

LITERATURE AND SOCIAL WELLBEING: AN ETHICAL RE-VIEWING OF THE INEXTRICABLE LINK

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Abstract

From time immemorial the wellbeing of individuals and societies has had a strong relationship with the literatures that have emerged during the time. Themes and motifs with social relevance have determined the course of action and direction of several civilized societies. Even inequalities that resulted in inhuman practices have been eliminated as a result of the continued and concerted efforts of well-meaning, socially responsible and society-conscious writers. Despite the popularity of modernist and post-modernist views and theories the notion that Literature must be strongly rooted not only in its artistic ethos but fundamentally grounded in moral and social obligations of a society has always enjoyed a positive reception and at the moment is gaining fast and quick currency. In this backdrop, this paper seeks to explore how literary works written during different time periods by authors of varied nationalities have captured the essence of human suffering attempting to transform mindsets through their works thus positively impacting their societies. This paper assumes that such changes are possible because authors on one hand and the readers on the other consciously endorse the view that one of the prime purposes of literature is the ethical well-being of a civilization and for a society to develop holistically there cannot be ethics with bounds. This premise will also be supported with a few examples from the literary world such as the ones by the American author Harper Lee, Afro-American writer Toni Morrison and India-born Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry.

Keywords: literature, societal well-being, ethical grounding, positive transformation.

The idea that literatures and/or literary readings of artistic works are inevitably connected with the well-being of an individual and society had occupied a central position in the past among many intellectuals; in contemporary times, the same idea is more pronouncedly expressed by scholars and thinkers of several civilized societies. A well-known postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak's comment on Paul Wolfowitz's treatment of the problem in Iraq is certainly of relevance here: 'If he (Paul Wolfowitz) had had serious training in literary reading and/or the imagining of the enemy as human, his position on Iraq would not be so inflexible' (23). The inference here is to the possibility of arriving at ethically superior decisions at crucial junctures in life if one has had a literary training over other fields of studies perhaps not so literary. Spivak's position though might not be entirely acceptable to many, it receives further credence,

however in the policy decisions of many organizations. The resolution passed by the University Grants Commission in India in its recently held meeting, in the backdrop of the finding that many terror activities involved science graduates, that all non-Humanities students must necessarily be oriented in the Humanities so as to imbibe ethical values in order for them to be able to live a responsible life is a pointer (The Times of India, 26 February 2013). It may also be expedient to mention here that of late, literary ethicists have placed special emphasis on not only the contents of the texts but on the reading process itself that in a way enables ethical investigation of literary texts. The novel, for example, one may conclude thus, is a site of ethical engagement which can affect the behaviour of the human subject that comes into contact with it.

The Collins Australian Dictionary defines ethics as: 'The moral fitness of a decision, course of action, etc' (563). An examination of literature and ethics necessitates, therefore, engagement with the values that are intrinsic to literature. I'm well aware of the implications of the use of the word 'moral' which is bound to raise issues of subjectivities and even inflame non-conformist tendencies by both post-structuralists and postmodernists. However the stance this researcher wishes to pursue through this paper is steeped in a pragmatic approach rather than an idealistic one: that subjectivities are inevitable, that rules and principles are essential for good governance and for all this to function smoothly a structure is mandatory.

So what is the purpose of an ethical inquiry into the novel? The answer, in my view, is to co-create a meaning, because all texts are essentially engaged in an act of communication. Every text, in that sense, is trying to communicate something(s) to the reader. There is, therefore, meanings in the text and the meanings require not merely deciphering or decoding but co-creation by the reader. Co-creation is an act that involves independent thinking which may or may not be compatible with the thinking of the author's, but the application of such thinking should positively impact society. In that sense, the ethical value of literature, as observed by Hale may be understood in looking at the ethical theory of the novel which is reading a literary work as an ethically charged activity more than discussing the ethical values of the characters and plot lines (189). Two authors worth mentioning at this juncture who have contributed significantly to ethical reading of literary texts are Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum. While Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) theorised the ethical effects of rhetorical practices Nussbaum's article 'Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy' (1983) looked at literature from a moral philosopher's perspective.

