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Exploring The Aspects Of Meta Ethical Moral Relativism In Brigid Kemmerer's "Call It What You Want"

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the differing perception people have when it comes to morality. Morality is not an absolute universal fact that can be pushed into the lives of people. On the other hand, vices can't be considered as virtues because of the differences people have amongst themselves, be it culture and class they belong to. Yet in the long run, the vices seem to be right in the eyes of the people when they benefit the huge number of people despite inflicting pain to few. Meta-ethical moral relativism helps to comprehend the existence of differing moralities and how it is hard to reconcile certain aspects because of the profound differences people have among themselves. Brigid Kemmerer's *Call it what you want*, explicitly explains the differing aspects of morality and how it can't be justified even if it benefits a huge number of people. Kemmerer questions utilitarianism and shows that no matter how profound and justifiable the differences are, certain things can never be considered as ethical. She embraces the irreconcilable nature of morality and at the same time shows vices can never become a virtue.

In this modern society, it is difficult to have moral codes and ethics, as everything has become right as long as it doesn't affect others. It might sound convincing and reliable to an extent, but deep down, it has its own loopholes. Brigid Kemmerer's *Call It What You Want* talks along the same line. There is only a small line between right and wrong, and sometimes it is actually really hard to determine what we thought as right was wrong.

In the novel, the protagonist Rob Lachlan steals forty dollars; when he was made to pick the currency, Connor drops when they get into a fight. He didn't use the money for himself. He just gave the money to Owen Goettler, who didn't have the money for his lunch. He eats the same cheese sandwich every day, and some days he won't eat at all. Rob has never stolen money from anyone. He never had the reason to until he found out his father had cheated so many people out of money, and Owen is one such victim.

In order to make even what his father did to Owen's family, Rob decided to steal those forty dollars. He was guilty, and he knew it was wrong. Yet his moral sense was completely taken over by the suffering Owen has been going through. Rob thinks in his mind, "I shouldn't regret giving Owen all of it. If I regret anything at all, it should be the stealing. But I don't." (Kemmerer 107) The money was collected by the lacrosse team, though they are the most funded team in that school. Even then they choose to sell a cookie for a dollar and a cupcake for two. While Owen cannot afford to eat anything other than a cheese sandwich. "I wonder what it's like to watch other kids hand over disposable cash when you're condemned to eat cheese sandwiches every day. And then the lunch lady judges you for trying to make the most of the money you get. Suddenly I want to give him the rest of my food." (Kemmerer 88).

This is the first time Rob has stolen something from someone. He never plans to keep on doing that. Yet it again happened for the second time. Rob didn't use it for himself. Owen has invited Rob to play video games in his home and Owen's mother came home early that day. Owen asked for the reason, she told how her shoe gave way and she can't go back and work unless she finds a hundred dollars to buy another one. That shoe was not a luxury; it's a necessity, as she is working as a nurse in a hospital.

Owen's mother in the novel says, "Take my shoes by the door and toss them in the dumpster, she calls after us. I can't believe I'm going to have to find a hundred dollars to replace those." (Kemmerer 156) Rob, once again, decided to steal, because if Owen's family did not get a hundred dollars, she couldn't work anymore and their economy would go down more. That does not make it right, yet the need for shoes did not let him think straight.

This time Rob does not steal the money directly, but he uses the credit card of Lexi Mitre. Lexi Mitre is the girlfriend of Rob's best friend Connor. Her family is very rich, and they pay the bills of her credit card without questioning. For instance, one time an online fraudulent company got hold of her card and asked for 3,000 dollars, and her parents paid the money without even giving much thought to it, and when they found out about it, it was too late, and the credit card company denied reversing it.

On the contrary, instead of being ashamed of it, Lexi found the whole situation hilarious and sent her credit card details to her inner circle and asked them to use it, as her parents did not care about the money. "She has a credit card that her parents pay without question… A few days after that all happened, Lexi texted her credit card number to our inner circle. She said, "If my parents don't care, you all should be able to reap the benefits"." (Kemmerer 135)

Here we have Rob Lachlan and Owen who don't have money to meet their necessary needs. How humiliating life would be when they don't have enough money to meet their ends. Economic struggles oblige a person to isolate themselves. Owen was one of that kind from the beginning. Rob, while talking about Owen says, "Owen Goettler is still sitting at a table by himself… He's pulling his cheese sandwich into minuscule pieces. Trying to make it last, I guess." (Kemmerer 28) Owen could be embarrassed to sit with others as he doesn't have anything to offer to others. Rob also felt the same when Samantha offered to pay his bill, "I don't need to buy dinner at a rinky-dink Mexican restaurant on someone else's dime." (Kemmerer 107)

On the other hand, Maegan can go and sit wherever she wants, as she is not on the receiving end. And she can go out and socialise, as she has the money to spend. When Megan and Rob went out for the first time for their math project, she asked him whether he would like to have coffee. He said yes and he looked at the menu for the cheapest coffee he could get. Megan looked at his face, found his oscillation and paid the one dollar. "It cost him a dollar. There are three ones in his wallet. No credit cards that I can see. I don't know why this feels significant but it does. Maybe because he slips out a dollar like he's extracting a kidney from his abdomen." (Kemmerer 54)

Most of the time, it's hard to break the space of isolation they have created around themselves. Silence becomes comfortable and it takes every ounce in their body to come out of that circle. Even when they come out of it, they just want to curl back in their shell as socialization demands money. For instance, Samantha has invited Rob Lachan to join them for lunch. Initially he refused and then gave in and went with them. He actually felt good when they stepped into the restaurant.

