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Research Article

Exploring the Role of Literature in Social Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This is a research article that explores this complicated aspect of literature in improving social sustainability. It will look at how literary work can help in the development of empathy, cognition, inclusion and positive social transformation in various communities. The paper has shown how literature impacted such values in the society, the struggle against bias and the encouragement to engage in common action through a critical analysis of the genre of literature as well as bridging the time gaps. The findings underline the extent to which the application of the literature can be deep as the tool of the social sustainability promotion and the establishment of the more equal and peaceful society. The literature has a significant role to play in social integration, strength, and overall wellbeing in terms of empathy, adequate discourse, and empowering individuals. Literature is also one of the best educators that help in strengthening the critical thinking and citizenship. It is through literature that future generations have the ability to be informed, empathetic, and socially aware citizens of the world through practicing the multivocality and multi-storifying within the academic curriculum. This study highlights the significance of literature in creating empathy, disrupting the prevailing paradigms, and causing positive social change and may eventually result in the creation of a more stable and just world.

KEYWORDS: positive social transformation, human values, social change

FULL PAPER**Introduction**

Literature is an important aspect of the society and this is why it has been in existence since the beginning of human thought. At first it was passed orally as a story, and progressively it took a different form of multiple genres, and forms of publication. It has come to the rescue of human beings during crisis and during the happy moments as well. Human survival cannot be complete without literature. The question now emerges on whether literature has contributed to social sustainability, as well, by teaching human values to the readers/listeners and promoting a more inclusive human society, which results in the desired phase of social sustainability and cohesion. The research being done stands on the assumption that it will be beneficial and help to make the society more sustainable.

Literature Review

Empirical studies have offered important information on the position of literature in social sustainability. Empathy and the ability to comprehend different viewpoints have been examined in a number of studies with respect to the influence of literature. For instance, a survey by Djikic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu (2013) shows that reading literary fiction enhances empathy by encouraging readers to engage with complex characters and their emotional experiences. Likewise, Bal and Veltkamp (2013) also concluded that reading literary fiction enhances the thinking process and the level of empathy compared to that of reading nonfiction and popular fiction.

Besides, literature has been found to nurture inclusiveness through contention of prejudices and stereotypes. The study by Aguiar and Lopes (2016) is an empirical study that examined how literature contributes to the advancement of inclusivity and discovered that reading literature with heterogeneous characters and plotlines led to a decrease in prejudice and greater acceptance of differences. Furthermore, literature in relation to mitigating the implicit biases was also examined in one of the works by Gottschall (2012) and it was found that implicit anti-stereotypical literature that narrates a story can lead to the development of more positive attitudes towards the marginalised groups. Literature also offers a communication and cultural interaction, which makes people of various origins interdependent with each other. A study by Mar and Oatley (2008) showed that the reading of narrative fiction encourages cognitive and affective interaction, being able to take a perspective on issues and focusing on cross-cultural awareness. Moreover, the study by Stroessner, Fazio, and Schaller (2011) proves that outgroup bias can be decreased and more positive attitude towards outgroup members can be achieved through exposure to narratives.

In addition to that, literature also encourages collective acting since it has the ability to sensitize people on social issues and ensure that readers become the drivers of positive changes. A research was conducted by Paluck, Shepherd, and Aronow (2016) to evaluate the use of narratives in encouraging pro-social behaviour and the researchers found that exposure to narratives that emphasized positive social norms had the effect of enhancing individuals' motivation to participate in prosocial behaviours. Equally, research by Smith, Melo, and Lubar (2014), and Iversen and Hesselink-Louw (2017) highlight the revolution that literature can bring about in the pursuit of activism and social mobilisation.

Objectives of the Study

This research paper will discuss the overall multi-dimensional effect of literature on enhancing social sustainability and how it will grow towards making a more just and balanced society. Moreover, the paper will discuss how literature can shape the values of society, social problems, and collective action. This study identifies the importance of literature as a strong instrument to enhance social sustainability and a more reliable and desirable world through an in-depth examination of the impact of literature on the development of empathy, dialogue, and community involvement.

Material and Methodology

The research uses both the mixed approach, which includes reviewing the empirical literature and a qualitative analysis of the chosen literary texts. A comprehensive search will be done in the academic databases and empirical studies will be selected on the basis of relevance and rigor of methodology particularly those that have investigated the impact of literature on social sustainability. Close analysis and reading will be used to conduct a qualitative analysis of literary works as well. The chosen literary works of different genres will be discussed to outline the important aspects that lead to social sustainability, i.e. the reflection of diverse personalities, the discussion of social problems, and the prospects of empathy growth and community activity. The qualitative study will be used to give the insight concerning the ways literature responds to challenges in the society and advances social sustainability.

Discussion

Literature is an important element in development of empathy. The description of various characters and their emotional lives enables the readers to work and connect with various views, getting to know better how others feel and advance the empathy. The results of empirical research presented by Djokic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu (2013) and Bal and Veltkamp (2013) allow believing that the reading of literary fiction improves empathy through emotional transportation and mental processing. With the ability to relate the readers to the lives and plight of fictional characters, literature

provides the reader an opportunity to empathise with people who have different backgrounds and thus should empathise as a key feature of social sustainability.

