

Art for Life's Sake: Social Aesthetics and Human Experience in English and Indian Literature

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Abstract

This research paper examines the principle of “art for life’s sake” and its manifestation in English and Indian literature. Moving beyond the aesthetic doctrine of “art for art’s sake,” this study explores how literature becomes a vehicle for social justice, political consciousness, and human experience. Through close readings of Sharankumar Limbale’s *The White Paper*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, and Derek Walcott’s “A Far Cry from Africa,” the paper argues that literature rooted in lived realities not only reflects society but also challenges its structures. These texts demonstrate how art becomes an ethical, political, and transformative force.

Keywords: Art for Life’s Sake, Social Aesthetics, English Literature, Indian Literature, Dalit Literature, Postcolonial Writing, Social Justice, Human Experience, Literary Ethics, Marginalized Voices

1. Introduction: Art for Life's Sake in English Literature

The debate between “art for art’s sake” and “art for life’s sake” has shaped literary criticism for centuries. While the former emphasizes aesthetic autonomy, the latter insists that literature must engage with human suffering, social inequality, and moral responsibility.

Writers such as Charles Dickens, George Orwell, Toni Morrison, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o exemplify the belief that literature should illuminate the lived experiences of marginalized communities. In the Indian context, Dalit literature, postcolonial writing, and feminist narratives strongly align with the philosophy of art serving life.

Thus, “art for life’s sake” positions literature as:

- A mirror of social realities
- A critique of oppressive structures
- A tool for empowerment
- A medium for collective memory

The three selected texts embody this tradition in distinct yet interconnected ways.

2. Sharankumar Limbale’s The White Paper: Dalit Aesthetics and Social Truth

Sharankumar Limbale’s *The White Paper* (Shwetpatra) is a seminal work in Dalit autobiographical writing. It rejects aesthetic ornamentation and foregrounds raw, unfiltered social truth.

2.1 Literature as Testimony

Limbale’s narrative exposes caste violence, humiliation, and systemic exclusion. His writing becomes a testimony of lived oppression, aligning perfectly with the principle of art serving life.

2.2 Dalit Aesthetics

Limbale argues that Dalit literature must be evaluated not by classical aesthetic standards but by its ethical and experiential authenticity. Beauty lies in truth, not in stylistic refinement.

2.3 Social Function of Literature

The text challenges:

- Brahmanical hegemony
- Social stratification
- Cultural invisibility of Dalits

Thus, *The White Paper* transforms literature into a political act, a form of resistance, and a demand for dignity.

3. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: Politics of Love, Memory, and Transgression

Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel is a powerful example of literature that intertwines personal trauma with political history.

3.1 Art as Social Critique

The novel critiques:

- Caste hierarchy
- Patriarchal norms
- State violence
- Colonial residues

Roy uses narrative fragmentation and lyrical prose to expose how “small things” — gestures, memories, forbidden relationships — reveal the larger injustices of society.

3.2 The Personal as Political

The tragic love between Ammu and Velutha becomes a symbol of resistance against caste and gender oppression. Their story embodies the idea that private emotions are shaped by public structures.

3.3 Narrative as Healing

Roy's art becomes a space for:

- Remembering silenced histories
- Questioning social norms
- Humanizing marginalized voices

Thus, the novel exemplifies art's capacity to confront and transform life.

4. Derek Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa": Conflict, Identity, and Moral Dissonance

Derek Walcott's poem addresses the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya and the poet's own mixed heritage.

4.1 Art as Ethical Dilemma

The poem dramatizes the conflict between:

- African anti-colonial struggle
- British imperial legacy
- The poet's divided identity

Walcott refuses simplistic answers, instead presenting the moral complexity of colonial violence.

4.2 Literature as Historical Witness

The poem becomes a witness to:

- Brutality of colonial rule

- Resistance movements
- Cultural fragmentation

Walcott's art is inseparable from the political realities of race, history, and belonging.

4.3 The Poet's Inner Conflict

The famous line "How choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?" captures the agony of hybrid identity. Here, art becomes a space for negotiating cultural inheritance and personal conscience.

5. Comparative Analysis: Art as Social Responsibility

Across these texts, several common threads emerge:

5.1 Literature as Resistance

- Limbale resists caste oppression
- Roy resists social and political authoritarianism
- Walcott resists colonial narratives

5.2 Literature as Voice for the Marginalized

All three works foreground communities historically silenced or misrepresented.

5.3 Literature as Ethical Engagement

These texts demand that readers confront uncomfortable truths about society.

5.4 Literature as Transformation

Art becomes a catalyst for:

- Awareness
- Empathy
- Social change

Thus, "art for life's sake" is not merely a theory but a lived practice in these works.

6. Conclusion

The selected texts demonstrate that literature is most powerful when it engages with life's complexities. Whether through Limbale's autobiographical realism, Roy's political storytelling, or Walcott's poetic moral inquiry, art becomes a force that shapes consciousness and challenges injustice. These works reaffirm that literature is not an escape from life but a profound engagement with it — an instrument of truth, resistance, and transformation.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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