

## Role of Class, Caste, Race and Gender in Literature

# 6

Dr. S.T.Tamizh Selvi\*

---

### Abstract

*In this article, I shall discuss on the role of class, caste, gender and racial differences expressed in the English literary works. Maintaining equality is a major issue expected in the world at the present time. The treatment of inequality prevents the peaceful atmosphere of a society. Inequality prevails because of the discrimination among people related to the class, caste, race and gender. I shall bring out some of the literary works that express caste class, racism and bring out the depressed condition of the black people who live among the white. Finally, I describe how women are degraded in the chauvinistic world society.*

*Thus, I am interested in bringing out the above themes with reference to the novels of Virginia Woolf, George Eliot, Vijay Tendulkar, Poems of Robert Browning, and One-Act play of George Bernard Shaw. I would also make reference work with some other literary works. In this modern world, unity and equality should be followed in every walk of life among people of all class, caste, race and gender. Only then we can create a real world of human beings.*

### Introduction

Literature is a reflection of life. As an art, literature is the organization of words to give pleasure; through them it elevates and transforms experience; through them it functions in society as a continuing symbolic criticism of values.<sup>1</sup> Literature consists of all the aspects of life and it is a tool that helps us to bring out the problems of class division and caste discrimination that exists in a society. Race and gender issues also are parts of literature. Many writers express their love on the nation, gender and caste to which they belong. Some of the writers write with social cause. They come forward to reform their society courageously. They criticise the present irrational practices of their uncivilized people. Through the novels, stories, poems and plays, the literary writers reveal how necessary it is to abolish the evil practices such as class differences, caste system, racial and gender discrimination.

---

\*Associate Professor & Head, Department Of English, p.m. Thevar College, Usilampatti-Madurai

**The role of class in literature-** In the poem *My Last Duchess* Browning expressed his class difference. When the Duke wants to marry for a second time, he demands dowry. The poet says it in the following verse as

*The Count your Master's known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretence  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed* <sup>2</sup> (lines 48-51)

It shows that he belongs to high class. The Duke was too harsh to his first wife he wants his wife to respect only him and degrade other people. He seems to be a narrow-minded person and more egoistic in his attitude. The poet expressed the harshness and the egoistic nature of the high class people.

In the novel *Adam Bede*, class difference between middle class and high class has been shown by George Eliot. The novelist brings out that people belong to common middle class undergo punishment and people belong to high class are left free from punishment.

For example, Hetty Sorrel, a middle class woman, loved a man belonged to high class. Both loved each other Arthur Donnithorn knowing that he could not marry her, loved her and later when Hetty wanted him to marry as she would deliver a child, she could not find him. He could not marry her. When the society comes to know the love-affair between Arthur- the rich captain and Hetty the middle class woman, the law punishes Hetty and banishes her from her native place and as Arthur belongs to the high class society, he was left free without even the smallest way of punishment. George Eliot brought out the social unjust laws that was framed partially in her society during the Victorian period. The novelist emphasizes the religion of humanity. <sup>3</sup>

### **The role of caste**

Although equality is encouraged officially in many countries, class difference prevails between the rich and the poor. There are royal people who are respectable, soldiers who protect nation, merchants who produce things and sell. The common man stands in the fourth group. It is divided into various categories especially-educated community and uneducated community. Vijay Tendulkar's 1983 Marathi play *Kamyadan* is the best example for class and caste explosive and disturbing. For this play, Tendulkar was awarded with the 'Saraswati Samman' and he had a shoe hurled at him at a Dalit conference. <sup>4</sup>

He expressed that Dalit youths are ugly and rough in their attitude. Further, the writer showed very badly that they would remain uncultured; even the inter caste marriage would not change them. The violent nature may be with every one irrespective of caste but he seems to have insulted the Dalit men. As he has his liberty to write what he wishes What I want to say is that any literary writing should bring positive changes to the society. The work should bring unity and peace among all sorts of people. It should not divide people of the same country. Vijay Tendulkar seems to have encouraged the upper caste people who oppose the inter caste marriages. In this way he is against the government which allows inter caste marriages in order to abolish caste system and maintain equality in society.

