Medieval Literature - A discussion with reference to Chaucer , Gower and Langland

Chaucers life, represents a period of rapid social and political change. It was a period of the wars, plagues, famines, revolts, reform etc ,which left the English society with contrasting features. We notice growth of patriotic nationalism as well as of social and political unrest, rise of new chivalry as well as the persistence with the old ethics, movements for reform as well as height of corruption among the nobility and the clergy. Many powerful trends under the influence of the Renaissance humanism were also introduced. These were the religious freedom and the spread of knowledge among the common people. This spread of learning was in the language that the common people understood very well. Hence the development of “English” language and learning stands out as the main features of Chaucer’s age. Chaucer’s own writings, especially of the last phase of his life, represent these developments fully well. That is why, Chaucer can rightly be called the representative of his age because he gives us a near complete description of the above mentioned conditions. Chaucer, owing to his emphasis on “the English” and “the human” is a largely a true embodiment of the spirit of his age.

Known as the first English author, Chaucer wrote in English at a time when Latin was considered the  or language which would not change, and most of the upper-class English spoke French. He chose the language of the lower-class Saxons rather than Norman nobility and this has perplexed readers and scholars for centuries. Chaucer did not try to impress his readers with his French, but began to develop English into a highly flexible literary language. Chaucer’s writings are numerous and show the range of his learning to the maximum. Besides vast knowledge, they also reflect his experience of life which he had gone through. In his works, we find the themes and characters which are a direct product of his close contact with the English society and the learning of his age.  Chaucer wrote many works, some of which like The Canterbury Tales (circa 1375-1400) he never finished. He pioneered many recognizably “modern” novelistic techniques, including psychologically complex characters: many claim that Troilus and Criseyde is the first English novel because of the way its main characters are always operating at two levels of response, verbal and intellectual. Chaucer is credited with the development of the pentameter, the 10-syllable, five-stress line that became the building block of English poetry . It was inspired by an Italian poetic line. It was Chaucer who first translated a Petrarchan sonnet into English. Chaucers books and manuscripts give us direct access to the culture and glimpses of the late medieval world . Chaucer’s great achievement was to establish English as a major literary language, and his poetry has been loved for generations for its humanity and humour. Chaucer is the writer whose work had the broadest range, writing dream poems, long narrative poems about doomed love affairs, royal commissions, translations, and even early works of science writing. Chaucer most famous work, The Canterbury Tales, also has similarities with Italian literature: the unfinished poem draws on the technique of the frame tale as practiced by Boccaccio in The Decameron .The Canterbury Tales innovates on this model in significant ways. But unlike in Decameron where the story tellers are a group of ten nobles, Chaucer’s tales are told by persons of the whole spectrum of the middle class, from the Knight to the Pardoner and the Summoner. And the tales are not told in the order that might be expected—from highest-ranking pilgrim to lowest.

There is much speculation as to why Chaucer left The Canterbury Tales unfinished. One theory is that he left off writing them in the mid 1390s, some five or six years before his death. It is possible that the enormousness of the task overwhelmed him. He had been working on The Canterbury Tales for ten years or more, and he was not one quarter through his original plan. He may have felt he could not divide his time successfully between his writing and his business interests.

Chaucer died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey primarily due to the fact that his last residence was on the abbey grounds. So important was he deemed as a poet that the space around his tomb was later dubbed the Poets’ Corner, and luminaries of English letters were laid to rest around him.

Although Chaucer is the most prominent figure of his age, certain other poets also are of great importance. First among them is Chaucer’s friend John Gower (1332-1408). However Gower lacks the element of interest, clarity and charm which are features of Chaucer’s poetry. Another important poet of the age was William Langland (1336-1400). His poem, “The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman” is an allegory of 15,000 lines. It is confused and formless but under the conventional device of dream, represents the social and religious conditions of his time. He exposes the corruption of the clergy, the greed of the landlords. Though he was not a reformer of religion and politics, he has portrayed the miseries of the masses. Although written for the people, its language is strikingly rustic and old-fashioned and it follows the Anglo-Saxon alliteration, the last English poem to do so.

In prose, the Age of Chaucer remains quite barren. The translation of the Bible by Wyclif makes use of a vigorous artless English. His pamphlets are significant in the sense that in these, English has been used for theological discussion. Previously only Latin was considered fit for this purpose. The age of Chaucer, therefore, is dominated by poetry. Poets of various rank and background give us a useful picture of their times. Although they vary in form and style, they have shown a considerable measure of originality and realism which are two great contributions of the medieval writers.