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Literature and Human Rights: A brief Overview

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Abstract:

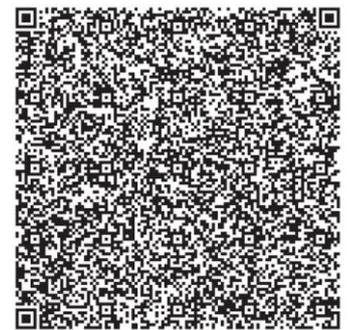
Literature and human rights are inseparably linked as both of these are concerned with the human world and the rightful place of human beings in society. Literature, especially fiction, deals with diverse human experiences and opens many windows to the world around us, instilling empathy about our fellow human beings. Novels and short stories present multiple viewpoints of different characters and reveal the complexities of the human situation, thereby bringing into focus the rights, responsibilities, privileges and deprivations of human beings in this world. Literature enlightens the readers about the human society and raises serious questions about the prevailing situation. The concept of human rights that emerged in the post-World War II period shares with literature similar concerns about human dignity. It is evident that on the one hand literature has upheld human values and on the other, movements for human rights provided writers with food for thought. Literature in the western world concerned itself with the natural rights of man and in our country literary works became sites of protest and resistance against all forms of discrimination, deprivation and oppression. Overall, literature has emerged as a very important component of the movement for ensuring human rights.

Keywords: literature, human rights, human dignity, oppression, deprivation

Introduction: The intersections between literature and human rights are very intimate. In the 18th century the development of ideas around natural law, which are really the pre-history of modern human rights, took place. These ideas were premised on the belief that all human beings have dignity, and that they should respond to one another recognizing natural human dignity. It is no accident that the novel was born at that historical juncture. Novels make other people's lives real to the readers and make them imaginatively follow the journey of the characters in fiction. Rousseau was a great advocate of natural rights and when he talks about Emile's education in his childhood he says that Emile should read novels.¹ Indeed, he should just read one novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, which presents a lonely individual's struggle against nature without any external aid and asserts faith in the resilience of the human spirit that refuses to concede defeat in the most adverse circumstances. Defoe shows Crusoe as the representative of ordinary man who can display extraordinary abilities, thereby reinforcing the naturalists' claim that every individual is entitled to basic human rights simply by virtue of being human. Therefore, it is quite evident that the ideas related to human rights are part of the literary tradition that goes all the way back to the 18th century. However, it is not only novel but also other literary genres which played a significant role in strengthening the struggle for securing human rights.

Trajectory of novel and growth of humanitarian ideals

Novels describe the lives of other people to make their entitlements to lives like ours and their entitlement to live according to natural law seems natural. During the 19th century the great moralists like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and George Eliot have taught about the relationship between political democracy, and rights and entitlement. Novels of Charles Dickens expose the cruelties and uncertainties of the industrial society and make the readers empathize with the victims of an impersonal and ruthless system that is propelled by merciless pursuit of profit. Writers like Maxim Gorky raised the novel to a revolutionary level advocating resistance against oppression and deprivation. During Holocaust Europe was face to face with an unimaginable brutality that seemed absurd. Novels were written to expose the naked monstrosities and to delve into the fathomless moral void. Primo Levi's novel *If This Is a Man* is a



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soul-stirring tale of inmates in Auschwitz. All these novels written before the promulgation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 discussed issues related to the attainment of a dignified life for each and every human being, thus laying a robust foundation of human rights regime.

The scale of literature's impact on rights is convincingly and wide-rangingly analyzed by Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* (2007):

...reading accounts of torture of epistolary novels had physical effects that translated into brain changes and came back out as new concepts about the organization of social and political life. New kinds of reading (viewing and listening) created new individual experiences (empathy) which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights).²

Hunt expands upon this analysis, claiming that literature does not just educate individuals but fundamentally changes their outlook. She contends that reading first-person narratives that document atrocities develop one's empathy for others; and argues that this heightened level of empathy drives the formation and ratification of human rights.

Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.* (2007)³ has provided a critical insight into the relationship between literature and international laws on human rights. In this timely study of the historical, ideological, and formal interdependencies of the novel and human rights, Joseph Slaughter demonstrates that the twentieth-century rise of "world literature" and international human rights law are related phenomena.

Slaughter argues that international law shares with the modern novel a particular conception of the human individual. The *Bildungsroman*, the novel of coming of age, fills out this image, offering a conceptual vocabulary, a humanist social vision, and a narrative grammar for what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and early literary theorists both call "the free and full development of the human personality." He argues that the *Bildungsroman* demonstrates that one is not "born free and equal in dignity and rights". Slaughter then argues that one becomes a citizen and eligible for human rights upon the attainment of *Bildung* (which can be loosely translated as maturity). Slaughter utilises a range of *Bildungsromane* to convincingly argue that they suggest that human rights are a reciprocal arrangement- one must respect others' rights (be civil) in order to have one's own rights respected (be treated with civility). This is a controversial conclusion that cuts against the liberal conception of human rights as an inalienable ethical framework. Although controversial, this conception of human rights is not unprecedented: in *The Human Condition*,⁴ Hannah Arendt makes the same argument utilising political theory. In Arendt's mind, one becomes human upon participation in a community; and we know that human rights are a reciprocal arrangement because if only a "single human being existed on earth" these rights would no longer be "valid and real". Arendt concludes that human rights are a product of human organization and are impossible without the presence of politics which is premised on plurality. Thus, she argues, "we are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights". Despite such controversies there are no doubt that literature does play a very vital role in sensitizing us about human rights and makes a lasting contribution in the struggle for achieving human rights for the deprived segments of the society. Before expanding upon this proposition, let's discuss briefly about the emergence of human rights regime after the World War II.

The idea of human dignity is at the centre of the concept of human rights. Historically the international concern for human rights was generated in the wake of the Second World War which was marked by unimaginable horrors of War and particularly the Nazi atrocities during the Holocaust. It was with the setting of the UN that human rights received a new international recognition. The Global concern for human rights was expressed in the Preamble of the UN charter, which identified human rights to be one of the founding purposes of the UN. Article 1 of the Charter obliged the members States to work to "achieve International cooperation...in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, language or religion". Article 55 stated the UN would promote "universal respect for, and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms." Article 68 mandated the Economic and Social Council to set up a Commission for the promotion of human rights. As per this provision the UN Commission on human rights was formed. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law."

Literature's role in documenting human predicament and generating human solidarity

The worst nightmare of the 20th century was the holocaust and Primo Levi's memoir *If This Is a Man*⁵ is an account of the Hobbesian reality that was deliberately created in the concentration camps. Primo Levi was an inmate of Auschwitz and this memoir is a first-hand account of that horrifying reality. At the beginning of the book, Levi describes being brought into the camp. He was Jewish-Italian and, as a member of the resistance, he was caught late



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on in the war, which meant he could survive. He describes coming into the camp, and they were already thirsty – he reaches out of one of the barracks to pick an icicle to suck, to drink, and it's snatched away by one of the guards. And he asks him why he had done that, and the reply was, "Here there is no why". What had been recreated in the center of post-Enlightenment Europe was its own worst nightmare, the very thing that it was built to prevent. He turns his scientifically trained and unrelenting gaze on what it means to live in a system where there is no 'why?' His analysis of modern forms of horror and the organization of modern forms of horror is brilliant. But he also poses a question about literature and humanity, right in the heart of the camp. There's a very significant chapter titled "The Canto of Ulysses" which describes Levi having a conversation with a younger camp inmate, a French guy called Jean whom everyone calls 'the Piccolo'. The Piccolo's job, because he's young, is to go and get the soup from the other end of the camp for the workers every day. All the other guys vie to be the one who goes to help Piccolo because it means that you can walk across the camp and you can actually have a conversation and be outside the unremitting horror for a bit. One day it is Levi's turn and he goes with Piccolo. He says he's suddenly filled with a need to talk to Piccolo about Dante, about the *Inferno*. Piccolo is French and Levi is Italian. Dante is written in vernacular Italian, which is supposed to make the journey into hell every man's story, as everyone could speak it. So, there's this great scene where Levi is trying to translate into French, from the Italian, just because he wants to hear it, just because he's desperate to communicate to this young man this great story. In the end, he says, 'Obviously, I'm not going to be able to do this, but Piccolo understands what I'm trying to do. He's heard I'm trying to tell the story.'

