

Taming the Heliogabalus: Sociological Relevance of Literature in the Contemporary Chaosmos

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Abstract: As writers, critics, researches and sociological analysts, we often wonder whether works of literature have really had an impact upon the mind and conscience of modern and postmodern human beings? The obvious answer is Yes. Even superpower nations and diverse countries across the globe, have produced writers whose landmark works have shaken the conscience of mankind about its future survival. Apocalyptic literature, increasingly written in the aftermath of World War II, has projected possible future wars and nuclear cataclysms as the grim doomsday syndrome. The ethos of “mass society” as reflected in works of literature, unfolds itself as the sociological ambience of consumerist politics, global hegemonistic appropriations, and dehumanization. Present-day man is an Orpheus who consents to his dismemberment, after committing “hubris”: this is what literary writings have increasingly come to portray since the late 20th century and even earlier. Such works “blend word and flesh into the dance of existence.” In context of these preceding observations, the paper makes an attempt to justify the symbolic “symbiosis” between human living and the existence of mankind. Some well-known literary works are cited as the creative, stirring reflection of a Polyphemus knocking upon the “doors” of present-day mankind. Ostensibly, literature and sociological realities get inextricably welded, as warning messages of writers of literature.

Keywords: Mass Society, Chaosmos, Apocalyptic realities.

The ancient Roman Emperor Heliogabalus was known for his demonic eccentricities. It is said that Heliogabalus would invite guests to a feast and would feed them sumptuously. These unwary guests, after being fed graciously on rich food and wine, would be taken like innocent lambs and put inside the belly of a huge iron bull. Fire would be burnt under the belly of the iron bull and in this beastly and inhuman manner, these unsuspecting, innocent guests would get roasted alive. In this paper the word “Heliogabalus” is used as a transferred epithet for our society, which provides all sorts of technological developments and then roasts us alive.

With due apologies to John Keats who said, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty/that’s all ye know, and all ye need to know,” it would be appropriate to say: “Literature is life, life literature, that’s all we know, and all we need to know.” From time immemorial, writers across countries, regions, cultures, and societies have reflected in their works the failings, depravities, eccentricities, and oddities of their respective ages. Literary writings invested with the politics of location in a globalized context, have compelled humans, governments, and institutions to ponder over misgovernance, exploitation, poverty, hunger, disease, corruption, and similar other ills and

afflictions which we witness in the contemporary postmodernist ambience of the 21st century. Literature and life have a symbiotic relationship, and no writer ever wrote or ever writes in isolation from his age. Literary writings become universal monuments of the human spirit and have a reflective, compelling influence upon the minds, intellects and thought processes of readers across cultures, ethnicities, sects, etc. A good number of texts written across the globe have frequently come under the scanner of literary theory, philosophy, anthropology, and psycho-analysis. The study of inter disciplinary texts and allied issues is generating a lot of euphoria, especially the manner in which it constitutes a methodology and technique of making up the world which otherwise presents a chaosmos or a diachronic spectrum with ever increasing eccentricities of “Heliogabalus,” the Mass society. These divergent texts help us make sense of the chaos.

With the advent of Postmodernism the symbiotic relationship of literature and society has undergone a sea-change; it reverses the trends and features of modernism, thereby creating a highly volatile, unstable, and unnerving ethos of mass society. This society, as discussed and argued by sociologists, psychologists, and iconic analyzers of human society, keeps on changing. Consumerism and consumerist politics in combination with such a society constitute a symbolic iron bull which exists even now and continues to “roast alive” contemporary humans across the globe. In the present times, as all of us know, cyber-technology, digital techtonics have revolutionized the thinking, mind-sets, and behavioral parameters of people living in even less under-developed countries. The contemporary chaosmos is basically a *jungle* in which the symbolic poltergeists continue to rattle the existence of 21st Century man. The present-day Heliogabalus is already super-active and baring its ferocious teeth simply to gobble mankind mercilessly.

