

Literature as a source of Socio-cultural studies - Study of the Chinese society of the Cultural Revolution through “Scar Literature”

Abstract:

Literature reflects socio-cultural-political realities of the society. It indeed reflects the good values, oppressions, bad times, social discrimination and other ills of the society. Literature mirrors the social oppressions with an intension to make people realize and amend their mistakes. Thus a positive change can take place in the society. . However some literature excludes the social exploitations and thus fails to expose the harsh realities. The ancient land of China which has been producing literature since the very beginning has come up with various literary genre. The Chinese literary work has enjoyed very prestigious position in the literary circle. Propaganda literature was also core part of Chinese literature in 1960’s.

This paper aims to look at the literary genre of Scar literature with a brief introduction of Chinese literature of previous era.

Key Words: Cultural Revolution, Propaganda Literature, Scar Literature.

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Introduction:

Literature is a very old word and it is very difficult to stress its exact origin. However many scholars opine that literature has originated in West and then flourished in Greece, Egypt where the ancient civilization started. The content of the literary works varied from time to time and place to place as per the social condition of that particular place and era. Earlier most of the literary works were on Gods and Goddess. However with the passage of time when peace no more remain a part of the society, then jealousy, fights, heroism, conquer became a part of the literature. Homer’s Iliad recounts the famous ten-year war between the Greeks and the Trojans while his Odyssey tells of the great hero Odysseus’s journey back home after the war to his beloved wife Penelope of Ithaca. ¹ Indian Epic Mahabharata and Ramayana also reflected the then turmoil existing in the society. The human figures featured in Indian epic were later portrayed as different incarnation of Gods. People’s faith and belief also shaped literature. Literature flourished all across the world reflects the realities of the then society.

Chinese Literature:

Similarly Chinese civilization which developed and flourished independently in a unique way in the Yellow River(黄河 Huáng Hé) and Yang Zi (长江 Cháng Jiāng) river valley has produced rich literary work since ancient past. The famous literary and philosophical work of Confucius (孔子 Kǒngzǐ), Mencius (孟子 Mèngzǐ), and Lao Zi (老子 Lǎozǐ) of Spring and Autumn period made major literary achievements. The literary works of these great philosophers shaped Chinese philosophy. The social belief system and religious philosophy dominated the literary works. Confucian Classics formed the base of Chinese philosophy in later ages.

Tang dynasty is considered as the Golden Era in Chinese history. The genre of Tang dynasty poetry helped people to understand the society, life style and values. Tang poetries are considered to be one of the finest literary works in the history of Chinese literature. The poems had autistics reflection of optimism and self-contained. Li Bai (李白 Lǐ Bái), Du Fu (杜甫 Dù Fǔ), Meng Haoran (孟浩然 Mèng Hàorán),

¹ Ancient History Encyclopedia, p-1

Bai Zhuyi (白居易 Bái Jūyì) are the prominent poets of Tang dynasty. In the Mid Tang dynasty politics suffered and discontent among the people arose, the anxieties, the trivialities of daily life, anchorage of spirits and hopes became new theme of the poetries. In late Tang dynasty hopeless, helpless feelings, nostalgia with the splendid era, such themes dominated the Tang poetries.

Puppet shows, play, Chinese opera, theaters, gained momentum in Yuan-Ming dynasty. The Zaju opera (杂剧 Zájù) of Yuan dynasty led a solid foundation of opera culture in China. The Ming era witnessed the development of novels. Among the Four Great Classical Novels of China, three novels: Water Margin (水浒传 Shuǐhǔ zhuàn), Journey to the West (西游记 Xīyóu Jì) and Romance of three Kingdoms (三国演义 Sānguó Yǎnyì) were products of the Ming Dynasty.

The Qing literature was written in very fine and subtle language. Dream of Red Chamber (红楼梦 Hónglóumèng) is one of the finest works of Qing dynasty. Some new ideas of West were introduced to Chinese literature and Western-style writing also became a part of the Qing literature. However novels were the main contribution of the era.

After the establishment of Republic of China in 1911 a new literary genre took shape in Chinese literary circle. Hu Shi (胡适 Hú Shì) through his article “A Preliminary Discussion of Literature Reform” (文学改良刍议 Wénxué gǎiliáng chúyì) gave a call for the vernacular language by discarding the classical language. Chen Duxiu (陈独秀 Chén Dúxiù) supported Hu Shi through his article “On Literary Revolution” (文学革命论 Wénxué Gémìnglùn). In the year 1919, Lu Xun’s (鲁迅 Lǔ Xùn) Mad Man’s Dairy (狂人日记 Kuáng rén Rìjì) was published in New Youth Magazine (新青年 Xīn Qīngnián) and it is the first vernacular literary work. It was the first fruit of the vernacular movement. The proponent also attempted to introduce Western Thought by discarding old Confucianism. These revolutionary writings gave new impetus to the Chinese literature in the Republican era. Wen Yiduo (闻一多 Wén Yīduō) and Xu Zhimo (徐志摩 Xú Zhīmó) also created new forms of literary

writings based on Western models. The social turmoil and chose, Nationalist Communist and word lord's clashes, the existing patriarchal mentality, Japanese aggression were reflected in the write ups of veteran writers like Ba Jin (巴金 Bā Jīn), Lao She (老舍 Lǎo Shě), and Mao Dun (茅盾 Máo Dùn).

