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Philosophy and literature: Redefining boundaries

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Abstract

Martha C. Nussbaum, along with a few other philosophers contributed towards bridging philosophy and literature, rendering it “a form that is the most appropriate one for their expression”. The multiple dimensions of literary studies were understood in the context of debates on self-understanding and the appropriateness of the methods of self-understanding. In this paper I intend to reflect upon Nussbaum’s take on philosophy of literature with the intension of finding out the reasons behind ethical grounding of literatures, especially focusing upon its impact upon the moral well-being of an individual. Nussbaum argues in favor of establishing an inter-connection between ethical enquiry and literature, directing one to act towards the ultimate morality of time. She addresses the pressure of the current scenario while discussing whether pondering upon the ethical aspect entails negligence towards the “textual content” of literature. Therefore this paper exhibits a shift in reading of literature; importance of addressing the ethical aspect of it. This transformation is a significant one in the sense that it creates an impact upon the crucial dimension of the notion of well-being.

Keywords: Literature, Philosophy, Nussbaum, well-being.

Introduction

Whether literature can be treated in the light of moral philosophy is a matter of debate based on which conceptual studies have been pursued. I am particularly concerned with the unambiguous inter-relationship between philosophy and literature on the account of which a significant philosophical interpretation of literature is possible, which would otherwise remain missed. Literary works often act in the form of an outlet for the creative side of the author which else remains under cover. Understanding such works in the light of moral philosophy provides them an added credibility, and enhances their importance. In this paper I intend to revisit this link, while highlighting the importance of it. There are a number of questions which one has to confront with while redefining the boundaries between philosophy and literature, while at the same time focusing on the relevance of philosophy in literature or vice versa. How philosophical analysis of a literature adds value to its content? Or, does the philosophical analysis of literature overshadows the story it carries. Is this inter relation necessary one based on causation or is it a mere correlation? The disagreements between scholars working in this area is rife and their arguments are often equally convincing. As a consequence, an endeavor in this field is not straightforward.

Martha C. Nussbaum, along with a few other philosophers contributed towards associating philosophy and literature, rendering it a form that is the most appropriate one for their expression in their viewpoint. The multiple dimensions of literary studies were understood in the background of discussions on self-understanding and the appropriateness of the approaches towards self-understanding.

Nussbaum argues in favor of creating an inter-connection between ethical enquiry and literature, directing one to act towards the ultimate morality of time. She discusses whether pondering upon the ethical aspect entails negligence towards the textual content of literature. The shift in reading beyond the layers has been addressed by her, particularly looking upon the importance of addressing its ethical aspects. This shift is a significant one in the sense that it creates an impact upon the crucial dimension of the notion of well-being. Individual narration of stories had many objectives behind them including entertainment. However, if one would look more deeply into the matter, then various other reasons behind creation of such stories could be traced upon leading one towards a new perspective of perceiving them.

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According to some scholars, stories bear a meaning to themselves not only in order to elevate the purpose of story writing but also in order to convey the unsaid, unspoken thoughts. Literary sources often have a deep connection with the ethical dimension of philosophy based on which one could trace an intimate connection between morals & literature. If one looks into the stories portrayed by the *Digha Nikāya* then the profoundness of its ethical side could no longer remain unpronounced. The stories were woven by the fine threads of morality making a place for itself within the material garb of *what ought to be done under what condition*. Many of these stories had been a source of dilemma and have created controversy over the ages. They have been intertwined with the lives of people reading them, their backgrounds, and the conditions of the society where they lived. As a result, their content developed a number of shades under the spectrum of multiple ways of understanding them, and a single way of interpretation them was not prevalent anymore^[7].

For example, if one looks into the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, king *Kūṭadant's* sudden transition in approach towards animals from being merciless to being merciful towards them could be subject to various interpretations. Lord Buddha's words may have unleashed the moral side of him from under the shackles of selfishness, and have brought him into the light of morality. He might have also considered the possibility of himself being born as a non-human animal in his next life and thus being subject to ill treatment. Fear in some form worked behind the transition observed in his approach. Fear of losing what he had and at the same time also worked his *desire* for mental peace and tranquility, reformed him to a new man who was a lot more different from the *Kūṭadanta* whom all knew.