That act of storytelling, of transnational, trans-lingual, trans-historical storytelling affirms their humanity at that particular moment. It doesn't redeem it, but it affirms it at the gates of hell. There is no doubt that telling of stories is a way in which we do affirm each other's humanity. The way human beings were relegated to the level of beasts and were exterminated with unimaginable indifference in the concentration camps shook the foundations of European civilization and generated the urge to protect human dignity.

Literature played a crucial role during the American Civil Rights Movement by documenting experiences, raising awareness, and inspiring change through powerful narratives and artistic expressions. Authors, poets, and playwrights used their works to reflect the realities of racial injustice and advocate for equality. Notable writers such as Lorraine Hansberry, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and Tony Morrison conveyed the emotional and political nuances of the time, highlighting themes of empowerment and resistance.

One of the most enduring and intriguing problems of the 20th and 21st century is the refugee crisis which has acquired a tremendous political significance in the last seven decades. Human rights of refugees are often sacrificed at the altar of xenophobic nationalism. Behrouz Boochani's autobiographical book *No Friend But the Mountains*⁶ is a testimony to the plight of refugees in today's world. This text dwells on the plight of a political fugitive who is trapped abroad after escaping tyranny and oppression in one's motherland. It is a refugee narrative that resonates with the horrifying experiences of millions of refugees and migrants across the globe. Boochani is an Iranian-Kurdish political theorist and writer who was imprisoned within the Australian migration and refugee regime in Manus Island up until the end of 2019. This book was first published in Australia in 2018 and was published in the US and the UK in 2019. The book was written via WhatsApp messages coming out of the Manus Island prison system and then translated by his collaborators and his main translator, who's an incredibly interesting writer and thinker called Omid Tofighian, who is based in Sydney. On one level, Boochani is again describing a system where there is no why. What the prison system, is doing is trying to force people to agree to go back to where they came from. Translator Tofighian writes in his translator's preface: "Both a profound creative writing project and a strategic act of resistance, the book is part of a coherent theoretical project and critical approach"

Boochani posits that the prison is a Kyriarchal system (a term borrowed from feminist theory), one where different forms of oppression intersect; oppression is not random but purposeful, designed to isolate and create friction amongst prisoners, leading to despair and broken spirits. The way Boochani describes the system has other strong echoes of Levi, like the precise description of queues for the doctor, which turn out to be for one painkiller, which is all the doctor ever gives you. There are economies of things like paracetamol and cigarettes that are set up just to keep these economies of pointless waiting going.

One of the really interesting things about the book is the relationship between the Australian system, the Manus Islanders who are themselves being paid by the Australians in a kind of colonial-settler legacy to do this work and the refugees and migrants who are imprisoned by the system. He shares that, but he also shares with Arendt and with Levi a strong desire to affirm a different type of life to the one that he's forced to live. That's where the sheer poetry of the book comes from. Interestingly, the human rights lawyer Itamar Mann, who works for an organization called Global



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Legal Action Network (GLAN), sent a copy of *If This Is a Man* to the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. Perhaps many won't recognize contemporary migrant regimes as atrocities because there's some ideology that says that's what you have to do—to treat refugees as if they're criminals. But what books like Boochani's do is reveal a situation as a moral atrocity – as a crime. In other words, our writers can give us new imaginative terms by which we can comprehend what it is we're doing. This, maybe, is a very human kind of evidence.

Indian Literature and the issue of human rights

Though serious violations of basic human rights of Indians as a whole were institutionalized during the colonial period, the caste-based atrocities and discriminations in traditional Indian Hindu society have a history of more than two thousand years. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand laid bare the naked brutality embedded in the caste-hierarchy that sanctions atrocities on so-called lower caste people in the name of ritual purity. They raised basic questions regarding the violation of human dignity and inalienable human rights of people from lower castes in the name of following tradition.