Presently, we the denizens of the second decade of the 21st century, are living in the age of demonic apocalypse or apocalypse of despair. In the aftermath of the Second World War, writers come to realize that modern man has developed and acquired the potential to destroy his world many times over, e.g., the use of nuclear bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. We, as writers, critics, researchers, and sociological analysts, often ponder over this stark reality, whether works of literature have really had an awakening impact upon the mind and conscience of modern and postmodern humans? The obvious answer is “Yes.” Superpowers and other countries across the globe have produced writers of all genres whose landmark works have shaken the collective conscience of mankind, especially about its future survival. Wasn't it Albert Einstein who once remarked that the Third World War would be fought with bows and arrows? Total annihilation of human civilization in the holocaust of a nuclear war is a foregone conclusion, and umpteen works of fiction, poetry, drama, and, of course, science-fiction, have illustrated in their respective narratives the stark shaking scenario of contemporary man's fate in the eventuality of nuclear global cataclysm. Coupled with this comes the dehumanizing “ethos of Mass Society,” a society which changes overnight and does not render itself to any assured definition. In such a society, ostensibly the one we are living in these days, consumerist politics,

global hegemonic appropriations, and the theft of the self become intrinsic components of our day to day existence. Ihab Hassan in the iconic work *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* says: “Radical questions engage the total quality of our life; they are questions of being. Often they arouse large hopes: to change consciousness, to banish death from our midst. They have a radical innocence” (xvii). It is such “radical questions” which came to haunt and stir the conscience of modern and postmodern readers. Across the globe these readers became increasingly aware of the imminent dangers that hover over their very survival.

In *Cat’s Cradle*, a Bokonon Calypso goes like this:

Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly,
Man got to sit and wonder
why, why, why ?
Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land,
Man got to tell himself:
He understand

These lines amply illustrate the mental, spiritual, and intellectual effete-ness of modern man and his mental bankruptcy. Similarly, in the last two lines of “The Second Coming,” W.B. Yeats writes: “And what rough beast, its hour come around at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” Apocalyptically, it is not the “Second Coming” of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born again to usher in the “Golden rule of the Messiah,” but it is the “Beast,” symbolically unbridled blatant evil under the aegis of Satan, that is going to govern the affairs and the fate of modern man.

Yeats’ anger presents a revelation against the ravages of a scientific and technological society which glorifies itself on its progress. It is no accident that so many ordinary people refer to the present day world as a “madhouse” which exhibits “the qualities of an individual going through nervous breakdown” (Toffler 365).

The myth-making technique of W. H. Auden’s *Shield of Achilles* presents a mix of contemporaneity and antiquity to depict the vast panorama of futility and anarchy which is modern human civilization. Needless to say, it is a similar blend we witness in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Such works continue to provoke our own questions, compel us to retrospect and reflect over our future survival on this already endangered and ecologically impoverished planet.

Coming to fiction, it is in a large number of novels, mostly American, that similar apprehensions have been woven into the role-playing matrix of narratives. All such works, as already pointed out, not only force us to think over our foreseeable future with grim prognosis, but constantly, with a fair modicum of self-reflexivity “blend word and flesh into the dance of existence” (*Orpheus* 5) and explore the “relationship between fiction and the age old conceptions of chaos

and crisis”(Kermode 1) and inextricably weld sociological realities into the very matrix of their respective narratives.

Some well-known literary works cited in the paper, present the creative, stirring reflections of a Polyphemus knocking upon the “doors” of the present day mankind. These works stir our conscience and compel us to reflect grimly over the apocalyptic realities which confront mankind. A few examples will amply illustrate this contention: Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*, *A Man without a Country* and *Hocus Pocus* to name only a few. In *Hocus Pocus*, Eugene Debs Hartke, the protagonist, lives in the fictional present “which is the year 2001 A.D” and being a postmodernist narrator he reflects a “neo-gnostic immediacy of mind” (Hassan, *Modernism* 4). His is a detoxified self, afflicted as it is with issues of innovation and renovation, creation and recreation, or simply invasion. All these terms denote the vocabulary of problematization with which the present day postmodernist human self has to wrestle. Any of us can be a Debs Hartke, and Hartke himself says: “The year is 2001. If all had gone the way a lot of people thought it would, Jesus Christ would have been amongst us again, and the American flag would have been planted on Venus and Mars. No such Luck” (Vonnegut, *Hocus* 1).

The apocalyptic types – empire, decadence and renovation, progress and catastrophe – are fed by history and underline our ways of making sense of the world where we stand, in the midst (Kermode 29). When we read literary works written in modern and postmodern times, such works, more often than not, raise certain fundamental issues related to our own existence as denizens of a scientifically and technologically advanced age. Immortal works of iconic writers like Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Jean Paul Sartre, Alvin Toffler, and many others, including the immortal Bard himself, leave a reader with no option but to introspect, reflect, and reassess his or her existential choices, preferences, habits, behavioral patterns, and what not. Playing their stringless lyres, modern and postmodern writers enchant us “with their twin melodies.” We “dream of bright life or unspeakable sleep” [Hassan, *Dismemberment* 4]. Postmodern humans of the 21st century, as literary works emphasize, are akin to the dismembered Orpheus, who after being killed by the Maenads and after his head is thrown into the river Hebrus, continues to sing on a lyre without strings.

