



RESEARCH PAPER

Literature and Secular and Religious Humanism

Dr. Muhammad Arif Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language & Literature, Institute of Linguistics & Humanities, Gomal University, D. I. Khan, Pakistan

DOI

[http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021\(5-II\)2.52](http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021(5-II)2.52)

PAPER INFO

ABSTRACT

Received:

October 22, 2021

Accepted:

December 26, 2021

Online:

December 29, 2021

Keywords:

Humanism,
Literature as Other
of the Sacred,
Literature,
Religious
Humanism
Secular Humanism

***Corresponding**

Author

sultanulaarifeen@g
mail.com

There has long been debates generally on the status of literature as to its instructive and pleasing role. This discussion still holds ground as human life is a motley of ever-changing experiences and observations which shape and reshape thoughts of the readers and writers. Despite significant changes in life styles worldwide, human interest in literary productions has not waned as different literary genres have over the years witnessed resurgence in humanism. This research is an attempt to know afresh the relationship between literature and humanism because the global village has been witnessing the breakdown of Grand narrative and the emergence of Petite narratives. The umbrella term humanism too has broadly been classified into secular humanism and religious humanism. This research therefore investigates whether or not secular and religious humanism are categories opposed to each other and whether literature is a surrogate theology, or it is the other of religion. So, discussed also are thoughts on the secularity and religiosity of literature.

Introduction

It is believed that humanism and English as a discipline belong to each other. If this is so, then there is a deep and ever engaging relationship between literature and secular and religious humanism. The importance of humanism can be understood from the following viewpoint:

Once vilified by anti-humanist theorists as bourgeois, essentialist and outdated . . . the terms 'human' and 'humanism' are currently being recuperated within literary studies and across the humanities more generally.¹ These changed conditions of theoretical and critical discourse now make it possible to claim that humanism and the academic discipline of English have always belonged to one another, that the nature of this belonging has doubtless changed over time and has come under pressure from other developments within the subject, but that 'English-as-humanism' survived, albeit often *incognito* throughout the theory years, to emerge into the present where it now lives and breathes more openly (Mousley, 2011, p. 1).

Mousley's views suggest the resurgence of interest in humanism both within and across the literary studies, but that is no surprise, because humanism, especially, in literature is present in multifarious forms. This presence of humanism within and outside the literary world would not have been devoid of diverse influences,

religious, non-religious, political, apolitical, social or financial. These have shaped and continue to shape the term. This diversity finds telling expression in literature, especially fictive literature: the narrative is said to be "human shaped," and "is a uniquely human way of making order and meaning out of the raw material of existence," (Sheehan, 2004, p. 9). Similar views are also voiced here: "(the) novel is the most humanistic form of literature due to its wide scope and borders" (Kharal, 2008, p. 3). Related also is the standpoint "From the point of view of structure, the novel is a world, and the writer its creator; no wonder the order of the literary world reflects the image of the world projected by its author" (Arroyo, 1992, p. 54). And the question "What relation does the novel have to human being, human life, humanism?," and its answer that "Its most obvious characteristic is the ability to encode life into text, by drawing on the conventions of 'formal realism'" (Sheehan 2004, p. 2), further reflects the humanness of the narrative or the novel. The description of this humanness in the novel can be of different types, but mostly within the large categories of religion or secularism.

With reference to a novel it is expressed, for example: in its strongest moments, *The Enchantress of Florence* repudiates linear, Eurocentric histories of the Renaissance and conjures in their stead a synchronous world of parallel realities in which the seeds of secular humanism flower not once but twice – once in northern Italy and simultaneously in northern India. Read reparatively, Rushdie's novel invites us to reconsider axiomatic tenets about modernity, secularism, and humanism – chief among them the relation between the ethos of modernity and the rejection of an enchanted world (Neuman, 2008, p. 675).

