

## Ethical Aspect of The Novel

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### Abstract

Most of the literary artists their own approach towards ethical values of the society. Quite often they wish to promote religious principles and didactic values through their poems, plays, novels, short stories etc. The aim of *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* is to 'justify God's ways to man'. Nobody can deny that Shakespeare is interested in justifying the importance of virtue, mercy, wisdom, love, integrity, forgiveness, friendship etc. and does not encourage evils at all. However, he warns the people when he says – A man may smile and smile and yet remain Villain. Even the epics of Homer, Virgil, and Dante had moral purpose to convey to the readers. As ethical values were ignored during the Restoration period, there was a reaction against loose morals and sentimental comedies were presented on the stage with long moral lectures.

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In 18<sup>th</sup> century Addison and Steele teach ethical values through the *Spectator*. Richardson refers to Christian values in *Pamela*, *Clarrissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*. Here Chastity is more important than life. At last Square Booby feels impressed with the ethical approach of Pamela and ultimately marries her. It is true that his sentimental morality is ridiculed by Fielding in *Shamela*. Yet Fielding interprets ethics in his own way and satirises lustful people like Lady Booby, Mrs. Slipslop, Tom Jones, Molly Segrim, Lady Bellaston, Lord Fellamore etc. He asks readers to give up reading his book if they don't like his sermons. 18<sup>th</sup> century is well known as the age of good sense as Dr. Johnson also accepts that the aim of grand literature is to instruct as well as delight. Oliver Goldsmith admires the merciful and generous nature of Dr. Primrose in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Nobody can ignore the ethical purpose of

Jane Austen's novels as she attaches due importance to virtue and decent manners. In *Pride and Prejudice* she ridicules Mrs. Bennet, Lydia, Mr. Wickham etc. for their indecent behaviour and admires Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy for their rational approach to life. In his autobiography Anthony Trollope asserts that he is almost a 'preacher of sermons'.

Charles Dickens condemns cruel people like Miss Havisham, Compeyson, Mr. Murdstone, Miss Murdstone, Estella, Mr. Creakle etc. and admires virtuous people like Mr. Magwitch, Pip, Jim, Mr. Micawber Mr. Herbert etc. He attacks the prison keepers in *A Tale of Two Cities* as prisoners had to suffer numberless agonies due to cruel officers. In *Hard Times* he exposes the tyrant nature of capitalists. Actually the artist is successful when he fulfils the mission of his art. He has to reach his readers with his noble ideas. How can he ignore the ethical values of society? Does he not make efforts to leave his mark upon people? Does he live in his world of imagination? How can he admire the wicked people? Daniel Defoe asserted that it is first duty of an artist to 'reform the wicked reader'. Every virtue has got to be encouraged by him as R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Praver Jhabwala etc. did.

R.K. Narayan refers to the fundamentals of Hindu mythology in *The English Teacher*, *Vendor of Sweets*, *The World of Nagaraj*, *A painter of Signs* etc. In *The English Teacher* Krishnan's wife is dead after a few months of marriage after giving birth to a female baby. Since she has reached heaven, she is above pain, pleasure, earthly worries, time, maya and death and birth. She asks Krishnan to live in the present and forget the past. Ultimately Krishnan resigns his job as a degree college lecturer and joins as primary school teacher. This confirms his detachment and liberation. The same theme is developed in *The Vendor of Sweets* when Jagan is fed up with the conduct of his Son Mali. He fails to understand as to how young man and young lady can share the same bed without getting married. Since Mali does not care for the instruction of his fathers, the latter feels restless. He even advises Mali to get married with Grace. When Mali is arrested, Jagan feels liberated and detaches himself from shop, house and other earthly things. In a merciful mood he gives money to Grace to buy a ticket for her home and renounces his home. In *The World of Nagaraj* the hero wants to write an authentic book on Narad Muni. Since he does not have enough material on this theme, his plan fails. However, he tries his best to lead a life of liberation. So, like Tobias Smollett, R.K. Narayan has 'adorned virtue with honour'. In *The Guide*, he makes Raju suffer for his bad Karma.