All the above enumerated facts have become socio-cultural-cum-socio-psychological realities with social-networking sites like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, etc, repudiating silence, subverting language, convention, and artistic form. Literary works, across genres, often “ring” startling “bells” to make us acutely conscious about a modern and now postmodern “Heliogabalus” eager to fill our “bellies” with a sumptuous feast” only to destroy us later, like the virus of “Big-brain culture” in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Galapagos* (PAGE NO.). That’s exactly, as contemporary writers express in their thought-provoking works, what postmodern mass-society precisely does with unsuspecting people like us.

R.W. Emerson’s words in “The American Scholar” sound pertinent in context of what American Literature, or other literature teaches us in context of life, living, choices, preferences etc:

We do not meet for games of strength or skill, or the recitation of histories, tragedies and odes, like the ancient Greeks; for parliaments of love and poesy, like the Troubadours; nor for the advancement of science Thus far our holidays has been Simply a friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give letters any more. As such it is precious as the sign of an indestructible instinct. Perhaps the time has already come when it ought to be and will be something else. (467)

With the quicksand unstable ethos of Mass Society, Manju Jaidka rightly points out that “In this rapidly changing world we are constantly called upon to re-consider, revise and reformulate our opinions. Recent history in particular, has taken us all on a roller-coaster ride” (Raina 13).

Late modern and postmodern works of literature compel us to keep pace with the ethos of mass society, a society constantly in a state of flux, changing overnight and bewildering one and all. Fall of the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 gave birth to a host of writings of diverse writers keen to make us aware of the kind of world we are now living in. Jaidka also points out that with “the de-bordering and re-bordering, with the changing cultural and political demarcations, literary boundaries must also change” (Raina 14). The boundaries of human thinking are also rapidly changing. Societies, cultures, affiliations, loyalties, go on assuming new contexts, contours, and configurations. Books on all these realities get published day-in and day out. How can any rational, educated and conscious postmodern human being keep himself aloof from all these realities? Literature and life, existence and erudition, academia and intellectualism are now two sides of the same coin. It also signifies an important formulation which is an urgent need to reconfigure creative boundaries besides the truth that literature and literary texts, with innate power of transforming the world have been and are being used as tools of empowerment to arm readers with the ability to negotiate the sweeping changes in context of economic, cultural, and historical truths. In spite of this known and practically seen counterproductive scourge, humans go on adopting an apocalyptic, rather cataclysmic posture over the myth of Progress, Nationalism and Chauvinistic-cum-demonic “muscle-flexing.” Be it scientists, politicians, statesmen, thinkers, policymakers, foreign policy planners, and advisors, all of them are accepting beliefs and implanting courses of action that can hardly result in anything but global suffering. A host of terror groups and organizations seem to be possessed by evil, with one common agenda: brutal torture and killing of innocent people. There are horrendous rapes and murders, child abuse, brutal killing of innocents, and in the words of Northrop Frye in his essay “Archetypal Criticism,” this world has become “the world of the nightmare and scapegoat ... the hell that man creates on earth.” A large number of literary works written at present have these very satanic threats to the future survival of mankind, as the main message-cum theme. Can we afford to shut our eyes to all these stark realities stalking us as humans?

Finally, it would be pertinent to say that literary works, since the ancient epic-ages of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, *Gilgamesh*, and many more lesser known ones, have enlightened us through the ages and awakened our sixth sense of “the ethics of resilience.”

Presently, our current postmodern times have attained a hyperreal dark shade of inspiration and action, of reflexivity and historicity, which in combination inscribe and subvert “the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth century” (Hutcheon 207) and continue to do so now in the second decade of the 21st century. Such stark realities get often expressed, highlighted, and strongly conveyed in literary writings across all dominant genres.

This essay began with a quote from Keat’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and I would like to end it with a Keatsian phrase, which very befittingly says: “that which is creative, must create itself,” as literature has a compelling influence upon mankind. Not only does it add an “aesthetic touch” to human life, it also refines the sensibilities and serves a serious purpose of “constructedness.”

The world of literary writings is a magical one as it is democratic, spontaneous, and a well-packed extravaganza, having something or some solution for every chaos and crisis. Only an ignoramus, with an Ostrich-like attitude would be oblivious of such compelling realities and undeniable truths.

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