Literature as Other of the Sacred

One reason for the growth of secular humanism manifests itself in the desire to challenge absolutes. It is stated "literature is, of all the arts, the one best suited to challenging absolutes of all kinds; and, because it is in its origin the schismatic Other of the sacred (and authorless) text, so it is also the art most likely to fill our god-shaped holes" (Rushdie, 2004, p. 424). If literature is the 'Other of the sacred' then by virtue of its origins, it is secular, and novel is its best mouthpiece. The other of the sacred then must also be sacred and by this virtue it appears to be a structural and ideological parallel to the sacred. And it might be due to this understanding "the contemporary novel represents a new front in the ideological war against religion . . . [and] apparently stands for everything - free speech, individuality, rationality and even a secular experience of the transcendental - that religion seeks to overthrow" (Bradley and Tate, 2010, p. 11). Here, some talk on otherness may be supportive for understanding the kinds of humanism under discussion. Otherness or Alterity, here, are thought to be synonymous terms. The definitions of the Alterity as "otherness" (Schwarz, 1994, p. 45), and "the quality or state of being other: otherness" (Alterity) are the sufficient reasons behind this perception given the root meanings. Besides, the otherness seems to be reflecting itself more clearly in alterity which is defined as:

(1) the state of being other or different. (2) the character of that which is other in the other. (3) the circumstance of "others" who are nominalized and distanced by hierarchical and stereotypical thinking. (4) technical term in postcolonial studies denoting the condition of otherness resulting from imposition of Western culture. (5) a category such that the markers of difference indicate the alterity of the Other is irreducible and infinite (Freeman, 2009, p. 404).

This definition suggests the status of secular humanism and religious humanism as categories opposed to each other whether or not it is admitted. It is worth noting here that otherness does not only police the external boundaries between these isms but there seems to be the same spirit working within these types too and this "otherness is common place in contemporary situation" (Treanor, 2007, p. 198), and the result is that the boundaries between and within these isms have collapsed, and which further appears to be a result of the postmodern age which is "characterized by the breaking down of Grand (or "Master") Narratives, the overarching systems that allow us to make sense of the world as a unified whole, as a cosmos rather than chaos" (Treanor, 2007, p. 1). The problem is but that the 'overarching systems' too have been so overshadowed by a number of their kinds and shades that a state of quandary seems to have been prevailing when it comes to the question of their truthfulness. The situation has either been deliberately created or it has emerged because of the changes in times. But whatever be the reasons, a man in the eyes of Treanor (2007) has been confronted with a number of narratives which he calls petite. These narratives where give voice to disparate perspectives, they also frequently take part in contrasting games of language with each being as legitimate as the other. The abundance of such narratives has created a situation where one is unable to understand the world. Importantly it has put the individuals in a quandary who cannot discern their place and position in the world. The identity crisis which one finds in the world may be because of the death of the Grand Narratives. One may say that literature presents these 'petite narratives' as a counter to religion or that the changing times have bequeathed us these narratives. It may be either ways, and we may have been living this condition without our knowledge. Here, a question might be raised as to whether the otherness or alterity is absolute or relative. It is thus emphasized "Otherness is not absolute, it is relative, it is the crossing of (absolute) alterity and similitude. Some others are more other and less familiar than other others, but no other is absolutely other" (Treanor, 2007, p. 207).

Literature as a Surrogate Theology

Looking from the angle of otherness at the secular humanism and religious humanism one is constrained to believe that both have made their inroads into literature with varying degrees and it cannot be denied. It does not seem odd, therefore, when one reads "literature is a form of surrogate theology in that it takes over from religion fundamental questions about the nature and meaning of human life" (Mousley, 2011, p. 16). If literature is a 'surrogate theology,' then an important question that may be asked here is that does it truly address the problems related to the 'nature and meaning of human life,' or it complicates the already complicated things? Whatever be the answer, it is however clear that literature plays a role either secular or religious, quasi secular, quasi-religious, and so on, in its various manifestations. The notion that literature is an alternative to literature can be substantiated by the view that one of its popular genres – the novel has been accelerating the secularization process. Below is thus highlighted such a relationship with reference to Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*:

For far too long, scholars of the novel have abetted the project of solidifying a tenuous equivalence between the novel as a genre and secularization as a normative project. *The Enchantress of Florence* presents a decidedly non-secular atheism, a modernity divorced from rationalism, and a vision of the encounter with fiction as enchantment rather than the willing suspension of disbelief. Despite its platitudes and pomposity, *The Enchantress of Florence* helps us to see why claims for the inherent

secularism of the novel as a genre will teach us little about either secularism or the novel; the novel can instead assist in the effort to theorize secularism, modernity, and humanism beyond the modes of reason and the effects of disenchantment (Neuman, 2008, p. 682).

