

Literary Texts towards negotiating the Practical Problems of Life : A Model

Dr Ravindra Pratap Singh

Professor, Dept. of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow
(rpsingh.lu@gmail.com)

Abstract:

The present paper discusses the association of literature with the real-life situation with reference to an essay “Of Studies” written by English essayist Francis Bacon. Bacon’s text “Of Studies” well appropriates the purpose and utility of reading, writing or other activities associated with a text in hand. The term study and the skills related with the study itself invite an understanding of reading skills, listening skills, storage skills and retrieval skills for the practical criticism of life, the problems, its conditioning and the efforts that are made to accommodate concrete solutions or optional ones for solving them.

Best practices in teaching and learning environment are the life blood of any state-of-the art academic institution. It is the power of human resources that takes the reputation of any institution to greater heights. The training of human resources in accordance with the global needs is a big challenge. Asustainable, inclusive and forward moving management of human resources can fulfil the gaps in physical resources up to a certain level. It is high time that the boundaries of traditional disciplines of knowledge should shape themselves in a new order. The patterns of ‘interdisciplinarity’, ‘multidisciplinarity’ and ‘cross disciplinarity’ offer potent solutions in this challenging world order .

While practicing English studies in classrooms for over two decades, I have felt the scope of negotiating the literary canons with social requirements and urgencies, and have experimented the scope of the application of literary knowledge in social sector. It is a kind of interpretation and reading of a text from the utilitarian perspective, and hereby, I have prepared a model where the study of any text takes a journey via several steps in a channel targeting the emotional responses from its stakeholders. It goes like this- “Text- denotation - connotation - reverberation- association- application.” From this point of view, my students and I read different texts of English literature towards finding the solutions of different problems. The proposed paper is an attempt at discussing this model as ‘best practice’ in English classroom.

Broadly speaking, when we offer any graduate or postgraduate programme in English literature in India, we have the following objectives to realise with the learners:

Developing the core and applied knowledge of English studies across the globe with special emphasis on Indian, African and Caribbean, Australian, Canadian and SAARC Literatures.

- i. Developing creative synthesis of texts, society and culture
- ii. Developing critical thinking and humanitarian values
- iii. Developing the research skills and aptitude of the students
- iv. Making the students aware of the distinct shift from Eurocentric literature to Indian literature in translation

- v. Associating and sensitising the students to society, environment, gender and social inclusion policies, social inclusion and other issues of human dignity
- vi. Proposing plans and projects that emerge out of negotiating and /or non- negotiating mass groups towards welfare of society at large
- vii. Evaluating responses out of a cultural set-up that do communicative communal practices
- viii. Reading literature in general and language used for its associated purposes towards a discrete social category or non-discrete social category
- ix. Language and literature that is pivotal in the emergence of debates and discussions for purposes of the growth of human mind

Keeping these objectives in mind, I planned to explain the association of literature with the real-life situation with reference to an essay “Of Studies” written by English essayist Francis Bacon. This essay well appropriates the purposes or utility of reading, writing or other activities involved or associated with a text in hand. The term study and the skills related with the study itself invite an understanding of reading skills, listening skills, storage skills and retrieval skills for the practical criticism of life, the problems, its conditioning and the efforts that are made to accommodate concrete solutions or optional ones for solving them. Bacon’s statement that studies serve for ornament and ability etc. comes true when we associate it with literature in the broader sense of the term. He states that, “Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. Their chief use for delight is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability is in the judgment and disposition of business. For expert men can execute, and perhaps judge of particulars, one by one; but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs, come best, from those that are learned.”(‘Of Studies’, 3). It is a proven fact that literature can serve many applied and creative functions. I tried to explain it to the students with a guided task. The description follows hereunder.

Task : As the first step in this experiment, I explained, the philosophy , connotations and denotation of studies to the select students of MA English, semester I (2017-18) of the Department of English and MEL, University of Lucknow. Towards giving it a concrete shape, I asked them to read Bacon’s seminal text, an essay, ‘Of Studies’ and to make a categorical presentation mentioning the uses and abuses of studies. As a collaborative work, we prepared a chart on the uses and abuses of studies. Then the participating students were asked to find out the instances from the practical life situations and to associate the findings given by Bacon appropriating them. By completing these steps, the students were almost sensitized that reading literature not only gives them theoretical knowledge, it also caters for behavioural aspects of life. They can find texts and illustrations for every emotion and context, and by a thoughtful reading they can come up with solutions to any issue and concern in the life. Since Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* was prescribed to them in their syllabus, I shared with them a case study associated with this text. I narrated to them the statement of Queen Victoria that she had got solace in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (next only to the *Bible*), when her husband Prince Albert was no more. We find this incidence mentioned Stephanie Forward in *British Library Newsletter*. Citing it, we find that:

Queen Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, died in 1861. In the years following, *In Memoriam* became increasingly seen as providing a model for public behaviour during the long period of the Queen Victoria’s mourning. The queen herself kept a copy of the poem by her bedside after Albert’s death and noted in her journal entry for Sunday 5 January 1862 that she was ‘Much soothed and pleased with Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. Only those who have suffered as I do can understand these beautiful poems. (Forward , Stephanie.)

The participants were given the task to find out quite personalised texts, emerging suitable for the instances of their own life and behaviour, and to reappear for the discussion after a week's time. By this phase of our collective effort, I could well notice them motivated and inspired.

