

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication

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Lecture - 02

Literature and its Relevance

Hello, welcome back to the 2nd lecture. In the first lecture of our course, Elements of Literature and Creative Communication, we discussed a couple of interesting concepts.

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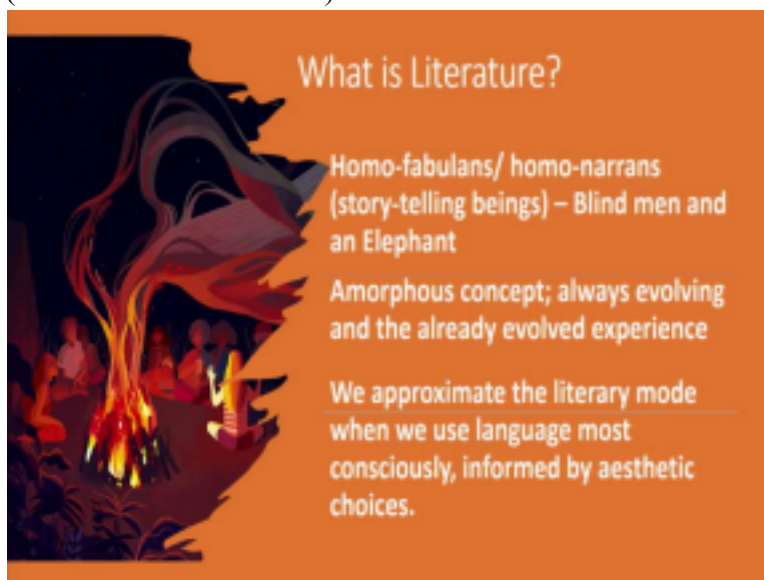


- Focus on practical-orientation of Literature
- Short Story of 17 Cows and 3 Brothers
- (Activity) A date with imagination – alchemy of unlimited sentences created with a limited set of words.
- Langston Hughes - Dreams
- Literature -- A Significant Expression of Humanity
- *Vagartha* - How Literature is a Fruition of Two Different Dimensions – Sound and Sense.

So, before we move on to today's lecture, let us have a quick recap of what we did. We began with an interesting proposition that emphasis would be more on practical aspects in this course. That is the reason why we began not with theories of literature or definitions of literature but with a practical taste of literature. So, as part of that, we began with the story of 17 cows and three brothers and how the three brothers could not solve the so-called puzzle that their father left behind. And after that, we had an interesting activity. If you remember, I took you on a date with imagination and most of you did some brilliant stuff. And here we discovered the beauty of Language and Literature because Language may be limited in terms of the number of words it has.

Still, literature in terms of language applications is very wide and diverse. So, in the activity, we also learned how we can create unlimited sentence structures with a limited set of words that are quite aesthetic, elegant, and beautiful in their own merit. After that, we discussed a short poem by Langston Hughes called 'Dreams'. I also told you that the set of words I gave was from Dreams, and we compared your compositions with Langston Hughes's poem and how there were interesting similarities, variations, and things like that. So, through that activity, we can even say that you have become peers of Langston Hughes, a very well-known African American writer. How? Because by using the same set of words that he used you competed with him, and you shared the same space that he shared, and therefore, you became his contemporaries- not in terms of physicality or not in terms of time, but you became contemporaries in a different sense. After this, we discussed how literature is a significant expression of humanity. And after that, we briefly discussed how Kalidasa, one of our ancient and significant poets, defines literature. He defines literature as a combination of a fusion and the fruition of sound and sense, Vag and Artha and how literature or the written word or even the oral word becomes a fusion of sound and sense Vagartha. So, in this class, we are going to discuss the relevance of literature, and also, we are going to continue understanding literature, the activity that we began in the previous class let us continue that in this class as well.

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So, our central concern for today's class is what is literature. I consciously do not wish to or deliberately I do not wish to take you through the etymological roots of the word literature, how it has a Latinate root and then it came to the French and then in English that is something that you can easily Google.

