

Novel in Contemporary Literary Research

Suab Ahmed

PhD Scholar, Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, (New Delhi) India

Abstract

In contemporary time, everything is changing such as human identity, psyche, self and human relations. Innovative technological and scientific inventions have generated new paradigms to deal with the emerging human problems. These inventions have influenced the contemporary literary narratives as the articulations have been shifted from theory to post theory, postmodern to posthuman, posthuman to post-posthuman, Anthropocene to post-Anthropocene and beyond. It has also influenced the process of contemporary research as the focus of recent researchers has shifted from poetry to fiction and from fiction to films and from films to video games to explore the ludic and virtual narratives in recent times of digitalization. So, present research paper is an endeavour to explore how the interest of recent researchers has moved from poetry to fiction, art, performance, dance, film/cinema and video games to lay out their literary research.

Keywords: Literary Research, Poetry, Fiction, Literary Theory, Identity, etc.

Introduction:

In a lecture entitled "Manners, Morals, and the Novel", Lionel Trilling tried to illustrate the task of the novel as the search of moral realism. It attempts to record the illusion by highlighting the moral depth of the characters. It tries to understand the reality of the society in the form of descriptive, expository and explanatory prose. Like short story and newspaper, it is also a dominant form of prose. Unlike poetry, it provides series of events through long narrative in a very lucid language. Its narration does not use the complex language embedded with irony and obscure meanings. Trilling conceptualizes the novel in the following way:

The characteristic work of the novel is to record the illusion that snobbery generates and to try to penetrate to the truth which, as the novel assumes, lies hidden beneath all the false appearances. (Trilling, 1947:19)

It has widely been an accepted critical perception amongst the scholars that the form of the novel as a literary genre originated from England. "It was neither Alexander nor Vasco-da-Gama, nor Nadir Shah who left an indelible lingua-franca on India but the British colonization which worked wonders." (Engade, 1995:1) The novel as a literary tool is one of the forms of prose which is a simple and lucid depiction of events through certain characters and plot. Its language is not obscure like poetry as in the article "What is Poetry?" Jacques Derrida puts forward poetry as the small and spiky but not easy to crack its meaning. It always creates a challenge to its reader to decode its depth meaning. Its layers seem to be complex which is not easy to disclose like the prose or fiction. Prose is written in the language of present day containing the socio-cultural relevance. B. P. Engade opines:

Novel form arrived in India during the late 18th century and the early 19th

century, as an inevitable guest from the West, particularly, England. During the colonial epoch, education imparted by the Christian missionaries, rendered immense service to India for, the medium of transmission was English. Thus, the natives of India, had the benefit of acquiring a uniform language of foreign origin, though speaking their own, different tongues. (2)

The concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English illustrates the meaning of the novel as a “fictitious prose narrative of book length portraying characters and actions credibly representative of real life in continuous plot”. Further, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines the novel as a “genre of fiction (i.e., prose works created by the imagination), of considerable length and some complexity, in which characters (usually but not always human beings) interact with one another in a specific setting”. *The Encyclopaedia Americana* defines the novel as a “twentieth century generic term for any type of prose fiction of book length in which characters and actions are presented in a plot as if representing persons and events in real life”. It may be opined that the main features of a novel are: 'prose', 'length', 'narrative', 'characters', 'action', 'plot', 'realism' and 'fiction'. The examples of the novels may be cited: novel in verse (Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, 1832), short novel: (Graham Swift’s *Mothering Sunday: A Romance*, 2016) novel depicting the lack of action and plot (a salient feature of the most modern novel), novels avoiding the narrative and characterization (postmodern fiction), novels reflecting its rebel against realism (modern and postmodern novels: Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Joseph Conrad’s

Heart of Darkness Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*), (Postcolonial novels: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*), (Science fiction novels: Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*), novels illustrating the psychological fragmentation of identity and alienation (diasporic fiction) such as Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*, Neel Mukherjee’s *A State of Freedom* and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*. In this way, Mikhail Bakhtin related to novel points out – “novel was the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it” (Bakhtin, 1981:7), and was considered the most adequate form of literary expression in the modern world. *Collier’s Encyclopaedia* has also conceptualized a significant observation related to novel by stating that the novel “has taken so many shapes, particularly in the last hundred years, that any more precise definition would eliminate a good proportion of works called by the name”. (Collier, 1983:17)

Objectives of the Study:

In this study, my focus is going to be on a critical study of the representation of fiction in contemporary literary research in the realm of humanities. The object of this research work is to bring into light how the focus of contemporary literary scholars has moved to the fiction from poetry in recent time. The present research work aims to study the genre of novel in contemporary time with the following objectives in mind:

- Tracing the changing notions on fiction in the contemporary time;
- Influence of socio-cultural, historic-political factors that have shaped the transitions in the notion of

contemporary literary research with reference to novel;

- Critical assessment of various facets related to poetry, prose and fiction in terms of literary research;
- Impact of language on the fictional world as contemporary novelists have invented a new literary idiom;
- How the focus of researchers at the departments of literature—Hindi, English, Urdu etc. has moved to art and performance, songs and dance, cinema and films etc.
- To trace the shift from poetry to fiction, performance, cinema, video game etc.

