

# Imperative Need for Human Praxis and Moral Configuration through Literature?

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## Abstract

This article throws light on the importance of human praxis and moral configuration through literature by paving the way for projecting human societal, cultural and moral values cherished and nourished by writers who have evinced in projecting such values through their immortal creations in the form of various genres like poetry, prose, drama and novel which have fertilized the so-called disturbed and chaotic minds of human beings. Though there are lolling with difference in the creativity, the ultimate reason is guiding the society with permanent values. Due to the disposition of technological growth, human race is found to be in a state of unrest, since the condition of human civilization, the externals dominate over the internal aspects of life. So, the human race tries to place and bring the real civilization on the basis of humanism, charity, sympathy, love and compassion which all are to be practiced in all walks of life in order to go for a better understanding of human values for leading a meaningful and purposeful life, always in all ways possible, that happens only through the study of literature.

**Keywords:** Human Values, Human Praxis, Moral Thoughts, Spiritualism, Materialism, Development of Technology. Literature

What is generally understood and accepted is that the European civilization with all its prosperity and achievement is in a state of tragic distress. The predicament of the European civilization is very much identical with the predicament of human civilization which is found at its crossroads. A kind of soulless materialism is sweeping the entire globe. Human race is found to be in a state of unrest and tension. The reason for this condition comes from tremendous preoccupation with materialistic dimensions of life. There is every possibility for the race to become extinct on account of a future nuclear holocaust. Technology and science combined with materialism have posed a great threat. Many writers kept on writing so as to “stimulate a greater awareness of the spiritual culture of the orient and to awaken serious reflection about the true nature of humanity on the part of members of a civilization that has become entirely too technological and materialistic” says Karan Singh (“Preface” P. VII).

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Truly speaking, there is a fundamental disposition between technological growth and spiritual development. It is the feeling of people filled with distant vision that technological growth does not keep pace with the spiritual pursuit. Human race is found paying much attention to the external conditions of life without bothering about its inner peace. The modern man has at its disposal all comforts, advantages and facilities which the ancient man did not possess at all some two thousand years before. But the greatest irony is that the modern man with all his comforts is in a state of tremendous mental discomfort. One thing is clearly known by experience that physical comforts do not ensure psychic and spiritual comfort. The modern civilization very much overbusying itself with the external conditions of life through science and technology is travelling in a blind alley. There is no total awareness about the fundamental problem of man which arises from a spiritual angle.

Whatever be the nature of a problem or crisis, whether it is political or social or whether it is economic or cultural, substantially it is a spiritual crisis due to loss of moral and human values in life and literature. With the progress of mankind, there has been a growing tendency to distance science and literature by the die-hards of the respective branches. One finds people making claims that science would not have been there if there had been no literary activity. It is so because, generally, literature is supposed to be about the dream of man his aspirations to soar higher and higher, his desire to catch up with the stars and the moon. Out of the dreams are produced deeds of man which are always able to meet a mere fraction of those dreams. Further, this leads people to associate science with reason and literature with imagination.

Claude Bernard said, “Art or literature is I and science is we”. A literary work has a very prominent personal mark about it. “The mind which creates and the man who suffers”, to lift a phrase from T. S. Eliot, both have a bearing upon the product of literature. Roughly speaking, literature and science have been defined as dealing with the inner and outer worlds of mankind respectively. Of Course, one can cite numerous instances of overlapping, but one does get the idea that both science and literature in a broad manner, are the two sides of the same coin – ‘the human faculty’.

In fact, a scientist, in the long run, goes into oblivion because it is not always necessary to know about the man in order to understand his creation. But the same thing cannot be said about a poet or a novelist or a playwright. Sometimes it is impossible to understand a piece of work of literature without knowing about the background against which that poem or novel came into being. In other words, one can say that scientific creativity is intensely subjective. In order to understand Shakespeare, for example, it is almost essential to refer to ideas of Aristotle on the tragedy and read the tragic works of Sophocles and other writers. It is so because a piece of

literature is open to numerous interpretations, as it is subjective in nature. Though there are some differences in the scientific and literary creativity, yet the notion that only reason is the guiding force of science and imagination that of literature does not hold much water. It goes without saying that dreams have to be translated into deeds and deeds must be concretised. For this we must have both faculties. Reason without imagination and vice-versa cannot provide anything intellectually satisfying and of permanent value.

