

Aestheticism Versus Morality

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Abstract

It has always been a matter of great concern as to what should be our approach at the time of dealing with a literary work. In other words, what a literary work is worth for is a question worth debating over. There are some of critics and writers who are of opinion that literature should always serve some social purpose and that it is not merely for the sake of aesthetic purpose. There is also a series of critics who stand quite opposite to this view that literature always should have a social end. They staunchly believe in the concept of art for art sake, meaning that art should be created only for the sake of art, and not for any social service. Now, while dealing with the question as to whether literature is for society and for removing its ills and weakness or it should only be for itself, we need to define literature first of all. Among many definitions of literature, perhaps the most popular one is “Literature is the mirror of society”. This definition categorically claims that literature is a social organ and it does not have anything to do with aesthetic pleasure or ecstasy. But the question that arises in our minds with reference to this definition is whether literature is concerned only with society, morality, ethics and as such, whether literature does not serve any emotional surge or what we know as aesthetic pleasure.

Key words : Aesthetic Pleasure, Art for Art’s sake, Ethics.

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Aestheticism, a European phenomenon during the latter nineteenth century, implies that art should be only for the sake of art and not for any social purpose, that art on the one hand and utility and morality on the other are completely two different streams and have nothing to do with each other. The aesthetes are of opinion that art is and should be autonomous. They emphasized on the self-sufficiency of a work of art, i.e. on its craft and artistry rather than its social concerns. Art for art's sake or the love of art for its own sake became the rallying cry of the aesthetes who gave supreme value to high artifice and stylistic subtlety in a work of art. The purpose of art, according to the aesthetes, is to impart aesthetic pleasure by the cultivation of Beauty, and in this way, art was divorced from morality and utility. In the Preface to the Renaissance, Pater explained the function of the aesthetic critic as follows:

“And the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyze, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of the impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue.....Often it will require great nicety to disengage this virtue from the commoner elements with which it may be found in combination”.

Thus it becomes clear from the above quoted view that an aesthetic critic is concerned with experience of beauty of a work of art, and that is why he should always separate it from other elements which are not beautiful, and also record his own enjoyment of it for the benefit of others. Now with out deviating from the main issue, it is necessary to raise this question at this juncture as to whether aesthetic pleasure, beauty, and artistic craft are the only things art should consist of or an artist should be associated with, and society, utility, morality and such elements should be brushed aside.

When we talk of society and purging it by removing its evils, we have many resources the biggest and the most flexible among them now-a-days is undoubtedly and unquestionably 'media'. Literature, yes, is also one among them, but is not as powerful as the media. This view is surely going to shock a number to literary men, but we will have to accept it at any cost. Literature is something which teaches and pleases. But we need to understand that even physics, chemistry, anthropology and such other subjects also teach us. The basic difference between these subjects and literature is that while the former teaches us the petty knowledge of the world, the latter teaches us the art of living, and true, the art of living is something which would always fail unless it is juxtaposed with aesthetic pleasure. Art is not the place to portray the ugliness, the evils, the corruption which are rampant in the society. Art should always cater our senses. Art should always bring us to a world where we can realize that "Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty." When we talk of the Indian Aestheticism, we become familiar with such emotional components like Rasas and Bhavas, and unless they are emotionally realized, felt and enjoyed, the purpose of a reader would be in vain. Here we can go to the extent of saying without the fear of contradiction that Indian Aestheticism is far more widened and illustrated than Western Aestheticism.

The world of everyday perception is not the subject matter of literature. It should always deal with something 'strange' so that the reader's lost capacity for fresh sensation may be renewed. This is exactly the view the Victor Shklovsky when he describes his concept of 'defamiliarization'. In order to have a better understanding, the following sentence of Roman Jakobson can be quoted:

"The object of study in literary science is not literature but 'literariness', that is, what makes a given work a literary work".

Now the question simply is 'what is this literariness which makes a given work a literary work'. To define literariness in this little space is perhaps not possible but it must be said that it is craft, artistry, beautification, or these aesthetic components which make a given work a literary work. From this respect, it can surely be stated that aesthetic components in a literary work is primary and all other things are secondary. Now when these aesthetic components are primary, the question still remains as to whether literature should serve social purpose. Whenever we have some literature serving some social purpose, it is expected that it should have a language which is simple, and informal, so that the message may be conveyed to the readers easily. Contrary to this, if the language of such a text is going to be formal, artistic and beautified, the purpose will not be able to be served. By this, it becomes very clear that social literature does not serve aesthetic purpose, which, as has already been pointed out, is primary (all other things being secondary) to all literature. From this principle, we can go to the extent of saying that the kind of literature which does not serve our aesthetic needs is not literature itself. It is mere some kind of information which is being conveyed from person to person. The kind of literature which serves social purpose is just a kind of media which completely lacks a formal language, a compact style, artistry, a beautified craft, and thus is all vain.

It is usually assumed that whenever we go through a literary work, our aesthetic needs must be fulfilled. It should give us some pleasure, some relief, some sensuous or sensual ecstasy, but it is a matter worth considering over that these needs of ours can never ever be satisfied by the kind of literature which is for some social end. Yes, these needs of ours will completely be fulfilled by the kind of literature which is written or composed only for its own sake. But here, some social activists can raise a question as to whether society we live in is important or not, we should do something for it or not, it is our primary concern or not. And if they ask this question, they are no doubt right. The importance and the primary position of society can not be ignored at all. We all should be quite devoted towards the society we live in. But what is to be understood at this juncture is that we are always for society and we can go to the extent of saying that we devote ourselves for society, but literature is not the proper medium for this at all. To serve society, we have various other mediums, but let literature be kept aside from the circle of society. Literature is only for aesthetic pleasure, and its purpose should never be ended in smoke.

Conclusion

Literature should always fulfill our aesthetic needs. For social needs, there are other mediums as well. Let the firmament of literature be aloof from all that happens in society. Let it be a world only to cherish us with its beauty, splendor and aesthetics.

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