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Sociology and Literature: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore the history, scope and the symbiotic relationship between sociology and literature as they substantially depend on each other. The nature of this relationship is organic and complementary. The function of the sociology is to underscore the connection between the social contexts and the social factors and determinants that drive people to action and literary expression. Literary production is an outcome of a social creative process. In recent years, a new branch of sociology came into existence called the sociology of literature. As it is concerned with the domain of literary study, the sociology of literature investigates the relationship between a work of literature and the social structure where it is produced. It further examines literary works from social, cultural, political and economic perspectives and explores the symbiosis between society and the author. The customs, traditions, values and norms of any society in a certain period of time are clearly reflected in the different genres of literature written during that period.

Key Words: Sociology-Literature-Relationship-Society.

Introduction

The investigation of art relationships, especially between literature and sociology, is not a new area. During the 19th and 20th centuries, coinciding with the development of social sciences, sociology as well as literature have become specific and systematic fields of study. Since the twentieth century, the interest in studying and analyzing literary genres in the light of social processes has steadily been increasing. As a result the sociology of literature as a new branch of sociology came into existence and it has been gaining momentum. It attempts to answer the following questions: is literature the result of a social process or is it a totally personal matter which has no relationship with the society in which the writer lives? What is the nature of the relationship between sociology and literature?

Discussion and Analysis:

1. Sociology and Literature.

1.1. Definition.

The word sociology comes from Greek and Latin which means friendship or community. Abdu Syani states that “sociology can mean the science of society” (29). Generally speaking sociology can be defined as the scientific and systematic study of human society. Shankar Rao calls it “the science of society” (17). It is mainly concerned with the scientific study and investigation of lifestyles and activities of human beings. It meticulously explores the structure, origin, developments, functions and motives of human communities. Alan Swingewood states:

“[s]ociology is essentially the scientific, objective study of man in society, the study of social institutions and of social processes; it seeks to answer the question how society is possible, how it works, why it persists” (11). Swingewood believes that only through exact analysis and minute examination of different social institutions such as society, religion, politics and economics can the overall social structure be constituted. Lucien Goldmann also asseverates: “sociology is a science based on an aggregation of categories forming an intellectual structure, then these categories and this structure are themselves social facts that sociology brings in to relief” (55).

In the opinion of H. K. Rawat, “literally, sociology is the study of companionship, meaning social interaction and its resultant relationship that exists between companions or groups of human beings” (3).

To take a comprehensive look at the different definitions of sociology, its concepts and nature, H. K. Rawat provides a definition survey in his book, *Sociology: Basic Concepts* (2007). They are listed as follows:

1. One of the earliest dictionaries of sociology, edited by H. P. Fairchild (1955), defined sociology as “the study of the relationships between man and his human environment” (3).
2. According to the Penguin Dictionary of Sociology (1994), “sociology is the analysis of the structure of social relationships as constituted by social interaction” (4).
3. H. M. Johnson writes: “[s]ociology is the science that deals with social groups, their internal forms or modes of organizations, the processes that tend to maintain or change these forms of organization and relation between groups” (5).
4. The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology edited by Johnson defined sociology as “the study of social life and behavior, especially in relation to social system, how they work, how they change, the consequences they produce and their complex relation to people’s lives” (4).
5. P. A. Sorokin states: “[s]ociology is a generalizing science of socio-cultural phenomena viewed in their genetic forms and manifold interconnections” (8).

Thus all the previous definitions highlight that sociology is a scientific study of man as a social being at the center of his society. It is also a study of man’s social actions and interactions, social processes and institutions, and the structure and system of society. Human beings are greatly influenced and conditioned by the institutions, structure and system of society and they are assigned roles to play according to the imperatives of the social system. Emile Durkheim deems sociology as “the science of institutions, their genesis and their functioning” (45).

Literature provides an appropriate channel to study such institutions as they are contextualized in it. Literature, on the other hand, is a work of fiction which is the result of social construction and interactions combined with additional natural emotion. In the words of W. H. Hudson,

Literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is thus fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language (10).

The definition of literature has been changing throughout history starting from Plato up to the present time. Most definitions, however, state explicitly or implicitly that literature is a reflection of life and an outcome of the interactions of many factors; social, political, economic and cultural to name a few. Wellek and Warren, in *Theory of Literature*, comes with the following definition:

Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation Literature represents life; and ‘life’ is, in large measure, a social reality, even though natural world and inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation (94).