So, the emphasis on this class as we have been discussing time and again is to give you a taste of literature. That is the reason why I do not begin with an external meaning of literature. So, the first thing before we even ask this question "what is literature" we need to understand our own nature. Human beings are called *homo sapiens*. You have heard of this phrase. In other words - wise beings, wise humans; *homo sapiens* means wise human beings. So, based on this there are a couple of neurological expressions to describe human beings as such and these are some instances of such expressions - *homo fabulans*. Based on *homo sapiens* these are neurological modifications *homo fabulans* or *homo narrans*. It simply means that like *homo sapiens* is a wise beings, *homo fabulan* or *homo narran* means storytelling beings. This expression shows how human beings since time immemorial have resorted to narrating stories and how narrating stories become a characteristic feature of *homo sapiens*. That is the reason why we can almost call human beings *homo fabulans* or *homo narrans*. Keeping up with the spirit of the course we began, if you remember, with a short story. Even here we are going, to begin with, another very interesting short story. We can call the short story Blind Men or a group of Blind Men and an Elephant. This is a very important short story. This short story plays a major role in the Indian philosophical traditions as well. And if you have read Ramakrishna Paramahansa's Vachanaveda, you keep reading this short story and even in the Indian Upanishadic traditions, this short story plays a very important role. You will have heard the story in some form or the other and the story is also linked to Buddhist traditions. That is why I said that in the diverse Indian philosophical traditions this story plays quite a significant role. There were a group of blind men who did not know what an elephant was. So, when an elephant was placed before them or when they were taken to a place where an elephant was, each of them begins touching a particular part of the elephant and starts describing the elephant from that particular point of sensation. Say for instance one blind man who touches the trunk describes the elephant as a thick snake. Another guy who touches the ears says it looks like a fan and the other guy who is holding the leg of an elephant says no, I would disagree with you an elephant is like a pillar, it is a solid pillar. And the guy who is holding the trunk who is just feeling the body he says no, I do not agree with any of you elephant is more like a wall, it is a thick wall. And the guy who is sensing the tail of the elephant says no, it is a very slick rope something like that. I say this because the concept of literature is something similar. The kind of definitions that we are going to discuss today are from certain vantage points. Please remember that no definition or understanding of literature would be able to give you a comprehensive idea of literature in its singularity. To understand literature in its complexity and diversity, you need to place it together with all our understandings of

literature. And why is it that the story plays an important role in the Indian philosophical traditions? Because this story is used as a kind of an example. It is a fable to describe the concept of God, how our understanding of God, our discourses on God or religion, how they are just fragmentary in nature and unless we club all these fragmentary understandings, we will not be able to get a complete or if not complete at least a comprehensive picture of God. So, I invoke the story because the kind of definitions, the kind of insights we are going to get no insight is going to exhaust the notion of literature. Therefore, we need to club them and together we need to understand what the concept of literature is. So, probably we might need an entire course or some writers even say that they need an entire life to understand the concept of literature.

So, let us understand this question what is literature in that spirit, all right? As it is quite evident by now, the concept of literature is quite amorphous. It is not a concrete definition. Whatever definitions we are going to give are quite amorphous, fluid definitions. So, like the concept of the world or the concept of the universe, our understanding of literature is constantly evolving and also already evolved. We say that the universe is still evolving and already evolved to a certain extent, literature too is still evolving and already evolved to a certain extent. That is why I call it a fluid construct or an amorphous understanding. Now, what do we call literature or when do we produce literature? It is said that when we use language most consciously, informed by aesthetic choices, then we arrogate upon ourselves a kind of a literary mode. If you remember the title of the course says Elements of Literature and Creative Communication. So, already many of you will have made some kind of clever connections between the two. Literature is also communication and communication are also literary in its broadest sense, but only when we mix the spirits of both do, we understand the objective of the course. The objective of the course called elements of literature and creative communication.

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Literature is...

- Literature is a verbal representation of human life in all its entirety and complexity. It is almost as old as language itself.
- Knowledge-production: the perceptual route and the conceptual route
- Turns the Abstract into the Concrete – the story of the Buddha
- Form and Content: 'how something is said' is equally important, if not more, than 'what is being said'
- 'A good book is an event in life' - Stendhal

The slide features a background image of a man in a white shirt standing in front of a large, dense bookshelf. The title 'Literature is...' is displayed in a dark box at the top left, and the bullet points are listed in a light box on the left side.

And continuing this discussion we can say that literature is a verbal representation. When we say verbal representation, it is a representation using words. Literature is a representation using words. What do we represent here? After all, or of course, we represent human life. We have already understood that right. Literature is a significant expression of humanity. We discussed that in the previous slide. Here we continue that concept and say that it is a verbal representation of human life in its complexity. Therefore, this is as old as language itself because ever since human beings began practising using language in a conscious way the concept of literature began from there itself. Because as we discussed in the previous class literature is also a kind of an application of language may be a specialized application nevertheless it is an application of language. That is the reason why we can call literature almost as old as language itself. Well, these days we discuss knowledge production, knowledge dissemination in serious ways, and things like that. There are two ways through which we can create knowledge or we can say there are two routes there are two paths to creating knowledge. One is the perceptual path or the perceptual route and the other is the conceptual route. Herein lies the distinction between disciplines such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, and fine arts and subjects in humanities. Remember, most of the disciplines in humanities are called intuitive sciences. Humanities is called a discourse in intuitive sciences. Please look at the expression 'intuitive sciences', we will discuss more of it. And before I proceed, please remember deliberately in this course I leave certain concepts partially discussed. Because my intention is not to exhaust the notion of the concepts that we use in the class, on the other hand, it is to just pique your interest in the concept. So, you can do a little more research on your own and search and then arrive at your understanding of these concepts. So, what is this conceptual route and the perceptual route? See the conceptual route is you imagine certain concepts. You imagine, you understand, it is a