He started regretting his decision when he realized the money he needs to pay for the food, where he says, "I'm also thinking about the fact that I've got three dollars in my pocket, and according to this stupid menu, a soda is a dollar ninety-nine. These thoughts tangle together and go nowhere good." (Kemmerer 106) "I set the menu aside and take a sip of my water. At least that's free." (Kemmerer 107)

As the novel progresses, it creates a turmoil in the hearts of the people and makes them drown in their own world of morals and ethics. For instance, when Rob Lachan stole the earrings of Connor's mom, he did feel guilty but his guilt was overpowered by the fact that Connor's mom doesn't even need it and above all she wouldn't even find it going missing. And when his guilt started eating him up making his life more burdensome than before, he confided the truth to Owen. Owen took a different perception about this whole scenario and justified Rob's stealing and convinced Rob as he is like Robin Hood.

You're not stealing for you, though, Owen finally says, you didn't even keep the ten bucks you threw at me that day. I'm still stealing. Yeah, but it's different. How? Your dad was stealing from people who couldn't afford it. He was doing it to put money in his own pocket. That makes him like… like the sheriff of Nottingham. I roll my eyes. And what I'm Robin Hood? Yes! He claps on the shoulder and grins. Because that makes me Will Scarlett. (Kemmerer 247)

Rob was convinced initially by stating that he is stealing not for his benefit but to help people who are in need, yet there was always a prick in his heart. That got intensified when Maegan confronted him

and accused him for being a thief, no matter what explanations he gave her. Owen's affirmations of him being Robin Hood starts to sound unconvincing to him. "He takes it, and we sit there in quiet silence. He's wrong, anyway: I don't know why I haven't sold them. He compared me to Robin Hood, but that doesn't quite feel right. As soon as the thought strikes me, I realise what my problem is." (Kemmerer 303)

Utilitarianism gives more significance to the happiness of the majority of the people leaving out the minorities who face little loss. Initially Rob was in that kind of mentality, as the novel progresses, the readers find Rob's moral tensions and then he realises why he was so bothered by the theft he has got himself involved, regardless of Connor's mom didn't give a thought to it. He says, "Connor's mom didn't steal the poor to buy those earrings. Neither did Lexi Miter or her parents when she was reckless with her credit card. That money in the bake sale cash box wasn't taken from anyone." (Kemmerer 304)

Owen can be considered as the embodiment of Meta ethical moral relativism. According to Metaethical moral relativism, no absolute or universal morality exists but the moral judgements and justifications are relative to the traditions, convictions or practises a group of people adhere to. For instance, when Maegan pushed Rob Lachan to return the earring, Owen found that as unnecessary. According to him there is no absolute right and wrong which he states, "We weren't going to hurt anyone. We weren't really stealing. We were just taking what people weren't going to miss and giving it to people who needed it." (Kemmerer 336) For him stealing from rich people is not a moral offense, as he comes from a place where meeting their necessity becomes a luxury. All he can see is the suffering, people like him are going through where he states, "My mom would lose her job if she didn't have uniform shoes, but you're going to get up in arms about earrings someone doesn't even know are missing?" (Kemmerer 281)

On the other hand, Maegan finds it hard to take Owen's perception of morality as right as they both belong to a different world. Though they are not from different cultures, the way they grow up makes them more different. When Owen got that ten dollars from Bob he went and bought snacks so that he can use it for a longer time. "Why did you just buy snacks? He zips up his bag but makes no move to leave the bench. Because they'll last longer." (Kemmerer 68) And on that day he didn't get his sandwich, because they might refuse to give him as he has money to buy snacks. This is the world Owen had grown up and still living which is explicitly seen through the words of Rob, "And he only ate one banana. I want to ask why he didn't get his trusty cheese sandwich, but maybe they won't give him one if he shows up at the register with money." (Kemmerer 68)

Maegan is brought up from the family where she gets whatever she wants, even if she didn't all the time, she wasn't put in a place where she is at the mercy of other people. "At the counter, I ordered a white chocolate mocha and pay for myself. Dad hates overpriced coffee drinks, but Mom loves them, so I slap down five dollars without thinking about it. Then I step aside and watch Rob Survey the menu board on the wall." (Kemmerer 53) Before meeting Rob, she never realized what it means to survey the menu board as you don't have money and you can't refuse a drink openly because of that.

