



The realistic tradition: Human Image in the Inhuman World

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Abstract -This paper presents the realistic tradition in literature and art re-centred the human image, moving away from Romantic idealism to focus on the “ordinary” person within a often impersonal. The real and imagined worlds came very close in the novels of the 18th century. They coalesced Defoe eminently succeeded in creating the facade of the real in the imagined : He possessed the sociological imagination as envisaged by the great sociologist. The novel as an art has been considered in its own right with its own rule with its universal acceptance and appreciation a creature of our own civilization

Keywords- Realism, human image, inhuman world, Daniel Defoe, realistic novel, pamphlet writers.

Introduction- Daniel Defoe’s literary innovation lies in his ability to place an ordinary individualistic human subject within a inhuman environment like deserted Island in Robinson Crusoe (1719) or the plague- ridden streets in A Journal of the Plague Year (1722). He celebrates the realistic tradition by shifting the focus from the heroic or allegorical to the psychological and material realities of individual experience. He demonstrate that the human image is defined by its ability to maintain its humanity through cognitive mastery, memory and religious faith, even when stripped of all social context in an inhuman landscape.

The novel as an art has been considered in its own right, with its own rules, with its universal acceptance and “a creature of our own civilization” E.M. Foster pointed out that the great feature which distinguishes the novel from the other arts is that it has the power to make the secret life visible. It gives a different view of reality from that given by poetry, or the drama, or the cinema or painting or music. All these can express of reality beyond the reach of the novel. But none of them can quite so satisfactorily express the full life of the individual man, woman or child.

The novel’s realism is a part of a much larger movement involving the end of the medieval word, a Post- Renaissance view of man as individualised, containing seeds of anarchy and alienation .The English novel travelled a long distance before it came to this state of realism. Talking about the qualities which go to the making of a novel in the real sense of the term, Dr. Ernest A. Baker, in ‘History of the English Novel’, says that “.....no work of fiction would be accorded the name of novel unless it were a prose story, picturing real life or something corresponding there to, and having the unity and coherence due to a plot or scheme of some kind or to a definite intention and attitude of mine on the part of the author”.

The first proposition, namely, that the medium of novel must be prose and not verse, takes us to 1579, when John Lyly’s ‘Euphues, the first prose fiction in English, was published. After him, Sir Thomas Malory was the first to choose the medium of prose to tell his tale of King Arthur and the Knights of

the Round Table, was only a compiler. However, fine a sense of narrative he shows, he cannot claim the title of the first English novelist.

The actual work for realistic fiction was, however, being done in other spheres which apparently had no connection with a fiction proper. The pamphlet-writers were doing the work of the novelist. Their books dealt frankly with scandals that touched every private individual and were illustrated with spicy anecdotes. The inferior writers encouraged by the welcome given to these writings, came out with their own, making up the deficiency of personal experience and first hand knowledge by covert thefts from their better-informed predecessors, with incidents which they easily worked up from here say and with downright invention.

It was Robert green (1560 -92) who first exploited the seamy side of life for literary purposes. Although he also produced examples of regular fiction such as, 'Arbastro', 'Pondosto' and 'Menaphon'. His real contribution to the development of the novel is to be found in his cony- catching pamphlets, for his regular fiction is conventional and artificial, following the tradition of Lily and Sydney. The realism of these lives of notorious cony-catchers and cut- purses, such as the 'Life and Death of Ned Browne', has a peculiar force about it. His real service lay in the description of some graphic scenes from a side of life that he knew from immediate observation, though only in part, and in having initiated "a kind of story-telling which, through the rogue-stories and criminal biographies, led to epoch- making developments in the hands of Defoe. Some of his anecdotes were comic enough, but the declared object was to expose craft and villainy, and the majority were like police reports in their quantity of detail and evidence. He puts on the airs of a special correspondent appointed by a modern newspaper to investigate a case, and thus can be called one of the pioneers of the method of 'circumstantial detail' which came to its full flowering in the hands of Defoe. As the author of Robinson Crusoe "he is remembered as one of the world's greatest story teller.

Of even greater importance than Greene is Thomas Nash (1567-160).It is the comic attitude of his towards life which distinguishes him from his contemporaries, a man of thorough common- sense. Throughout the 'Life of Jack Wilton' (1594) he sticks to realities. Not that he ever troubled himself about literary accuracy, his literary conscience was not so sensitive. Dr. Baker suggests that Nashe in taking the help of fact for passing downright fiction as genuine matter, was a predecessor of Daniel Defoe, though Defoe probably knew nothing of him. Nashe appears to have supplied him with hints for the autobiographical form of his tales which guarantees that the story was fact and not fiction and also for the method of introducing actual historical personages in a story in order to give it an appearance of historical verity. Defoe might have also take hints from him for his art of circumstantial vividness. Defoe, like a supreme artist, exploited the full possibilities of this method and perfected it.

There is another very important fact about Nash to be noted. His style is neither Euphuistic nor Arcadian. He did his best to cultivate an individual style, vigorous, easy and vital, which was well-suited to his subject-matter. His prose was without those literary affectations and peculiar manners of styles .