cognitive intersection; it is a cognitive intersection to knowledge production. You imagine. An idea is something that you imagine, you execute, you think it twice and then that leads you to understand something, and that is a conceptual route to knowledge-making and knowledge production.

The other is the perceptual route. The perceptual route involves your sensory organs. I see - I use my sensory organs. I see and learn something. I hear and learn something. I touch, I taste things like that; that is the perceptual route. And here in the perceptual route emphasis is more on experience as such it is an experiential understanding as opposed to conceptual understanding. Literature belongs to this category of perceptual route that is it gives you an experience. Like it is always said - the taste of the pudding is in eating it because if you have not had a taste of the pudding, you would not know what a pudding is or if you are from South India let us say *obbattu*; there is a delicious thing called *obbattu*. So, if you have not eaten it, no description would do justice to the delicacy. So, literature is experiential, unless you experience it, you would not know what it is. That is the reason I said that literature creates knowledge differently. And how does it do that, how does it do that? If the conceptual route resorts to abstract things, the perceptual route turns it into a concrete object. To make these complex words sound very simple, now it is a simple thing. Now, when I say freedom, let us say, for instance, there is a guy or a girl who wants to understand the concept of freedom no amount of explanation would explain or I mean would be sufficient to make the child understand freedom. On the other hand, what you can do? You can show the child a caged bird, and you release the bird from its cage and the bird flies or show it through the picture or make the child read it in a short story and things like that. That is when the child understands it right. So, more than the concept of freedom, the image of the bird freeing itself from the shackles from the cages give you an idea of freedom, right.

So, this is what literature does. It turns the abstract concept into concrete. How does it do that? By appealing to your senses by making it a part of your experience everyday experience. I can extend that analogy and give you one more story. Please remember you will be in for treats. In case stories are what you like, you are in for treats because in this course we will narrate stories after stories after stories, maybe some interesting poems and lines like that. It is a kind of a question that I almost ask my students in one of my introductory classes, when we say the Buddha, what comes to your mind. Most of them almost without any pause say the enlightened one. The Buddha means the enlightened one. I ask them, what is enlightenment? Well, they start scratching their head; well enlightenment. On the other hand, rather than leaving the Buddha as simply an

enlightened one because if you simply use that phrase enlightened one, we may not be able to understand what that state of enlightenment is. And unless we understand that state of enlightenment at least partially, it does not serve any purpose. I mean that epithet enlightenment does not serve any purpose right. I give them a story. Now, imagine a person standing on top of a seven-storeyed building. So, there is a mansion huge mansion with seven storeys. So, what happens? The person standing on the seven-storeyed building can easily watch who is coming in and who is going out. Supposing somebody whom he does not like is trying to enter the house, he can immediately instruct his servant say the master is not within please send that person away because that guest who wants to come in is not a welcomed guest. On the other hand, when he is standing on top of the seven floors if he sees a person approaching and he wants to meet that person because he is a welcomed guest then he instructs the person below please open the door, I want to meet him, something like this. That is the advantage. The person standing on the seventh floor of the seven storeyed building - that is what he can see, that is the advantage. So, Buddha is also somebody like a person standing on the seventh floor. Well, you might ask how is it, how are you going to connect the Buddha with the person standing on the seventh floor. Now, let us replace the seven-storeyed building with the seven layers of consciousness or multiple layers of consciousness then Buddha is a person who is standing on top of that. Then what happens? Supposing anger is trying to knock in and enter you because Buddha is a person standing on the seventh of the seven layers there could be any number of layers of consciousness we do not know, he can instruct the person. Let us say here the intellect or Buddhi say no. Anger is not a welcome guest. Therefore, the intellect shuts the door because the master above has instructed him not to open the door. Therefore, anger is not welcome. So, is hatred, supposing hatred is trying to knock on, I mean knock on your doors and wants to come in you can similarly close the door. You need not even let hatred enter you. It can make any attempts, but you do not need to yield to those attempts. On the other hand, imagine love is knocking on your door. Love is a welcome guest, is not it? Don't you want to welcome love? Fine. You ask the intellect to open the door, let that emotion come in, let that feeling come in. Compassion knocks on the door. Compassion, of course, is a welcome guest. You let him in, something like that. When I explain using this story almost always everybody understands what the state of enlightenment is. If we can understand the story then we would be able to practice it in our own lives. If not to a complete extent at least we can begin our journey. We can keep the first step ahead right, that is the first step. If you understand the story and have experienced the spirit behind it, you have already taken the first step towards becoming the Buddha. Of course, it is quite an arduous

journey, but you have started with a bang because you have understood what the journey is all about you have kept your first step.

