Negating Literature as a Reflection of Society: Constructing an Alternative Definition with Isaac Asimov's Short Stories

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Abstract

Literature is defined as a reflection of society that is based on historical facts and the present. French philosopher and author Jean-Paul Sartre also defined literature as an entity that has to liberate itself from external factors, bring out the truth about the oppressed, alienate the unknown, engender a change in society, and all this should be discussed well within the boundaries of the world we all know. Such rigid definitions of literature not only marginalised the extent of literature but also dismissed genres of literature such as science fiction. On the other hand, science fiction has been said to be an integral genre of literature, but placed close to fantasy. There is a prevalent logical opinion that science fiction is fundamentally distinct from fantasy and also, it is different from every other genre of literature. Hence it is a genre by itself. Departing from the rigid principles of 'literature' and distancing itself from fantasy, science fiction, as a genre, predicted the future. This paper discusses how science fiction, though neglected by mainstream literature, went on to welcome a great change that transformed human life. For the purpose of this study, Isaac Asimov's writings will be studied with a particular focus on the short story 'Runaround' and his views on science fiction as a genre and its position in literature.

Keywords: Isaac Asimov, Literature, Robotics, Science-fiction

Science fiction in the gamut of literature

Literature is too vast to understand by a definition. Each philosopher and scholar had their own views as to what exactly literature is and what it has to do. Of them, the views of Jean-Paul Sartre stand tall for their philosophical standpoint. Sartre begins to probe into the nature of literature through the acts of writing and reading. According to Sartre:

> Writing and reading are two facets of the same historical fact, and the freedom to which the writer invites us is not a pure abstract consciousness of being free. Hence, in each one there is an implicit recourse to institutions, customs, certain forms of oppression and conflict, to the wisdom and the folly of the day, to lasting passions and passing stubbornness, to superstitions and recent victories of common sense, to evidence and ignorance, to particular modes of reasoning which the sciences have made fashionable and which are applied in all domains, to hopes, to fears, to habits of sensibility, imagination, and even perception, and finally, to customs and values which have been handed down, to a whole world which the author and the reader have in common (Sartre, 1988).

Though his standpoint is that of the Marxists, his words echo the voice of the majority of thinkers of his time. With such anthropocentric understanding of arts, literature, as an art and medium, gained utmost importance over centuries.

He further notes regarding the foundations on which all reading and writing has to happen for greater good. Sartre argues that literature should not alienate or displace the reader from the world he knows. He says that it is this familiar world which the writer animates and penetrates with his freedom. It is on the basis of this world that the reader must bring about his concrete liberation; it is alienation, situation, and history. It is this world which he (I) must change or preserve for myself and others (Sartre, 1988). A close observation of Sartre's argument will tell us the truth that by finding the centre of gravity for literature in the present and the past, it was purposefully distanced from the notion of the future. Even if literature was allowed to meander into the future, it mostly resulted in utopian narrative, or it was science fiction (hereafter referred to as SF). For Sartre:

> Literature has the responsibility to enlighten the world of the suffering and oppression, and reconstruct a just society. It has to liberate itself from external social and political pressures and emerge as a valiant warrior of truth to shed light on the negativity that is prevalent in the society and go about reforming it. Literature, entirely liberated, would represent negativity in so far as it is a necessary moment in

> reconstruction. But to his knowledge, this type of society does not for the moment exist, and it may be doubted whether it is possible. (Sartre, 1988)

By attributing such singular characteristics to literature, it had been contained well within the frontiers of history and the present, anticipating it would live up to the ideals of some influential thinkers. This was when literature branched out into various other genres like SF. So, is SF literature? Yes. Can it be judged by the usual literary criteria? No (Russ, 1975).

Science fiction is not just a way of storytelling but also a well organised and defined genre for writers, a profitable marketing segment for publishers, and an assemblage of innovative ideas that envisioned a different world. The genre of science fiction is nothing new, but it took a considerable amount of time to gain prominence in the modern era. SF is said to have begun in the sixteenth century with the works of Thomas More, and later writers such as Francis Bacon, Voltaire, Mary Shelly, Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, Mark Twain, H.G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, Karel Capek, Aldous Huxley, John Campbell, Isaac Asimov, C.L. Moore, Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury, Philip K. Dick, Samuel Delany and many others have nourished this genre with short stories, novels, comics, essays, movies and TV series. The piquant nature of this genre is that it could successfully escape the magnetic field of traditional literary tenets, of course with some turbulence, and think of a world that is non-existent. It traversed from the known to the unknown bravely. Notably, magazine fiction (SF) fetched this genre a great curiosity among the readers. It was during the magazine-era of SF, from the 1940s on, that the imagined application of experimental method and technological innovation not to physical problems but to fundamental questions about society and the mind began. One such application of scientific principles to society can be found in Isaac Asimov's stories about Hari Seldon, later assembled into the novel 'Foundation' and the corresponding sequels (1951–86). (...) This faith in predictive social science led not only Asimov but a number of other writers as well to begin considering social dynamics more seriously, writing stories that emphasized politics, religion and other collective activities (Attebery, 2003). These developments in SF and its departure from static understanding of life and the world resulted in one of the greatest inventions - the robot. Robots, as a concept, made their first appearance in the English dictionary and literature with the translation of Karel Capek's play R.V.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots) in 1923. Capek was a Czech. In his native language the word robot means 'a worker'. In his play, robots were the humanoid creations of Rossum and his son, constructed in the fond hope that they would function obediently in the service of man. This popular conception is a mechanically operated man capable of carrying out human actions efficiently (Engelberger, 1980).