Literary fiction, according to literary ethicists debates norms and values. Three prerequisites must be in place, according to Cosgrove for a piece of fiction to be characterized as literary. Pavel describes these in detail in "Fiction and Imitation". First, 'it must engage with the human condition, for literature is a springboard for reflection on the human condition' (522). In other words, literature offers an opportunity for contemplation about what it means to be human. Second, as observed by Cosgrove, literary fiction must operate on multiple levels - that is offering a potential for multiple readings of a text. Phelan too endorses this view of layering in "Rhetorical Literary Ethics and Lyric Narrative: Robert Frost's *Home Burial*" when he states that literary ethics sees 'the literary text as a site of a multi-layered communication between author and audience, one that involves the engagement of the audience's intellect, psyche, emotions, and values' (630-31). This engagement is crucial or else there is a rupture in the writer-reader circuit which might disrupt the activity itself. Lastly Cosgrove places emphasis on the synthesis that must exist between form and content which is to say the way the story is told cannot be separated from the story itself. In other words, the forms employed in a work must 'operate in a dialogic relation' to the topic/theme of the said work.

In this understanding of the literary, one is bound to notice that the idea of ethics is inextricably linked to both the acts of writing and reading. The author is conscious of the choice of a story he/she decides to share with the readers and they in turn consciously choose to read what they would like to. The writer and the reader have the freedom to terminate the activity at any point in time. The decision to continue the acts is determined and governed by individual motivations. Therefore, both storytelling and listening are acts with ethical implications:

to read a 'novel is to open oneself up to a type of decision-making that is itself inherently ethical. For the new ethicists, the novel demands of each reader a decision about her own relation to the imaginative experience offered by novels: Will I submit to the alterity that the novel allows? An affirmative answer launches the novel reader into a transactional relation with another agent, an agent defined by its Otherness from the reader'. (Hale, 189)

For Hale, this submission or subordination or willingness to consider the alterity is a 'crucial pre-condition for positive social change.' Hale, in fact, suggests that while reading literature may help readers build empathy and in the process enable social change what is important is the argument that reading literature is essential for social change - a line of thinking similar to Spivak's mentioned earlier. The new literary ethicists quite strongly argue how reading builds empathy through a shift in perspective; how literature manipulates our feelings and calls upon our inbuilt capacity to feel with others. This act of 'occupying' other perspectives, engaging with other situations, contexts helps in understanding the world.

We certainly enjoy fiction because it helps us better understand the world to which we belong. We like to recognize our world in the worlds of imagination, but we also appreciate fiction for its ability to make us less dependent not just on actual stimuli but on actuality as such. In other words, we also appreciate it for its power to create alternative sets of situations, thereby putting the actual world into perspective, challenging its supremacy. All fiction wields this power. (Pavel, 529)

Two important ideas have emerged so far: firstly writing is an extremely conscious act: the writer while in the act of writing is conscious of the time and space he/she occupies, the issues and problems the society faces and those that he/she wishes to discuss. If not overtly, they do find their way covertly into the narrative. To the writer talking about the problem is more important than offering solutions. Secondly, for a reader of a literary text the act of reading too is an extremely conscious act. Reading is not only creating meanings of the symbols on the page but imagining a whole new world of newer possibilities. It is to analyse the present, examine and diagnose the problem and attempt at fixing the problem for a better future. Reading therefore cannot be a passive activity. With this framework let us approach the writings of the three writers chosen for the purpose.

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* are classic examples of how the writer-reader circuit or nexus is strengthened through the act of reading which may strongly affect public opinion at times even resulting in a major societal change in perspective. The rationale for the choice of these writers is to bring out the similarity in thinking and writing about socially relevant ideas and themes despite the different nationalities and geographical boundaries. The choice is also not in any case to show its limitedness but merely indicative or representative. What is crucial however is in each of these cases the author has written about issues that have affected them deeply. Unless there is a

disturbance within no positive external action is possible. For one to seriously discuss something 'that something' must have the power to affect the individual. The individual, in turn must allow himself/herself to be affected. It is in this extremely delicate process of affecting and disturbing serious works are created by writers and co-created by readers. For instance, at the heart of the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* stands the trial- a reference to the Scottsboro Case as the trials of the nine men came to be called later on. Harper was only five when this happened but the impact it had on her was so strong that she uses it to play a significantly crucial role in the novel. She was deeply hurt by the trial, which many believed was motivated by racial prejudice. In all probability Harper, too shared similar sentiments and they are reflected in the novel. Also, the fact that it took the author seven long years to write and that it was published in 1960 just before the peak of the American Civil Rights movement is also very significant in this context. Similarly for Toni Morrison's work *Beloved* a real life incident is absolutely central. And for Mistry caste discrimination in India and the related atrocities committed on the marginalized is only a manifestation of the West's insistence and support for racial hegemonic structures and practices.