But for Thomas Deloney Nashe would have had the credit of making the most substantial contribution to realism. Deloney put himself forward as the eulogist and defender of the trading corporations. Deloney's distinction lies in the handling of dialogue and characterization . His dialogue is perfectly

natural, “the best that had been seen as yet in an English prose tale”. The lifelikeness and naturalness of his dialogue is enhanced by the fact that he was probably the first English writer to spice his conversation with dialect, and probably also the first to make play with malapropism . He was completely wanting in constructive skill, and in this respect was much inferior to Lily, Sydney and even Nashe . But when we turn to character – drawing, neither Lily nor Sydney, not even Nashe, with his fierce portraits in the malevolent style of a lampoon, can stand on in comparison with Deloney . It is not to be denied that characterization in his hands has not very much advanced . It is yet entirely superficial, limited to external behaviour and idiosyncrasies, never getting down to display the motives and the inner spring of heart. In truth, there is always something lacking in Deloney which is fundamental, something which goes to make a genuine novelist what he is, something that cannot be dispensed with in a story, as distinguished from what is at best only “ an amusing display of manners and peculiarities .

It was Thomas Dekker who turned this business in the particular or literal sense to an artistic purpose in his ‘Shoemakers Holiday’. Prof. Legouis says, “he wrote not novel but social studies and pictures of London life”. His tracts and pamphlets have a place equal to that of Greene’s and Nashe’s in the evolution of realistic fiction. His first prose pamphlet was ‘The Wonderful Year’ in 1603, from which Defoe took valuable hints for his famous ‘Journal of the Plague Year’. Dekker attempts no history of the terrible, creeping progress of the visitation, as Defoe did in his ‘Journal’, but paints a few gruesome pictures and tells some seasonable and several grimly comic anecdotes. While Defoe’s was to be a tragic masterpiece, his is a lighter work, written with the aim merely to amuse and interest.

What was needed most at this time was a model of prose that made no pretence at being anything else, a clear, realistic, matter- of- fact prose so as to be capable of expressing the realistic tendencies that were now coming in the sphere of fiction. This was supplied by the essayist, above all, by the pioneer Bacon (1561-1626). Indeed, his sentiments of practical, calculating worldly wisdom would not have engaged the novel-reading public, but what matters is not so much the nature of his sentiments as the clearness and conciseness with which they are put forward. When Bacon tried his hand at fiction his style is the same lucid, clear style of his essays. The ‘New Atlantis’ has inspired future generations mainly by its simple charm of narrative. When, following the tradition of More’s ‘Utopia’ he sought to fulfil his ideals in a far-off, unknown island, he also contributed to the tradition of Crusoe stories which found its highest fulfilment in Defoe.

Side by side with the realistic pamphleteers may be placed the character- writers who were also doing valuable service to the novel. At the beginning of the 17th century character writing was becoming a fashion with amateurs of literature who were interested more in the variations of human nature than in story- telling. These analytical epitomes of character were as old as English literature itself.

The next important character-writer was Thomas Fuller (1608-61). His characters are almost destitute of the Theophrastian quality, for he is always busy with the concrete, the personal, the historic. He is more a portrait-painter than a character-writer, and as an artist in portraiture he is among the finest. His portraits are usually vivified by anecdotes that reveal the born story-teller.

It was in the 'The Tatler' and 'The Spectator' (1709-12 and 1714) that character-writing reached its highest point and made a more direct contribution to the novel. It was in these two periodicals that character first became specific- the characters are given names which served to individualize them.

Moreover the spirit of benevolence and the love of mankind which the two periodical showed in dealing with the problems of everyday life were to be a saving and vitalizing principle to the future novel, the very basis of the whole conception of it. Some additions and omissions, the transposing of some events ,and a greater illusion of reality would have turned the Coverly papers into a novel of manners and character combined.

But, before we come to this writer, that is Daniel Defoe, there are a few more writers of the realistic tradition to be considered. In fact, the main literary tradition throughout the 17th century had not been that of realism. Once again, fiction in the shape of heroic romance had relapsed into the region of pure airy imagination and artificiality .

This gloomy prospect was broken by John Bunyan (1628-88), one of the most English geniuses in English literature. He would have been disagreeably shocked that he had been known for his 'Pilgrim's Progress', 'Holywar' and 'Life and Death of Mr Badman' were ,to be considered as fiction.

Even some writers of the heroic-romance-tradition as Mrs. Aphra Behn(1640-89), tried to bring a touch of realism to their works. Realism collects materials and uses them to give circumstance and an air of actuality to an imaginary action. She is one of the pioneers in the new realism. Nearly half a century before Defoe, with much less ability, knowledge and thoroughness, she had practiced the method of authentication, of which Defoe was to prove the supreme master for a long period

In short, when Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) came upon the scene fiction had on the whole, begun to settle down to its own proper sphere. Novelist were growing more clearly aware that their business was with life as it is, and, consequently, romance was getting old-fashioned and ridiculous. The object of both romance and novel had been to tell a touching or exciting story. The novel, as it was gradually evolving did not consider its only duty. It further aimed at exhibiting life as it actually was. The professional writers were only beginning to understand this. They acknowledged the need for verisimilitude but they did not know how to achieve it. The kind of verisimilitude they observed was after all, limited only to an avoidance of improbability. This was only a negative virtue, "to insist that a story must be plausible in its circumstances and incidents is but a small advance on the road of realism, it is to show an ancient weakness, but not to attain a new strength. When the novelist had acquired the art of conveying the illusion of life, he would be able to present the improbable and even the impossible without infringing verisimilitude .This was done by Defoe.

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