Hudson contends that “literature grows directly out of life is of course to say that it is in life itself that we have to seek the sources of literature, or, in other words, impulses which have given birth to the various forms of literary expression” (10). Thus there is a strong connection and reciprocal relationship between sociology and literature. The sociology of literature has become a recognized scientific and systematic method for analyzing different genres of literature as they are originated in social contexts.

1.2. Historical Development.

The middle of the eighteenth century marked the beginning of sociology as a new discipline of social science on its own right. Before this time, sociology was subsumed under social philosophy rather than social science. It was August Comte (1798-1857), a French philosopher, who attempted a systematic study to make sociology as the scientific study of society. The word ‘sociology’ was used and introduced for the first time by August Comte in his work *Positive Philosophy* (1839) and it was defined as the science of social phenomena. Therefore sociology is an in-depth analysis and investigation of the relationships, processes, actions and interactions of the social system. Comte was mainly concerned with the examination of the nature of human society and its underlying principles. He was the person who gave sociology its name, shape and laid its foundation as “an identical branch of social science” (qtd. in Swingewood, 40-44).

Similarly, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) added many significant contribution into the march of sociology as an independent and systematic discipline. *Principles of Sociology*(1877), Spencer's influential book, reveals the major fields of sociology and puts a tremendous stress on the sociological study of community, politics, industry, social control and family. In addition to that he laid emphasis on the sociological study of aesthetics and art. The emphasis on interrelations of the different factors and elements of the society is of a paramount importance.

KarlMarx (1818-1883), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Max Weber (1864-1920) also consolidated the foundations and establishment of sociology as a systematic and scientific branch of knowledge. Karl Marx was interested in the economic aspect and class struggle as the catalysis of any social action. He thinks that the economic factor influences the generalcharacter of all other aspects of culture and social structure. EmileDurkheim saw social life as a set of social facts and statedthat these facts are nothing more than collective ways of thinking and feeling aboutsociety. According to Max Weber, the underlying basic unit of society is the individual. Much of his work has been devoted to explain a new method of understanding processes, actions and reactions of social phenomena.

These are the founding fathers of sociology, however, a great deal of modern thinkers and sociologists also contribute significantly to expound the methodology, nature and scope of sociology. In addition to these founders and thinkers, many factors have a tremendous influence on the progress of sociology as an independent and significant branch of human science. These influencing factors are the French Revolution, the IndustrialRevolution and the intellectual ideologies such as socialism, individualism, humanitarianism, positivism, colonialism, and the mushroom growth and developments in modern natural sciences. Notwithstanding, the credit for founding and systematizing sociology as anindependent scientific discipline indisputably goes to August Comte, Herbert Spencer, KarlMarx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber who were the pioneers in their leading role in establishing sociology a scientific discipline of social science.

Put in a historical perspective, one can say that the first one who attempted to study sociology as an approach to analyzing literature in a scientific and systematic way was H. A. Taine. His work entitled *History of English Literature* (1886) constituted a turning point in the history of the sociology of literature. Many critics who significantly contributed to the progressive wheel of the sociology of literature came later such as Karl Marx and Frederic Engels who gave it a new turn. However, the sociology of literature occupied an important place among critical theories only in the late twentieth century at the hands of such prolific social critics and thinkers like Lucien Goldman, Leo Lowenthal, Robert Escarpit, Alan Swingewood, Diana Laurenson and John Hall. To particularize, Rene Wellek, Austin Warren, Swingewood and Diana Laurenson profoundly carried out their studies on the sociology of literature.

1.3. Scope and Nature.

Sociology of literature is a new approach to the study and analysis of literature which attempts to understand societal aspects of a particular group of people. The correlation of sociology and literature is basic and sociology turns out to be a science while literature appears to be a phenomenon of society. Swingewood (1972) states that sociology is a scientific and objective study of man in society, the study of institutions and social processes. Sociology tries to answer questions about society, how it is possible that this work is done, how and why the community survived. From the point of view of sociology, literature does not exist in vacuum or acts as autonomous.

