

**Literature as a Social Reform Tool: Changes in its Impact from Sentimental
Literature to the Domination of Post Structural Theories**

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Abstract:

Literature is an effective tool for social reform. The Sentimental Literature of the late Nineteenth Century played crucial role in American society in the Civil war periods as in the English society of Victorian times in forming opinions about slavery, women franchisement, prison reform etc. and thereby affecting individuals and society. But does literature still has the same power to affect society the way sentimental literature did before? To what extent the post structural theories pause hindrances in the social reform mission of literature and the problems of uncertain language with endless meanings and the language of sentiment in pragmatics if it tends to create binary divisions in the society – an elite class of post structuralism and a common class of emotions.

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Literature has got the immense potential to reflect the society of its time along with the exposition of the particular ages' faults, foibles, prejudices, inequalities, discriminations and thereby to foster the societal reform by affecting the policy makers, political affiliates, legal reformers to take desirable, concrete actions in the society. This social mission of the literature and thereby its scope to remedy the evils in society is recognized by the academicians, politicians and the common people who read the fiction or poetry just for the entertainment it provides. English literature is all – encompassing: it ranges from societal utilitarianism, didacticism to the celebration of individualism, entertainment and aesthetic pleasure. The history of the English Language and Literature reveals how it acted as a social critique in the different ages in which it evolved with the creation of new style, form, narrative technique in different genres or achieving maturity from the borrowed styles and forms from the continent. Throughout the centuries, the writers wrote with avowed dreams like 'to justify the ways of God to men' (as Milton in Paradise Lost) or 'to enliven morality with wit and to temper wit with morality' (as Addison in The

Spectator) and they addressed in different ways the various pressing issues of their time in their writings. While some writers resorted to satire as a corrective to human vice and folly and thereby to improve society, others created utopian societies in their works for others to imitate a just and perfect society.

Sentimental Literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century played a crucial role in the societal reform of the English and American societies and the changes it brought in the society is conspicuous. While satirical works tried to ridicule its subject, sentimental works elicit the reader's sympathy and empathy for the plight of the subject it delineated in the work. In its portrayal of character and the realistic settings it creates, the sentimental works get more appeal to people directly than the Utopian fictions. However, The Sentimental novels or the Domestic Fiction or The Woman's Fiction as they were called, were treated as a derogatory term in the later centuries and critics derided it as mere 'tearjerkers' for their over indulgence in the tender emotions of pathos and sympathy. Is it justifiable to consider sentimental literature as mere tearjerkers and to deny the crucial role they played in the societal reform? Do the literature of the post-modern era has the same power to impact the society the way the sentimental literature did in the Victorian period in English Society and the Civil war periods in American society? How the post-structural theories and criticism hinder literature to exert its power and divide society by creating the binary divisions which it tries to destroy.

Markman Ellis in *The Politics of Sensibility* argues that sentimental literature has contributed to movements for social reform, including opposition to slavery, criticism of the questionable morality involved in some commercial and business practices and the movement for

the reformation and relief of prostitutes (Abrams 280). The sentimental novelists shared with their readers optimism even in the midst of the depressing inequality and visible segregation of the society. They were able to create and sustain values with the prevalent Christian morality of the age like the value of benevolence as Ellis puts “The act of benevolence itself has significance within the sentimental equation. The act of giving has as much profit for the individual as does the act of receiving: indeed sentimentalism values giving above all else” (Ellis 135). The Sentimental literature tried to redefine the societal values, the existing gender roles, giving voice to the marginalized sections of the society (women, slaves, and prostitutes) in realistic terms and brought the issues to the attention of the people even in an age where literacy was limited and its ideas spread from people to people and disseminated across the society. This kind of a democratic opinion making among the people even among the illiterate mass of people in English and American societies was productive and useful for societal reform in institutions like school, prison, hospital, in its buildings, staffing and in its operations. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff notices how Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* made the abolitionists to redefine masculinity as a necessary step toward the abolition of slavery by portraying the aggressive, dominant men who held slaves as uncivilized and the men who show compassion, cooperation, civic spirit as civilized so that men could oppose slavery without jeopardizing their self-image (596).

Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill made use of this kind of redefining the gender roles without affecting the self-image of the men for the equality for the women’s suffrage and emancipation through their autobiographical writings evoking sentiments and thereby ensuring

the participation of men for women's cause (Botting 211). In this respect, the sentimental literature played a crucial role in the transformation of the society as Daneil R. Vollaro speaks about the historical incident of Abraham Lincoln meeting and praising the role of H.B Stowe's work in the American civil war: "The long-term durability of Lincoln's greeting as an anecdote in literary studies and Stowe scholarship can perhaps be explained in part by the desire among many contemporary intellectuals to make literature a lever of social or political change"(18).