It's comprehensible why the morality of Maegan and Owen are wired in different manners. The conversation between Owen and Meagan made her rethink the moral values she had within her.

Owen picks up the abandoned sandwich. We weren't going to hurt anyone, he says. You think the bake sale is going to miss forty bucks? That doesn't make it right, I say. I eat a cheese cake every day, but the lacrosse team is getting new sticks because some kids could afford to pay three bucks for a cookie. You think that's right? (Kemmerer 280)

Maegan was not pushed in a place where she needs to be shrewd when it comes to money. She can spend how much ever she wants. Hence, her morality differs and she sees things as black and white, but when Owen pointed out how miserable and monotonous his life and stealing little money is not going to hurt anyone, Maegan was still unconvinced and finds it hard to compromise the morality when it comes to stealing but also struggles to escape from the point Owen has made.

I frown. He can't solve a crime by committing more-but Owen's words about a three- dollar cookie are lodged in my brain, and I can't work them loose. Think about it. Owen throws his backpack over his shoulder and turns away. We weren't all raised by cops Maegan. (Kemmerer 281)

Carol Rovane, professor of Metaphysics has stated, "On this account, the truth-bearers in one world are not logically related to the truth-bearers in another world (so there cannot be strict disagreement), and yet it is not possible to embrace both worlds (so they are alternatives)." This can be explicitly seen in

the characters of Maegan and Owen. Stealing is morally wrong; no amount of justification is going to make it right, yet Owen finds it hard to accept, while Rob initially resisted and realised the values of morality when it comes to stealing. In a way Rob and Maegan are of the same world. It's true Rob has been suffering and struggling financially yet he was not struggling from his birth like Owen. Rob has led a luxurious life where He was never pushed to think more about money unlike Owen who has lost his father in a young age and his mother lost all of the savings his father made in his medications. Sadly, he lost his father as well as their savings. Hence, a moral judgment may be true for the occupant of one world, but not for the occupant of another world.

The moral values Maegan had from her childhood got tumbled down after her conversation with Owen. But when they were confronted by Owen's mother that made them see more clearly what they were actually missing. When Owen told her that he bought the shoe with Lexi's money because they don't have the money to buy and she had way more than she needed. Owen's mother replied to him saying, "Just because we don't have something doesn't mean we take it." (Kemmerer 338)

Secondly Owen was explaining how the forty dollars Rob sold is not a big deal as they need it more than the Lacrosse team. He was again confronted by his mother who said, "You don't get to decide who deserves to have what, she says. Or who doesn't, for that matter." (Kemmerer 338) Thirdly, Owen started defending saying, they don't even care about the earrings as they have plenty of other earrings to keep. Owen's mother explained how she never sold the pendant with diamonds on it no matter how hard survival has become as it was gifted to her by her husband. People had judged her for wearing it, but they don't know how special it was to her. She said to Owen, "You said they wouldn't miss it. But how do you know? How do you know those earrings weren't special to that woman? Her voice has softened. "What puts you in the position to determine the best use of what you were planning to steal?" (Kemmerer 338)

Owen's mother is a wise woman and when she said, "Other people don't have the challenges we have, Owen. But that doesn't mean they don't have their own." (339) Connor can be seen as a kid, who had everything and nothing to lose. He comes from a wealthy family, handsome and had girls flaunting over him. He is in the lacrosse term and might get a scholarship. But when it comes to his relationship with his father, he had his own hardships to deal with. "Last year, Connor got a C on a midterm and his dad locked him out of the house all night." (Kemmerer 150) What Owen had with his mother is totally absent in Connor's life.

No matter what Mrs Goettler says, Owen was unconvinced. "I'm not, he says, backing away. No one got hurt. It might not have been right, but it still doesn't feel wrong." (Kemmerer 339) The Meta ethical relative theorists say "The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons." This is quite applicable when it comes to Maegan and Owen as their worlds are different, but there is a tension between Owen and his mother Goettler itself. They are not from different backgrounds and Owen was brought by none other than Goettler herself. In that case, the world is not different here but their experience is. Goettler has seen more and experienced more to understand what is virtue and vice. On the other hand, Owen is a kid, who hasn't seen more except the sufferings and pain of his own life and others who are like him.

In conclusion, Kemmerer's *Call it What You want* explicitly explores the different perceptions people have and how it is totally contrasting when they belong to different world and how it remains in opposition even in case of people from the same family as age and experience is also a factor that influences one's take on morality. This paper can be summed up in two lines from the novel, a conversation between Goettler and Maegan, "I'm not lost. I want to do the right thing. Most of us do, she says ruefully. The problem is that it doesn't always look the same for all of us." (Kemmerer 340) Rob does not intentionally steal to steal, but he stole the forty to help Owen which at that time seemed right to him, he took that as a way to right the wrong his father did to Owen's family, sadly he ended up doing the wrong things.

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