In a similar way, within the *Mahāsudāsana Sutta*, desire seemed to play a pivotal role. The king lived a life read about in fairly-tales, embroidered by luxury and splendor. Finally he ended up giving away all material wealth possessed by him in exchange of the reward of mental peace and tranquility, which he desired above anything else. In the life of king *Mahāsudāsana* *desire* seems to play a very important role. In the initial years of his life his desire for material comforts lead him towards the attainment of a luxury embedded lifestyle, while later on his desire for the attainment of peace and tranquility surpassed all other desires.

Another interesting idea has been put forward by D.D. Raphael which emphasizes upon the fact that any work of literature could be treated as a work of philosophy as well. He argues in favor of literatures being embellished by thought provoking materials which could be equally treated as philosophical writings, in the same vein as Nussbaum.¹ In order to capture the essence of any literary work, it seems crucial to emphasize upon the ethical impetus borne by it. Scholars have attempted to analyze this matter by looking at it from various perspectives in order to bring in more clarity within the understanding of their inter relationship. Any text rendered as literary could create a philosophical understanding of it with respect to a certain targeted

¹ D. D. Raphael, Can Literature be Moral Philosophy? , *New Literary History*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Literature and/as Moral Philosophy (Autumn, 1983), pp. 1-12, The John Hopkins University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468990>, Accessed on: 16-03-2016 05:58 UTC

audience, in a way diluting the gap created between moral philosophy and literary works. On the other hand, within philosophical writings one could place her arguments embossed within stories and thus choose non-relational ways of persuasion. Such inter-relation can be very well witnessed while analyzing Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, *Dighanikāya*, *Jātaka* stories *et al.* These have been based upon self-observation which in turn is inter-linked to philosophical analysis of the text.

George Eliot says the following in relation to the above discussion:

My writing is simply a set of experiments in life an endeavor to see what our thought & emotion may be capable of- what stories of motive, actual or hinted as possible, give promise of a better life after which we may strive... I became more & more timid with less daring to adopt any formula which does not get itself clothed for me in some human figure & individual experience & perhaps that is a sign that if I help others to see at all it must be through the medium of art^[2].

From the above lines, it becomes evident how in Elliotts view art forms play the role of the fruit bearer of real life stories, to which one could relate more easily without the requirement of any further medium. Literary works are made alive by incorporating characters from real life, to which one could easily relate oneself, thus making the task of understanding the authors intention easier. Authors intention could be anything ranging from giving a clear moral message or telling her own story. The purpose gets well served if and when she uses the right framework of description, which according to Elliot, is made up of real, individual experiences.

Also, when one tries to emphasize upon any problem existing within any philosophical approach, the task gets easier when supported by examples. As for example when an environmental pluralist tries to show how pluralism is distinct from relativism while building a case in favor of pluralism, using examples while making her point makes the task a lot easier. In addition if the examples used could relate to human life scenarios, well connected to human relations per se then it becomes even simpler for the reader to get hold of the ongoing discussion. Thus stories depicting human life often tend to convey important points which are not so easily conveyable otherwise.

I would like to highlight upon the example from real life, which in a way has simplified ones understanding of the distinction between pluralism and relativism. Before going into the example, defining relativism and pluralism seems crucial. Relativism is open towards all answers for any ethical query and to furnish an explanation for a conflict^[3]. Also Bernard Williams says all goals, virtues and ideals are compatible and that what is desirable can ultimately be united into a harmonious whole without loss is the main theme of relativism^[4]. Pluralism does not support the claim

² Anthony Palmer, *Philosophy & Literature* , *Philosophy*, Vol. 65, No. 252 (Apr., 1990), pp. 155-166, Cambridge University Press, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3751385> Accessed: 17-03-2016 08:47 UTC, pp.155

³ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London: Fontana Press/ Collins, 1985, as given by Baghrmian, *Relativism*, pp.222

⁴ Williams in Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, introduction by B. Williams, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, xvi as given in Baghrmian, *Relativism*, pp. 225.

of compatibility of all virtues and is unsure whether the conflicting virtues can be reconciled within a harmonious whole. Thus pluralism parts way from relativism at this very central point.