These remarks hence show that the relationship between literature and secularization has been established. A different viewpoint, however, is also present which suggests "literature can never be entirely secular" (Ward, 2009, p. 21), because religion and literature by being cultural products can be subjected to cultural analysis. Ward explains the word cultural and suggests that it should not just be considered as the product of social circumstances but that the cultural as well as the social are rooted also in the imaginaries. The imaginary is explained in the following manner:

The imaginary is that magma of images which consciousness can treat only partially. We can view the imaginary in two distinct but maybe increasingly related ways: the first after psychoanalysis, and particularly the work of Jacques Lacan and Cornelius Castoriadis; the second after the explorations into effect and consciousness undertaken by modern neurophysiology (Ward, 2009, p. 21).

The cultural and imaginary origins of literature cannot be doubted but saying that religion too has the same origins can be challenged on numerous grounds, including, primarily, the rational and spiritual that the world is so often accustomed to and familiar with. The imaginary, however, may make its roads into religions on personal, groups or institutional levels where the desire is to make rooms for the likes of one's own. It is here that the secularity and religion get mixed to form a new structure which cannot be called religious but have more affinities with the secularity which keeps advancing and attracting people towards its folds. Here, the followers have more options to perform the actions of their likes. Now the argument that literature can never be secular in its entirety seems to be linked with the belief that "literature operates like religion" (Ward, 2009, p. 23). Further, four key phenomenon are thought to play an important role through which literature is said to resist secularity, they include:

the imaginary; the imaginary's recourse to the teleologies (and eschatologies) of narrative; the irreducibility of language which cannot but open us to the mythological and the metaphysical; and the operations of believing that constitutes a "faith" that is aesthetic in the Greek meaning of that term: affecting the senses and exciting the soul (Ward, 2009, p. 27).

The same four reasons, however, can also be attributed to the secular nature of literature and the foremost amongst them could be its imaginary part which finds its reflection through narrative. The imaginary feature of literature is further explored and explained in this way:

Literature, in the Western sense, as Jacques Derrida has forcefully argued, depends, moreover, not just on the right to say anything but also on the right not to be held responsible for what one says. How can this be? Since literature belongs to the realm of the imaginary, whatever is said in a literary work can always be claimed to be experimental, hypothetical, cut off from referential or performative claims (Miller, 2004, p. 5).

The roots of this (imaginary) literature can also help one understand its secular / religious origins as it is stated "the word literature comes from a Latin stem. It cannot be detached from its Roman Christian/European roots. Literature in our modern sense, however, appeared in the European West and began in the late seventeenth century, at the earliest" (Miller, 2004, p. 1). Furthermore, its roots are also traced by Miller (2004) who postulates a relationship between the modern Western concept of literature and the modern research university, modeled round the University of Berlin established under the guidance of Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early part of the nineteenth century. It had two main motives – *Wissenschaft*, knowing the truth of things, and *Bildung*, training (originally) male citizens according to moral ideas and attitudes appropriate for the nation. Miller further observes that identifying the research university as the sole influence in literary directions would be false, as newspapers, journals, critics and reviewers also made a significant contribution.

'Finding truth' and 'training citizens' were activities primarily associated with religious texts: but literature now seems to have adopted these principles in order to raise awareness and help people to live a better life. Literature and religion are linked: "There is a kinship between literature and religious study which offers opportunities for valid use of the affinities existent between them in both fields" (Nye, 1940, p. 31). Seen also is a "possible link of religion and the novel both in the characters and in the structure. The early European novel (from Chretien de Troyes in the Middle Ages through Mme. de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Cleves* [1678]), is Catholic" (Arroyo, 1992, p. 52). In a similar vein, Arroyo (1992) states that one can associate the early European novels with religious trends.

