
HUMANE APPROACH IN CRISES: THE ESSENCE OF LITERATURE

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Abstract

The paper explores the essential role of literature as a humanising force in times of crisis, foregrounding its capacity to cultivate empathy, compassion and moral awareness amid pervasive isolation and suffering. Drawing upon a wide range of literary, philosophical and spiritual traditions—from Whitman, Arnold, Galsworthy, Beckett, Shelley and Keats to Tagore, Emerson, Buddhist thought and Indian metaphysical concepts—the study examines how literature responds to the fragmentation of human relationships caused by modernity, technological excess, religious dogmatism and self-centredness. Through an inter-textual analysis of poetry, drama, fiction and philosophical discourse, the study argues that the failure of mere communication systems is counterbalanced by literature's deeper ethical and emotional intelligence. Literature transforms pain into insight, reaffirms the unity of the self with the universal soul and restores faith in compassion as the fundamental principle of human coexistence. Ultimately, it is contended that literature functions not merely as an aesthetic expression but as a quiet yet enduring moral force that sustains humanity during moments of existential crisis.

Keywords: Literature and Crisis, Human, Compassion, Isolation, Empathy, Communication, Humanism, Transcendence, Moral Imagination, Universal Unity.

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From the earliest stages of human civilisation, literature has served as one of the most profound expressions of humanity's inner life. Far beyond entertainment or artistic display, it embodies the moral and emotional intelligence that sustains human existence, particularly in times of crisis. True art does not impose itself through dogma or force but works upon the human spirit in subtle and unobtrusive ways, awakening empathy, reflection and renewal. Its influence often remains unnoticed—transforming individuals “unawares”—yet its power to shape perception and moral vision is undeniable. The poet or artist, through imaginative insight and emotional identification, reveals truths that transcend ordinary experience and become essential to human resilience. In this sense, literature represents not only an aesthetic pursuit but a humanising force, reminding one that the true strength of humanity lies in its capacity for compassion, understanding and creative endurance. It is through this quiet, transformative energy that literature continues to guide the humane approach in crisis, preserving the essence of what it means to be human.

The present study seeks to explore how literature reflects and reinforces the human capacity to respond to crisis with empathy and creative insight. It examines the ways in which writers across periods and cultures transform suffering into meaning, thereby reaffirming the enduring moral function of art. By focusing on the subtle yet powerful humanising influence of literary expression, it is argued that literature serves not only as a record of collective pain and endurance but also as a guiding light that nurtures emotional intelligence, ethical awareness and hope. In tracing this vital connection between art and the human condition, the discussion aims to reveal that the essence of literature lies in its ability to sustain humanity—quietly, imaginatively and profoundly—through every crisis.

Though stated in a somewhat prosaic and self-assured manner, the true role of the poet is powerfully affirmed by Shelley, who in “A Defence of Poetry” declares that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (70). His assertion captures the subtle yet profound influence of art on the moral and emotional life of humanity. Similarly, Keats emphasised the unique relationship between perception and creation when he reflected in “Hyperion” that the miseries of the world become his own and will not let him rest (374-383). Through such empathetic identification, the artist transcends personal boundaries to embody a universal human experience. This transcendence, made possible through what Keats termed “negative capability,” signifies the highest achievement of art: the ability to endure uncertainty and suffering while transforming them into insight and beauty. In this sense, literature becomes not merely a mirror of life but a quiet force that elevates the human spirit and affirms its capacity for compassion, imagination and resilience.

The same truth is highlighted by Ghosh when he makes his protagonist Dolly in *The Glass Palace* elaborate the Buddhist concept of *Karuna*, roughly translated as compassion. As Dolly reads a discourse by Buddha addressed to his son, Rahula: “*Develop a sense of mind like the earth, Rahula, for on the earth all manner of things are thrown, clean and unclean, dung and urine, spittle, pus and blood, and the earth is not troubled or repelled or disgusted . . .* (Ghosh 343; ellipses and italics in original).” She continues:

. . . develop a state of mind like water, for in the water many things are thrown, clean and unclean, and the water is not troubled or repelled or disgusted. And so too with fire, which burns all things, clean and unclean, and with air, which blows upon them all and with space, which is nowhere established . . . (343; ellipses and italics in original).