While, on the other hand the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* sheds light on a very important dimension of relativism. It says that at the time of any moral query the doctrine of relativism places equal amount of importance to all the available answers^[5]. The sole aim of this theoretical position is to focus upon the subjective points of view of the decision makers. However, in such kind of subjectivity is generally not appreciated by all and often faces huge amount of criticism.

It is important to note over here that the doctrine of relativism is not popular for a good cause. Relativism has often been mentioned while criticizing some ones moral stand. Nevertheless, according to Chris Gowans, there are supporters of the doctrine of relativism as well. He mentions some supporters of moral relativism like Gilbert Harman, David B. Wong *et al.*^[6]. In order to safeguard relativism from criticisms; relativists such as William James have introduced some new ways of approaching the doctrine of relativism^[7]. To begin with, James has focused upon the functional aspect of relativism. He says that relativism is functional only within a particular framework. For example, the doctrine of pragmatism which is a form of relativism owing to its nature of adhering to particular framework is both coherent and disciplined in its way. Due to the framework specificity of the decision maker, different judgments being formulated by different decision makers move in various directions. Thus, in this way, James has tried to save relativism from the charge of being incoherent. While talking about moral relativism, a question often arises within ones mind related to the strategy which the relativist ought to follow while dealing with the variety of moral viewpoints which are not in synchronization to her own^[8]. On that very note, the term tolerance often strikes the chord. Tolerance and relativism are often considered in the form of a duo, or it can be said that they complement each other. One may disagree with others points of view but there has to be a certain way in which the relativist ought to express his or her disagreement towards them. Gowans^[9] says: In this context, tolerance does not mean indifference it means having a policy of not interfering with actions of persons that are based on moral judgments we reject^[10] It may be inferred from the above lines, that according to Gowans the existence of diversity of ethical viewpoints is both good and bad. Diversity in ethical viewpoints is good because it makes way for functionality of the doctrine of relativism within the practical world. It is bad because the existence of such diversified points of view leads one towards conflict with contrary views. Conflicts are undesirable and hence diversity of points of view does not hold good always.

Baghramian highlights the fact that relativism starts its journey from the point where from one accepts the

incommensurability of moral truth claims^[11]. She seems to suggest that different varieties of moral claims which are content wise dissimilar to each other have to be accepted by the relativist without questioning them any further. Else the doctrine of relativism will break down.

After digressing briefly into the intricacies related to the doctrines of pluralism and relativism, I would like to quote an example from R.A. Shweder in order to elaborate more on this:

On September 4, 1987, Roop Kanwar, a beautiful eighteen year-old, college-educated Rajput woman, received national press coverage in India when she immolated herself in front of a large supportive crowd, with her dead husband resting on her lap...The cremation ground was enshrined a romantic memorial to an extraordinary act of devotion^[12]

The lines quoted above can be subject to various kinds of interpretations. It can be viewed as an expression of the devotion which the Hindu women nurture within themselves towards their husbands. The woman described above named Roop Kanwar possesses an individual mind which has been trained in a certain way mainly due to the impact of some culture specific norms and stigmas. Now, if this incident is not analyzed and questioned, then the cruelty involved within it would remain dormant or under cover. Mainly because when one is wearing the glasses colored by the doctrine of relativism, he or she is not able to realize the cruelty involved in cases like the one described above. As rightly pointed out by Baghramian^[13] the doctrine of relativism in a way creates an invisible mental barrier due to which one is unable to look beyond the culturally defined norms and ideals. This reveals the inadequate nature of relativism in reaching up to the state of justice which got simplified after analyzing the example involving the real hero Roop Kanwar.

While on the other hand, within Nussbaum's *The Fragility of goodness: Luck & ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, she attempts to undo the sharp distinction in between literature & philosophy by arguing the following:

- (i) Literary texts often lead to the stimulation of emotions & imaginary insights.
- (ii) One's involvement with literature in general, leads on to the involvement of emotional response.
- (iii) This emotional response in between leads on to help constitute knowledge or any knowledge related activity.^[14]

Our mental activity, as we explore the ethical conception mainly comprises emotional response. She tries to argue the above by claiming emotional response to be a part of cognitive knowledge^[15]

I agree with Nussbaum on the fact that textual understanding and self-knowledge are two co-related things. Similar issue has also been taken up logicians in order to understand the extent of logical studies involved in helping

⁵ Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, pp. 313.