Giving the example of Dostoyevsky it is stated that his writings introduce ideas of free will and determination fused together; the protagonists bear responsibility for their actions but are also guilt-free agents of cosmic forces. Similarly, Cervantes juxtaposes freedom and cosmic determination in his writings. Don Quixote, delinked from his Catholic roots, is presented as a mad character that stands above the concepts of goodness or badness, somewhere between reason and unreason. Yet another example is Segismundo, the protagonist of *Life is a Dream* by Calderon, who is presented as a man-beast poised on the border. The kinship between literature and religion is explored by Eaglestone (2009) who considers this interaction to be extremely complex in modern times. To reinforce his point he refers to the historical development of Anglophonic literary criticism:

(it) has been inextricably intertwined with religion, from the establishment of the teaching of English Literature in India as a replacement for missionary work in the first half of the nineteenth century, through the Newbolt Report of 1921, which argued that 'literature is not just a subject for academic study, but one of the chief temples of the Human spirit, in which all should worship', to, say, the late work of Terry Eagleton and his move away from a noticeably messianic Marxism to a more sympathetic treatment of religious themes (Eaglestone, 2009, p. 37).

Nye (1940) is of the view that both religion and literature focus on man. The linkage that he finds is related to human problems, which to him are, and have always been, the same in essence. The concerns of the past have their echoes in those of the present. Nye states that the choice of the genre, religious or literary, does not matter much. He gives the examples of Emerson, Thoreau, and Freneau, Emerson with his Oversoul, Thoreau with his moral vision of man and state, Freneau with his ideas of nature and the divine. While contemplating one the works of such writers, one finds that lines are blurred. So, literature appears to be a blend of secular and

religious sentiments, thoughts, views, concepts and ideologies. This is why that Gunn (1970) considers literature to be a mirror of nature and that it can play a role in assessing cultural and religious distresses of contemporary times. There are others who hold a stronger view than this, that literature can offer a significant commentary for addressing contemporary confusions:

Still others maintain that every successful individual work of literature, as an instance of the artist's sacrifice of himself and his own intentions to the objective requirements of his craft, presents us with the paradigmatic religious situation, a virtual reenactment of the Crucifixion in which the artist empties himself for the sake of his materials so that their meanings may live. Yet another group of critics work on the contrary assumption: instead of emptying himself of every vestige of his personality, his inwardness, the true artist, they argue, serves a religious function precisely to the extent that he carries the expression of his own personality, his own humanitas, to its uttermost extreme, since truth of a religious order is disclosed to man only under the shadow of ultimacy. A variation on this same theme is played by still another group of critics who contend that the great writer, through his capacity to penetrate beneath the superficial appearances of his age to its deepest, unspent sources of life, is a spokesman for Being itself. And by giving formal expression to life's deep-running currents, he thus helps in his work to conserve what has survived from the past and to release what may shape the present and the future (Gunn, 1970, p. 271).

A relatively old but still relevant opinion is found in de Blacam (1922), who wonders if Milton would have been Milton had he not been a Puritan, suggesting that his religious and classical roots added to his experience had much to do with his development as a poet. This kind of speculation would be valid for most writers. Can they be removed from the crucible of living that shapes their perceptions? Can they rise above it, or are they irrevocably bound by it? Or do they shape one aspect of it in accordance with perceptions gained in another? Knight and Mason (2009) speaks highly of literary, theological and philosophical writing:

With religion, literature makes space for feeling, emotion, and the communities of readers who experience life and thought in particular ways; with philosophy, literature shares a determination to question received wisdom and pursue new modes of thought. Of course, none of these disciplinary descriptions are rigid: literature, philosophy and religion coincide, conflict and converse at every turn, collectively forming a rich inter-disciplinary trinity that encourages us to explore the possibilities of theo-philosophical literary criticism. Such talk sounds grandiose, even idealistic, but the religious and literary imagination helps save our thinking from dangerous pretensions, bringing abstract vocabulary down to earth by insisting that words have flesh and an earthly history (Knight and Mason, 2009, p. 150).