Mulk Raj Anand whose voice dominated the Indian English fictions of 1930's and 40's, is best remembered all over the world for his brilliant portrayal of Indian society. In writing of the pariahs and the marginalized rather than of the privileged, he had ventured into a territory that had been largely ignored till then by the Indian writers. In caste-ridden Indian society Dalits are regarded as "impure" and are deprived of basic human rights. Mulk Raj Anand's fictions expose the brutality of casteism and uphold the human rights of the marginalized masses. KR Srinivasa Iyenger writes about the themes of Mulk Raj Anand :

It was Anand's aim to stray lower still than ever Sarat Chandra or Premchand did, to show to the West that there was more in the Orient than could be inferred from Omar Khayyam, Tagore or Kipling, and so he described a waif like Munno in *Coolie* and untouchable like Bakha, and indentured labourer like Gangu and set them right at the centre of the scheme of cruelty and exploitation that held India in its vicious grip.⁷

Mulk Raj Anand's first novel *Untouchable*, published on 1st May 1935, is possibly his most accomplished work. While some critics termed it as "dirty", EM Forster in his preface to *Untouchable* says: It seems to me indescribably clean and I hesitate for words in which this can be conveyed. Avoiding the rhetoric and circumlocution, it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it.⁸

The novel describes a single day in the life of the protagonist Bakha, an introspective young sweeper. He is eighteen-year old son of a sweeper Lakha who lives in the outcastes' colony in Bulandshehar, a small cantonment town of North India. Bakha's day begins with cleaning the public latrines and he goes through a series of humiliating experiences which make him desperate to find a release from the degradation of his life. Bakha's sister Sohini is doubly victimized first as an untouchable, then as a young girl. Kalinath, the village priest of the temple makes crude sexual assault on her. As she starts screaming, he shouts 'polluted, polluted', and a crowd of caste-Hindus, furious with Bakha's trespassing into the temple complex gather immediately and cry hoarse about the pollution. Bakha, despite being black with anger restrains himself. Sending away Sohini to collect food from door to door he goes to the town where he suffers insult and mental agony. On returning home, he tells his father, "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt". In the end Bakha finds three alternative solutions to his problem: a missionary tries to persuade him to embrace Christianity, he listens to Gandhiji who advocates social reform, and he also hears of mechanized sanitation, as the only answer possible.

Untouchable is a scathing indictment of Hindu Society during 1930's and refers to a number of customs, traditions, and social evils. The so-called untouchables' lived in kutcha mud-walled, single-roomed cottage that was used as kitchen, sleeping room, sitting room and for placing baskets, brooms etc. There was no proper system of drainage and there was foul smell everywhere. The untouchables were not only poor, ill-fed, ill-clothed but also sick and diseased. Bakha's mother died because of lack of treatment, and his father was asthmatic. These people who occupied the lowest rungs of caste hierarchy were subjected to worst forms of deprivation and social ostracism. They could not draw water from the village-well. When Bakha goes to collect food, a loaf of bread is thrown at him as if he were a dog. Sexual exploitation of the poor and untouchable woman was also a grim social reality that did not escape Anand's attention. By exposing the priest who is polluted by the very shadow of the untouchable but makes sexual advances to the young girl behind the courtyard of the temple, the author locates hypocrisy at the centre of the Hindu society.

As one of the founding members of Progressive Writers' Association Mulk Raj Anand remarked:

Indian writers can fulfill their creative aspirations only by a radical realization of the causes that hamper our social life and by portrayal, through a heightened sensibility, of all those tragedies in the obscure lanes and alleys of our towns and villages which have only just begun to find utterance in the literature of India.⁹



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Anand tried to remain true to his ideals throughout his literary career. His another important novel *Coolie* is a social chronicle that narrates the miserable life of Munoo, an orphan who, appearing in different avatars as domestic slave factory worker, pickle maker, coolie and rickshaw-puller, dies of tuberculosis. The deplorable working conditions of labourers and ruthless exploitation of the toiling masses by the colonial masters and their Indian managers form the crux of this novel. Anand refers to the resistance put up by the Trade Union activists in Bombay against different forms of oppression and the conspiracies of the propertied classes to subvert such attempts by using the tool of communal violence.