⁶ Chris Gowans, "Moral Relativism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/moral-relativism/>, (accessed on November 25, 2014).

⁷ Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, pp. 313-314.

⁸ Gowans, "Moral Relativism"

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Maria Baghramian, *Relativism*, Oxfordshire and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp.271

¹² R. A Shweder, *Thinking through Cultures*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., 1991, pp.16, as given in Baghramian, *Relativism*, pp. 278

¹³ Baghramian, *Relativism*

¹⁴ Isabella Wheeler, Literature and philosophy: Emotion and knowledge? , *Philosophy*, Vol. 79, No. 308 (Apr., 2004), pp. 215-245, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3751972>

¹⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory* , A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature, ed. Gary L. Hagberg and Walter Jost, Wiley Blackwell, 2010, UK, pp.16, 245

one to understand human behavior.^[16] Parikh discusses real life scenarios and analyzes some literature in showing how consideration of epistemic conditioning of any literature helps one in reasonably understanding other people. As for example, in Bernard Shaws play, *You Never can tell*, A rich businessman Mr. Crompton happens to be in no good terms with his wife and three children (Gloria, Dolly and Philip). Following is the description of an event described in the play where the family reunites over dinner. (William is the name of the waiter and McComas is a family friend.):

PHILIP. Mr. Crampton is coming to lunch with us.
 WAITER (puzzled). Yes, sir. (Diplomatically.) Dont usually lunch with his family, perhaps, sir?
 PHILIP (impressively). William: he does not know that we are his family.
 He has not seen us for eighteen years. He wont know us. (To emphasize the communication he seats himself on the iron table with a spring, and looks at the waiter with his lips compressed and his legs swinging.)
 DOLLY. We want you to break the news to him, William.
 WAITER. But I should think hed guess when he sees your mother, miss.
 (Philips legs become motionless at this elucidation. He contemplates the waiter raptly.)
 DOLLY (dazzled). I never thought of that.
 PHILIP. Nor I. (Coming off the table and turning reproachfully on McComas.)
 Nor you.¹⁷

The waiter, William has been able to draw an inference of second order based on which he predicts Cromptons recognition of his wife and family over dinner. The time lag in between would not definitely have been able to undo the memory he had related to his wife. While, Dolly and Philip being less experienced than William was fails in correctly predicting their fathers behavior towards them. Thus, epistemic reasoning plays an important role over here in knowing someone elses mind without actually knowing the person in reality.

This example is from Skyrms, as highlighted by Parikh^[18]:

Fireflies use their light for sexual signalling. In the western hemisphere, males fly over the meadows, flashing a signal. If a female on the ground gives the proper sort of answering flashes, the male descends and they mate. The flashing code is species-specific. Females and males in general use and respond to the pattern of flashes only of their own species. There is, however, an exception. A female firefly of the genus *Photuris*, when she observes a male of the genus *Photinus*, may mimic the female signals of the males species, lure him in, and eat him. She gets not only a nice meal, but also some useful protective chemicals that she cannot get in any other way. One species, *Photuris versicolor*, is a remarkably accomplished mimic capable of sending the appropriate flash patterns of 11 *Photinus* species.^[19]

Here the female firefly, of the genus *Photuris*, is relying upon some sort of convention which pre-exists within her

species that a certain form of signals signifies that a *Photinus* female is waiting for the male one. This act while been analyzed is found to be tightly harnessed in the intention to deceive, which gets unveiled been understood in the subject under condition gets laid in an epistemic background.

Conclusion

It seems clear that many authors have used epistemic reasoning with an undertone shade. While on the other hand, moral grounding of literature provides it with a firmer base to function upon, fulfilling literature in a more meaningful way. Connecting philosophy and literature, along with the use of epistemic reasoning spells out a uniquely different way of looking at it. The sting of inter-connection between the literature-philosophy supported by appeal of this duo towards emotions & knowledge cannot be ignored. Given its diversified strands, the term "Philosophy of Literature" is also susceptible to various interpretations.

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¹⁶ Rohit Parikh, *Epistemic Reasoning in Life and Literature*, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, July 18, 2012, pp.1

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.4

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.6: B. Skyrms, *Signals: Evolution, Learning and Information*, Oxford U. press, 2010

¹⁹ *Ibid.*