strict neutrality between various points of view concerning a particular issue, presenting them all equally eloquently and leaving it to the readers to draw their own conclusions. Support to any one point of view, they contend, will reduce literature to social and political propaganda.

The fact, however, is that such a collage of photographic details may not have any direct bearing on life and its reality, since it is neither history nor literature. It neither selects facts, as a historian does, nor does it place them in an imaginative context, as does a writer. Speaking of Balzac, Oscar Wilde observed that he was "no mere reporter. Photography and process verbal were not the essentials of his method. Observation gave him the facts of life, but his genius converted facts into truths and truths into truth". Wilde drives the point home in his characteristic style by drawing a distinction between Zola's *L'Assommoir* and Balzac's *Illusions Perdues*. The former he calls a piece of "unimaginative realism" and the latter "imaginative reality."

2.5.2 Literature and Neutrality

As for maintaining strict neutrality between various points of view, such a position is contrary to the reality of life wherein everyone is forced to take sides all the time on all kinds of issues. We have the testimony of no less a celebrity than Thomas Mann who in his *Kultur und Politik* recognises the fact that "being apolitical is nothing less than being simply antidemocratic." Mann, starting from *Reflections of an Apolitical Man*--the title speaks for itself--learnt his lessons the hard way, because he was born and brought up in the spiritual traditions of German burgher society. He was forced to admit that "I arrived at the conviction that what is political and social is an indivisible part of what is human and enters into the one problem of humanism, into which our intellect must include it, and that in this problem a dangerous hiatus destructive for culture may manifest itself if we ignore the political, social elements inherent to it." (Aesthetics and Poetics, p. 16)

Earlier, Romain Rolland who too had opined that a writer should remain uncommitted, revised his opinion about the neutrality of a writer. Howard Fast illustrates the point through the example of portraying a workers' strike: "A motion picture camera may preserve the strike as a partial abstraction; but this would be neither art nor truth. To become art the strike must be related to historical process and that relationship can hardly be neutral." (Literature and Reality, p. 20-21)

A completely neutral stand is, therefore, myth. Chinua Achebe, using rather strong language for his otherwise mild manner of expression has called such "neutral" art as "deodorised dog-shit." In fact, to be neutral as a matter of principle is in itself a partisan position. A writer, therefore, has to make a choice between the responsibility of siding with truth, justice and humaneness or standing in open favour of exploitation and injustice. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o puts it:

...literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battlefield: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to
A Grain of Wheat remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics. (Writers in Politics, preface)

2.6 AFRICAN LITERATURE POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY

In the case of African literature, politics has always been of paramount significance. Alex La Guma, renowned novelist from South Africa has put it in a most dramatic manner:

I, as a South African writer, am prepared TO RUN GUNS AND HOLD UP RADIO STATIONS, because in South Africa that is what we are faced with, whether we are writers or whether we are common labourers. (“The Writer in Modern Africa” p.20)

The question of ideology—the author's intention or attitude—to which we have made a reference above, is an integral part of this relationship between literature and politics. In the case of African literature this question of ideological stand-point of the writer although implicit in the very social nature of literature, became prominent in the context of the various freedom struggles and it continued to remain relevant in the post-independence period as well, as the gap between the affluent few and pauper majority widened alarmingly and as the infrastructure of ethics crumbled. As Alex La Guma puts it, “when we sit down to write a book, I or any of my colleagues around me, we are, as writers, faced with the reality that 80% of the population lives below the bread-line standard.” (Wetberg, 1988:20)

It is within this broad-based framework of relationship between literature and politics rather than any specific theory of literature that this book attempts to evaluate the major writings of Ngugi wa Thiong’o.

However, before we analyse the writings of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, it would only be appropriate to look at the grafting and development of novel as a genre on the African soil, particularly in the sub-Saharan region. This we will do in the next Unit.

2.7 LET US SUM IT UP

In this Unit we have looked at the definitions of literature, politics, their respective natures, and also the relationship between literature and truth, literature and reality, literature and subjectivity, literature and naturalism, literature and neutrality. We have also discussed the political nature of African literature and its ideological content.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. Why is it that literature and politics are considered to be incompatible?
2. What is the nature and function of literature in society?
3. What is relationship between literature and truth, literature and reality and literature and subjectivity?
4. Comment on the ideological nature of African literature
2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Barabash, Y. *Aesthetics and Poetics*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977