Moreover, books overcome prejudices and encourage diversity. Literature can challenge the views of society and break down stereotypes through the presentation of various characters, stories and experiences. The empirical research by Aguiar and Lopes (2016) shows that when people are exposed to literature depicting various representations, more persons become accepting of differences and less discriminatory. Providing readers with alternative viewpoints and breaking stereotypes, literature makes readers challenge their prejudices and a more heterogeneous and equal society.

Along with the development of empathy and inclusivity, literature can also help to carry out dialogue and exchange of cultures. The qualitative study of literature shows that literature offers a space where different people of different categories can share their stories and get a chance to understand and connect. According to Mar and Oatley (2008), reading narrative fiction facilitates cognitive and affective experiences as it enables the reader to be in the position of the characters and understand the culture and life of other people. Literature can enhance discourse and eliminate boundaries and promote cross-cultural awareness through these engaging experiences.

Literature encourages group activities since it educates people on addressing social problems and motivates the reader to be an agent of change. The review of empirical research indicates the transformational power of literature to encourage people to act in a prosocial manner and social activism. Paluck, Shepherd, and Aronow (2016) show that the exposure to the narratives with a focus on the positive social norms and collective action makes people more motivated to engage in the pro-social activities. Through the telling of stories that point out social problems, and provide answers to them, literature encourages the reader to identify his or her agency and act to bring about social sustainability.

Literary works tend to present the readers with varied and not so clear characters which act as the trigger towards empathy and comprehension. As an example, the book by James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, is about racial identity and the struggle against which the African Americans fight in the United States (Baldwin, 1955). Experiences of the characters help the readers to learn more about the challenges and feelings that accompany racial discrimination. Literature offers an avenue of looking at different cultural orientations which brings out a feeling of connection among people of diverse backgrounds. The story by Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* explores the issues of a dystopian world and stresses the role of community and collective responsibility (Butler, 1993). By making audiences plunge into this thought-provoking story, Butler shows readers the possibility of unity and cooperation in adversity. Literature frequently has social injustices as a subject that

introduces the reader to the reality of disadvantaged groups in the society and elicits empathies. Toni Morrison in her *Beloved* portrays the terrors of slavery and its historical effects on people and groups with heartbreaking results (Morrison, 1987). The character of the protagonist takes readers through the process of dehumanisation of slavery and challenges them to put into considerations the significance of healing and reconciliation. Literary works that value representation and give different voices a voice can be used to address the biases and inclusivity. *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng is a book that deals with such themes as identity, race, and class, employing various characters (Ng, 2017). Ng encourages readers to challenge preconceptions and create a more inclusive perception of human experiences because of offering various viewpoints. Literature can dismantle the stereotypes and biases by showing more subtle and complicated representations of people and groups. In *The Midnight Children* by Salman Rushdie, the story is authored to intertwine different cultural and religious identities, and bust the stereotype and to emphasize on the similarities of different people, regardless of their cultural differences (Rushdie, 1980). This stereotyping breakage encourages empathy and understanding, which are factors in social sustainability. Literary works have the potential to find safe spaces within the marginalised communities since they provide true representations and stories that affirm their experiences. The author "Sing, Unburied, Sing" by Jesmyn Ward deals with the life of black people in the American South, capturing the idea of race, family, and systemic oppression (Ward, 2017). Through giving a voice to the marginalised, the novel by Ward creates empathy and understanding and empowers the marginalised communities.

Literature can often be viewed as the mirror of the society and, therefore, it reflects historical and political realities and creates critical thinking. The story of the adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a typical representative of the novel which criticizes the social conventions especially about race and morality (Twain, 1885). With the help of Huck, the reader is exposed to the effects of racism and is urged to challenge and question the status quo in society. Literary works can be effective advocacy and activism tools that encourage readers to act and positively change society. The book *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf is a feminist manifesto which promotes the equality of genders and the issue of the voices of the women in the literary world and the society (Woolf, 1929). Woolf makes readers think about the need to defy the patriarchal order and promote a more fair world. Literature can bring the community to action and engage them in the process of change by raising social issues and making readers the agents of change. The *Book Thief* by Markus Zusak is a story that uses words and literature to show how they transform people during the Holocaust (Zusak, 2005). By the experience of the protagonist, readers can see the strength of narration and encourage them to rise against injustice and oppression. Literature can be very essential in liberalizing social sustainability through the encouragement of empathy,

challenges biasness, dialogue, and motivating people to take action together. Using the research of empirical studies and analysis of literary fiction, one realizes that literature could influence the culture of the society, form empathy and understanding, and give a power to people and communities to act to make the world more equal and peaceful.

Conclusion

Literature promotes social sustainability because it shows in the spirit of empathy, inclusiveness, dialogue, and action. Empirical studies have always shown the effect of the literature on the development of empathy, diminishment of prejudices, cultural exchange, and the motivation to take action together. Literature enables people to be knowledgeable, kind, and socially aware world dwellers through the reflection of different stories and social concerns. As the society continues to become more inclusive, fair and united, the literature will become a powerful tool in addressing the social problems and creating a better and sustainable future. The use of literature is also important in helping in the development and upkeep of it.

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