It need not be remarked that the abovesaid are the essential constituent elements of the whole creation, sentient as well as insentient. Only through the navigation of the limited self does one become capable of entering the universal soul pulsating in the whole of creation—even the establishment of the bond of unity between the creation and the creator. R.W. Emerson, one of the nineteenth-century American transcendentalists, elaborates the same notion in his own unique way in his characteristic essay titled “The Over-Soul.” In it, he speaks of the underlying unity between the soul and the Over-Soul, corresponding more or less to *Atman* and *Paramatman* in the ancient Vedic terminology. The identity of the soul and the Over-Soul, or of *Atman* and *Paramatman*, is elaborated through the analogy of *Anda* and *Brahmanda* therein. The universal nature of truth or wisdom gets further corroborated in Socratic thought as well. Socrates, having recourse to the inward mode of mysticism, unequivocally avers: “Know thyself and know the world.” Spanning the whole range of religions and philosophies from the most ancient to the ultramodern times, this unifying truth holds unchallenged sway over all of them. The equal importance of the two aspects of the self is categorically emphasised by Whitman in his characteristic poem “Song of Myself”:

. . . the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is,
And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own
funeral drest in his shroud (72)

Inversely speaking, this harmony between the soul and the body has been emphasised by literary thinkers through generations of creative expression. Forced by the whirlwind of hatred sweeping across the globe, each one of the creatures has shrunk into the cocoon of its own self. This crippling malaise of mankind has been beautifully poetised by Matthew Arnold. He creatively postulates the idea that the essential human condition in the world is one of existential isolation and loneliness. Aptly and beautifully is it epitomised in the opening lines of the second part of his “To Marguerite”:

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
We mortal millions live *alone*. (Arnold 464; italics in original)

The utter hopelessness of the human condition and the poet's resignation is signified by the word that begins the poem “Yes!”—the mark of exclamation clinching the issue in an irrefutable manner.

In the created world, men are not only spatially isolated, converted into small islands, but also all means of communication in-between them are absolutely snapped. Strategically speaking, “echoing straits” have been thrown between them to make all meaningful human communication impossible amongst them. As a consequence thereof, despite their being millions, there is each one of them condemned to be alone in the mortal perishable domain of creation. The same existential anguish is dramatised by Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, where the awaited figure never arrives, thus highlighting the essential human predicament of isolation in the world.

John Galsworthy, too, poignantly dramatised the abovesaid isolation in the mode of solitary confinement in his play *Justice* that he holds to be worse than death penalty. It is a well-known historical fact that in Britain the capital punishment was awarded only in “the rarest of the rare cases” and the hardened criminals were confined in the segregated cells as if they had been assigned to the mutually exclusive islets of Arnold. Galsworthy's dramatisation had the desired effect upon Churchill's conscience that compelled him to drastically reduce “the period of solitary confinement” (Galsworthy 110). Solitary confinement is worse than shooting a dog: “It's the same with dogs. If you treat 'em with kindness they'll do anything for you; but to shut 'em up alone, it only makes 'em savage” (66). Hence, one can comfortably infer from a perusal of the abovesaid typical instances that normal human condition is living in peaceful proximity with all means of communication in operation. But, as is ironically underlined by Whitman, the effectiveness of all physical means of communication is useless unless there is something worth communicating. In his poem “Passage to India” celebrating the opening of the Suez canal: “I see in one the Suez canal initiated, open'd” (322) and laying down of the transoceanic cable between the old and the new Worlds, thus augmenting the direct channels of verbal intercourse, Whitman quizzically suggests the inherent failure of human achievement:

In the Old World the east the Suez canal,
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,
The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires. . . . (321)

Therefore, the attainment of wisdom is the primary condition and all means of communication are not only secondary, but at a higher plane, they become absolutely redundant, worth only discarding. If man attains humility enough, he can learn this truth through an observation of the activity of the ordinary bee, since it buzzes only till it has found the source of honey, but once discovered, it settles down tranquilly to suck it. Thus, metaphorically speaking, silence becomes eloquent and the sound attains significance only through soundlessness. All the storms of the oceans rage only at the surface, the utter peace and tranquility reign at their depths:

O the joy of that vast elemental sympathy which only the human
soul is capable of generating and emitting in steady and limitless floods.

