**Week Six: Fiction and Truth**

**Introduction**

Today, we have to move our exploration and investigation deeper. Let us treat one of the central issues in the Philosophy of Literature, namely the relationship between fiction and truth. You would recall that we treated the ‘paradox of fiction’ theory in the last class which sought to explain how human emotions can be genuinely stimulated while reading fiction, a forged literature. Today’s theme is also in the same line. How can we derive truth from literature, is it possible? By the end of this class we should be able to answer that question.

**The Nature of Truth in Philosophy**

In Philosophy truth is a central theme. Around it has been built a lot of theories. These theories try to answer the question of the nature of truth. Here we find the commonest as correspondence theory, coherence theory, phenomenological theory, and pragmatic theory. You need to look up what these theories are all about, to help you understand how truth is articulated in terms of theory. But in principle, truth usually refers to a fact or reality. Example man is an animal. In itself this claim that truth is about fact, is also contestable, because even the nature of fact or reality is not definite since a lot depends on how each philosopher decides to define reality, either by relating it to something tangible or historical fact or relating it to something believed in or accepted. Here issues of morality or claims about God can be truthful just as much as saying that there is a city called Lagos. Like all philosophical problems, truth is not easy to pin down. But this concern about the nature of truth is too general. This is not the direction we would be travelling or the line of thoughts we shall be pursing here. That is the field of epistemology. It does not represent what we need to know in this course of Philosophy and Literature.

**Truth in the Philosophy of Literaturee**

Now, for this course, the question needs to be made clearer and narrower. Rather than just asking the question of the nature of truth as a theory, this course or more specifically this lesion seeks to determine how our perception of that reality or our acceptance of a certain belief can be conveyed by means of a form of literature called fiction or imaginative writing. In other words, can or cannot a forged story help us to perceive reality (whatever it is) as it is. The framing of this question is very important because it moves it away from the nature of truth as such to the way the piece of literature portrays a certain reality, that is, how a piece of literature can help us understand or appreciate or accept a certain reality or a given perspective thereof.

* Examples from biblical literatures: Let us point at some of the biblical stories and the kind of truth they portray. The biblical story of Job is fiction, but can it tell us about God? Are the claims made about God in the Book of Job true? As stated in some other passage, did Jonah get into the belly of a whale? Did Jesus go without food and water for as many as forty long days? Did the angel appear to Mary to speak to her about God’s choice to make her the Mother of Jesus? Did Satan appear to Jesus during the temptations? Did he take him from here to there, having a conversation with him? These examples from the bible, are they true in the sense of occurring just as the description goes?
* Examples from Secular Writings: Same goes with some of the secular writings and literary forms. While reading Shakespeare’s drama Macbeth, can we be led to understand the true nature of man or some aspects of him? Reading the novels of Chinua Achebe, what kind of insight does it give you about Nigeria as a country or about Igboland? Can those insights said to be true? Can those insights have philosophical value? For instance, can a non-Igbo man, maybe an American man, get an insight into the culture, cosmology, worldview, and philosophy of Igboness? If this insight is derived from a fictitious story, can it have truth value? Are there novels or stories you read that bring you to a moving appreciation of epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, or anthropology? Concerns like this are the main point of today’s lesson. Please do not miss it, it is very important.

It is important to note that even fictious writings have varieties. Some of them are representations or exaggerations of actual events but rendered in a prose or drama form to conceal the actual persons or events that is written about, yet leaving no doubt to anyone who knows about the event that indeed it is this event that is being described. Usually names and dates of actual personsmay be changed just as details and outcomes may be adjusted to fit the authors intentions. Good example of this is when people write about actual wars or conflicts, while changing the names of places or persons. It is fiction but of course also factual in a sense. Good example of this is Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is a fictitious story of the Nigerian Civil War. *Death and the King’s Horseman* by Wole Soyinka is a telling example. It is a drama about an event that happened in Oyo State of present-day Nigeria. In like manner, prose may be purely imaginative although drawing from real life stories. Good example is Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which though a fictious novel, is of course a story of Igbo culture before the coming of the white man. But great care must be taken, not to take it that the renditions of Achebe in that novel correspond to actual events or that the places he uses are in fact real and historical. But are the things he says in the novel true? Is it a true representation of any people?

**Analysis**

From the foregoing, you can see that it is quite confusing and a matter of debate whether fiction has a truth value. It is up to you to take a position as to whether you are convinced that some elements of truth can be deduced from a purely forged story or not. As already mentioned in passing above, the things to look out for in any fiction of whatever type, is whether the writing exhibited sufficient depth as to be able to capture correctly aspects of human nature and human behaviour, questions of morality and foundations of ethics, insights into metaphysics, worldview, cosmology, origin of the world or man’s sense of meaning, or explain the culture of a people in such a good manner that its epistemological traditions stand out. It is to the extent that writers are able or unable to make some of these things clear and evident in their writings that make its truth value compelling to readers or not. Therefore, whether a fictitious novels can have truth value, in the context we are investigating it in this course, will depend on your own personal take on the prose or drama in question and the author’s ability to shed light on the some aspects of reality that you are conversant with. It is up to you to argue and defend whether indeed any fictitious book has made you come very close to reality. Or made you understand yourself or mankind more. Or made you see new perspectives or possibilities in life. But then, you will have to tell what it is that you see that is true and why.

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