Two Leaves and a Bud, published in 1937, portrays the widening hiatus between the haves and the have-nots, ruler and the ruled and exploiter and the exploited. It recounts the shattered hopes of a Punjabi peasant Gangu who is lured into work in the tea estates of Assam and goes through a life of tremendous hardship. He is a victim of systematic starvation and is shot by a British soldier who tries to rape her daughter. The promised paradise of Assam plantations with its thick vegetation and idyllic greenery is a mirage. This dystopia sucks life out of the underprivileged as they are made to toil relentlessly for the colonial master. Anand also severely criticizes the wealthy Indians who were hand in glove with the British colonial power in aggravating the plight of the indigenous peasants and workers. There are countless literary texts which mystify and, in the words of Frantz Kafka, 'put us to sleep'. There are also texts which awaken. Mulk Raj Anand's works belong to the latter category.

Munshi Premchand, one of the foremost writers of India, unequivocally called upon the authors in colonial India to concern themselves with "the problems of our life" and deal with "such themes as have a social value". He hoped that writers would become "standard bearer of humanity, of moral uprightness, of nobility." His novel *Godan* and short stories like *Kafan* (The Shroud) and *Sadgati* (Deliverance) are some of the literary specimens where he brings to light economic and social exploitation in rural society and voices his protest against feudal and caste-based exploitation.

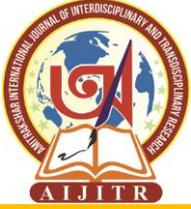
The greatest doyen of Indian literature, Rabindranath Tagore was not indifferent to the issues of human dignity and human rights. Tagore's concept of individual freedom and growth reflects his belief in the inherent dignity and potential of every human being. He argued that true freedom goes beyond political rights to encompass intellectual, artistic, and spiritual development, enabling individuals to realize their fullest potential and contribute meaningfully to society. For Rabindranath Tagore the poet and the humanistic philosopher, the concept of religion is based on his idea of God and the significance of man given by him. Tagore religion is the Religion of Man. It is the religion by which man can realise his innermost essence. The assertion of the primordial relationship is the essence of Tagore humanism, and he calls his humanism the 'Religion of Man'. Rabindranath Tagore develops his philosophy of humanism in his book *Religion of Man* the poet says, "Let me assert my faith by saying that this world consisting of what we all animate and inanimate things has found its culmination is man, its best expression. Man as a creation represents the creator and this is why of all creators it has been possible for him to comprehend this world in his imagination to realise in his individual spirit union with a spirit that is everywhere."¹⁰

He states further, "One may imagine that an individual who succeeds in dissociating himself from his fellows attains real freedom, inasmuch as all ties of relationship imply obligation to others. But we know that, though it may sound paradoxical, it is true that in the human world only a perfect arrangement of interdependence gives rise to freedom. The most individualistic of human beings who own no responsibility are the savages who fail to attain their fullness of manifestation. They live immersed in obscurity, like an ill-lighted fire that cannot liberate itself from its envelope of smoke. Only those may attain their freedom from the segregation of an eclipsed life who have the power to cultivate mutual understanding and co-operation. The history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship."¹¹

Conclusion: There is an intimate relationship between human rights and literature, especially since the advent of the Enlightenment project. Literature's historically unique ability to inhabit the perspective of those whose rights have been violated predisposes literature for modern rights advocacy. In the liberated colonies of erstwhile European powers, we witness the resurgence of literature that affirms the rights of the natives and challenges the Western notions about the inhabitants of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. The discourse of human rights follows different trajectories in the global North and global South. However, in both the hemispheres, literature plays a pivotal role in shaping people's ideas about human rights and has contributed significantly to the consolidation of humanitarian forces.

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