Chinese literature thus developed in a sequence without any disruption and flourished across all ages.

Contemporary Chinese Literature:

Literature is regarded as the mirror of the society. Literature is believed to be the reflection of existing realities of all levels of a particular period. Not only it reflects the ground realities, but also the superficial, luxurious, extravagant, sybaritic and opulent lifestyle of the elite class. However, the gap between this theoretical statement and the experience of socialist writers in China becomes conspicuously noticeable at certain period. As a case in point for consideration, the literature that emerges during the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命 Wénhuà Dàgémìng) was criticized later on merely as propaganda literature championing the causes and aspirations of a minority section of the Party leadership. It was not regarded as pure literature in the real sense of the term. This means that type of so called literature did not reflect how the people of the society were leading their lives. The writers were deprived of voicing their own opinions and depicting the realities. It is only after the end of the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 and the beginning of the period of "Reform and Opening up" (改革开放 Gǎigé Kāifàng), especially the Scar Literature (伤痕文学 Shānghén Wénxué) in China is reported to have reflected the tragic experiences that the Chinese society has experienced during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution. Many new aspects and points about the nature of the Chinese society emerge from this socio-cultural phenomenon if we examine them from a historical perspective.

It is reported that the Gang of Four (四人帮 Sìrénbāng) had their faction and supporters who wrote for them to propagate their ultra-leftist viewpoints. They did not allow other writers to freely express their views and write what they thought to be correct. However after the arrest of the Gang of Four, Deng Xiaoping (邓小平 Dèngxiǎopíng) launched the thought liberation campaign based on the principle of "practice must be the sole criterion to judge the truth." Deng Xiaoping's line of thinking was approved in the 3rd plenary session of the 11th central committee of the

Party and this encouraged the intellectuals and writers to write freely about their ideas and opinions on the developments of the Cultural Revolution and its effect on the socio-cultural arena of the society of that time. Following this line of free-thinking (to the extent the Party then allowed), Lu Xinhua (卢新华 Lú Xīnhuá) wrote a short story titled the Scar (伤痕 Shānghén) and got it published in Wen-hui bao (文汇报 Wénhuìbào) of Shanghai. This new genre of literature got huge enthusiastic response and support of the people from different walks of life. Liu Xinwu's (刘心武 Liú Xīnwǔ) 1977 short story "The Class Teacher" (班主任 Bān Zhǔrèn) has also been described as part of the scar literature. It may be noted that the growth of such scar literature corresponded with Beijing Spring, a period of greater openness in Chinese society for which this has been described as the "Second Hundred Flowers Movement" (百花争鸣 Bǎihuā Zhēngmíng) in the short history of new China.

The theme of the Scar Literature mostly focused on portraying "human nature", the tragedy of the socialist society, creating the typical characters and stressed on the need to write about the reality of the society etc. At the same time the scar literature also talked about love and faith, socialist humanitarianism and proper understanding of others; its writers were practically not opposed to socialism, but on the contrary retained faith in the ability of the Party to rectify the past tragedies and embrace love as a key in solving social problems. The trauma of Cultural Revolution and ideology of the Party was twined together by the writers through their literary works in such a way that Cultural Revolution is not considered by the common masses as communist catastrophes. However Cultural Revolution had unconsciously driven people to accept Deng's socialist modernization over Mao's Utopianism. The swift shift from Mao's Utopianism to Deng's socialist modernization and the acceptance of the new ideology by masses also got reflected in some of the write up of post Mao's era.

Following these short stories and the publication of many letters to the editors acclaiming them, host of other short stories were written and published in other newspapers and magazines, which gradually turned out to be literary movement urging and encouraging all young writers to focus on the objective realities of the society as the new theme to make their works more lively and creative.

From the above account, it becomes clear that the literary policy line that was spelled out in the Yan-an forum of Art and Literature (延安座谈会 Yán'ān Zuòtán huì) of August 1942 in the words of "art and literature is to serve the people" had been completely abandoned by the party leadership of early 1960s and instead, a dictatorial

literary policy line had then become predominant in the Chinese art and literary circle. This speaks of the fact that socio-cultural consciousness of the people had not yet then developed to be so strong despite various mass educational and literary campaigns by the Party. The writers' freedom of thought and expression had been crippled. However, to refute the argument of the dissident intellectuals in favor of literary freedom, the Chinese communist Party (CPC) leadership talks about the conflict and contradiction between socialist democracy and the Western type bourgeoisie democracy.

Conclusion:

The Chinese people and society had long been suppressed under the feudal, semi-feudal and semi-colonial rule of both domestic and foreign masters for a long period of time. This sense of being oppressed and suppressed had deeply seeped into the consciousness of the masses of the people. It had become a part of the peoples' culture to endure oppression and repression, despite the strong history of peasants' rebellion in Chinese society since Han dynasty. But, the process of on-going liberalization and globalization of the Chinese society is most likely to create a new momentum in the field of ideology and culture of the 21st century China which would create favourable conditions for the rise of a new era of freedom of thought and expression for the new generation of Chinese writers and intellectuals. Whether this trend is visible or not needs to be probed through a comparative study of the "Scar Literature" of the early phase of the "Reform and Opening Up era" and the literature of the 21st century.

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