The Concept of Truth in Islam and in Fictional Literature
Md. Muhasin Uddin[1]

[Literature is akin to religions as all the holy books of the world religions belong to literature. But very paradoxically a number of religions do not support the practice and culture of literature, especially the fictional literature. In spite of regarding the Holy Quran as the greatest monument of literature, Islam is also traditionally discouraging and sometimes even considering sinful the practice and culture of fictional literature. This essay aims to show how far the question of practising the so-called *untruth* or *falsity* in fictional literature holds ground to validate this disapproving view of Islam.]

Fictional literature is a phrase combining two words or terms 'fiction' and 'literature' of which the latter is too familiar to need any definition or clarification. The other word 'fiction' which demands a bit of definition or clarification enjoys quite a variable range of denotation. According to J. A. Cuddon, fiction is

> 'a vague and general term for an imaginative work, usually in prose. At any rate, it does not normally cover poetry and drama though both are a form of fiction in the sense that they are moulded and contrived- or feigned. Fiction is now used in general of the novel, the short story, novella and related genres' (Cuddon 343).

M. H. Abrams defines fiction as 'any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that in fact happened' (Glossary 64).

---

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Trishal, Mymensingh

Like these two, most other definitions also cover only the literary aspect of the term and accordingly attempt to specify the forms of literature which it usually designates. However in our discussion here, we have kept in mind another important philosophical dimension of the term which is related to the concept about *truth*, *untruth* (falsity) and poetic faith. We have consciously kept it in mind because we know that this dimension of *truth*, i.e., reality-consciousness always underlies the process of fabricating facts and events in all fictions. Based on that dimension, by 'fictional literature' we mean here any literary work, both in prose and poetry, that fabricates things and facts but still sincerely attempts to claim a *faith* of the readers. By this definition we want to exclude fairy tales, romances, fables, science fictions and works like these from the area of fictional literature, since those are not intended to claim a faith; and at the same time, by this definition, we want to include epics, dramas and narrative poems in the area of 'fictional literature'.

It is now clear that in our use here the term 'fictional literature' is intended to signify both its philosophical connotation and its literary denotation. With this view in mind, we have chosen the word 'fictional' instead of 'fiction', since this adjective form 'fictional' refers to the philosophical aspect of *truth* and *untruth* of things, rather than a mere literary genre. But at the same time the word 'fictional' has an implicit reference to a certain genre of literature as its noun form 'fiction' usually refers to that. This deliberate selection of words in the title then necessarily implies that the proposed analysis will consider it importantly how far the *falsity* or *untruth* underlying fictional literature accounts for the disapproving attitude of Islamic scholars towards it. In order to do justice to this implication of the title, we will explore and analyse- a) what critics and literary philosophers think about the *truth* or *untruth* of fictional literature, b) what the Scriptures of Islam say about

truth and *untruth*, and then c) whether the *untruth* of fictional literature (if there is any) can be considered quite sinless by the Islamic standards of judgement.

The western critics and philosophers have viewed the *truth* in literature in different perspectives which are even conflicting with each other. The ground of this conflict was actually paved by the doyens of philosophers- Plato and Aristotle themselves. Plato's theory of idealism says that the ultimate *truth* lies somewhere away from this material world. According to this theory, what we see or perceive by senses is just the shadow of that ideal or ultimate *truth* and is, therefore, never the genuine *truth* (qtd. in A. Rahman 2). If we connect this theory to Aristotle's poetic theory of *mimesis*, there emerges a newer view about *truth* in literature. According to Aristotle, all forms of literature can be 'described in general terms as forms of imitation or representation' (Aristotle 31). This phrase certainly supports us to deduce that whatever literature presents is not itself a thing or a fact, rather just an imitation of another thing or fact that it attempts to present. On the basis of a fusion between these two theories, it becomes legal to say that what fictional literature presents is as true as the facts and phenomena of the day-to-day life which the material world presents, as they both do the same thing: replicate or imitate the genuine or ultimate *truth* lying somewhere away from this material world.