In this short play, Tendulkar tells us the story of an inter-caste marriage between Arun Athawale, a Dalit youth belonging to the Mahar caste, and Jyoti Devlalikar, a Brahmin lady.. But the novelist expressed that the marriage was not a successful one. It may happen. Arun's alcoholism, his ill-mannered and foul-mouthed behaviour quickly escalates into physical violence after marriage. But despite this suffering, the Brahmin wife lived with him. This play consists of the major issues of the society such as class, caste, and gender. In this play, the playwright seems to have expressed that inter caste marriages will not be a solution to bring equality in the society.

I would like to bring out the harsh treatment of the upper caste men and how the boy who belongs to the barber caste was affected emotionally. Mulk Raj Anand was an Indian writer in English, notable for his depiction of the lives of the poorer castes in traditional Indian society <sup>5</sup>

In the story –'The barber's Trade Union', Mulk Raj Anand presents that Chandu a boy and son of a barber belongs to barber caste and he wants to wear a decent dress in the same way as a doctor wears. But on seeing his new dress the noblemen of his village Bijay chand abused him that he was a son of a pig .

Thanu called him a clown when he met Pandit Paramanand, he shouted at him and said that he had no right to wear such a dress. But there were rare people like Anand to encourage him. Chandu said that he too treats his customers' pimples, like a doctor. He has reason to wear the new dress. He justifies that he could wear such new dress. It was only Anand who told Chandu that it was marvelous to see Chandu in the new dress.<sup>6</sup>

The boy was humiliated. He was honest and he did not ask free money or donation from the upper caste men but they finally said that they would not give him job if he wore new dress. They are like animals live in human body. The writer enlightens the society that they come out of barbaric life and live with human soul .

### Role of race

Martin Luther King expressed in his auto- biography and speech that *one hundred years later the Negro still is not free*; He emotionally says that they have to suffer by the chains of discrimination.<sup>7</sup>

They live on a lonely island of poverty. He finds himself an exile in his own land. In *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe shows that racial as well as fanatic attitude of the missionaries and how the native people suffer in their own land. In the story, the main character- Okonkwo could not tolerate inhuman attitude of the Deputy Commissioner. They express their racial feeling and try to control the native people of Nigeria. Except Brown, the majority of the missionaries are shown to be lacking in compassion and understanding. <sup>8</sup>

This novel demonstrated a society that was orderly, stable, peaceful and civilized before the white race came to their country. Early African writers asserted that the white race has destroyed their rich history and culture. They have the responsibility of rewriting the image of Africa that had been presented as derogatory in every aspect. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* could be the best example for this. The white people have given false image of every nation they ruled over.

Mahatma Gandhiji, the father of India, was pushed out of the train to the platform by the white racial Ticket checking officer in South Africa. The reason was that he was a black man . He was not allowed to travel in the first class compartment equal to the white man. This is one of the horrible racial attitudes of the white race. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, even Shakespeare showed the racial difference. I could observe this view as in *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio the English man was shown as a kind and good person whereas Shylock -the Jew is shown as a wicked money-lender.

In the *Isolated incidents*, Bharati Mukherjee who is an Indian born American writer exposes the rigorous immigrant laws and racial discrimination that prevalent in Europe even at this present time. In the story, two youngsters named Persawd and John Mohn come to the Human Rights Department . Persawd was assaulted in the subway by

some unknown assailants. But he could not produce any witness because the assailants fled away after the attack. The police suspected that Persawd might have been started the fight at first in a drunken mood. John Mohan asks him to take up the case as there was no safety for immigrants in Canada. Ann one of the main character takes down the documents to submit before the Royal Commission.<sup>9</sup>

Racism still affects new settlers; although the westerners provide more opportunities to get job for people of other nations, and Americans made Kalpana Chawla a great personality, racial feeling makes the Europeans mad. Racism should be completely abolished in the world as all are human beings and all nations share many things, wisdom, and life style. Friendship and good relationship should be maintained by all the nations of the world.