Literature has the power of persuasion, and well loved literature can save a keen reader from depression, anxiety, low energy state of the lack of concentration, and give sensitive shoulder at the loss of person or matter. A text alters the experiences of the stakeholders, the readers, listeners, audience corresponding to its manner and forms of representation, creating an effect that helps them to criticise life, and sustain it presenting diversified solution to the problems plausible from everyday life. When one reads or rereads a text, or through interpretation or reinterpretation, understands a text, there occurs elevation of the spirit of heart and mind and even that of physical realization in the body that either elevates or devastates the human condition. The School of Constance, towards reception aesthetics, propagates the idea of understanding a text from the viewpoint of readers as an important entity in the meaning-making process. Reading itself is a process of many an approach that an individual adopts as per the background consciousness and knowledge that interferes with the approaches that the text offers him or her. In the ongoing brainstorming sessions of reading, the reader, in fact, is creating a text of his or her own i.e., creating yet another text in the parallel emergence and here my hypothesis of literary text as a curative entity works. To cite Wolfgang Iser in this context:

It is the virtuality of the work that gives rise to its dynamic nature, and this in turn is the precondition for the effects that the work calls forth. As the reader uses the various perspectives offered him by the text in order to relate the patterns and the “schematised views” to one another, he sets the work in motion, and this very process results ultimately in the awakening of responses within himself. Thus, reading causes the literary work.

(Iser “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach, 280)

However, the reader might suffer from the affective fallacy while going through the thought processes in understanding its meaning, as has been talked above in the text like Bacon's ‘Of Studies’, ‘Of Gardening’, ‘Of Judicature’ etc. In *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), the corpus categorically forms utilitarian approach that helps an individual or a group or a society in having ready filters of suggested proposals in handling and working out the important problems of routine life encountered by them.

There exists a rich storehouse of classics and their representations in different forms of human art or human artistic activities in the revelation and realisation of truth in a spiritually ambiguous world that allows the readers to handle the problems of life without being thwarted of their emotions. The world, indeed, is full of matters on the subjects that imbibe expressions from the themes like cheating, betrayal, truth, recovery, love, revenge, crime, punishment, advice and silence, and quite pertinent questions of life and death. As texts, in broader parlance, these themes express the trajectories of life in miniature. A reader or any other stakeholder is left in a smoke-world, struggling and trying to visualize the way out, getting stuck into the problems of choices in life. The following statement of Shakespeare via his character Hamlet, as expressed in Act III Scene 1 of *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, coheres with the context more closely:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them.

(Shakespeare, pp .98-99)

Authenticating Bacon's sources of understanding the utility of studies, a text takes an individual to discover and rediscover the modes that stand as a helping tribute in one's behaviour in evaluating the existence of mankind. It emotionally strengthens and widens the horizons to study any human situation anywhere on earth establishing a close dialogue that creates solutions for those far away in time or space transcending the boundaries, as it is a popular saying in Hindi, "*jahan na pahuche Ravi wahan pahuche kavi*", i.e. the flight of fancy of a poet is swifter than the rays of the Sun. It is the bash of readers, listeners or the stakeholders that stands supreme in judging and evaluating the intentions and contentions of the text for the specific purposes of life depending upon their individual competence, performance and personality. So is the relevance of the text floated by authors like Roland Barthes. Roland Barthes states that, "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture." (Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' 146). Simply forwarding the views of Barthes, we can infer that a text is a series of phonetic sounds with variable meaning; depend on the purpose of the author. The author's purpose for writing text is to share their experiences with culture. In his article, Barthes differentiates between the "scriptor" and the "author" by stating that the word "author" implies more authority over the reader's interpretations. The author inflicts a certain viewpoint on the reader, which inevitably overshadows the reader's creative mind.

Critics like Stanley Fish have spaced stakeholders and readers with supreme authority of establishing meaning of the text as per their choices and priorities of life that condition them. In his essay "Is there is a text in the class", Stanley Fish focuses on the subjective reception of text. A literary text or a text in general is an open opportunity towards yet another creation that engages a reader's state of mind, understanding, wit, competence and intelligence towards a variety of inquisitiveness and queries that give courage to sustain the existence of life, even during the last hope of the lasting values on Earth. It is the formation of a poetics that has a capability of miraculous response to the riddles of life.

Conclusion: Out of our deliberations, practice and discussions, we can infer that literary texts can play a cathartic role in setting the mood, uplifting the lowered esteem, augmenting the emotions and whetting the desires and cravings. Good literature, notwithstanding its origin and timeline, can provide food for thought, and works as 'freshening April showers' and a kind of 'soothing balm'. This way, we could realise the application part of literature, and that in a way, stands as the *raison d'être* of literature in the current scenario where everything is to be justified and validated. 'Art for art's sake' is giving way to 'art for life's sake' paradigm.

Works cited :

Bacon, Francis . 'Of Studies'. In *Selected Essays : An Anthology of English Essays for Undergraduate Students* . Ed. Department of English and MEL, University of Lucknow , Orient Blackswan, 2013.

Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Harvard University Press, 1982.

Forward, Stephanie . 'In Memoriam A.H.H. by Alfred Lord Tennyson'. *Discovering Literature : Romantic and Victorian*. British Library Newsletter .<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/in-memoriam-ahh-by-alfred-lord-tennyson>. May 15, 2014. Accessed: 15-03-2020 .

Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach". *New Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, On Interpretation: I (Winter, 1972), pp. 279- 299. The Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468316> .Accessed: 15-03-2020 15:04 UTC.

Shakespeare, William .*The Tragedy of Hamlet*. London: Methuen and Co.1899.

Roland Barthes. 'The Death of the Author'. 1977.<http://www.deathoftheauthor.com> . Accessed 15 Mar.2020