

Human Rights Literature: Revisiting the Wounds of History

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Abstract: Human Rights Literature is a literary genre that deals with human rights issue and thus- directly or indirectly- promotes values of human rights. The aim of human rights literature is to combine the literary driving force with the motivation for action, which is a fundamental and integral element of the struggle for protection of human rights. This literary genre is based on the concept of “Engaged Literature” that was first articulated by the French writer, philosopher and Nobel Laureate Jean Paul Sartre. Human Rights Literature is committed to society and believes that each one of us has moral duty and power to make a social change. It is based on the belief of the enormous power of literature to make a change and in the responsibility of the author towards readers both on the social aspect and artistic one. My aim in this paper through three important historical wounds is to show how human rights were (is) neglected in the past. These historical wounds are Racism, Holocaust and Partition of Indian Sub-Continent. Choosing few literary forms of literature for each historical wound I would like to show how the perspective of literature matters in Human Rights and opens a new avenue of interdisciplinary study.

Keywords: Human Rights, Racism, Holocaust, Partition of India

Human Rights are those rights which belong to an individual as a consequence of being a human being. ‘Civil Liberties’ are the rights guaranteed to citizens or residents of a country or a territory as a matter of fundamental law. It is the birth right inherent in all the individuals irrespective of their caste, creed, religion, sex and nationality. Literature has substantially contributed to the protection of human rights. Literature can inspire us to change

our world and give us the comfort, hope, passion and strength that we need in order to fight to create a better future for us. The literary creation such as novels, poems, short story are mirror of society.

Sartre argued that intellectuals and the ordinary citizens must take a stand, especially in regard to major political conflicts. Sartre hoped that literature would serve as a means to enable oppressed minority groups gain recognition and that members of the elite would be moved to action as a result of the influence of literature.

Most us might think, what do novels, poems and creative stories have to do with our human rights? Archbishop Desmond Tutu, an opponent of apartheid and an active social activist during his Nobel Peace Prize speech in 1984 says,

“They are all bound up with this wonderful talent we humans have: to empathize with others. If by reading ...we are enabled to step, for one moment, into another person’s shoes, to get right under their skin, then that is already a great achievement. Through empathy we overcome prejudice, develop tolerance and ultimately understand love. Stories can bring understanding, healing, reconciliation and unity”.

This interdisciplinary subject of Human Rights and Literature gained momentum after September 11, 2001. The shift in political, social, cultural and intellectual landscapes at that point seemed suddenly to change the understandings and practices of war, imprisonment, torture and immigration.

This paper will be concentrating on three important historical incidents which changed the entire outlook of how humans view each other but also question of equality of human rights. A sincere attempt has been made in this paper to show how human rights are violated through different timeframes relating to three different incidents using creative works which are hugely inspired by these incidents. The three ‘wounds’ that this paper will be concentrating on are: Racism in America, Holocaust in Europe during World War II and the partition of Indian Subcontinent.

When we talk of racism, our mind registers an immediate image of two different colors. Though this happened two centuries ago but its repercussions are still being felt. Though

racism began as a form of race, ethnic or religion based discrimination it took a violent turn in America in 1800's. This resulted in slavery where Africans were treated in the form of slaves because they were Black in color. Which simply meant they are inferior to the superior Whites. With this difference on the basis of color segregation came the segregation of laws. A special law named Jim Crow laws was introduced in the southern states of America. This law did not protect the rights of African Americans but safe guarded the interests of White Americans. The result of this discrimination led to the American Civil War which lasted four years (1860-1864). The entire nation was divided between two armies. The Northern Union and the Southern Confederate. The Unions won the war under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln. The result of this war was the abolishment of slavery but this great nation had still a long way to go. This racial segregation became a predominant theme in most of the American writings. Various writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Harriet Beicher Stowe, Mark Twain raised a very important question through their writings, Are we not One? Have we lost faith in humanity? Among these creative writers there was a young up beat poet in Harlem, New York, who was changing the perspective of this problem through his creative poems. One of the most celebrated African American poet was Langston Hughes who is considered as an important figure who along with Martin Luther King Jr raised his voice against this discrimination. Hughes writes a poem on this issue. The title of the poem is I Too am America. Just to illustrate how Hughes in these below few words asks a very important question,

I, Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen," Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America. (Collected Poems, page 18)

With the publication of this poem, Langston shows that he too is the constitutional member of America who shares equal rights as the 'Other' American does. If poetry gave voice to the human rights in America, then the genre of novel too had an equal and more dominant presence. Novels like *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison showed how even children at a very young age are affected by this insane bifurcation based on color. Especially the novel by Toni Morrison in which the central character Pecola, a young girl thinks that she can go to school, if she has the Blue Eyes. A reference to the eye color of a white girl whom she has seen passing by the street.

Racism is important in discussing the Human Rights because no rights were given to the African Americans. This led to continuous efforts in changing the rules. The end result led to a very famous phrase during the Harlem Renaissance which was, "BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL".

If racism happened because of color segregation, then Holocaust happened because of superiority in race by one frantic dictator. Holocaust is an event in which many people are killed and many things destroyed. From 1939 to 1945, statistically speaking millions of Jews were killed by the Third Reich (Nazis) during the Second World War. Six Million Jews vanished from the face of planet because they were considered as an inferior race. Stephen Spielberg, Hollywood's celebrated movie maker, directed a movie on this cause. Schindler's List (1994), is a classic Hollywood dramatization of the story of Oscar Schindler, a Nazi official who rescues 1300 Jews from the Nazi Regime. Similarly, Anne Frank a 14-year-old young girl feels helpless when she is captured from her home when the Nazis capture Amsterdam, her hometown. Anne Frank is taken to a concentration camp in Bergen-Belson. She starts writing diary secretly about the camp, the captive people and her strong disbelief of how low a human can go to kill another. Her diary was founded by an American soldier lying at the bottom of the pyramid of dead Jews. This diary was later published and titled, *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. This book gives a detailed description of the concentration camp and how the Nazis treated the Jews. Above all how this young girl lost faith in humanity.

The last and the most important historical landmark that am presenting is the Partition of subcontinent India. Usually, the partition of India is neglected because very few choose to speak on it. The partition of India is on par with the holocaust. The partition may have happened due to political reasons or the stakes of India attaining freedom was very high. We cannot and should not forget the magnitude of violence that was given to us. When we talk of partition of India very few authors choose to discuss it, authors like Khushwant Singh through his novel *Train to Pakistan*, Amrita Pritam through her *Pinjar* and Bapsi Sidhwa through her *Ice Candy Man/ Crackling India*. I would like to show the violation of human rights in the partition of India trough Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man*. This novel told through the perspective of an eight -year- old girl. This novel shows the sexual trauma, domestic violence and incest suffered by women both in India and Pakistan. In one of the disturbing descriptions of the novel which is said through the character of Ice Candy Man where he finds about a train which is filled with dead bodies of women and children. We as readers look at the Ice Candy Man from the perspective of Lenny, the eight-year-old narrator,

“Ice- Candy- Man comes to an abrupt and jolted halt. He is breathless, reeking of sweat and dust, and his frantic eyes rake the group. They rest for an instant on the Sikh and come flutter back to us. ‘A train from Gurdaspur has just come in,’ he announces, panting. ‘Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women’s breasts! ... I was expecting relatives ... For three days... For twelve hours each day... I waited for that train!’”. (*Ice Candy Man*, 149)

Looking at the various discrimination especially on women, The United Nations World Conference on Women, Beijing in 1995 bore the motto, ‘Women’s right as human rights’. All three important incidents of the past screams and asks one question, ‘Where are our Rights? Rights which can affirm us that we are one.

There is no singular way to map the theoretical territory of the inter discipline of human rights and literature, given its complex historical antecedents as well as the pressures – political, intellectual, aesthetic of the presents. I have not aimed to cover the vast spectrum of human rights violation nor every literary form. My contribution belongs to different historical periods and literary genres from different theoretical foundations. I hope in this spirit, this serves as an invitation to further developments in the inter discipline of human rights and literature.

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