#### **The Role of Gender in literature**

In literature, gender plays a major role. The women suffer in every walk of life; only literature helps them to reveal their grievances. In India, the Tamil poet Bharatiyar and the Rationalist E.V.R. Periyar wrote and worked for the women's emancipation. Kavimani Desiga vinaygam Pillai composed a narrative poem known as Marumakkal Vazhi Manmееam and brought the social change. The poem describes woman's sufferings. Further the woman who narrates her experience was the fifth wife of a rich man. The poor woman's parents accepted to arrange marriage to her with the senior man. So she became the fifth wife. It was the condition of the women in those days. Rich men were allowed to marry five times. The poor women became the victims of the social custom. When the poem was published, the theme was discussed in the Tamil Nadu Assembly and a new act was passed to punish such men who marries several times. Thus in the course of time the evil system was abolished. It is thus literature has the power to bring social changes.

In the novels of Virginia Woolf, she attacks the gender variation that prevailed in her English society in her period. In *A Room Of One's Own*, she encourages women to fight with the father who refuses to give education to his daughter and she takes pity on the women who always look after the household works and miss the public meetings.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, she exhibits how women lose identity after marriage. Mrs. Dalloway is a woman character in the story. She was an intelligent and talented person in many fields but her knowledge is unused after marriage. She was hidden in the shadow of her husband.

Her real name 'Clarrisa' after marriage disappeared. She became Mrs. Dalloway as her husband was Mr. Dalloway. As a woman, she longs for many things and she missed her place and friends but even after marriage Mr. Dalloway enjoys life without missing anything .

The restrictions prevent woman to make achievements in life. In the one act play, 'Keep On Running', the restricted life of woman is revealed. The playwright Roger Burford- Mason exhibits how Jackie Wells as a woman is tortured by the social expectation. Being a student in a school, she wants to establish herself as a first rate runner but she has to overcome many obstacles that impede her ambition.<sup>10</sup>

When her school Headmaster informs her that she has been chosen to run for the County team in the National finals starting next week in Brighton, she was happy and wanted to practice but her father asks her to come with the family to go to see her aunt Betty in Norfolk to spend a week-end with her. He says that the childless aunt longs to see her. When Jackie refuses he is enraged and he says that settling in a traditional domestic life is far more important than running. Then her boyfriend 'Kevin Holland asks her to come to the dancing hall for disco dance on Friday. But, Jackie does not go because the hall would be smoky and she would be tired at night and may fail to go for running practice.

Further, her classmates too criticize her as she does not spare time for them. Gynnis wonders whether Jackie is capable of any love life as she often goes out for running. Thus, people around her discourage her; it was only Jackie's instructress Miss Bell advises her to go ahead with her career. She promises to calm down Jackie's lover, friends and father. It was only in her dream she could take part in the competition and could win the race. She gained the title of the golden girl of British running'.

The author expresses rightly that women's ambition could be made possible only in dreams not in real life. The convention of the society must be changed at first. Every society believes the idea that women are weaker sex and they need protection. In the name of protection, the society restricts woman in various angles. It shows that a woman who wants to achieve something in life has to come across a number of problems. Women should be empowered and given equal status in the entire world society.

George Bernard Shaw in his one act play 'A Meeting in a forest' shows that woman is totally neglected by her husband in domestic life. The wife Megaera wants her husband to dance with her.