Two important questions that one is compelled to ask at this juncture: firstly, why do writers choose to write about such themes? Secondly, why or what could be the reasons for the success of these works? The answer to both questions is an ethical one - one that rests on the link that connects literature and its all-important purpose which is the wellbeing of society. The writers' choice of themes is a conscious one driven by external events and their impact on him/her. Writing is an act of communication through which meanings are created and co-created based on one's understandings of the world. Works that deal with issues that affect the larger public good inevitably become successful as readers are able to easily relate to them. The relevance and the necessity to discuss such matters of importance is also deeply felt by the readers as they continue to affect them in some ways. Harper's novel was readily accepted by the public as it provided the reader the space for active engagement with serious contemporary issues. While relating to the issues discussed, the reader continues to question existing conditions, examines their consequences through an ethical investigation keeping the future, too in mind. In the racially charged atmosphere of the 1960s America Harper was able to sensitize the readers on an extremely sensitive issue. "Mockingbird", Harper wrote in 1993 "still says what it has to say; it has managed to survive the years without preamble". Through the course of the novel, along with Scout the reader too learns. As the novel progresses Scout learns that despite humanity's great capacity for evil, it also has a great capacity for good as well and that evil can be mitigated when approached with an outlook of sympathy and understanding.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is yet another example of the inextricable link that exists between literary works and their impact or influence on society and its wellbeing. Set in the Reconstruction era of 1873 the theme revolves around the powers of memory on one hand and history on the other. For the slaves the past is a huge burden; at the same time the memories are inescapable. The novel, read from that position is a powerful commentary on the psychological and historical legacy of slavery. Morrison perhaps is suggesting through this work that a stable future can be created only after confronting and understanding the ghosts of the past. Almost every character in the novel is affected by the practice of slavery. The author herself was affected deeply by a real life incident in which Margaret Garner, a slave killed her own child to 'free' her from slavery. Through the act of infanticide Morrison highlights the perverse forces of slavery wherein a mother, quite paradoxically is forced to kill her own creation in order to save it. Morrison's intent is also to educate the contemporary American society through confronting,

understanding and addressing this evil legacy which manifests even today in many forms, both overtly and subtly.

Rohinton Mistry is an India-born Canadian writer who without mincing words attacks the neo-colonial leaders in India for using caste for their ulterior political ambitions which results in a dehumanizing effect on the society. Mistry like Satre seems to strongly believe that all writers must firmly be rooted to reality and no matter how hard one tries, complete extrication from it is impossible. In fact, not doing so would even signify escapism. Hence, in Mistry's *A Fine Balance* issues and concerns relating to human rights and human dignity occupy the centrestage. Mistry, in this sense may therefore be seen to be in the elite company of Immanuel Kant, John Rawles, and Lawrence Kholberg who strongly subscribed to the Universalist theory. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* impacted public opinion to that extent that it eventually resulted in creating awareness among its readers about caste issues and political failures. As a conscientious writer, Mistry's choice of themes is deliberate; through his novels he reveals his concerns for social welfare raising his voice against violations of human rights by poignantly depicting the sufferings of the marginalized at the callous and cruel hands of the neo-colonizers. Writing is not simply an aesthetic or artistic exercise, according to Mistry but an act of social commitment that must therefore effect social change.

In conclusion it is evident from the writings of these three writers and of course in many others, that the choice of themes and issues that they have discussed are consciously done with a view to communicating their thoughts on these matters to a larger audience hoping to effect certain changes in society, the rationale for it being the recognition of the inextricable link that exists between literary texts and social welfare. The nexus between the two is consciously felt and recognized for an implementation of the same. No matter where writers hail from and irrespective of the historical time frames the need to create a better social space is a common concern felt and expressed by them through their works. The readers, too substantially contribute in this process through their responses to the stimuli created by the authors. Although as writers and readers the result or the outcomes of their attempts at change cannot be guaranteed by them, the intention and the objective require recognition and appreciation, for they are there and they do play an extremely crucial role in shaping or moulding a civilized society.

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