

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Environment and the creation of literature

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Abstract:

“One is not a writer for having chosen to say certain things,
but for having to say them in a certain way. (25)
- Sartre

The environment does impact the creation of literature. However, it is essential to understand the term 'environment', as it is polyvalent. The term 'environment' could mean the 'environ' from where the writer writes, or the term 'environment' could be looked upon as the 'ecology', or, to name it in general parlance, nature. Having now an ambiguity to settle for the term 'environment', the ambiguity in the usage of the terms, I have narrowed it down to the idea of considering the 'impact of the environment on the creation of literature' and assuming that the environment here implies both the surroundings but could also be focused on the environment, meaning nature.

Keywords: Environment, Literature, Ecology, Nature.

Having divided a broad area of environmental impact into two parts, let us first address the first interpretation of the term as the 'general environment'. This general environment could further be divided into political, cultural, social, religious, economic, familial, and geographical.

Ray Bradbury cites an anecdote in which he was enraged by a photograph depicting Puerto Ricans and wrote a story, 'Sun and Shadow'. Ray Bradbury is of the opinion that "... if you are writing without zest, without gusto, without love, without fun, you are only half a writer ... keeping one eye on the commercial market..." (4)

Orwell, on the other hand, goes further to assert that there is a great impact on a writer's early life and the age he lives in. In his essay 'Why I Write', he says, a writer's subject matter "... will be determined by the age he lives in—at least this is true in tumultuous, revolutionary ages like our own—but before he ever begins to write, he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never completely escape." Orwell enumerates four reasons why one writes: they are i) sheer egoism, ii) aesthetic enthusiasm, iii) historical impulse, and iv) political purpose.

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But Sartre is unambiguous in asserting that writers write to trigger change in humans. According to Sartre,

“If you name the behavior of an individual, you reveal it to him; he sees himself. And since you are at the same time naming it to all others, he knows he is *seen* at the moment he *sees* himself. ... Thus, by speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it ...”
(Sartre 22)

In the process of naming, the writer will reveal the man to other men by laying bare a behavior. (Sartre 24)

For Somerset Maugham, writing is from his experience and environment and the people to whom he was exposed. In his book *The Summing Up*, he confesses that ‘fact and fiction are so intermingled’ in his work and was interested in men in general, obscure as well as famous, as he might find singularity and infinite variety providing unending material. Concluding the book, he confesses, “... as from people I have met here and there I have constructed a play, a novel, or a short story. We are the product of our natures and our environment.”

Satire and caricature are yet another sphere of reaction to the environment. Say, for instance, the production of films like *Thuglak*, which caricatures the Emergency in India, by Cho Ramasamy, is a political satire. *Gulliver’s Travels* is a satire on the society of the time. These political satires reveal the period’s political climate and record it for posterity.

It is not just the immediate surroundings that worry the author. It may also be a distant land, especially for a diasporic writer; it could be his homeland, far away. Salman Rushdie, when he was penning *Midnight’s Children*, which is about India, was in London. In his essay on Imaginary Homelands, he states that he is drawing on memories of a distant past and is geographically removed from his immediate surroundings.

If we consider all postcolonial writers, most are reacting to the political, economic, social, and cultural conditions prevailing in their respective countries. For Wole Soyinka, it was a political environment that determined his narrative, including clashes of cultures that are being foregrounded by the writers. The colonial impact that jarred the consciousness of the people had triggered the sensitive people who turned into writers and reflected the environment they were inundated in.

Chinua Achebe’s writings are an expression of counter-narrative to the colonial narratives on Africa. His reactions in his texts are politically charged and sensitising towards neocolonialism. Writings of Franz Fanon and Albert Memmi are a direct result of the colonial legacy – reactions to the colonial encounter. Writings of indigenous writers and their assertion of their cultural and spiritual identity is again an urge to create a counter-narrative to the colonial discourse.

It is pertinent to note that the emergence of existentialism in literature, especially in Europe, is a direct impact of the existentialist crisis the World Wars impacted and the crisis it caused on the closely held religious

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beliefs. Writings of Sartre and Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett are reflections of that environment in which they existed.

Amitav Gosh and his novels are simultaneously contemporary and historical narratives. His writings are based on revising history while critiquing contemporary context, encompassing political, cultural, and social environments, and crafting a tapestry of interwoven narratives. For instance, the narration of the Opium Wars and the emergence of imperialism on a large scale is a vast canvas that attempts to capture tumultuous events related to colonial aggression in a text that could also reflect the contemporary corporate colonisation of a different kind.

In the case of Sudha Murthy, who is straddling modernity and tradition, she takes a stand on the traditional values that she espouses and would be reflecting the contemporary environment and its clash with the traditional values. Her novels reflect society and its inner workings.

Alice Munro, in her mostly autobiographical stories, drew her characters and anecdotes from the society she hailed from, and the locale was rural Ontario. The transition of the twentieth century could be traced in her stories if the focus of research were narrowed to the man-woman relationship in her stories and the community's attitude in transition towards extra-marital relationships. Here Munro reflects the environment in which she lived. Also, her texts, when seen chronologically, trace the late 20th century in all its flavour.

Having made certain that the immediate environment – be it political, social, or cultural – has an impact, the next phase of the article is to consider the environment as nature.

The case of Thomas Hardy or the romantic poets is entirely different. While Thomas Hardy could bring out the characters' moods in his narrative, taking its sustenance from describing the surrounding nature in his texts, nature itself becomes one of the characters that determines the flow of the novel.

Humans respond to and are influenced not only by their surroundings but also by texts. It is equally true that writers are also influenced by other texts. Sartre is of the opinion that "... there is no doubt that the arts of a period mutually influence each other and are conditioned by the same social factors." (7) Salman Rushdie lists his literary ancestry to many great writers in his essay *Imaginary Homelands*.

Ancient Tamil literature is divided based on the environment from which it emerges or reflects or the mood that it ascribes to. The influence of nature on people and the categorisation of literature based on nature is attempted in the Sangam Age, where not only literature but also the mood of the characters or the literary output is categorized based on the natural habitats – Kurunji (hills and mountainous regions), Mullai (forest), Marutham (fields), and Neithal (land adjoining the sea). Palai, meaning "the desert," was a later addition.

The Tamil texts are geocentrically categorized, and further classification of texts and moods was mandated by the day's timeline to capture the people's mood.

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Now moving on to the second part of interpreting the term 'environment' as nature, it is to be understood that reaction to environment is conditioned by worldviews, ethos, and belief structures from which an author emerges.

On the other hand, if we are to consider the essence of the term environment as nature, then it would be essential to perceive nature through lenses in which the writer had already immersed his/her experience, beliefs, ethos, and worldviews. While the settler literatures perceive nature in Canada as alien and oppressive, like, for instance, white Canadians or European Australians consider nature in their respective lands as alien, and there is a pressure to overcome Nature, they end up surviving. Climate fiction and eco-criticism are products of thinking on these tangentials.

The indigenous literatures emerging from indigenous cultures such as the Aborigines, Maori, Inuit, Cree, and Iroquois have distinct narratives, the discourse reflects their environments from their perspectives. For instance, in the text *Stones and Switches* by Lorne Simon, nature is perceived as a communicative entity. It is pertinent to note that, in the context of indigenous communities, responses to the environment are unique: they ought to be viewed not from a European perspective but from the communities' own standpoint. To conclude, even to perceive nature or to have an environmental perspective of a literary text, it has to be culturally validated from the standpoint of that particular worldview on nature.

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