But Androcles dances with a lion insulting his wife. He understands the pain of an animal but could not understand the feeling of his wife who longs to dance with him. She says that he has never danced with her for the past ten years but dances with the animal- lion in front of her. Shaw does not seem to have belief in love relationship between man and woman. He shows that the institution of marriage leads to endless slavery. In *Things Fall Apart* Chebe criticizes the male chauvinism. Women's life in Umuofia is pathetic. Men are allowed to have as many wives and children as they can support. <sup>11</sup>

In the award winning novel of Rama Mehta *Inside the Haveli* women's purdah culture is expressed. Geeta, the central character of the novel, when first enters into Udaipur as a bride of a Haveli son Ajay. Some women came to welcome her at platform. They asked her "Where do you come from that you show your face to the world?"

It is indeed a great thing to learn that P.T. Usha in India in this century was able to shine in running and her father encouraged her. Following her, Sania Mizra and Saina Nehwal shine in sports. In the same way, Sareena Williams in USA, Sharapova in Russia, Mary Gome in India shine today because of literature. The difficulties of women are expressed in writing through the woman characters in various genres novels, short stories poem and drama.

The world society learns that it is not justice to suppress woman and it comes forward to provide opportunities to woman to make achievement. But even in this twenty first century, women suffer in various ways which have been continuously expressed by the woman writers. Selfless Social work made Mother Teresa a great woman and finally she came to be known as a saint. All Women should be proud of the Mother as she received the Noble prize for peace in 1979. <sup>12</sup> Women's community should be proud of the mother whose service to the mankind was accepted as a divine service. Next to service, Education raises women and adorns her with social status. Only literature brings out women's problems to the world. Women should spare time in writing diary and book. It paves a way for them to express their condition and helps them to fight for their rights.

Women should not be discouraged by the incidence such as harassment of Delhi Medical student and U.P. Dalit girls. Women should come forward to create history overcoming all huddles and problems. As Virginia Woolf said, women should have social contact and come out of the mere washing and cleaning works. I wish all women on this

women's day to have unity among all sorts of women to shake the world with their powerful deeds.

### Conclusion

Thus literature describes all issues of a society and it is a tool for expressing our emotion. The function of literature is to nourish our emotional life. An effective literary work speaks to us directly. It touches our inner life and converts the culprits. Literature expresses the experiences of the writers. It also makes the readers imagine the imaginary things.

It teaches how to write and it also carries some sort of messages to the readers, protest against oppression, discuss on rights and unjust dealings, etc. In this way, literature expresses various ideas on class division, caste system, racial discrimination and gender issues. Thus literature has brought reforms in the world. It helps us to understand the society in which we live. Although equality is somewhat achieved in somewhere in the world legally, emotionally it is not followed by the individuals. Peace will be maintained only when equality is followed in the world. Through literature, we have to achieve many more things and so, let us take part in literary works such as short stories, novels, poetry, and drama and analyse continuously. We should become the creative writers of literary works and try to eradicate the evil practices of our society.

### References

1. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/essays/literature.htm>
2. Robert Browning, *My Last Duchess* lines 48-51
3. George Eliot *Adam Bede*.ed Dr.Vikas Sharma( Meerut Journal Anu Books,)2013 p81.
4. <http://www.flipkart.com/search?q=article+on+kanyadann+by+vijay+tendulkar&as=off&as-show=off&otracker=start>
5. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulka\\_Raj\\_Anand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulka_Raj_Anand)
6. Prof. S.Yusuf *Five Short Stories Indian Writing In English Madurai: Vasan Publicaton* p. 12-20
7. Blossoms–English for Enchantment , Chennai: Emerald publishers 2007.
8. Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* ed by P.C. James Daniel Madurai:Manimegala Publishing house, 2009 p. 194.
9. Prof. S.Yusuf *Five Short Stories Indian Writing In English Madurai: Vasan Publicaton* p.57-60



10. Roger Burford- Mason ed. *Vasans* Shamugakani Madurai –Vasans & Iruilappan, 2011 P.69-71.
11. Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* ed by P.C. James Daniel Madurai:Manimegala Publishing house, 2009. 192-193.
- 12.. Board of Editors *Kaleidoscope* Chennai:Emerald Publishers 2012 p24-25.