There is no denying the fact that scientific discoveries and inventions have made our life – our material life – quite comfortable. But material life is just one aspect of a human life. In fact, an overdose of materialism may make human life almost animalistic and human personality shallow. In *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot deplors the same devastating impact of materialism. To counterbalance it, to make human personality and human life wholesome, there has to be an equal dose of things which enrich the mental and the intellectual faculty of man from a humanistic and moralistic perspective. Though the very mass and intricacy of knowledge necessitates specialization, yet the search of all scientists and humanists alike is for truth. That search can be best described in the following lines with which William Blake begins his *Auguries of Innocence*:

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a wildflower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour”.

The capacity to reflect on life seriously is basically along the line of spiritual enquiry. In the present conditions of human civilization, the externals dominate over the internal aspects of life. Unless the technological order of reality is reversed, there is, no doubt, no hope for the human future. Man is in a mess not because he has done it knowingly or deliberately but because he suffers from want of proper directions. The greatest tragedy in the human civilization comes from a certain amount of spiritual inadequacy. Truly speaking, human tragedy issues from man’s lack of directions and values – societal, human and moral. So long as science provides leadership for life, all types of human distress, both morally and spiritually, will continue to multiply. The only answer lies in the spiritual and moral renewal of man. Science has done a very wonderful work in reorganizing the external world. But man has to do a great deal of work in reorganising his inner world for which study and understanding of religion and literature become out and out imperative. Religion and literature are two eyes of man’s ‘inner peace and calm’. “Religion”, as Minicher K. Spencer puts, “it is the most Great Peace, the healing of the individuals and the nations as well. It is the saintliness of the saints, the wisdom of the wise and the strength of the strong. It moves the worlds, all nations and all races to one....it is the lively calm that is keenly active unruffled in the ebb and flow of life” (P 1). He further adds:

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“True spirituality is the way of life and view of life as well. It makes us feel the pulse of the world and expresses the heart-beat of every life on earth. It sheds light that reads and reveals the true literature of life and living, the library of the universe in our mind. It is the freedom of spontaneity and the courage of truth, brilliancy of brain and illumination of soul. Spiritual awakening is a down of self-light, a divine awareness into the meaning and mystery of life here and now” (P XIII).

Truly speaking, man needs not mere learning but wisdom, not mere societies but unity, not mere service but love and compassion, not mere drugs or medicine but health, not mere law but life, not mere nationalism but humanity at large. This synthetic view of life will pave the way for the nation and international realization of the Reality of all realities, the Religion at the back of all religions. It will lead to the ideal of oneness of human race. Man is an expression of God and God is the reality of man. When man thinks of his body, he is a servant and God is the master. When man looks at his soul, he is a part and God is the one stupendous whole. But when man realizes his true nature, he is divine and one with God. The highest spiritual ideal should emphasise quality rather than quantity, the individual rather than the mass. The individual is the key to life’s problems. The happiness of one and all, the peace of the world, must be first made in the individual, in everyone, based on the beatitude of constructive living and life of the Eternal Truth.

In fact, our daily life is our temple and our religion in the midst of richness of variety and manifoldness of diversity. Religion is written in the life of every individual and one has to study it there “Religion cannot be taught by words, however subtle, but can be caught by intuitive experience” (Spencer XII). Being an expression of God, man is more philosophical and spiritual than social or political. He has in the main to satisfy the demands of the divine plan on the stage of life. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa used to say that God in chains in man and man from chains is God. Emerson, the great philosopher-poet said that God is an infinite circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose centre is everywhere, whereas man is the same infinite circle whose circumference is nowhere but whose centre is located in a particular body. Shifting the centre from the particular and identifying it with that of the universal is the crux of religious thought and spiritual spontaneity.

All the major problems facing modern civilization the threat of nuclear war, exhaustion of Earth’s natural resources, environmental pollution, moral degeneration, and so on – contain elements jeopardizing the continued existence of humanity. Although it is true that, at present, the industrialized nations are most seriously affected by these concerns, if they pursue material prosperity as their forerunners have done, the developing nations too will sooner or later have to confront at least some of the same problems. In other words, these problems affect all humanity. Since these problems are man-made and therefore different from natural disasters, their solutions

necessitate fundamental alterations in our way of living. And this in turn demands “a profound spiritual revolution that will change our interpretation of ourselves and our surroundings. This is where oriental thought, which stresses the spiritual instead of the material aspects of human experience, becomes increasingly significant” (Singh 99).