The Literary Theories have come to play very crucial role towards the second half of the twentieth century. While New Criticism, Formalism, Structuralism were only concerned about literature itself – words on the page, its form and structure, later approaches Marxism, Feminism and African-American studies were concerned about the politics of literary texts. All these approaches to literature tried to give voice to the marginalized (women, black people), to expose the class struggle in the society, to reveal the exploitation of the working class by the bourgeois, to bring those in the periphery towards the centre. These theories or approaches in literature aims to social reform but it works very different from the way the sentimental literature had worked centuries before. Theories highlight rationality over feelings and sentiments and it believes the radical changes in society can be achievable through educating the masses and making them rational rather than emotional. Marxist theories subject the literature of the Victorian times and tries to prove how the bourgeois literature promoted the status quo through its ideologies.

As the theories evolved, developed and institutionalized in its pursuit to find new ideas, thinking and perspectives the post-structuralism, post colonialism all emerged. However, many of the radical ideas of the post structuralism poses real threats to literature in its capacity to affect

society. Derrida's attack on the so-called logocentrism of Western thought – its unwarranted trust in language as the vehicle of truth, and his claim that surplus meanings are possible in a text rather than a single meaning all makes the pragmatic use of language and literature complex. As long as the text is not a structure but a chain of signs that generate meanings and none of the reader is capable of achieving the correct meaning since there is no meaning as true meaning, language itself loses its power to convince any truth. But in sentimental literature, the way it could bring changes in society is by showing the society what is truth and a welfare state by evoking the sentiments from the reader and through the effective use of sentimental language.

Louis Althusser's analysis of ideology gives insights about the various ways in which literature can conspire with and simultaneously deceive its readers. His proposition holds that non-ideological thought or action is not possible for all the works, words reveal the ideology of the writer or the speaker and it causes implication to literature. The literature that is written with an intention to reform the society can also be criticized under the blatant ideology of the writer it promotes. Since the post structural theories revolutionized the literature and language, the predicament of the literature and writers in the post-modern period is immense. Post-structural theories are evasive and its arguments have got the power to make people accept it, but it puts unsurmountable obstacles for the literature and language in its social mission to improve the society for its betterment. In the academic circle, where the theory has dominated and made the people reasonable, the critics are forced to adopt a halfway position.

Apart from the problems and implications discussed so far, there are a chain of problems to evolve from these post-structuralism. Many of these ideas about ideology, deconstruction are

interdisciplinary in a sense not limited in English literature and language alone. However, it is very complicated to understand for the majority of the people –even those who are literate, as they do not get such opportunity to critically think when they cling on to their biases and traditional bound beliefs. How these theories and their approaches can educate the masses who are illiterate and ignorant. How far the theory which undermines the concept of truth or the potential of language to lead to truth in the absence of religion and philosophy could address the pressing issues of the people and try to bring societal change. Do the theories tend to make an apparent binary division –an elite class of intellectuals and a common class of emotional?

Julia H. Fawcett in her essay “The Fate of over Expression in the age of Sentiment” by quoting John Mullan argues that the language of sentiment has the potential to affect people and it celebrates spontaneous display of emotion as a key to one’s fitness for society (140). The language of sentiment is easy to understand for the majority as it appeals to the heart rather than to the brain and it can change the society’s perspectives on things. Though it is true that excessive emotions are not helpful the writer who knows how to use his style of narration, skills in the selection of words and appropriate form and the development of the plot can succeed in evoking the feelings from the reader. Sentimental literature can be useful for social reform when the writer is more “an earnest performer” with skills (a person who cries because he or she is sad) and less “a mimetic performer” (a person who cries because she or he pretends to be sad) (Fawcett 137).

It is questionable to what extent sentimental literature can affect the readers of the post - modern period where the uncertain language itself is not capable of one true meaning and the

society and the times have changed significantly. Though people still have the potential for feelings when properly evoked in literature, films, photographs, pictures the society's attitude itself towards changed in the 21st century as Jane Tompkins argues: "The very grounds on which sentimental has been dismissed by its detractors, grounds which have come to seen universal standards of aesthetic judgment, were established in a struggle to supplant the tradition of evangelical piety and moral commitment these novelists represent. In reaction against their world view, and perhaps even more against their success, twentieth-century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly with womanly inferiority" (160)

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