

Why Literature?

Devkota and Vargas Llosa on Literature

Hriseekesh Upadhyay¹

Abstract

Literature along with music and arts is viewed in both Eastern and Western tradition as an essential mark of civilized human beings. Lacking any of these would render a human to the level of animal existence. We all aspire to rise to the higher level than that. Literature makes us understand our inner feelings and helps us overcome our darker inclinations. It enlightens us about what might be rumbling in the minds of fellow human beings. Literature composed in ancient times or in our own living era, literature of the distant continents or our own homeland makes us evolve into better human beings. The predominance of science and technology in our times makes literature even more important for the mental health and general well-being of humanity.

Keywords: creativity, human and animal existence, universal well-being, citizens in democracy, Vargas Llosa and Mahakavi Devkota

When Mahakavi Laxmi Prasad Devkota was in the height of his literary crest during the 1940s and 1950s litterateurs were taken in high regards in Nepal. Devkota was especially honored for his creative life and powerful outpouring of his creativity in poetry, essays and long narrative epics. In the 1970s and the following decades literary writers in the Western societies were constantly asked questions like why write and what is the use of literary work in contemporary world. Devkota explained why literature mattered for human society in essays like ‘Sahityama Shivatwa’ (universal well-being in literature), ‘Lekhne Bani’ (habit of writing) and ‘Kala ra Jivan’ (art and life) in the context of Nepali society. The same question of why literature in modern global context is taken up by the Peruvian Nobel Laureate in a 2001 essay in The New Republic. This presentation makes an attempt to highlight the views of Devkota and Varga Llosa on Why Literature? in the light of two short essays by these two writers representing different eras and different social and cultural world.

Devkota’s thoughts on the values of literary works are succinctly expressed in the essay Sahityama Shivatwa—on the presence of universal well-being in literature. Vargas Llosa takes up the perennial question of Why Literature more than a half century later after Devkota ruminated on the topic. Both the authors seem to speak in one voice: they

¹ Prof. Upadhyay is affiliated to IACER College, Pokhara University.

observe literature helps shaping human values and contributes to strengthening ideals and beliefs that enhance human life higher than animalistic existence. It is remarkable that the views of these two writers on literature who lived in different continents and in vastly different cultural milieu half a century apart present identical perspectives. They aver without literature humans would be poorer in all areas of experience, understanding and sense of leading a meaningful existence.

Introducing the key concept of ‘Shivatwa’—the general well-being in literature Devkota writes:

Ever since good literature began to be viewed as propagating general well-being of all in society and as the carrier of progress, ‘shibatwa’—general well-being—is regarded as the integral part or value of literature. Whether we view from the perspective of social well-being or the collective sense of beneficence, we can discern the unbreakable and close relations between literature and general well-being, no matter whichever critical perspective we may look from. (From Devkota, *Dadimko Rukhnera*, p. 110, *my translation*).

Of course, Devkota then expands the discourse to the notion of truth--‘satyam’—and beauty—‘sundaram’. These two related ideas take us to the fields of reality and artistry constructed in the language.

Presenting his views on the social function of literature, at the dawn of twenty-first century, the cosmopolitan Peruvian novelist Vargas Llosa writes:

I am convinced that a society in which literature has been relegated—like some hidden vice—to the margins of social and personal life, and transformed into something like a sectarian cult, is a society condemned to become spiritually barbaric, and even to jeopardize its freedom. I wish to offer a few arguments against the idea of literature as luxury pastime, and in favor of viewing it as one of the most primary and necessary understandings of the mind, an irreplaceable activity for the formation of citizens in a modern and democratic society, a society of free individuals (Vargas Llosa, 2001).

Both Devkota and Vargas Llosa strongly relate literature to civilization and higher order of society; the higher a society attains its literary and artistic achievement, the greater would be its indicators in other areas of life.

Mahakavi Devkota argues in his piece: “Any work that harms society could only be poison, not good literature. We call that work as good literature which form the creative flow of those enlightened persons who make efforts to create literary output

with the beautiful blend of heart and intellect. The existence of such work confirms the coherence of social perspective, balanced growth of heart and intellect. It reflects the era it was created, and its progress too depends on its usefulness and its level of beneficence” (Devkota, p. 110, my translation).

Vargas Llosa’s pick in this regard goes like this: “Good literature, while temporarily relieving human dissatisfaction, actually increases it, by developing a critical and nonconformist attitude toward life. It might even be said that literature makes human beings more likely to be unhappy. To live dissatisfied, and at war with existence, is to seek things that may not be there to condemn oneself to fight futile battles, like the battles that Colonel Aureliano Buenda fought in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, knowing full well that he would lose them all” (Vargas Llosa, 2001).

Literature nourishes human thirst to gaze into the unknown and explore the complexities of human aspirations. Regarding the role of readers, Devkota observes: “The sense of general well-being though remained high up to this level, it stood incomplete and not fully formed. Hence, it failed to emerge into the house of solid bricks founded on science and conscience. At this stage we can merely contemplate the notion of universal well-being, but fail to gauge the concrete steps toward it and envision its shape. Absence of science and suspicion as well as parochialism get mixed up with it and its true spirit largely gets crushed” (Devkota, p. 111, my translation.).

The Peruvian author elaborates on this issue of the reader and literature in this way: “(L)iterature has been, and continues to be, as long as it exists, one of the common denominators of human experience through which human beings may recognize themselves and converse with each other, no matter how different their profession, their life plans, their geographical and cultural locations, their personal circumstances. It has enabled individuals, in all the particularities of their lives, to transcend history: as readers of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Dante, and Tolstoy, we understand each other across space and time, and we feel ourselves to be members of the same species because, in the work these writers created, we learn what we share as human beings, what remains common in all of us under the broad range of differences that separates us. Nothing better protects a human being against the stupidity of prejudice, racism, religious or political sectarianism, and exclusivist nationalism than this truth that invariably appears in great literature: that men and women of all nations and places are essentially equal, and only injustice sows among them discrimination, fear and exploitation” (Vargas Llosa, *ibid*).

In a summing up observation on Why Literature?, Devkota states: “Under the influence of literature, we commit ourselves quietly to erase differences. Light glows all around us. Preparation for higher living moves on, on the same old plateau. Sublime characters and emotions of millennia surge within us to form life. We are on the lookout for literary heights to scale the golden peaks of our time, with our calls addressed to epoch shapers of the coming days. But we are integral to larger humanity wherein the unlit glow of humanity glimmers audibly for higher life” (Devkota, p. 115, my translation).

Vargas Llosa puts forth the following in conclusion to the question Why Literature?: “Nothing teaches us better than literature to see, in ethnic and cultural differences, the richness of human patrimony, and to prize those differences as a manifestation of humanity’s multi-faceted creativity. Reading good literature is an experience of pleasure, of course; but it is also an experience of learning what and how we are, in our human integrity and our human imperfection, with our actions, our dreams, and our ghosts, alone and in relationships that link us to others, in our public image and in the secret recesses of our consciousness” (Vargas Llosa, *ibid*).

It is amazing indeed that the two great literary artists writing in distant continents from each other and expressing their views in a timeframe of more than half a century apart came to observe identical sentiment on this perennial topic Why Literature?

Works Cited:

Devkota, Laxmi Prasad. *Dadimko Rukhnera*. 3rd edition. Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan, 1988.

Vargas Llosa, Mario. Why Literature? The Premature Obituary of Books. *The New Republic*, May 14, 2001.