A Short Review of Literature:

As has been stated earlier, that my focus is going to be on the notion of the exploration of the genre of novel in contemporary literary research, this research paper is an attempt to investigate the transition in literary research from poetry to other literary forms. The paper examines and explores the aspects of novels in response to history, culture and identity. Most of the works done in this area of research have focused on short stories and poetry, but much critical attention has not been credited to contemporary fictions.

Novel in Contemporary Literary Research:

Like other forms of literature, novel has also been explored from various perspectives which try to serve the straightforward ideology to the reader regarding the current issues discussed in the text. Critics with feminist concerns investigate novel through the categories like gender identity, sexuality, patriarchy, body and self. Marthe Robert in his magnum opus *Origins of the Novel* suggests

that the novel emerged as a dominant form of literary expression in the present time: “mainly due to its encroachments on neighbouring territories it surreptitiously infiltrated, gradually colonizing almost all literature” (Robert, 4). Or, “similar in many respects to the imperialistic society from which it sprang ... it is irresistibly drawn towards the universal and the absolute, towards generalisation of events and ideas” (4). Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* illustrates that “imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such degree that it is impossible ... to read one without in some way dealing with the other” (Said, 70-17). Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983) goes on to connect the rise of the novel “with the rise of modern nationalism” (Anderson, 45). In his book, he aptly opines that the nation attempts to acquire a historical place and status only after becoming conscious of nationalism. He defines the novel “along with the newspaper, plays a significant role in re-presenting the imagined community of the nation. The novel, as a genre, acquires a coherence, which is marked by its function in creating a nation-idea” (58).

George Lukacs, who is a Marxist critic, propounds an innovative method in his *The Theory of The Novel (1920)*, which he defines as the “abstract synthesis” to opine the term novel. Lukacs puts forward a comparative analysis of novel with epic by arguing that the literary form of epic depicts human characters at home in the universe without having a sense of themselves as unique individuals, while the novel is a representation of “transcendental homelessness” or man's alienation from the world. Lukacs puts his idea forward by depicting: “the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no

longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). Further he points out that: "The epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life" (60). The protagonist of the epic unlike the novel has never been delineated as an individual in the strict sense. The major theme of epic does not illustrate personal destiny of the protagonist but the destiny of the entire community. The material of the novel has a "discrete, unlimited nature" (81) while that of the epic has a "continuum - like infinity" (88). The novel as a literary form of expression emerges as the epic of the modern world which has been "abandoned by God" (88) and which also narrates the adventures of interiority of the human characters in a lucid language. The principal character of novel always develops his identity as a seeker who attempts to reconcile the paradoxical nature of his time and society.

In this way, Mikhail Bakhtin in his "Epic and Novel" has also tried to suggest the contrast by depicting that the epic, the oldest form of literary expression which has done its proliferation through the different phases, with the novel which is "the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding" (Bakhtin, 53). The protagonist of the epic may not move beyond his "destiny or fate" (66), while the hero of the novel is represented as "an individual" (66) who emerges as the reflection of the "inconclusive present-day reality" (66). Bakhtin opines the fact that

the novel and the epic are illustrated by two rival impulses of "novelness" (68) and "epicness" (68) which may dominate the various forms of literary expression from time to time and need not to happen in any historical sequence. Ralph Fox in *The Novel and the People* has also compared the novel to the epic arguing it: "The epic art form of our modern, bourgeois society" (Fox, 72).

Christopher Hill, in his *Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth Century England* (1985), disseminates his investigation: the "novel is to bourgeois society what the epic had been to feudal society" (Hill, 324). He brings out his observation through the key elements of the epic that are military courage, honour, chivalry, and from the seventeenth century onwards "no significant poet" (324) has written epics. In the same way, Ian Watt in his *The Rise of the novel* (1968) has also observed the development of the literary form of novel in the modern era and he has written one whole chapter entitled "Fielding and the Epic Theory of the Novel" to deconstruct Fielding's classification of *Joseph Andrews* as "a comic epic poem in prose" (Watt, 1968:249-250). In this book, he endeavours to bring out the methods to analyse the novel vis-à-vis the epic by arguing:

... it is surely evident that... the epic is, after all, an oral and poetic genre dealing with the public and usually remarkable deeds of historical or legendary persons engaged in a collective rather than an individual enterprise; and none of these things can be said of the novel (Watt, 1968:249-250)

Franco Moretti in *Modern Epic* (1996) continues to define Hegel's perspective of epic to depict that the prominent novels

such as *Ulysses* or *Hundred Years of Solitude* are in fact epics, which have been wrongly classified as novels in a novel-centric literary world (Moretti, 1996:120). In the similar vein, Joseph Frank in his 'Spatial Form in Modern Novel' (1945) attempts to categorize *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as epics. Henry James in one of his most well-known essays "The Art of Fiction (1884)" writes: "the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the: supreme virtue of a novel - the merit on which all its other merits.... helplessly and submissively depend" (James, 1884:99). Similarly, Trilling like Henry James has also pointed out in his essay 'Manner, Moral and the Novel' (1950) that "novel...is a perpetual quest for reality..." (122). He tries to suggest that poetry is full of imagination and indecision as William Empson in his "The Seventh Types of Ambiguity" deploys the ambiguities in the development of poetry as a piece of literary expression but the form of novel emerges as the liberal form of literary articulation in the modern, postmodern, posthuman, post-anthropocene and digital era.