Thus sociology, as the scientific and systematic study of human community, gains its material from a variety of sources. Literature is one of the primary sources on which sociology depends. Like sociology, literature examines human experiences and social processes in their chameleon-like manifestations. It is a reflection of the society in which it is created. It holds a mirror to the life of individuals as well as social groups so as to record human actions, interactions and multi-layered relations. Sociology attempts to study the literary facts and their impact on socialrelations. So thesociologists such as M. C. Albrecht, Rene Wellek, and others agree with the argument that literature is an institution, and sociology is the study of this institution.

Sociology, today, has established itself as a distinctive discipline on its own right. Sociology of literature, in contrast to other social sciences, focusses on the study of literature for the sake of understanding all aspects of human life and all social forces that impact communities as well as individuals living in them. So, literature is regarded as the expression or representation of human lifethrough the medium of social creation or institution called language.

The raw material of literature is individuals and society. These two elements constitute the outer world which is transformed in the mind of the writer to become a reality and a source of wisdom and pleasure. Thus the changes in both content and form that accompanied the march of literature came into existence as a result of changes in the ideas, concepts, values, preferences and priorities of society. The sociology of literature tries to investigate and study the symbiotic correlation of society and literature. Every society has its own system of norms, behaviors, values, beliefs and traditions which are reflected in its respective literature. There is a reciprocal influence and relationship between this system and literature and this system provides writers with a variegated sort of images, ideas, themes, symbols and forms of literature. Consequently different kinds of literatures can be found across the world.

Geography, economy, politics, science and other factors of a given society greatly and drastically change the character and shape of its literature. The geographical environment determines the ideas, styles and themes of literature. The literature of the desert dwellers will be radically different from the literature of the mountain dwellers. Scientific inventions and developments have caused a paradigm shift in in the structure of societies and subsequently in the structure, content and form of literature. English twentieth century literature comprises of themes, styles and images which are substantially different from those of the Renaissance literature. Subsequently if literature is interpreted and analyzed away from the society in which it has been created, due justice will not be given to such an analysis which might turn out to be maimed and unreliable. Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* emphasizes the fact that literature cannot be adequately understood without its cultural and social context.

Hence, literature is the outcome of subjective and objective forces which mutually interact within society. Classical critics and philosophers think that life is the true impulse or catalysis behind the creation of a literary work. W. H. Hudson lists the impulses behind the production of a work of literature as follows: "The great impulses behind literature may be grouped under four heads - 1) our desire for self-expression; 2) our interest in the people and their doings; 3) our interest in the world of reality; and 4) our love of form as form" (11). H. A. Taine also argues that "a work of art is determined by an aggregate which is the general state of mind and surrounding circumstances" (30).

In *The Sociology of Literature* (1979), John Hall reiterates what Matthew Arnold has stressed. Hall uses a special term for the first time, the social referent, which means context of. The social referent put a further emphasis on literature as being a reflector of social reality. Hall believes that a minute and detailed analysis and investigation of a literary text is necessary for arriving at social facts and generalizations, however, this analysis should be carried out in the context of the entire social structure so as to find out the yoked relationship between society and literature. According to him, the currency and popularity of a literary work largely depends on the close link between text and context. Hall emphasizes the fact that a work of literature is formed and molded out of the prevailing and dominant social and cultural values of the age.

It goes without saying that literature is the outcome of specific social actions recorded in a highly inspiring moment. These social actions and reactions are the main interest and the area of the study for the sociology of literature. However, the job of the sociology of literature becomes challenging as the New Criticism ignores all the factors that the sociology of literature depends on in its analysis. The new critics call for paying attention only to the text and its internal organic structure without taking into account its context and referent. Yet, the sociology of literature has successfully carved out its way.

Conclusion

Sociology and literature can arguably be two faces of the same coin. In other words, literary genres nourish on the social milieu, processes, and events. It is impossible to divorce literature from the social contexts where literary creation takes place. The sociology of literature becomes an established and systematic field of study whose main function is to show the symbiosis, interconnectivity, interaction and delicate intricacies between literature and all the sociological activities occurring in society. The theory of sociology of literature can be contrasted with the critical theory of the school of New Criticism where the text long lives and the author and social milieu are dead. Investigating and analyzing literary genres from a sociological perspective has been gaining recognition and momentum as sociologists as well as anthropologists try to establish their arguments and theories on folklore, literature and excavations among other things.

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