

Theme of Exile in Literature Down the Ages

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Abstract: *What is it that one singularly remarkable feature setting literature apart as an art form? Is it only about a reflection of the society that the author hails from? What if he is born somewhere and he settles down elsewhere? What he writes, is no longer a reflection of the society he hails from. So, what happens to literature when an author is forced into exile? What feelings come into his works? What pain? What pleasure? And how is it manifested through his works - characters and themes?*

Does the genre 'exile literature' have an existence? Are authors who go into exile then deemed 'exile authors'? Reaching a consensus about 'exile literature' as a genre or category runs into a number of problems. But how does literature change as an art form in exile? How is it any different from other forms of literature?

The works of writers which are considered to belong to the category 'exile literature' often have little in common. Similar experiences like being severed from your country of origin or loss of home and language do not, of necessity, find their way into literary texts. But they are very often manifested in myriad ways. The pain of moving to new lands, the awe of taking in new surroundings, the courage in encountering diverse adversities, the sense of alienation gradually giving way to acceptance and adaptation, are all reflected in theme of exile, with powerfully impressive protagonists battling against all odds on foreign grounds, and emerging triumphant.

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Literature in exile goes back a long way with a host of notable works going back to the beginnings of recorded literature and coming down the ages to the present day. One of the earliest recorded works based on exile is the most substantial surviving old English poem, Beowulf that mediates between a settled and unsettled culture, between one which enjoys the benefits of a stable ordered agricultural society and one which relished restlessness of the wandering warrior hero. Beowulf can very aptly be called an epic poem in the sense that it celebrates the achievements of a wandering hero in a narrative verse, and follows the life of a warrior king who performs great deeds of power, including destroying Grendel, the predator that stalks Beowulf's land at night, dwelling apart from men and faith. It is Beowulf who challenges the intruder, who goes into exile from his own country to fight the creature, who drives the wounded monster back to his lair in the wilderness and kills him. Even Beowulf's final struggle with the Dragon is an exile, and Beowulf seems to be a more troubled man, one haunted by a looming sense of destiny, that he who has lived by his determining ancestral inheritance, the sword, must now die by it. The poem ends with the implication of a heroic submission of a benevolent Almighty God.

The Anglo Saxon Period also witnessed other great works based on the theme of exile. In the fragmentary poem known as the battle of Maldon, the fatal war between the Essex nobleman Byrhtnoth and the raiding groups of Vikings is celebrated, with Byrhtnoth seen as something more than a brave and rash warrior – he is seen as a martyr who dies in exile magnanimously giving up his life and those of his loyal vassals for the sake of his kin and his nation. In Widsith we see a form of a soliloquy spoken by an imaginary scop who describes the different people from the different walks of life and royal princes from different lands, all of whom he meets in his journeys to various lands. This scop Widsith has prospered in his journeying whereas the narrator of the poem the Wanderer, who is not necessarily a minstrel, cries on having lost his lord and patron and is now confronted with a bitterly alienating vision of frozen waves, seabirds, and winter cold. The Seafarer presents a contrast between the comforts of a settled land and the troubles and dangers of the sea at once more poignant and more ambiguous. Similar themes are explored in many other works of time and include the Wife's lament and the Husbands message and others. One of the greatest works on the theme of exile belongs to the Medieval Age, and is authored by the man who gave the world the Heroic Couplet, The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer. In the General Prologue, the congregation of the pilgrims at the Tabbar Inn is presented to us according to their estate and rank. The Knight at the top of the social scale seems 'a worthy man', loyal to his knightly vows and embodying the spirit of chivalry. Similarly, the Parson stands for the true mission of the Church to the poor, and the Ploughman for the blessedness of holy poverty. (copy paste a short summary) As a social diary The Canterbury Tales highlights the question of degree and the social perceptions conditioned by

rank. As a piece of work on exile, it delineates the feelings and experiences of the pilgrims who assimilate together at the Tabard Inn before they set off for Canterbury to pray at the tomb of the martyred Saint Thomas Beckett. The Christian poet of the Canterbury tales, one deeply influenced by both Boccaccio and Dante consistently strives to show us a broad spectrum of sinful humanity on an earthly journey, a journey which original readers would readily have recognized as a prelude to a heavenly one.

The Age of Renaissance and Reformation saw the birth and thereafter the rise to name and fame of two of the greatest writers in the history of English literature, Sir Christopher Marlowe and Sir William Shakespeare, some of their more notable works being based on the theme of exile. Marlowe's *Edward II* differs from his other tragedies in that it exploits a far greater equilibrium between its central character and those surrounding him. Where the other plays insistently celebrates the dangerous detachment of the hero from the limiting restraints of society, *Edward II* explores the problem of the moral conflict within an established society. Unlike the Megalomaniac seekers chasing military, political or intellectual power, Edward is born into an inheritance of the royal Government but throws it all away for homosexual love unacceptable to the orthodox historical world in which he is obliged to move. A king in exile without command, a lover denied fulfillment, a lion transformed into a lamb "encompassed by wolves" and a man ultimately reduced to the depths of human misery by his enemies. Edward is Marlowe's most tragic character in what is perhaps his most deeply unconventional tragedy.

Shakespeare fiddles with the theme of exile in many of his tragedies most notably in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. *As You Like It* is replete with incidents of banishment. Characters like Rosalind, Orlando and Duke Senior have been forced into exile from their homes whereas some like Celia, the noble servant Adam and Duke Senior's loyal band of lords have voluntarily abandoned their positions out of a sense of righteousness. The sense of restoration with which the play ends depends upon the formation of a community of exiles in politics and love coming together to soothe their various wounds.

The Restoration Age sees the greatest Exile themed literary work in John Milton's magnum opus *Paradise Lost*. Laced with the theme of exile was the subject of failure of human kind to love according to the divine order and its slow but providential deliverance from the consequences of the Fall. Through the story of the exile of Satan and later on that of Adam and Eve, the poem also focuses on the theme of obedience to the behests implicit in the creative order of the disaster of the Fall is as much ecological as it is moral. One of the greatest testimony to the creativity of the work based on the themes of exile and its subsequent experiences, *Paradise Lost* has gifted to the world the concept of the villain hero – one who constantly presents the temptation to see his rebellion as a heroic gesture of liberation and confuses the human mind with the dilemma of romanticizing the rebel against all odds.

The theme of exile has always been of great interest and enchantment to many writers in the course of literary history and piqued their imagination and triggered their fantastical interests. The reason behind the enduring appeal of exile and its consequent circumstances and ordeals is two-fold – either because their own personal experiences involved their desertion under compulsion of their native country for political reasons, or because, unhappy with their society and its ways, they consciously decided to live elsewhere.

Exile in fiction, as in life, is of different kinds, each kind as individual and as different as the people living through it and penning down their experiences of it. Exile or displacement from the native land, whether under compulsion or a deliberate act of intention is nothing less than a calamity. The word Exile might have negative connotations, but if a holistic view of the word Exile is considered, the definition and elaboration would encompass migrant and non-resident writers and even gallivanting writers roaming from place to place for better and better options to satisfy their creative cravings. Global literature can boast of a large number of writers whose writings have prospered and grown in name and fame beyond the boundaries of nativity while they were in exile. This view has been strongly supported by cultural theorists and literary critics strewn around the globe.

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