This *idealistic* view about *truth* was first vehemently opposed by the 18th century *naive realist* philosophers like Thomas Read and the nineteenth century empiricists. The naive realists asserted that the 'ideal world', as expounded by the idealist philosophers, is just illusory and unreal. According to these naive realists no truth lies away from this material world. The objects of the material world are substantially real or true and their reality or *truth* is not subject to one's own mind,

idea or senses. The senses, however, are the windows through which the material world allows us to know about its existence (Rahman 3). Quite opposite to the theory of Aristotle and Plato, this theory of the *naive realists* poses a persisting conflict among the views of 'fictional truth' in the western world. The earlier theories of idealism equated 'fictional truth' with 'material truth' as they both were equal in importance to represent the ultimate truth. In conflict with this, the naive realistic theory establishes *truth* in the material world suggesting that the fictional literature can be at best a shadow of *truth*, not the *truth* itself. This strongly points to the falsity or *untruth* of fictional literature.

We can remember here that earlier very paradoxically Plato also had brought the charge of *falsity* against fictional literature saying that poets are liars. This was paradoxical because, according to Plato, the material world which is imitated by poets is not itself true, and therefore by imitating it a not-truth is being reproduced as another not-truth and this act cannot be called a lie. So the charge made by Plato philosophically did not actually hold ground then. But it began to be convincing when the naive realists stated their view that *truth* lies in the material world and day-to-day experiences, and it is perceivable through senses. Then it is apparently impossible that fictional literature can be true as it is neither the material world itself nor a true report of one's day-to-day experiences which is, by definition, impossible to be 'fictional'.

This alleged impossibility of *truth* in 'fictional literature' has been challenged by many critics and philosophers at various ages. Among them Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) was the first important one. He acquitted the poets (here to be meant as the writer of 'fictional literature') from Plato's charge of falsity or *untruth* not taking into consideration Plato's philosophy of 'idealism', as we have done above.

Rather he put his argument against Plato from the standpoint of a 'realist' or 'naive realist'. Sidney argued that nothing can be false or *untrue* until it is claimed to be *true*. A writer of the 'fictional literature' puts forth a narrative before his readers with the presupposition that things are fabricated here. He does not want anybody to believe it. Sidney says that a poet 'nothing affirmeth, therefore never lieth. For as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false'. 'The poet' Sidney continues 'never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe what he writes. He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention; in truth, not labouring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be (Sidney in Norton Anthology 493).

The modern theorists also support and present the easily intelligible logical view of Sir Philip Sidney. A major proponent of this view, Margaret Macdonald elaborates that fictive sentences are meaningful according to the rules of ordinary, nonfictional discourse, but, in accordance with conventions implicitly shared by the author and reader of a work of fiction, they are not assertions of fact, and therefore are not subject to the criterion of *truth* or *untruth* as these apply to sentences in nonfictional discourse (qtd. in Abrams, Glossary 65). Similarly almost all modern critics agree to the fundamentals of the realistic philosophy and at the same time convincingly establish that 'fictional literature' bears *truth*, nevertheless, the nature or the level of this *truth* is necessarily different.

In his analysis I. A. Richards states that fiction is a form of emotive language, opposite to the referential language. In referential language a statement is 'justified by its truth, i.e., its correspondence . . . with the fact to which it points'. But the emotive language of fictions presents a texture of pseudo-statements and these

pseudo-statements are justified 'entirely by its effect in releasing or organising our attitudes' (qtd. in Abrams, Glossary 65). Richards' view therefore affirms that the concept of empirical *truth* based on the referential world does not work in the area of the emotive language of fictions.

The famous philosopher Leibnitz's idea about how God created the world serves as a philosophical basis to establish the view that the world of fictional literature stands as a different but parallel world in which reality or *truth* is constituted by 'probability' or 'possibility', not by the things or facts of the experienced world. According to Leibniz-

> God had present to him infinite number of 'possibles' or model essences. He could not bring all these essences over into existence, because existence may only be achieved by a set of 'compossibles'- that is, by a system of essences which may exist together, because they are neither self-contradictory nor otherwise incompatible. From the alternative sets of such compossibles, or model of worlds, God, in accordance with his excellence, selected the best of all possible worlds of realisation (qtd. in Abrams, Mirror and the Lamp 276-77).

This view of Leibniz instigates us to say rather blasphemously that the fictional literature actually presents only those varied versions of TRUTH which even God could not realise or bring into existence owing to certain technical problems.