Secular Humanism

Secular humanism is not a new phenomenon. It has existed both side by side and in opposition to its religious 'Other.' Secular humanism, according to one source, is considered to be "humanism viewed as a system of values and beliefs that are opposed to the values and beliefs of traditional religions" (S. Humanism); and according to another, it is "alternative to religious belief" (Norman, 2004). Likewise, it is opined that "secular humanism aims to liberate humanity from the tyranny of religious absurdity in order to actualize goods that constitute true ideals for

humanity" (Klemm and Schweiker, 2008). Yet in another, broader aspect, it is believed that secular humanism

...names a general tendency toward cultural forms. It defines education, art, politics, literature, economics, etc. in such a way that they owe nothing to religion and cannot, in principle, disclose experiences of religious transcendence . . . Yet according to our definition of religion in both its general and particular dimensions, secular humanism, ironically, qualifies as a functional equivalent of a religion. Ingredient is the mood of joy in exercising the liberating power of free and rational inquiry in order "to bring out the best in people so that all people can have the best in life."¹⁹ Secular humanism is committed to solving human problems in practical ways, to moral principles, to constitutional democracy and protection of the rights of all minorities, and to the maximization of human potential. Redemption is *from* religion and *for* the world (Klemm and Schweiker, 2008).

Of course, secular humanism is not a religion in the sense of linkage with a divine entity. It functions as one in the sense of being a widespread belief system, whether or not it takes cognizance of divinity. It is a practical 'religion' that advocates the merits of a severance from traditional religion. An in-depth understanding of the notion, however, requires an insight into terms such as secular, secularity, secularization and secularism through which the ism finds its reflection in the activities of life.

Religious Humanism

If secular humanism is the absence of religion from the public domain, then by the same principle, religious humanism is the absence of secularity or secularism from the public domain. One thing is manifest: these isms stand in opposition to each other. The secular notion privileges human rationality only, and considers it the primary governing principle of human life: on the other hand, while religion also gives importance to rationality, it posits transcendence and spirituality as vital elements of human life. For the secular mind, "religion is an unnatural imposition on human nature which should be dispensed with," and for the religious mind, "religion is an intrinsic part of human nature and can no more be expunged from that nature than sexual desire or the need for society" (Evans, 1999). Evans also believes that a concept of humanism devoid of the forms of religion is considered to be dry by religious humanists.

Religious humanism for Jakelić (2014) is threefold. First, it is the thought of humanity before God: second, it gives importance to the worth and sanctity of human life: third, it is comprehended in terms of moral responsibility that people owe towards God's creatures. These ideas might seem to put human rationality in control, but in practice they are rarely observed. Religious humanism is also known as 'theological' humanism, which, according to Klemm (2007), is a belief that human beings are prone to mistakes, are free in modest measure, and are quite capable of changing. Human beings can be guided by normative, religious principles, and their activities can be integrated for attaining personal wholeness and social coherence. Integrity of life is considered to be a symbol of God's being, so theological humanism

primarily focuses on that. This understanding of the term suggests a capacity to bring together opposing forces and convert them into complex unities.

Freedom in 'modest measure,' 'personal wholeness,' and 'social coherence' are the attributes of religion which keep the society intact. Klemm (2007) identifies two major threats that are posed to human existence today. *Overhumanization* is the first: this happens when freedom is misused in an aimless manner, when humanism delinks itself from theology and tries to inhabit a space that is universalized and nihilistic. In over-humanization there is no constraint of a higher order on the individual. There is no acknowledgment of the symbol of God, and no divinely inspired principles by which human activities could be rightly guided or measured. The second threat is *hypertheism*, which results from a freedom that places itself under certain specific interpretations of divinely inspired laws, forgetting the fact that divine laws are mediated by human will. Some specific symbol of God is idolized and confused with a universal reality. Hypertheism is so obsessed with God and His will that critical thought is denied a role. It does not allow sacred texts or beliefs to come under scrutiny. There is a conclusive and security specific desire in hypertheism. So the chosen sacred language and specially selected religious communities are preferred over others as a refuge from the outside world. The essence of hypertheism is that there is a desire to live according to the laws provided by God but at the same time a localized idea of God is upheld. In the presence of these two dominant threats the population is divided into zealots of either secular or religious schools of thought. Klemm believes that despite the obvious differences the workings of the two are directed towards undignified ends. Freedom of action is turned into silence, and God is presented as a supernatural hyperbeing whose edicts obstruct human freedom. These extremes are found in societies, but the life of the majority of people is lived somewhere between the two. The conflict may also give birth to a mixture of both with the balance tilting towards either end.