Later, Isaac Asimov, in the 1940's, began rethinking robots in a happier light. Asimov's robots were benevolent. In a series of robot-ic stories that are both ingenious and delightful, Asimov postulated roboticists with the wisdom to design robots that contained inviolable control circuitry to ensure their always 'keeping their place' (Engelberger, 1980). Asimov, in a series of short stories published between 1950 and 1977, developed the idea of robots that serve the human race. He is even credited for inventing the word ‘robotics’ - the study of robots. According to Asimov, robots do not consult their conscience when faced with an ethical dilemma; they obey the three laws that absolutely govern their behaviour. Asimov’s robots do not run on rails, their behaviour is not necessarily predictable, they are not morally clockwork figures. He laid out three laws by which robots should function in his short story ‘Runaround’, which are:

1. A robot may not injure a human being, or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given to it by a human being, except where such orders would conflict with the first law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the first or second laws.

Runaround is set in the year is 2015. Engineers Greg Powell and Mike Donovan are on a base on the Mercury (planet). A few hours after working, they encounter a malfunction with Speedy, a robot sent to retrieve selenium from pools on the planet's surface. Selenium is used to maintain climate control systems on mercury without which they will be burnt to death. Speedy, the robot seems to have identified a selenium pool but is moving around listlessly without any particular action. The engineers then decide to travel through the tunnels under the surface to reach the location where Speedy is stuck. They make their way to the tunnel exit close where Speedy is. One of them comprehends that Speedy's malfunction is the result of a conflict among the three laws of robotics. Speedy is unable to decide between obedience to humans (law 2) and self-protection (law 3). Thus the robot obeys their orders, but retreats again as its actions could put itself in danger. Then the engineers try to resolve the conflict by increasing the concentration of carbon monoxide that forces Speedy further away from the selenium pool and out of equilibrium. Their plan fails. Just then, as they are running out of time and Powell is in a life-threatening situation, he discerns to invoke rule 1 that says a robot should not allow a human to cause harm. While speedy comes back to normalcy, it reaches Powell to save him and move him to a safe place.

Though 2015 is too early for robots to save humans on their own, the laws of robotics formulated by Asimov are appreciable. Runaround is a short story that proved SF is a source of potential ideas that are practical to an extent.

Based on the trajectory of the genre of SF, if we are to map its position in the gamut of literature, it may not find a place that is of any importance. Though SF gained immense popularity among readers all over the world, it is not regarded as a genre of serious literature. Even writers such as Isaac Asimov had to face serious criticism for his works on robots, especially for the laws he proposed. It is easy to underestimate Asimov as a writer: the dry, flat, prose style, the underdeveloped characters, a lack of visual and descriptive flair, these things can distract the critical reader from his considerable artistic strengths. Nor have favorable critics been able, effectively, to frame a defense of Asimov's importance except in terms of an entertainer, a puzzle-setter and humorist, a polymath populariser and so on (Roberts, 2006).

Despite the uninterrupted reception of SF and its prominence among other genres in literature, it was ignored equally by scholars and critics from an academic standpoint. In a few instances, SF is forcibly coupled with fantasy, which is rejected by several SF writers. It is argued that there is no agreed definition of SF as such, as it is easy to demonstrate what science fiction is not rather than what is. It is even possible to describe what it does. SF can be defined as fiction about science, but on the contrary, there is SF literature that contains no detectable amount of science at all. It is not fantasy. The joining of SF with fantasy triggered wide dismissal, which articulated the opinion that SF is not just different from fantasy alone, but from all other literary genres. To render into simple words, SF is primary a literature of ideas. Ideas are discussable. In fact, they demand discussion; and the sorts of ideas that arise from the reading of SF demand that the discussions be with others who share an interest in them (Pohl, 1997). Perhaps, this underpinning is felt by all the readers and hence there emerged closely-knit groups – fan clubs and readers' clubs - of SF admirers and readers who do not just discuss but further the ideas they extract from the texts they read.