This way the modern western critics and philosophers find fictional literature endowed with *truth* and ample divine illumination. Even *pragmatics*, the science to study the meaning of speech or discourse, allows fictional literature the freedom to suspend 'the normal illocutionary commitment' without breaking the practical and social norms of *truth* (Abrams, Glossary 65). As a juxtaposition with these views,

we will now try to show what the Scriptures of Islam say about the *truth* or *untruth* of fictional literature and whether Islam can admit of acquitting fictional literature from its traditional charge of *untruth*.

Both the basic Scriptures of Islam, the Quran and the Hadith, proclaim most fearful warnings against lies (*untruth*) or the practice of falsity. At least at nineteen places in the Quran the almighty Allah admonishes the mankind not to practice lies or *untruth* (M. Rahman 620). The admonition goes so far that Allah the almighty declares- 'Only those persons tell lies who do not have faith (in Allah)' (Surah Nahl, Verse 105). Two books of hadith, 'Imam Ahmad' and 'Baihaki' also quote Muhammad (sm) saying- One who is a Muslim is free from lies (*untruth)* and any breach of trust (qtd. in Ahmad 10). Similarly all the authentic hadith-anthologies quote numerous sayings of Muhammad (sm) warning against the terrible consequences of practicing lies or *untruth*.

Now naturally a question arises whether these terrible warnings have been uttered out against all forms of lies or *untrue* things without considering their degree of harmfulness, or against the lies or *untrue* things within a certain range of harmfulness which are apprehended to disturb the prevailing affinity and congeniality in the society. To find an appropriate answer to such questions first it is necessary to see what the Scriptures of Islam directly or indirectly tell about the definition or basic concept of *truth* or *untruth*.

In this regard, we can refer, at least, to one indirect idea about the basic concept of lie or (*untruth)* provided in the holy Quran. The first verse of Surah *Munafiqun* says- "When the hypocrites come to thee, they say 'we bear witness that thou art indeed the apostle of Allah'. Yes, Allah knoweth that thou art indeed His Apostle.

And Allah beareth witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars". Here it is important to notice that Allah is calling the hypocrites liars though the hypocrites are speaking the truth that Muhammad (sm) is the apostle of Allah. Allah is calling them liars only on this ground that they themselves do not have faith in what they are saying. It proves that a statement cannot be true only because it is materially true or false. Its *truth* or *untruth* is further subject to a question of 'faith'. If the speaker has sincere faith in it and if the listener's faith is also intended, only then the statement enters the domain of *truth* and *untruth*, the above-quoted verse of the Holy Quran suggests. It is clear then that, according to the Holy Quran, 'faith' entertained by the speaker and intended from the listener is an essential condition for the determination of *truth* or *untruth*. This aspect of *truth* and *untruth* suggested by the Holy Quran, at least, narrowly saves the writer of fictional literature from the charge of lying or *untruth* as neither they themselves entertain *faith* in the factuality of their write-ups nor they intend to create any such *faith* in the readers.

Fictional literature does not present things and events with any intention to create in the reader any faith in the factuality of their described things or the reported events. The events or things presented in fictional literature however claim a faith of a different nature which is based on inductive analogy and its resultant generalisations of day-to-day experiences and which actually distinguishes fictional literature of our definition from fairy tales, chivalric romances and science fictions. It is not a *faith* directly in the thing or the event, rather a *faith* in the generalised aspect of the thing or the event which is merely an abstract and conceptual aspect of the respective thing or event. It could be compared to one's faith in the numerical figures such as 1, 2, 3, 4 etc. which have no real existence other than a reflection of reality of the things they refer to. So the faith intended or created by fictional literature is not concrete enough to place the things and events

of fictional literature in the domain of *truth* and *untruth*. This establishes the view that according to the Quranic suggestion about *truth* the fictional literature cannot be categorically declared untrue or false and therefore it can be acquitted of its alleged charge of *untruth*.

The philosophical discussions in authentic books of Islam also duly echo this view. Taftazani, a famous scholar of Islamic philosophy, dwells long on the view of *truth* and concludes- *truth* is *adherence* to the fact and *belief* in the fact together; and *untruth* is to break either or both (Taftazani 39). Fictional literature aims neither at establishing these two (*adherence* to the fact and *belief* in the same) nor at breaking them. It has been elaborated earlier with reference to Sidney and his followers that fictional literature essentially prepares the reader with two presuppositions: (1) the narrative presents what is possible and not what is factual, and (2) the narrator himself does not believe it factually and does not expect anybody to believe it that way. This presupposition keeps fictional literature away from any 'informative' or 'referential' narrative only which could be judged as true or untrue with the Islamic determiners of truth: *adherence* to the fact and the target of being *believed.* So it is legitimate to say that the Quranic verses and the sayings of Muhammad (sm) damning the practice of *lies* or *untruth* do not actually promulgate any damnation against fictional literature.

