

R. J. Rees on Why We Study Literature

M. A. Sami Siddiqui

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
JES College, Jalna

D) Meaning and features literature

R.J. Rees is a critic and literary historian of the 20th century. In his book, 'English Literature: An Introduction for Foreign Readers', he discusses an important question why we study literature. In the beginning he talks about the general response. He points out that today science and its study has become more significant. He also opines that study of literature cannot solve our problems like malnutrition, war, violence, etc. So, literature seems unimportant. Then Rees turns to the definition of literature. He gives two meanings of the term. In general sense, anything that is written is literature. From this point of view, time – tables, catalogs, text – books, travel – brochures, advertisements, news – items etc. are literature. In a serious sense, literature is writing which expresses and communicates feelings and attitudes towards life. Rees give the comparison of an account of London from an encyclopedia and a poem about

London. He thus establishes the fact that literature expresses feelings and attitudes.

For giving the second quality of literature, Rees compares journalism and literary writings. He says that a journalist writes of and for his own day. On the other hand literary writings have permanence. Rees is against the categorization of good and 'bad' literature. He is of opinion that literature should be a mirror of human nature. It should be close to life. This closeness comes out of actual human experience. Again, the quality of this experience is more important than its quantity.

One more feature of literature is originality. Rees quotes Shakespeare and Pope and says that being original does not mean expressing new themes but looking at the old ones in a new way. Next to originality is craftsmanship. A writer should have complete command over the language he uses. A prose writer should know grammar and usage. A poet should know the

different verse techniques. At the same time, it should be noted that technique is not everything. If a person knows the technique of writing but has no power of imagination; he cannot be a good writer. Creative imagination makes literature lively. Apart from these qualities, good literature also has moral consciousness.

II) Reasons for studying literature

Rees then comes to the original question of 'why we study literature'. He says that we study literature to know about a foreign country. He gives the examples of Shakespeare's historical plays and novels of D.H. Lawrence in this regard. There are some general reasons of studying literature. In civilized countries people study literature to appear cultured or well read. Students study literature to pass examination. Rees points out that such an aim of studying literature is certainly bad because it does not improve the imagination of the students or readers.

Among some other reasons of studying literature is to seek pleasure. Some literary works give direct and immediate pleasure. Others demand concentrated reading. The great works of art including literature can be enjoyed if we have a desire to read them. At each reading, we discover new pleasures and problems. This shows

that literature can be fully enjoyed after repeated reading and much thought.

But, the best reason for studying literature is moral education. Rees refers to Plato, Sir Philip Sidney and Dr. Samuel Johnson in this regard. He says that literature enlarges the reader's experience of life. Though it is not a real experience, it helps one to become a full man. By seeing the common faults of others, we can learn what not to do. Like history or philosophy, it gives us a better understanding of ourselves and our fellow beings. Rees calls it an important step towards international understanding and world peace.

III) Dangers of studying literature

Rees concludes the essay by pointing out two dangers of studying literature. One is the habit of thinking of the past. Another is the habit of reading books about books instead of the original text. Thus the essay deals with three aspects: meaning and features literature, reasons for studying literature and dangers of studying literature

Reference:

- Rees, R. J., English Literature: An Introduction for Foreign Readers, Macmillan, 1973.