

Excerpts from the book *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World* by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Western classical music is one of the richest and most important art forms in the Western world. In the Renaissance this music continued to be closely allied to medieval music and most of its inspiration came from Christianity and the Church, especially from the Gregorian Chant which was the most pure form of church music. However, gradually the courts began also to become patrons of music and during the Renaissance one begins to see the introduction of instrumentation in addition to the human voice even in religious music and the development of what is called secular music and the rudiments of the opera.

After the twelfth/eighteenth century, however, music also gradually became more worldly and with the rise especially of the Romantic movement subjective, psychological and emotional elements became strongly present in it.

There exists in the West, in addition to classical music [there are] folk and popular music . . . Popular music . . . has come to the fore especially during the last century as a direct expression of modern ideas and sentiments and in fact has had an important role to play in both reflecting the state of each generation of Western society and contributing to the psychological state of that generation. One can see the power of popular music in the types of music that have developed among the young during the last few decades with wild rhythms, played very loudly and with frenzy. As examples, one can cite rock, heavy metal and similar kinds of music which appeal to the lowest animal instincts and attract tens of thousands of young people to concerts which often result in riots and social disorder. To say the least, these kinds of music do not issue from submission to God nor lead the soul to submission, nor are most of its star performers, who have become among the cultural heroes of the current scene, models of spiritual discipline or moral probity.

And yet these kinds of music have found a large attraction among the youth in the rest of the world including some Islamic countries. These kinds of music both reflects the rebellion of the youth against the norms of the society in which they have been born and also to a large extent contribute to the sense of "freedom" from order although this freedom is often nothing other than the freedom of the lower impulses of the soul and the psyche from any higher principle rather than freedom in its spiritual and religious sense.

Literature

Every civilization has its own literature and the West is no exception. It has also produced great literature not only in Latin which was the classical language of the West but even during the Middle Ages and certainly later in many of the local vernacular languages. It is also interesting to note that the early literary works in European vernacular languages had to do with religion and traditional Christian civilization as did the Divine Comedy of Dante in Italian, which is perhaps the greatest work of Western literature, the Sermons of Meister Eckhart in German or Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in English. Like the other fields of art, however, with the Renaissance there was a sudden rise of what one could call secular literature.

The novel in the modern sense of the term is a form that did not exist in classical Islamic literature although short prose works which could be called short philosophical novels were written in both Arabic and Persian but with very different aims from the modern novel. As mentioned before, the central form of literature in Islam continued to be poetry whether it was of the epic or lyrical kind. In contrast, in the West the novel became gradually the central vehicle for the expression of literature, much more important than poetry which began to decline especially in the areas dominated by the major European languages.

The novel gradually became a mirror to reflect society and the actions of human beings and from the late thirteenth/nineteenth and early fourteenth/twentieth centuries to penetrate more and more into the psychological realm within the consciousness of the individual. The novel became a mirror of life itself and as longer novels began to be written especially in the thirteenth/nineteenth century, the novel became a world of its own in a sense independent of the created world outside.

It is true that a number of the great novelists of the thirteenth/nineteenth century such as the Russians Tolstoy and Dostoevski or the French Victor Hugo were men who had a religious vision and who believed in God, but gradually the very experience of reading the novel in a sense became a substitute for sacred and religious art and life. Literature, especially in the form of the novel, began to create an ambience to compensate many readers for the loss of God in Western society while at the same time the novel continued to be a profound critic of what was going on in European and American societies. Some of the European writers such as Charles Dickens in England, Emile Zola in France or John Steinbeck in America had an important role to play in pointing to some of the injustices and evils of the society of their time but by and large the novel moved literature away from the religious role it had played in earlier Western society and still plays in what remains of the traditional Islamic world.

It is not possible for a Muslim to understand the West fully without knowing at least something about such figures and also the role of literature and especially the novel in the modern West. Again like painting, literature in the form of the novel and to a lesser extent poetry has been a mirror for each age reflecting some of the deepest cultural impulses of each generation. Altogether, however, as the very process of modernization has accelerated, the impact of the men and women of letters has by and large decreased especially in the last few decades with the predominant influence of the visual media of television and the cinema. Today, people read less and the central role played by the written medium in the West from the time of the spread of the art of printing to the fourteenth/twentieth century is now waning to some extent.

Despite everything, literature continues to survive and is one of the means whereby the more sensitive souls of Western society, especially those who have been given the art of writing and the keen eye with which to observe the crisis in which the modern world is immersed, continue to play a role as critics of the modern world. At the same time modern literature also continues to fulfill its share in the destruction of the sacred and substitution of a subjective world for one in which God's presence is ubiquitous. It is necessary to remain aware of both of these roles of literature in modern Western society.