

The Enduring Significance of Literature in Times of Militarism, War, and Modern Imperialism

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

The Faculty Journal of Arts
Rajshahi University
Special Volume-6
ISSN: 1813-0402 (Print)

Received : 06 March 2025
Received in revised: 09 April 2025
Accepted: 16 March 2025
Published: 25 October 2025

Keywords:
Imperialism, Literature, Resistance, War

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how literary works can provide a critical lens to examine causes and impacts of war and imperialist ideologies in the backdrop of the ongoing militarism, war, and modern imperialism. Literature gives voice to the oppressed often silenced by dominant narratives of power and thus interrogates the dehumanizing forces of militarism and justifications for war. By analyzing texts from various historical and cultural contexts, the paper highlights how authors develop people's moral conscience against war, exploitation and neo-imperialism. Though literature fails to stop the genocide in Palestine, the relevance of the study and teaching of literature cannot be denied. Drawing on the traditional notions of literature being an integral part of liberal humanism, this study attempts to exemplify the enduring significance of literature in combating war and imperialism drawing on war literature and postcolonial narratives produced by some great writers – Leo Tolstoy, Erich Maria Remarque, Wilfred Owen, Joseph Conrad, Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Vonnegut and Mahmoud Darwish whose works have stimulated the moral imaginations of readers towards the horrors of war and its unethical sides, and therefore help stop or avoid a war or genocide and envision a more just and peaceful world amidst the persistence of war and imperialism.

Introduction

Following the Aristotelian concept of art as imitation of life, literature can be defined as an art of representation of life and society. But what is the purpose of literature? Traditionally to cite Horace Walpole, there are two-fold purposes of literature: One is to delight and another is to instruct. Though in modern times the didactic nature of literature is not appreciated much, nevertheless it remains apparent or hidden in almost all literary pieces. The arts and humanities, including literature and literary criticism, concern themselves with the fate and prospects of humankind. These fields have been placed under increasing pressure to give an account of themselves—partly because unlike science and technology the value of the arts and the humanities is not immediately apparent, partly because states and universities have suffered harshly competitive fiscal demands, and partly because increased criticism has been lodged against the arts and humanities from both within and beyond the academy. Any attempt to justify the arts and humanities must account for their universal purpose and their specific role in a given age. The rising importance of science and technology, the growth of virtual media and AI, and the rise of militarism and war crimes along with the growing popularity of post truth and neoliberalism, the existence of the humanities discipline is threatened and albeit questionable to some quarters. The dominance of science with its present focus on computer and mobile phone technology, online media, and weapons of mass destruction as a part of capitalism giving birth to extreme nationalism, white supremacist philosophy questions the justification of the study of the subjects of humanities, especially literature. Moreover, the shortage of jobs for humanities may be the other vital issue for students not to study humanities any longer or for government policies to cut budget for humanities. This is more intensely felt though in the West, predominantly in the USA. The US involvement in the world politics with its aim of spreading its empire through its economic and military base has necessitated the focus on the education and research on science.

This neo-imperial aspiration has made this one-time colony of the UK produce and trade arms of mass destruction. The US foreign policy of selling arms to its allied countries, especially Israel and some other Middle Eastern and African countries is one of the reasons for its change of focus from the humanities to the science. Hence, it raises the question that to what end the study of literature contributes to the US national strategy of extending its military power across the world. Or, to what extent the study of literature abates the growth of militarism, the rise of military conflicts and the onslaught of neo-imperialism. The present essay aspires to find the relevance and justification of the study of literature as an integral part of any system of education.

Irving Babbitt more than a century ago stated the necessity of the study of the humanities in *Literature and the American College*: “The humanities need to be defended to-day against the encroachment of physical science, as they once needed to against the encroachments of theology” (31). Literature of the classical Greek and Roman period delighted and enlightened the Greeks and the Romans through the tragic stories of Oedipus and the destruction of Troy. So war literatures made the Greeks abandon the concept of heroism and embrace knowledge and justice. So the way the Greeks taught literature was through the theatre. The staged dramatic spectacle must have got direct impact on readers’ minds and thus could ennoble people. This is how the ancient Greek produced Plato and Aristotle. Then in the medieval period when religion was used as a medium of oppression and exploitation by some corrupt clergymen, literature came to replace it with some solace. When capitalism, secularism and imperialism turned people into machines and oppressors, literature challenged the ideological foundation of these modern evils. Thus, in an era when military conflicts and genocide continue to scar our global conscience—from Gaza to Ukraine, from Sudan to Myanmar—it becomes urgent to ask: what does literature do when bombs fall on civilians, on schools and hospitals and when hungry people waiting for aid are shot?