T.S. Eliot is taken into consideration for the purpose of analyzing the conditions of the human civilization. Human civilization is in peril. The reason is that it has turned away from valuable things like religion and philosophy. Eliot’s perception of the human civilization is represented in many poems. His primary preoccupation in all poems is to show that the modern civilization has neglected the value of myths. Eliot, to speak the truth, was more of an anthropologist, when he came to the poem “The Waste Land”. He knew that all myths embody an imaginative insight into reality. The modern civilization is in touch with life through fact and reason alone can never provide a foundation for the growth of a civilization. According to Eliot, the modern world is in the grip of materialism, rationalism and sensationalism. It is in search of very superficial things which will never nourish the well – springs of life. There is total loss of perspective in modern man. He is not mature enough to look backward and forward for a better review of things. His incapacity to see things clearly is his basic tragedy. His poem “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a depiction of the representative predicament of the European civilization.

Man has an inadequate understanding of life. Neither is he in a position to master himself, nor is he in a position to understand life. His position is precarious. Such men like Prufrock are found in plenty in the European civilization. Therefore, it is a real call for alarm and warning to everyone that civilization is at crossroads. Men no longer live. They just exist mechanically and materially. A man with shallow sensibility is Prufrock. He lives from the mental level with all its limitations. There is no proof in the poem that he has seen the significant side of life. The evidence is there in a line in the poem which states that the life that Prufrock holds in his hands is something trivial. His act of twisting the lilac is comparable metaphorically to diabolical twisting of life. It is a twisted mind which sees life in a twisted form and so he is not a correct model to be followed. Most men live like Prufrock without any conviction. According to Eliot, he who sees life sees it significantly, To a man like Prufrock all higher dimensions of life remain closed and strange to him. His being insensitive to anything is a sure sign of death. He is dead symbolically because he is not alive to the real meaning of life. Since faithlessness sweeps the entire universe, the urgent need is for human praxis and spiritual orientation.

Utility is considered the greatest criterion for modern living. If a thing has no utility or usefulness, it has no reason for existence. In this connection, it is worthwhile to make a reference to the one-eyed Phoenician sailor in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. He is on the far seas exposed to the odds of the winds and waves. Eliot is placing a very crucial question whether the sailor can move

through the seas successfully. The journey on the sea is hampered by storm. The kind of overwhelming materialism which the sailor has and for which he has become one-eyed is what engages the attention of Eliot's mind. Perhaps the other eye which is a reference to faith is absent. Life on the sea is imagined as a journey. To move through the sea of life, one requires faith. The sailor lacks faith as he has only materialism in his purview. This phenomenon of materialism has blinded his other eye which is an eye of faith. The journey across the sea becomes unsafe because he has no faith to go by waves on the sea pose no threat so long as a person nourishes his life on faith. Swami Paramananda holds aptly:

“Faith is a dynamic and a constructive force in our life. Through the exertion of this divine gift, men have wrought miracles in every age and in every country. We may scoff at the very mention of faith and try to discard it from our highly civilized modern life, but in no way do we shake this eternal foundation of truth save to impoverish our individual life” (P 8).

It is this faith which the one-eyed Phoenician lacks and so he is in peril without knowing it. The emotional confusion found in man is the result of his incapacity to adhere to any religion for resolving the crisis. Lack of spiritual interest in anything has placed human praxis and civilized culture at crossroads. Eliot has seen this problem in the figure of a Jewish character ‘Gerontion’ who wishes to die. The problem comes to a person who leads his life floating without any foundation. It is lack of faith in religion that taken away man's meaningful relation to life. Besides religion, literature also brings meaning to life and mental equilibrium to human beings.

As T. G. Williams puts it, “the function of literature to raise language to a higher potential than will serve for practical ends, and to persuade it to yield values related to the spiritual needs of mankind” (P 15). What demands one's immediate attention is his preparedness to place faith in religion and spirituality. In the absence of this effort, men behave like pigmies for want of interest in the higher dimensions of life. The habit of viewing life with meaning is impossible to a person who wanders in life endlessly without knowing the destination.

The predicament of Gerontion is comparable to a person who does not know where he must start and where he must end as far as the mystery of the journey of life is concerned. Gerontion is excessively active without being purposive about anything. It only makes him tired and he, being old, is languishing himself into a kind of actionlessness or inertia surprisingly. The dilemma of the modern man is peculiar as he is caught between two totally contrary status of activity and inactivity. Lack of being informed about the serious things in life and the act of wandering in the realm of reason keep a person going round and round without arriving at anything worthwhile.