.....

O the joy of increase, growth, recuperation,
The joy of soothing and pacifying, the joy of concord and harmony. (Whitman 142)

As is elaborated by Whitman in the above-quoted poem, Americans had made a tremendous advancement in the field of technology and navigating engineering. They could connect the old world and the new, and hence celebrates the opening of the Suez canal. He views the completion of railroad link in the same light. Most of all, euphorically speaking, talks of the laying down of oceanic cable connecting the old and the new worlds—Europe and America, but punctures the balloon of their ego by emphasising that despite the remarkable development in the means of communication there is nothing worth communicating because of the utter lack of profundity and wisdom in their discourse. It is figuratively enshrined when he sarcastically remarks:

“We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough” (Thoreau 52).

Hence, it can safely be concluded that though the means of communication had been developed, yet the development of human self, mind and soul were miserably lacking.

Similarly, the basis of all disagreements, animosity and hatred is man's mind, his misconceived notion of his superiority and his uncontrollable lust in its various forms. It is almost always generated by man-made notions of caste, creed, sex and religion. By its very etymology, religion means the instrument of reunion. But, strangely enough, from time immemorial, it has been misused as the hidden weapon of division, subjugation and suppression. Thus, through man's wilfulness, the source of cohesion has been converted into the divisive, annihilating, uncontrollable energy causing doom and destruction.

Somewhat different in appearance, but essentially the same spirit infuses Tagore to undertake the virtually impossible mission of wiping away every tear from every human eye. Even a cursory glance will reveal to man that all religions of the world are inspired by an unquenchable thirst for cohesion of creation. But in his own vested interest, man has wilfully interpreted them as divisive, exclusive forces of segregation. It has been made to serve only the contractors of religion and not mankind in general for whom one and all religions come into existence. The situation has been worsened by the element of division that surreptitiously crept into virtually all the religions. One of the finest forces of thrust at universal compassion of Christianity: “Though shalt love thy

neighbour as thyself” (qtd. in Durant 382), is further crystallised in the moment of crisis into: “Thy need is greater, my brother” had become self- defeating through the use of covert coercion for its world-wide spread. It has been actually epitomised in the Christian crusader’s image as holding the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other. No less terrifying is the distortion made by the preachers of Islam when their conquerors tried to thrust it down the throats of their unwilling subjects. There are similar endless examples of such coercions rampant in the world, may be in the name of caste, creed or religion. Swept off their feet by bigotry, the fundamentalists over the ages have spread more hatred than love in the world, whereas the quintessence of all means of reunion is love:

Take now the enclosing theme of all, the solvent and the setting,
Love, that is pulse of all, the sustenance and the pang,
The heart of man and woman all for love,
No other theme but love—knitting, enclosing, all-diffusing love. (Whitman 365)

Arthur Miller strains the seams of the language to highlight the underlying cause of the self-centredness of man: “You[Willy] are the saddest, self-centred soul.” (92). The question now arises as to how the situation can be retrieved. One and the only way left to the individual is to rise above himself through compassion and reach out to others to ameliorate universal suffering. This process and its unique nature is neatly summed up by Arun Joshi in his *The Foreigner* and is remarked upon thus:

June was one of those rare persons who have a capacity to forget themselves in somebody’s trouble. . . . June perhaps was essentially so uncomplicated a person that whenever she saw somebody in pain she went straight out to pet him rather than analysing it a million times like the rest of us. And this is what she did that evening. (Joshi 97)

Through sensitisation and refinement of sensibility, art metamorphoses man, without his being intellectually conscious of it. It functions at the subconscious and unconscious levels of human psyche and it expands its horizon to become all-inclusive. The concluding *Upanishadic* prayer has it: *Vishwa ka kalyan ho, Praniyon mein sadhbhavna ho*—the welfare of the whole world and the prevalence of good feeling among all living creatures. More or less, the same is held forth by Guru Nanak: *Tere pahne sarvat da bhala*—because of you, all should be benefitted. One more step in the direction that completes our hoary ancient wisdom is that the bounds are extended to comprise both *zarh* and *chetan*: living and nonliving. This is all that arts aim at and this is what it should move towards, more so in the midst of crises:

All, all for immortality,
Love like the light silently wrapping all . . . (Whitman 184).

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