The Pedagogical Role of Literature

Louise Groarke states, “Literature is like putting on spectacles so that we can read the world “like a book.” It is like looking through a telescope. Or a microscope. The point is to see something we are too obtuse to notice and tend to overlook” (232). Throughout history, literature has functioned as a powerful medium of truth. Whether in the form of poetry, fiction, drama, critical essays, or memoir, it holds a mirror to up to life and politics. It extracts the hidden truths and challenges the dominant exploitative political discourse that often sanitizes or erases the history of the exploited. Literature as a form of satire aims at reforming the society by correcting the evils and vices without any bloodshed. Let us consider the pleasant drama of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* that encourages to solve inheritance and usurpation conflicts through the magical transformation of the usurpers of the dukedom who willingly step down from their wrongfully occupied thrones or positions. The old duke who is banished by his own brother does not collect troops to reclaim his throne. Rather, he allows time to pass and in the end his brother realizes his mistake and returns the dukedom to his brother. So what message it entails is none other than the idea that there are more civilized ways to deal with or settle conflicts without violence and war. *Macbeth* teaches the futility of ambition and the consequences of one’s evil deed. *Hamlet* also demonstrates that by killing his own brother Claudius could not live long. History teems with a lot of examples like this. And obviously the Renaissance literature started to change the scenario of British life and politics.

Despite having the supposed humanitarian and human rights concern, literature is not always antiwar. It takes both pro-war and antiwar positions depending on the writer’s perspectives, purpose of writing and socio-historical contexts. Traditionally, from ancient literature the modern period war has often been glorified, and consequently heroism has been worshiped. From Homer’s *Iliad*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Beowulf, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Tennyson’s *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, Richard Lovelace’s “To Lucasta, on Going to the Wars”, Rupert Brooke’s *The Soldier and there must be some other that glorify war as a noble pursuit*. On the other side, Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Wilfred Owen’s poems (*Dulce et Decorum Est*,

Anthem for Doomed Youth, Joseph Conrad's *The Warrior's Soul*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* – all these demonstrate the waste of life, death and destruction in a war and thus attack the false glorification of war. The teaching of war literature makes people develop their awareness and conscience about the horrors of war.

Literature against War

The haunting war poem of Wilfred Owen, *Dulce et Decorum Est*, describes the brutal realities of war and rejects the propaganda that glorify the idea that it is noble to die for one's own country. In a more recent context, Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet, evokes in his verses a land ravaged by occupation and war. His poem *Identity Card* is a direct address to an Israeli officer, boasting of his Arab identity. "Write it down. I am an Arab" asserts personhood and Palestinian identity in the face of erasure and genocide. He shows the consequences of oppression and injustice "But if I become hungry/The usurper's flesh will be my food/ Beware .../Beware .../ Of my hunger/ And my anger!"

Besides, there are some works that present both heroism and horror. Shakespeare's *Henry V* is such a piece that presents patriotic speeches ("Once more unto the breach...") but also demonstrates war's cruelty and the suffering of common soldiers. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* also glorifies courage and love in wartime as well as focuses on disillusionment and futility of war. However, Hemingway's most famous anti-war stance after his direct experiences in World War I and the Spanish Civil war is found in his 1946 article "Notes on the Next War: A Serious Topical Letter": "A country never wants war until a man through the power of propaganda convinces it. Propaganda is stronger now than it has ever been before. Its agencies have been mechanised, multiplied and controlled until in a state ruled by any one man truth can never be presented" (4). Thus, Hemingway appeals to the American people not to get involved in any war. He thinks going to war is death. Moreover he argues that how false idealism of patriotism is exploited: "War is made or planned now by individual men, demagogues and dictators who play on the patriotism of their people to mislead them into a belief in the great fallacy of war when all their vaunted reforms have failed to satisfy the people they misrule"(Notes 6).

As a volunteer in World War I, Hemingway watched the devastation of the war and translated the trauma of war into a literary masterpiece in *A Farewell to Arms* where he shows like that of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* that war is not romantic—it is chaotic, random, and ultimately futile. Elsewhere he says, "Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime". His famous iceberg theory is applicable to war as war hides most of the devastations and miseries inflicted on the humans — on both groups who win and who are defeated. Today, as civilians are dying, children are being starved to death, hospitals, schools and refugee camps are destroyed in Gaza, the study and teaching of Hemingway's literature makes us put resistance to war and raise voice for the Palestinians.