Conclusion

Literature is such a significant body of knowledge that it has the capacity to include in its folds almost everything that happens within or outside a human being. It is a parallel universe to ours and is human shaped. And humanness of literature is an unending debate. Since life is usually seen across religious and secular lines so one finds such sentiments and thoughts embedded in various literary genres. There have been discussions for and against the concept that literature is a surrogate theology or that literature is the other of religion. Whatever be the case, it is noticed that humanistic quality of literature has been classified along secular and religious lines. The study shows that literature cannot be entirely secular or religious because modern human life is a mixture of different tendencies which affect our approaches to life.

References

- Arroyo, C. M. (1992). Literature, Religion, Theology. *South Central Review*, 9(1), 44-56.
- Bradley, A., Tate, Andrew. (2010). *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- de Blacam, A. (1922). Literature: Lay-Brother of Religion. *The Irish Monthly*, 50(583), 1-5.
- Eaglestone, R. (2009). Religion, Truth and the 'New Aestheticism'. In M. K. a. L. Lee (Ed.), *Religion, Literature and the Imagination: Sacred Worlds* (pp. 37-46): Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Evans, D. (1999). *Humanism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*: Washington Area Secular Humanists.
- Freeman, C. W. (2009). Alterity and its cure. *CrossCurrents*, 59(4), 404-441.
- Gunn, G. B. (1970). Literature and Its Relation to Religion. *The Journal of Religion*, 50(3), 268-291.
- Jakelić, S. (2014). Humanism and Theoretical Pluralism: A Response to Christian Smith's What Is a Person? *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 42(1), 156-166.
- Kharal, A. A. (2008). *Humanism in Pakistani Novel in English From 1985 to the Present*. National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.
- Klemm, D. E. (2007). Religious Naturalism or Theological Humanism? *Zygon*, 42(2), 357-367.
- Klemm, D. E., Schweiker, W. (2008). *Religion and the human future: An essay on theological humanism*: Blackwell Publishing.
- Knight, M., Mason, Emma. (2009). Saving Literary Criticism. In M. K. a. L. Lee (Ed.), *Religion, Literature and the Imagination: Sacred World* (pp. 150-161): Continuum Literary Studies.
- Miller, J. H. (2004). *On Literature: Thinking in Action*: Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
- Mousley, A. (2011). *Towards a new literary humanism*: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Neuman, J. (2012). The Fictive Origins of Secular Humanism. *Project Muse*, 50(4), 675-682.
- Neuman, J. (2014). *Fiction Beyond Secularism*: Northwestern University Press.
- Norman, R. (2004). *On Humanism*: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Nye, R. B. (1940). American Literature and the Teaching of Religion. *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 8(1), 31-34.
- Rushdie, S. (1991). Is Nothing Sacred? In S. Rushdie (Ed.), *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*: Granta Books.

Schwarz, C. (Ed.) (1994) *The Chambers Dictionary*. Edinburgh: Chambers Harrp Publishers.

Secular Humanism. (2015). Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved June 28, 2015, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular%20humanism>

Sheehan, P. (2004). *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*: Cambridge University Press.

Treanor, B. (2007). *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate*: Fordham University Press.

Ward, G. (2009). Why Literature Can Never Be Entirely Secular? *Religion and Literature*, 41(2), 21-27.