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**THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN SHAPING SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS:
PAST AND PRESENT**

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ABSTRACT

Literature has never just been a way to show off one's imagination; it is a powerful force that changes, reflects, and critiques society. Literary works have been used for moral questioning, political dissent, cultural preservation, and social change throughout history and across cultures. Literature is both a mirror and a lamp. It shows us how things are and how they could be better, from ancient epics to modern digital stories. This article looks at how literature has changed people's minds about social issues in the past and present, showing how it can change minds across time and cultures.

Keywords: *Literature, Social, Past and Present.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has never just been a way to show off one's imagination; it is a powerful force that changes, reflects, and critiques society. Literary works have been used for moral questioning, political dissent, cultural preservation, and social change throughout history and across cultures. Literature is both a mirror and a lamp. It shows us how things are and how they could be better, from ancient epics to modern digital stories. This article looks at how literature has changed people's minds about social issues in the past and present, showing how it can change minds across time and cultures.

1.1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR LITERATURE AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Social consciousness is being aware of how society works, the unfairness in it, the groups we belong to, and the duties we all have. Literature enhances this awareness by:

- 1) Representing the lived experiences of marginalized communities
- 2) Critiquing systems that are unfair
- 3) Keeping cultural memory alive
- 4) Encouraging change and fighting back

5) Promoting compassion and moral contemplation

Aristotle said in *Poetics* that literature brings about catharsis, which is an emotional cleansing that helps people understand morality better. In the same way, modern thinkers like Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci stressed how literature can show class structures and ideological control.

1.1.1. LITERATURE IN THE PAST: AN AGENT OF ETHICAL FORMATION AND REFORM

1) The Classical Canon: Ancient roots of Cultural Expression

Old texts were very important in setting moral and social standards. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are two Indian epics that talk about dharma (duty), justice, and how to run a country. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two of Homer's epics, also had an effect on Greek moral and civic identity.

Greek tragedies, especially those by Sophocles, questioned authority, fate, and what people are responsible for. Literature fostered public discourse and moral consciousness through narrative conflict.

2) From Medieval Faith to Renaissance Humanism

In the Middle Ages, literature supported religious and moral lessons. Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* gave people a moral guide to sin and forgiveness. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* depicted various social classes, subtly condemning corruption.

The Renaissance was a time when people started to believe in humanism. William Shakespeare's works looked at power, ambition, justice, and identity, making people think about how politics and morality work. Later, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* dealt with ideas of power, free will, and rebellion.

3) Literature and Social Reform in the 18th–19th Centuries

The industrial era made social inequality worse, and literature became a way to make things better. Charles Dickens wrote books like *Oliver Twist* that showed child labour and poverty, which made middle-class people feel bad for them. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sparked anti-slavery sentiment in the United States. This shows how literature can affect political movements. In colonial India, authors such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee employed fiction to foster nationalist sentiment, whereas reformist literature tackled concerns including caste discrimination and the subjugation of women.

1.1.2. LITERATURE IN THE PRESENT: PROTEST, IDENTITY AND GLOBAL AWARENESS

1) Postcolonial Voices and Identity Formation

Postcolonial literature recovers marginalized histories and interrogates imperial narratives. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* challenges colonial stereotypes of Africa and changes how people around the world think about cultural dignity. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* looks at caste, gender, and political corruption in India, giving a voice to people who have been pushed to the edges. These kinds of works encourage people from different cultures to talk to each other and be good global citizens.

2) Voices of Empowerment: Feminist and Dalit Literature

Feminist literature contests patriarchal frameworks. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* promotes intellectual autonomy for women, shaping numerous generations of feminist ideology.

Dalit authors like Bama in *Karukku* recount their experiences of caste oppression, turning individual accounts into a form of collective resistance. Literature thus transforms into a locus of empowerment and societal enlightenment.

3) The Digital Turn in Contemporary Literature

In the digital age, literature goes beyond books to include blogs, spoken word poetry, graphic novels, and stories told on social media. Writers today talk about climate change, migration, rights, and racial justice. Movements like #MeToo have led to memoirs and autobiographies that change the way people talk about things. Literature today is participatory and transnational, encouraging immediate global involvement.

4) Literature as an Instrument of Social Awareness

- 1) Creating Empathy: Readers become more emotionally intelligent and morally sensitive by putting themselves in other people's shoes.
- 2) Critical Reflection: Literature challenges prevailing ideologies and social hierarchies.
- 3) Cultural Preservation: Oral and written traditions protect the memory of the group.
- 4) Political Mobilization—Revolutionary and reformist literature incites activism.
- 5) Identity Formation – Stories help people in a community talk about who they are and what they have in common.

2. CONCLUSION

Literature has always changed how people think about society by showing how things really are and imagining how things could be different, from ancient epics to modern digital stories. It used to strengthen moral frameworks and inspire movements for change. Now, it amplifies the voices of those who are left out and raises awareness around the world. Literature is still an important part of culture; it is an ongoing conversation between text and society, imagination and responsibility. Literature still teaches us to care about others, speak out against injustice, and work together to make things better, showing that the written word is still one of the most powerful tools for changing society.

3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

None.

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