Literature is also a form of communication. We have already discussed that. It is capable of being literary in the hands of a competent communicator - whatever he or she speaks becomes literary and that is when it can inspire people. Remember the words of Gandhi or remember the words of Churchill. Communication is also how we speak what we speak. Similarly, in literature, it is not about content, but what is the structure in which you have placed this content. So, we use terms called form and content, or structure and content, in literary jargon. So, how you say something is equally important. If not more than what is being said. So, both form and content together constitute literature and its elements. So, depending on that structure literature can be classified into various other categories that we will discuss in subsequent classes. For time being what we can know is that literature is not just content, it is also formed. So, let us continue this journey and understand what literature is. This is an extraordinary quote by a renowned 19th-century French writer called Stendhal - "A good book is an event in my life." When he says a 'good book' - he means reading a good book or reading a literary piece of literature. What a remarkable statement. So, now compare and introspect how reading a good book is an event in life. I want to leave this discussion incomplete so that you can think and discuss and then come up with your understanding.

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Literature: A consciousness-raising enterprise!

- Song of life! Language of dreams?! (Mahashweta Devi)
- Consciousness Raising Activity: "If the literature we are reading does not wake us, why then do we read it? A literary work must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us." – Kafka
- Literature helps me live a thousand lives within a single

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Continuing the discussion of our understanding of literature we can say that we can describe literature in many ways. Mahashweta Devi - one of our gifted Bengali writers. We do not need to call our writers Bengali writer, Kannada writer, Hindi writer,

Malayalam writer - they are Indian writers, but of course, they write in a particular language; nevertheless, they are Indian writers. So, Mahashweta Devi is also a Jnanpith Awardee. She describes literature as a celebration of life as a song of life because if life were to have an expression, then it would express using literature that is why it is a celebration of life or a song of life. She also calls it a language of dreams. Let us remember fables, short stories, novels, poems they are uttered dreams. When we dream, they are not uttered, but here you can call them a manifestation of our dreams or utterances of our dreams. They have all uttered dreams: a poem, a fable, a story, a novel, a play. And therefore, Mahashweta Devi goes on to call that to dream is to be a fundamental right. She gives a clarion call in one of the literary festivals. She says that to dream should be our fundamental right. She accords dreaming the status of a fundamental right. What a lovely insight, right. And I also use another important term and this term is an important concept in feminism especially. Still, in most of the other activist theories, too consciousness-raising activity is an important concept. Still, probably for the first time, the second wave of feminists begin using consciousness-raising activity as an important measure. What is a consciousness-raising activity? Well, for them, when you make a person narrate his or her experiences of life - a group of people listens to it. It creates awareness. It is an awareness-raising activity. Therefore, feminists believe that through these kinds of group sessions, by making each other narrate to each other the experiences of their life or the experiences of their oppression, you create a kind of cathartic effect and thereby raise awareness among people. Literature precisely does that job. That is the reason why I call literature a consciousness-raising enterprise. Remember what Franz Kafka, a remarkable novelist if you have time, please read a brilliant novelist, he says that if the literature we are reading does not wake us, then why do we read it because the purpose of literature is to awaken us. A literary work must be an ice axe to break the sea frozen inside us. Literature acts as something that breaks the ice within. The ice here is again metaphoric. Ice prevents flow; you need a melting of the ice for the free flow of life. So, literature must create that experience in us. So, literature, in that sense, is also a consciousness-raising activity. And before I end this class, I give a very interesting line to my students, and this is something that all of us can think over right.

So, this is we can begin our next class with an interesting discussion on this. Just consider this statement: literature helps me live a thousand lives within a single life. Literature helps me live a thousand lives within a single life. Pause for a while and see.

What the statement is trying to say. Debate with yourself - is it possible to live multiple lives within a single life? Human Beings are mortals. When we say mortals, mortality means we have certain limitations; but is it possible to be immortal, can literature make me immortal, can it make me live multiple lives, a million lives, or a thousand lives or a hundred lives within a single life? So, think about this and in the next class, we can continue our discussion of literature. So, before we go, here is an interesting thing for us to think deeply about. "Literature helps me live a thousand lives within a single life."

Thank you, see you in the next class.