The modernist writers like Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence were writing in the early twentieth century. They had debunked the traditional methods of realism and its aspects in their novels such as continuous narratives, omniscient narrators, chronological plots and close endings. They had developed an innovative form of novel by experimenting with the idea of stream of consciousness, non-chronological and discontinuous narratives, subjectivity, point-of-view, impression, self-reflexivity and fragmented form. In this regard Frederic Jameson argues in his "Beyond the

Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism":

[T]he target of their [the modernists] attack becomes the very concept of reality itself ... The objection is thus, clearly, a critique of something like an ideology of realism, and charges that realism, by suggesting that representation is possible... tends to perpetuate a preconceived notion of some external reality to be imitated... (Jameson, 1992:174)

Subsequently, postmodern novels appeared as a reaction against modernist novel. It also shared certain features but the treatment of the novelists was entirely different. It is not an easy task to define the exact difference between modern and postmodern novel since both of these literary movements happened simultaneously. Writers like Beckett, Ionesco, Kafka, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Arthur Adamov, Nabokov, Rushdie and Marquez had written the novels that could be marked the postmodern texts. McHale had depicted the difference between modernist and postmodernist fiction in the following words:

...the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as... How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?... What is there to be known; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? (McHale, 1987:9)

On the other hand:

...the dominant of postmodernist fiction is Ontological... That is,

postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like ... which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it...what is a world?' what kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? (9)

In the present time it is not hard to accept the fact that after modern and postmodern era, not only in English literature but in the literature written around the globe, the literary articulations are excessively emerging in the form of fiction. Poetry is often tossed aside in favour of novel to express the spectrum of sensibilities. After T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), hardly a couple of poets win the noble prize in literature in successive decades, who received this award in 1947. Consequently, in the postcolonial period, few poetic voices receive a shaft of recognition worldwide such as Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) and Derek Walcott (1930-2017) who belong to the postcolonial world. They expressed beam of their thoughts through poetry. In the postcolonial period, novel was the form of literature which was much explored academically and dragged a large number of readers towards it. It colonized the other genre of literature as well. A large number of postcolonial writers such as Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), Toni Morrison (1931-2019), Gunter Grass (1927-2015), V. S. Naipaul (1932-2018), J. M. Coetzee (1940-), Harold Pinter (1930-2008), Orhan Pamuk (1952-), Doris Lessing (1919- 2013) and Alice Munro (1931-) chose novel as a genre to assert complex human relationship, skepticism, visionary force, identity politics, cultural colonization, melancholic human soul, everyday prattle multicultural commitment. These novelists

as come from postcolonial world experimented with the narration of fiction. They put forward the originality of thoughts and delineated innovative experiences having encountered around their surroundings. They developed the innovative key words which dominated the entire postcolonial period across the world even in the native or folk narratives such as colonialism, ambivalence, alterity, colonial education, essentialism, ethnicity, exoticism, hegemony, hybridity, ideology, language, magic realism, mapping, meta-narrative, meta-fiction, mimicry, nation-state, orientalism, race, semiotics, space/place, subaltern, worlding, other, identity, self, intertextuality, speculation and diaspora. The diasporic novels are one of the resonant articulations in the development of postcolonial fiction. In such writings, the novelists endeavour to explore the thematic contours of 'movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland'. Such literary expressions have revolutionized the reader-writer nexus in the present multicultural and cosmopolitan world, especially the form of novel. These novels are embedded with the literary devices of 'bildungsroman', 'künstlerroman', 'allegory' and 'antithesis'. These texts reflect the idea of heteroglossia which opines the process of the multiple readings of a text. In *Imaginary Homelands* Salman Rushdie writes:

Exile or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being muted into pillars of salt. If we do look back, we must also do in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that

our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (Rushdie, 1991:10)

In the recent past the discourses on diaspora gained much popularity. The major themes related to diasporic consciousness delineated through the genre of novel. Poetry was not taken seriously to deal with diasporic sensibility. A large number of writers appeared from south Asia who illustrated the issues related to history, culture and memory. These writers depicted

their identity crises in the territory of England, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Newzeland and America. Their writings illustrated the fragmented relationships between their thoughts and emotions which they realized hard to fulfil in the foreign location.

As the writers are expressing their themes and issues through the narratives of novel, the contemporary research scholars have also shifted their attention to explore the major themes and issues in fictions. The scholars are exploring novels, films, art, performance and video games to develop their thesis in the present multicultural global cosmopolitan digital world.

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