Now even if someone very naively considers fictional literature to be untrue for its *non-adherence* to fact, then also fictional literature may not be condemned as that particular *lie* or *untruth* which has horribly been damned by the Quran and other Scriptures. The unequivocal statement of the Islamic *standard of moral judgement* has a great role to play here. The Prophet (sm) categorically says that surely it is the end that determines the justness and unjustness of all actions (Bukhari 3). This

gives one a powerful license to decide about the legality or illegality of an action just on the basis of the intention or the end of that particular action. If the end conforms to the ethical line of Islam, the action, whatever it is, is just, legal and ethical. This *standard of moral judgement* obviously has a strong role to determine the sinfulness of *untruth* or *lies*. If the *lie* or *the untrue* report is not intended to disturb any individual interest, social congeniality or the religio-ethical manifesto of Islam, it cannot be judged as unjust or sinful, since the end of that particular *lie* or *untrue* report uncontaminated by any evil intention does not permit such judgement.

Based on this set *standard of moral judgement* the interpreters of Islamic Laws (Muftis) have duly promulgated the validity of telling *lies* at several situations. Imam Ghazzali specifies five such situations: (i) in order to save one's life or property which is unlawfully endangered, (ii) in order to conceal one's sin related to the negligence of duty to Allah, (iii) in order to mend the breach of relationship between two persons, (iv) in order to win over the enemy in a religious war, and (v) in order to please the spouse and maintain a peaceful conjugal life (qtd. in Ahmad 11 – 12). The list shows how importantly the ends of the lies have been considered in judging their justness or unjustness. The end of the *untruth* or *lie* of fictional literature, if there is genuinely any, is simply to please some story-loving mind which very reasonably can be considered more innocent than the end of telling *lies* to the spouse, since the latter is very likely to keep up one's interest and harm the other's (though to a very minor extent) whereas the former does not intend any such harm. This establishes our point that lies in fictional literature are not less innocent than, at least, one category of lies that has been declared valid by almost infallible a personality of Islam, Imam Ghazzali. So there is little scope to say or

think that Islam discourages or should discourage fictional literature due to its practice of *untruth* or *falsity*.

Fictional literature as a form of intellectual art is thus self-immunised from the charge of *falsity* or *untruth*. We think that the living Islamic scholars, who are imposing the charge of *falsity* upon fictional literature either themselves or by being induced by the judgement of earlier scholars, should open-mindedly consider the arguments and the way of thinking that we have put here. We are hopeful our arguments furnished here in favour of acquitting fictional literature from the charge of *falsity* will serve as an appeal before the scholars of Islam to give up their rather narrow, outdated and orthodox view about fictional literature.

Works Cited

Abrams, M. H. The Mirror and the Lamp. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1958.

- - - . 'Fiction and Truth'. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Bangalore: Prism Books Pvt Ltd. 1993.

Ahmad, Enayet. Zeman Al-Ferdaus (Urdu). Ed., Mufti Muhammad Yusuf. Chittagong: Kutbkhana Faizia, n.d.

Aristotle. ''Poetics''. Trans. and Ed., T. S. Dorsch. Classical Literary Criticism. Penguin Books, 1975

(Al)Bukhari, Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Ismail. Bukhari Sharif. (Arabic – Bangla). Vol. 1. Dhaka: Islamic Foundation. 2005.

Cuddon, J. A. 'Fiction' The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms. Penguin Books, 1991.

Rahman, Akimun. Adhunik Bangla Upanyase Bastabatar Swarup (Bangla). Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1993.

Rahman, Muhammad Habibur. Koran Sutra.

Sidney, Sir Philip. "The Defence of Poesy." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Gen. ed. M. H. Abrams. Vol. 1. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 1993.

Taftazani, Said Uddin. Mukhtasarul Ma'ani (Arabic). Dhaka: Hasina Kutubkhana, n. d.