Leo Tolstoy critiques war from within. His *War and Peace* has been one of the most profound literary meditations on war ever written. Though he describes the different incidents of the Napoleonic Wars, his real focus is on fate, human error, suffering, and the absurdity of trying to rationalize war. Tolstoy finally rejects war altogether. In his later writings, such as *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, he envisions a pacifist Christian anarchism, condemning all forms of organized violence, state-sanctioned or otherwise. His ideas may have influenced nonviolent resistance movements from Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr. Phil Klay, a US Marine turned writer, writes fiction to demonstrate the moral and psychological toll of America's endless wars. His book *Redeployment* does not glorify military service, but exposes its unethical and bleak sides. Similarly, Khaled Hosseini in *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* gives personal, human faces to conflicts that the West often views through impersonal statistics.

Literature and Modern Imperialism

Modern imperialism, unlike its 19th-century model, is obviously subtle, and complex, as it functions wearing the robes of humanitarianism or economic development, but literature often unmasks their real faces. As *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, in contrast to Kipling's works, unmasks the hypocrisies of Western civilization and Western imperialism, so does Chinua

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a postcolonial classic offer a counter-narrative to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Thus teaching of Joseph Conrad is indispensable when speaking of literature and imperialism, especially to see how being a European and working as a seaman under British imperialism Conrad offers a powerful critique of imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and *Nostromo*. Not only that he masterfully demonstrates the inherent evils residing in humans through the journey up the Congo River in *Heart of Darkness* where the journey becomes a metaphor of a descent into one's own inner self or soul to discover that every civilized human also possesses the enormous capabilities of evil, which they like that of Kurtz may fail rationalize and suppress. In *Nostromo*, Conrad explores imperial capitalism in Latin America, portraying how financial and geopolitical interests use idealism, revolution, and even war for their own ends. His *Under Western Eyes* like that of George Orwell's 1984 examines the nature of Russian autocracy and the futility of political anarchism and revolution. Thus, Conrad's work remains deeply relevant in the 21st century. The ideological justifications for wars—be they humanitarian, democratic, or economic—still echo the hollow rhetoric of civilizing missions of the nineteenth century in the slogans for fighting against terrorism and self-defense. Conrad's shorter works, such as *Gaspar Ruiz* and *The Warrior's Soul*, displays his engagement with the moral complexities of war that show its dire consequences even for the brave soldiers and the humanity even in the midst of war. Side by side Chinua Achebe should be included in the syllabus to understand how writers like Conrad despite their critique of European imperialism betrays their colonial perspective and missions through their failure to portray the real Africa.

Similarly, Arundhati Roy, in her novels and essays confronts state violence, Hindu nationalism, and global capital as modern avatars of imperial power. Postcolonial theory examines the myriad causes and consequences of Western literature on imperialism. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said argues that literature from the imperial center despite its partial criticism of imperialism ultimately supports and legitimizes imperial conquest. George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*, and 1984 warn about fascism from his experience in the Spanish Civil War. H.G. Wells' essay *The Rights of Man* urged resistance to Hitler. Hasan Gyi, a Rohingya refugee poet, and others in exile use poetry and memoir to document genocide, statelessness, and the trauma of flight. In Syria, works like Khaled Khalifa's *Death is Hard Work* depicts the horrors of civil war, dictatorship, and disintegration. The obliteration of civilian life in Gaza—thousands of children killed, entire neighborhoods flattened, and basic infrastructure destroyed—is not simply a political crisis. It is not only genocide but a moral failure of our civilization. However, there is people's resistance against the brutal atrocities committed by Israel and the USA. Millions of people now boycott Israel and come to the streets every day even in the USA, Europe, Australia and Israel. Though they fail to stop the ongoing genocide and destruction, they keep putting up resistance through their writings and activism. One of the most haunting literary responses to the ongoing genocide is the final poem by Refaat Alareer, a Gazan writer and professor of literature, killed in an Israeli airstrike in December 2023. His short poem, "If I Must Die", went viral worldwide after his death:

*If I must die,
let it bring hope,
let it be a tale.*

Conclusion: The Imperative to Teach

The significance of teaching literature in times of war and imperialism is immense. Its ethical, political, and human concerns act as forces of awareness and resistance. Its moral vision questions and humanizes the cost of war, challenging the logic of violence, and keeping alive the hope for a more just world. When journalists are silenced, writers remain. When statues fall, stories endure. When history forgets, literature remembers. Thus, the pedagogical significance of literature lies not in mere imparting pleasure, but in building up conscience of mankind. Let us teach literature not just as art, but as intervention. In times of war, the act of writing, reading and teaching becomes an act of resistance.

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