Bhabani Bhattacharya follows the theory of art for the sake of morality and describes the difference between the economic thought of Gandhi and Pt. Nehru in *Shadows From Laddhakh*. He seeks synthesis between capitalism and small scale industries. In *A Dream in Hawaii* he mentions the gulf between chastity and materialism. Swami Yogananda feels attracted towards his old student and yet hates the material aims of his followers. Finally he controls his lust and returns to India from Hawaii. Here the artist mentions his views regarding soul, God, next life, earthly existence and at the same time describes the difference between good and evil. He does not want that religion should be adopted as the source of income by the trustees of a unit.

Arun Joshi mentions the fundamentals of Hinduism in *The Foreigner* and *The Lost Labyrinth*. The hero of *The Foreigner* is eager to get the reply of certain philosophical questions – What is the reality of existence? Who is he? What is relation with the family members? What is divine light? Can a common person get divine bliss like Buddha? Why do the people suffer on earth? In *The Last Labyrinth* the artist refers to the fundamentals of the *Gita* and asserts the information of detachment and liberation. The greed of the hero is satirized here. Virtue and truth admired here by Arun Joshi. In *A Case for Billy Biswas*, the artist refers to the search of Billy Biswas though he is not justified in deserting his wife for a tribal woman.

Nathaniel Hawthorne discusses the problem of Chastity in the novels *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*. She asserts : A high truth, indeed, fairly, finely and skillfully wrought out, brightening at every step, and crowning the final development of work of fiction, may add an artistic glory...'

For W.M. Thackeray 'truth is best' and the artist must not hide ethical values from the readers, In *Wuthering Heights* Emily Bronte satirises the evil deeds of Heathcliff. In *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Bronte has all sympathy for miserable orphan. George Eliot influenced the moral taste of her readers with her novels. Flaubert is famous for 'artistic detachment'. Emile Zola exposed the aristocrats of France in *Nana*. Once he said, 'truth misleads no one'. He was always conscious of the high moral purpose of the artists. R.L. Stevenson says that it is never safe to hide whatever is true. Same approach has been adopted by Thomas Hardy as he raised moral issues in *Tess* and *Jude the Obscure*. He frankly says that prostitutes of mind and soul are more immoral than the prostitutes of body. For him Tess is a pure woman as she is pure at heart. How can a novelist afford to commit moral injury? He said :

A novel which does moral injury to a dozen imbeciles, and has bracing results upon a thousand intellects of normal vigour, can justify its existence, and probably a novel was never written by the purest-minded author for which there could be found some moral invalid or other whom it was capable of harming?

Khushwant Singh asserts the need of Hindu Muslim Unity in *Train to Pakistan* and *Delhi*. He discusses sex freely in *The Company of women* and yet asserts the fundamental of the *Gita* here. He refers to the principles of Hindu philosophy in the chapter on *Yasmeen*. Then he defined Hinduism in *The Burial At Sea* and exposes the capitalists, British students and pseudo-Hindus-saints bitterly.

Namita Gokhale and Shobha De raise many moral issues in their fiction. In *Paro : Dreams of Passion* Namita Gokhale satirises Paro for her flirting nature. Even Priya is exposed by the artist. The question arises – who is a new woman in India? in *Two Sisters* and *Strange Obsession* Shobha De raises moral issues and satirises the women who are greedy, possessive, jealous and have no ethical values. V.S. Naipual and Bharati Mukherjee also discuss the traits of people who have no moral sense.

So, the artist may not solve the moral question towards the end of the novel. Yet he cannot from his responsibilities towards the end of the novel. Yet he cannot escape from his responsibilities towards the society. Even E.M. Froster, Joseph Conard, Muriel Spark etc. write to confirm their faith in truth, virtue, wisdom, prudence and other ethical values.

## References

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne: *Preface to The House of Seven Gables*.
2. Thomas Hardy: *The Profitable Reading of Fiction* in Miriam Allott's *Novelists on the Novel*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959, p. 98.