Pohl further notes the traces of SF in actual research. Futurology (future studies) is a method of scientific research that is employed to develop formal methodologies for future predictions. It was also used in reputed agencies that work for the government such as Rand Corporation and Hudson institute. However, those methodologies did not yield accurate predictions most of the times. After much effort, scientists came to the conclusion that it is impossible to predict the future but the one thing we can do is to invent it. Departing from the unproductive methodologies, scientists developed another method known as 'normative forecasting' that involves listing out of all the possible outcomes and future scenarios of a phenomenon or a decision. One of the tools that normative forecasting used is SF. SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) and early efforts in rocketry were the result of this process that took help from SF. Over a period of time, prediction and invention began

walking hand in hand which resulted in a good number of workable and practical solutions to several problems. Of course there occurred many failed attempts.

In the gamut of literature, SF may be customarily categorised under popular fiction. Sometimes it may become a different category on its own but never under 'literature' as such for the fact that SF does not comply with the tenets of literature. But if one goes by definition of literature, as discussed earlier, it has to play its role in the society to bring about a constructive change that betters the lives of the people for whom literature is being produced. Though some may argue that the anticipated and speculated change that actual literature aims to achieve is underway, many others argue that it is negligible. On the contrary, SF played its role in engendering a change so big that it envisioned and caused the advent of robotics into human life and its impact was so profound that it also inspired a young entrepreneur to found the world's first robotics company Unimation, in the United States. The founder of the company, Joseph Engelberger, is a contemporary of Isaac Asimov in graduate college and Engelberger's inspiration to set up Unimation was Asimov's short stories.

Literature, robots and future

In his book *The Complete Robot*, Isaac Asimov noted that on June 10, 1939, he sat down to write his first robot story. He wrote *'Robbie'* about a robot nurse, a little girl, a prejudiced mother, a weak father, and a tearful reunion. Something odd happened with his first story. Until then, robots were thought to be functioning as companions to humans that would lend a helping hand at home, but Asimov began to think of robots as industrial products built by matter-of-fact engineers. They were built with safety features and they were fashioned for certain jobs so that no tragedy was involved. As he continued to write robot stories in this manner, this notion of carefully-engineered industrial robots permeated his stories more and more until the whole character of robot stories in serious printed science fiction changed not only that of his own stories, but of just about everybody's. As time went by, he made other discoveries, for instance, when he used the word "robotics" to describe the study of robots, he was not using a word that already existed but had invented a word that had never been used before (Asimov, 1984). Asimov's futuristic ideas and the scientific advancements that were brewing in the world at that point of time kindled a thought in Joseph Engelberger if robots can be employed in industries.

One evening in the mid 1960s, Joseph Engelberger met George Devol at a party. Devol had just patented a design for a computer controlled mechanical arm. Engelberger saw this as a primitive robot. They then partnered and formed the company Unimation. The first design of these mechanical arms was designed in the 1940s, which were used to manipulate radioactive material from behind the safety of lead-glass screens. After the founding of Unimation, the

use of robots in industries took a considerable amount of time. However, Japan was one country that saw the potential of industrial robots and invested heavily in research and development of robotics. Engelberger took his company to Japan and started manufacturing there. Gradually robots evolved from being machines that can do the work humans can do to machines that can perform functions that humans cannot.

Thus, SF stepped out of the tenets of literature, ventured out to invent the future. Though SF was relegated to a peripheral position in literature, examples like 'Runaround' and 'Unimation' proved that the change is actually underway.

Asimov and literature: In his own words

A series of interviews have been conducted with Isaac Asimov over a period of time to delve into the intricacies and inspiration that led him to produce the most loved SF stories. One of the interviewers asked if there is a correlation between the stress on robots in his stories and his feeling, as expressed in his essays, that SF should be fundamentally social literature. Asimov answered:

> By my own definition, SF is the branch of literature which deals with the response of human beings to changes in the level of science and technology. Over the past two centuries, we have watched our society grow more and more machine-made, so to speak; and I assume that in one of our possible futures, machines will continue to play more and more of a part in our society—in fact, to the point where machines may eventually "take over." So, a good portion of my stories deal with this possibility; I have machines beginning to have human intelligence and capable of doing all sorts of complex tasks we associate only with human beings; and eventually I write stories in which the machinery does, more or less, threaten to take over. (Freedman, 2005)

In Asimov's view, it can be perceived that robots are not monsters that will destroy their creators because he assumes the people who build robots will also know enough as to how to make one with an inbuilt safety system. On the other hand, when the time comes (speculatively) when robots are intelligent enough to replace humans, it would be inevitable. Asimov argues that we have had many cases in the course of human evolution, in which one species replaced another, because the replacing species was in one way or another more efficient than the species replaced. Contrary to the rigid anthropocentric principles of literature, Asimov does not think Homo sapiens possess any right to the top ecosystem. He concludes by saying that we are doing such a miserable job in preserving the Earth and its life- forms that one can't help but feel the sooner we are replaced the better for all other forms of life (Freedman, 2005).

