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Human Rights

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Human Rights through Literature

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"Human rights" refers to the basic rights and freedoms such as the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law. Wikipedia defines human rights as "are moral principles or norms, which describe certain standards of human behavior, and are regularly protected as legal rights in municipal and international law. They are commonly understood as inalienable fundamental rights "to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being, and which are inherent in all human beings regardless of their nation, location, language, religion, ethnic origin or any other status. We all know the power of literature as a source of transformation not only in the mind of the reader but also in society in general. Literature does have the power to change lives. Literature has a unique power to touch the hearts and minds and engage readers in a way that is distinctly different from other texts. It has the capacity to drive change and motivate people to take action. Literature can cultivate a better understanding of Human Rights through critical evaluation of characters, analysis of scenarios, and examination of diverse historical voice. Students will not only gain pragmatic skills for critical reading, but will also begin to understand their responsibility in creating change while realizing they are accountable for their actions.

Through literature people can find their place in the world, feel they belong and discover their sense of responsibility. Today's understanding of human rights was created through various factors and no one can deny the role played by certain forms of literature in forming this concept of human rights. Naturally, literature can be used to promote human rights in undeveloped countries and create awareness among the young generation. All literary genres deal with human rights issues, and thus – directly or indirectly – promotes values of human rights. The goal of this course on human rights through literature is to combine the literary driving force with motivating students for action. The course is based on the belief in the enormous power of literature to drive change, and create awareness among people of their rights and the rights of others. One main objectives of this course are the representation of human rights violations as a social problem and pointing out how reforming society is both urgent and necessary. In order to explore this dilemma, this course focuses on the intersection between human rights advocacy and the various cultural forms that explicitly attempt to participate in human rights discourse. Through studying poems, novels, drama and short stories that reflect on the atrocities of slavery, oppression of women, racial discrimination and inequality.

Of all the literary forms, fiction is perhaps the most closely related to social and political reality and the most useful in advocating human rights. As Rockwell says, "the patterned connection between society and fiction is so discernible and so reliable that literature ought to be added to the regular tools of social investigation" Bradbury sees the novel as "a mode of inquiry into the knowable, analogous in its empirical modes, and methods to other forms of written inquiry." Balzac has defined the novel as "the private history of nations". This definition points out the relation between the novel as a literary genre and the national identity. Undoubtedly the scope, subject matter and structure of the novel makes it "more than other literary forms, exposed to the facts of a time, the articulable relationships of a time, the ways of knowing a time, (and) the ideological interpretation of a time". The relationship between the novelist and his age is stressed by Edward Said who believes that, "Every novelist is of his time, however much his imagination may take him beyond it". In other words, novelists cannot escape from the political, social and intellectual realities of their society. "writer has no choice", Ngugi WaThiong'o wrote in his 'Preface to Writers in Politics', "whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in society." The writer must meet the challenge of his time and strive to tell the people the truth of the time, and reflect in his works the sense and spirit of the time that shaped his sensibility. He must give articulation to "the consciousness of his time that he shares with the group of which historical circumstances, class, period, perspective makes him a part". Through analysis of a variety of human rights storytelling genres that reflect a range of contexts, this course will suggest that it is impossible to understand human rights without also thinking about the stories that create and sustain their idea.

Poetry is also a powerful means through which poets strive to make change in their society. In the Arab World, poetry was always associated with freedom movements and the struggle against colonialism in the 20th century. It can, then, be used to spread awareness of human rights. There are many ways in which human rights issues can be successfully voiced through poetry. Poetry can deal with racial discrimination, social injustice,