A land without spiritual guidance is “The Waste Land”. Men who lack spiritual perspective and moral orientation are known as the wastelanders. Total spiritual emptiness is what makes the men and the civilization hollow. Eliot makes a crucial distinction between ‘living’ and ‘existing’. Men in whom aimlessness and purposelessness dominate are people comparable to papers which are taken by the wind in the direction in which it travels. Men are therefore like bits of papers who possess brute existence. To exist without the capacity to live in certainly an unspiritual state. The greatest threat to a civilization and a healthy human existence is neatly discernible when men remain passive doing nothing. Man is placed in a spiritual and metaphysical struggle between good and evil. To be in the world without facing the picture of life is deliberately shutting oneself out of the battle of existence. What has to be truly understood is that where there is no spiritual purpose animating, there is nothing but total death of sensibility.

Man’s life depends on the choice he makes for seeing the significance of anything in life. The study of books, especially gems of literary wisdom, is what is required at present. Even Tiruvalluvar’s glory does not lie in saying something that was never said before. The fact that Tiruvalluvar is a Mahakavi – great poet has been accepted by time and history and does not require further proof. He is great not because his ideas were original but because he marvelously reconciled the facts of life. His rightful place as a world teacher ‘a universal bard of man’ is secure because he spoke from the depths of him being and made a deep impact on his readers. As Thomas Carlyle said, “Originality is not novelty but sincerity”. (Krishnamoorti 148). Seen from this angle, Tiruvalluvar spoke with “a forceful originality, concern and compassion, that have almost no parallel in the world” (P 148). He accepts traditions, and pays handsome tributes to books, scholars and wise men who lived and taught before his times. His statement on repeated study is an expression born out of experience:

“The friendship of the worthy is like the repeated  
study of great books”  
The more you approach them,  
The more you will discover in them (Couplet 783)  
"நவில்லொறும் நூல்நயம் போலும் பயில்தொறும்  
பண்புடை யாளர் தொடர்பு" (குறள் 783)

He also talks about squeezing out the wisdom of a book through a thorough study and then abide by its teachings in actual life:

“Learn, that you may faultless learning gain  
And having learnt, true to it remain” (Couplet 391).  
"கற்க கசடறக் கற்பவை கற்றபின்

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## நிற்க அதற்குத் தக" (குறள் 391)

He wants readers to keep on learning upto their dooms day, glorifies learning as an imperishable and flawless treasure. Every prophet or seer who stands on the turning points of human history, makes use of traditional and well-worn words and phrases, examples and similes, morals and tales of wisdom so as to make people understand the significant meaning and purpose of life. Great men of the world like Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, Eliot, Tiruvalluvar, Kambar, Vivekananda, take their fellow beings to new heights of awareness, employing as their stepping stones mere words worn out with the passage of time, thereby converting them into words of wisdom pregnant with meaning related to human praxis and moral configuration in life and literature. "The true aim of education is to make the individual develop his faculties fully and freely so that he is enabled to realize the best in life" (Muthuraman 14). No doubt, the aims of learning get fulfilled only when the spiritual aspects of human life is recognized, and due respect is accounted there to moral configuration and human praxis in all respects for which study of literature seems imperative.

Literature is one of the Fine Arts, like Music, Dance, Painting, Sculpture as it is meant to give aesthetic pleasure rather than serve any utilitarian purpose. "Expression is the fundamental thing in literature" (Mullick 2). But what does the author or writer express? It is his experience of life. Now as experience is the substance of literature, everything that can be experienced by man in life for the sake of experience becomes the subject matter of literature. Literature communicates experience. In other words, the experience which lived in the author's mind must live again in the reader's mind. The writer must arouse the same imagination in his reader and control it in such a manner that the reader may also imitate that experience. This he achieves by means of words which should act as symbols of his experience so that it can be properly represented to the reader. Truly speaking, literature is intimately related to society. Viewed as a whole, a body of literature is a part of the entire culture of a people. Human society influences literature in many ways and the connections of literature with society are integral and pervasive. In fact, the range of social influences on literature is as broad as the entire range of operative social forces: "the prevailing system of social organization..., the characteristic emotional and moral tone, the sense of the past and the pattern of the future, the driving inspirations and myths and their relation to the contemporary realities. There is nothing in the compass of social life that does not play its part – small or large, directly or by deflection, giving literature the impress of its surroundings" (P 11).