Asimov was often asked about his views on the position of SF in literature and how he would define it, for which he said science fiction is the very relevant branch of literature that deals with human response to changes in the level of science and technology. And such writing goes to the heart of matters that trouble us now, because the world is changing at whirlwind speed. Moreover, any person who is, let us say, between fifteen and thirty years of age today is likely to live well into the twenty-first century. The world is going to be completely different then (Freedman, 2005). He understood future as something that is inconclusive, incomprehensible and unimaginable. Particularly, during his time, the world was undergoing a rapid transformation that was prompted by science and technology, and it was inevitable. Therefore, basing on the world he had seen, Asimov believed that if the world is transforming at such a rapid pace, it would be even more in the future. To face that future and make informed decisions, according to Asimov, one needs extensive imagination. He believes no amount of reading in any field but SF is going to convince anyone of the inevitability of change in society. At the same time, he dismisses the false notion that SF writers predict the future accurately and act as prophets and he also opines that SF writers attempt only to prepare people that a great change will take place.

On par with other literary genres, SF also has a unique character that makes it last, according to Asimov. When an interviewer asked what makes a SF work last, Asimov opined that SF will have something to say to generations yet unborn. In other words, Shakespeare's plays don't have meaning only for the English people of 1600. They deal with human beings in such a way they have meaning for us today (Freedman, 2005). While Asimov politely clarifies that he is nowhere near Shakespeare, he further says that his own writings will have something to say to the future generation as to how their previous generations thought and lived.

Another interviewer asked him about the speculations; extrapolation and the predictions he made about the future through his writings for which Asimov fondly remembered the company Unimation. He said that when he wrote the robot stories, he had no thought that robots would come into existence in his lifetime. In fact, he would have bet they would not. But we do have robots, and furthermore, they are the kind he described—industrial robots, created by engineers to do specific jobs, with safeguards built in. He was the first one—or the first one to get away with it—to portray robots in this way. The other stories written back in the 1940s, for the most part, showed robots as either menaces or symbols of a persecuted minority. Joseph F. Engelberger, the president of Unimation, says he has decided to devote his life to manufacturing robots after reading Asimov's robot stories (Freedman, 2005). Asimov is also said to be the first SF writer who described space walk quite accurately from a psychological standpoint in 1952, which was about thirteen years before the first space walk

actually took place. He admits that moments like those certainly make him happy and elated as he was an acrophobe and despite that, his imagination predicted correctly how a space-walk would be.

In another interview he was asked about the idea of robots that are out of control referring to the three laws of robotics he devised. The interviewer compared the rise of computers that are more powerful than the human mind when should humans start worrying about humans. Asimov answered by drawing a line between fact and fiction, science and speculation that reads as follows:

> When they are so complex that we can't be sure of their responses, and then we'll have to put in generalized precautions, generalized safeguards. As long as what they do is precisely what we tell them to do, then we are the safeguards. But when they do not, then some kind of general guidelines will be necessary. I haven't the slightest idea how something like the three laws of robotics would be programmed into a computer, but I leave that to people who know more than I do. (Freedman, 2005)

Asimov had great interest in imaginative writing. Though he is credited for coining the word robotics, inspiring the inception of the first robotics company and formulating the laws of robotics, he only sees it as a collective victory of science and fiction that welcomed a great change in human life.

Conclusion

Science fiction is not seen as an integral part of literature for several reasons. By defining literature as a reflection of society, scholars and critics have distanced SF from the literary canon. As discussed above, SF does not reflect society but talks about the future, in most cases. For instance, Asimov's 1951 short story 'The Fun They Had' proves this fact. This story describes how children store books in computers and take lessons from robots through a TV set in the year 2157. If we look around, we can see the same events happening right in front of us. Runaround may have talked about a few things that are too early for our time but The Fun They Had seems to late. By analysing this one instance, we can comprehend that literature as defined and accepted as a deeply rooted social tool does not necessarily bring about a change in society but only talk about it in volumes. If literature is about change, then SF negates this rigid definition deftly. Drawing the necessary elements to define SF from Asimov's works, we can propose that literature can cross boundaries, and try to reach the future and it need not necessarily be placed well within the world known to man.

This study can be further extended to the short stories of Isaac Asimov and the impact they created in the real world. Works of other SF writers can also be studied to see how they played a role in showing a way to the future.

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