The general view of moral philosophers is that any writer or author does inevitably influence the lives and character of his readers and that is why he is considered to be 'a good influence'. Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apologie for Poetrie* argued that the value of creative literature lies in the fact that by adding emotional appeal to the finer human qualities, it can do more to make

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men finer than the philosophers can. Spenser wrote *The Faerie Queene* in order to “Fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline”. Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* with a view to “justifying the ways of God to man”. Dryden, a great poet and critic, expressed his view of the moral value of literature. He remarked: “Delight is the chief, if not the only end of poesy.... the first rule for heroic or dramatic poet is to lay down to himself what that precept of morality shall be which he would insinuate into the people” (P 15). Dr. Johnson seems to fluctuate in his view about the moral value of literature. One sentence of Johnson summarises the truth admirably:

“The only end of writing is to enable the reader better to enjoy life, or better to endure it”

Endurance, of course, involves qualities of character. In the Romantic period, Shelley remarked: “Shakespeare, Dante and Milton are philosophers of the loftiest power”. Wordsworth emphasized the didactic element in literature when he remarked: “I am nothing if not a teacher”. Keats also, who was a worshipper of Beauty, wrote in *Sleep and Poetry* that the great end of poesy is

“... that it should be a friend  
To sooth the cares and lift the thoughts of men”.

And in *Hyperion*, he said that only those can be true poets “to whom the miseries of the world are miseries and will not let them rest”. In the Victorian period, Matthew Arnold made a slight concession to the ethical demands of his age by defining poetry as the “criticism of life”, but Ruskin was the most emphatic in his view of the moral value of Art and Literature. Another great writer of the nineteenth century, who laid great stress on the moral aspect of Art and Literature, was Leo Tolstoy. According to him, Art is “a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feeling and indispensable for the life and progress towards well-being of individuals and humanity” (P 15). Some twentieth century writers like Bernard Shaw and Somerset Maugham followed Tolstoy’s views in a milder form. In brief, moral issues or considerations no longer fail to enter into the subject matter of every writer who is handling life and character. A moral issue may characterize the theme as it is done in, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, in Macbeth and in most of the great tragedies of the world. No doubt, morality being one of the principal issues in life belongs to the very fibre and texture of all literature.

The future of mankind depends upon man’s preparedness to keep pace with non-material dimensions of life. The modern materialistic civilization has generated competition, rivalry, hostility and self-aggrandizement. But a real civilization can survive only on the basis of the restoration of human innocence, charity, sympathy and love. A great threat to the upkeep of the civilization is hidden in divisive, fanatical and materialistically orientation of life. What is

happening is one thing and what is needed to happen is some other thing. Till both these issues gain recognition, the hope for a new future remains a remote ideal. Socrates is said to have brought down philosophy from Heaven to live among men upon earth. A similar exploit can be ascribed to Tagore. “The spirit, the bare transcendental Reality contemplated by the orthodox Vedantis, has been brought nearer to our planet, close to human consciousness in Tagore’s vision, being clothed in earth and flesh and blood, made vivid with the colours and contours of the physical existence” (Gupta 64). Falling in line with the spirit, human life reaches its highest angle in embodying the spiritual consciousness here on earth.

As globalization, in its aftermath, brings material prosperity to a minority, the poor continue to live in abysmal conditions. While the rich enjoy fizzy drinks, the poor have to be satisfied with muddy waters. Even more shocking is ‘social discrimination’ and the conditions of women are equally deplorable. All these happen due to lack of moral and spiritual values in life. The golden saying of *Mahabharata* is apt to quote here:

“Simplicity of character, truth, compassion for others, self-discipline of the mind and the body and to do no violence to any being – these are the attributes of the purity that comes from the pilgrimage of the mind” (*Mahabharata*).

We live in a world of chaos and confusion and the everyday newspapers bring to limelight the degeneration of our values and morals in their headlines that read terrorism, corruption, murder, scandal, social discrimination etc. Why all these happen? “it is due to the wants and needs of the people that have manifold that have turned them selfish and self-centered”. People who are firmly grounded in values and morals become great inspirations and are looked upon by people from all walks of life and they become naturally leaders of great quality” (Kavitha 109). Values, morals and ethics are all interdependent which all join together in making all men become humane, morally, ethically and spiritually to the core, if they are followed and practiced by them in life, for which proper study of literature will help in all respects because the study of literature has such meritorious uses as establishment of human unity, formation of international understanding, global co-operation, inter-disciplinary approach, breaking world vision, philosophical doctrine of the identity of all mines, relation between literature and other branches of knowledge, common cultural conviction, bringing together of East and West, control of racial fanaticism, co-existence of multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural communities, developing humanism in the concept of universal brotherhood etc. In a nutshell, it may be said that the study of literature aims at a global vision for if one looks at life from a human point of view, all narrow prejudices and unwanted elements will be out of purview. Moral, human, social and spiritual values should be imbibed through the study of the valuable books on literature so as to live a life indeed rather meaningfully and usefully because human unity is not a mechanical concept. It should be practiced

and translated in all walks of life. The practical method to bring this value into force lies in the proper study of *Human Praxis and Moral Configuration through Literature*.

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