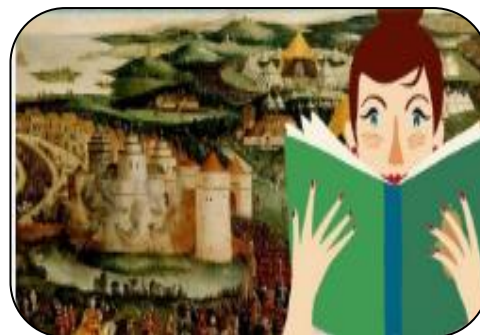




AN EXPLORATION OF HISTORICAL NOVEL IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT:

The present research paper endeavors to show the relationship between history and historical fiction. As we know, the history is based on research and scholarship. The historian takes pain to bring about the truth about a historical period. The history is pure facts and truth. On the other hand literature is imaginative. The author gives full freedom to his imaginative faculty while writing. But in historical fiction there is union of fact and fiction. The author tries to give justice to both history and literature while writing a historical novel.

KEY WORDS: History, Historical Fiction, Fact, Truth, society, imagination, novel.

INTRODUCTION:

The novel is the youngest and most popular form of literature. It originated in England in the eighteenth century. We can define novel as a very long narrative in the prose. No definition of novel can define it in precise terms because novel has no fix form. Samuel Richardson is considered father of English novel and *Pamela* is the first novel in English. After that the novel has gone through various changes and transformations. The novel further developed in the various sub genres depending on matter and manner such as historical novel, gothic novel, epistolary novel, science fiction, regional novel, naturalistic novel and so on. One of the major sub genres of the novel was historical novel which was developed by Sir Walter Scott. History is one of the oldest disciplines of the knowledge and novel is the youngest form of literature. History is fact, novel is fiction. So the present research paper tries to investigate the relation that these two share.

Defining Historical Fiction

There are several definitions of historical novel. The shortest possible definition of the historical fiction is given by Johnson in his book *Historical Fiction: A Guide to Genre* as

"fiction set in the past"(Johnson,2002)

The above definition of historical fiction is very broad and all inclusive. It doesn't talk about other features of historical novel than setting. H Butterfield in his book *The Historical Novel* defines the historical novel as

"the historical novel is a fusion. It is one of the arts that are born of the marriage of different arts. A historical event is 'put into fiction' as a poem is

put to music; it is turned into story as words into songs; it is put into context of narrative”(Butterfield,1924)

Butterfield’s definition also highlights one important aspect of historical novel. It tells us that historical fiction is born out of fusion of history and imagination. Harry Shaw defines historical novel in his book *The forms of Historical Fiction* as

“in a historical novel history is, as Russian formalist would put it,“foregrounded”. When we read historical novels, we take their events, characters, setting and language to be historical in one or both of two ways.They may represent societies, modes of speech or events that in very fact existed in the past, in which case their probability points outward from the work to the world it represents;or they may promote some sort of historical effect within the work, such as providing an entry for the reader into the past in which case the probability points inward to the design of the workitself(Shaw, 1983)

Avron Fleishman defined historical fiction in the following words in his book *The English Historical novel : Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* as

“ the historical novel is distinguished among novels by the presence of a specific link to history: not merely a real building or a real event but a real person among fictitious ones . When life is seen in the context of history, we have a novel; when the novels characters live in the same world with historical persons we have a historical novel”(Fleishman, 1971)

Features of historical Fiction

Historical fiction is a hybrid genre, an oxymoron because it bridges the gap between facts and fiction, history and literature, the real and imaginative. Historical novel narrates issues, conflicts, events, ideology, way of life, society and weather from a particular age in the past.As stated above the genre of historical fiction is hybrid because it draws both from real and imaginary.Historical fiction is similar and distinct at the same time from history because it largely based on historical events, but is different from history.Both the historian and novelist try to contrive history in their own way. But the novelist takes liberties with historical facts. His Focus is not on the past event or fact but on human emotions, experiences and motivations. History states the historical fact; the novelist evaluates the human action. While using facts, the novelist imposes his own order on material provided by the historian. While history is purely facts, objective science, historical fiction is subjective as the material and method, order and interpretation is imposed by the author. While history states the obvious, historical novel tells what is hidden or concealed. In the authors hand historical discourse takes form of fiction.

The novelist arranges historical events around a main character for reconstructing ideal qualities around him. History records only hard facts, event and actions, but the author tries to decipher the purpose and motives behind an action. He makes some inferences from the events and actions. He makes the story more interesting, fascinating and convincing to the readers. Along with real historical persons, author invents many minor characters which may or may not be part of history. These minor character invented by the novelist interact with the real historical person and become a part and parcel of the history. The author doesn’t merely state the past events; he creates new fictional reality by reconstructing ideas and qualities around character. Ernest Baker in his book *A Guide to Historical Fiction* states the utility of historical fiction in following words;

Historical fiction is not history but it is often better than history. A fine historical painting, a pageant or a play may easily teach more and carry a deeper impression then whole chapters of description and analysis.A good historical novel – though chronology may be at fault and facts inaccurately stated will probably succeed in making a period

live in the imagination, when text books nearly give us dry bones.(Baker, 1914)

The actions in a historical novel takes place in distant past, so there is a large time gap between the events narrated in a historical novel and the author who writes the historical novel based on that particular period. The scholars and critics state that that there must be at least a gap of one or two generation between what happened and the writing about that period by author. This does not mean that the novelistic can take liberty with the material he draws upon. One of the daunting tasks while writing the historical novel is that of scholarship. The novelist must study all the material about that particular period. He must study the historical writings about that period by historians. He must study the manuscripts available. He must visit the various sites that he is going to write about. Then novelist must try to reconstruct that historical time in his novel. It means that author should stick to the official and historical record as much as possible. There should be no contradiction between historical record and what is written in historical fiction. The writers should give true representation of the age as far as possible. It also does not mean that he should care only for historical facts. The historical fiction is not only about the great kings, knights and battles. George Lukacs comments on this aspect on historical fiction in his classic book *The Historical Novel* in following words,

What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events , but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experiences the social and human motives which led mean to think, feel and act just as they did in the historical reality. (Lukacs , 1989)

The novelist should reconstruct the past way of life in his novel-- its customs, traditions, values, languages, weather, food habits , means of transportation etc. To show all these things the novelist inserts non historical, imaginative material in the novel. At the same time he must maintain equilibrium between historical and non- historical. There must be just and artistic mixing of the two.

The aim of literature is to inform, entertain and inspire. This aim will not be achieved by merely giving dry facts and chronology of historical events. So in historical novel the author takes liberties with historical material provided by the historian. As stated above the novelist invents imaginary characters which interact freely with the historical figures. Sometimes such minor, invented character function as an eye witness, observer and narrator in the historical fiction. Sometimes thoughts of the characters are reproduced. The characters minds are probed and revealed. Dialogues are put in the mouth of the character which may or may not be actually correct. Sometimes the novelist may alter the chronology of the historical events. This may be done for the purpose of making events more dramatic and suspenseful. Some events and action are added to historical facts to make the story more attractive appealing.

The novelist tries to make history accessible to a large number of readers, makes it a memorable experience. One more marked difference between history and historical fiction is that of method. The method of a historian and that of novelist are radically different. The historian gives importance to the narration, to the events and actions that happened in the past. On the other hand the novelist concentrates his attention on the character. But it is not a biographical sketch like a historian. The novelist makes it more interesting, appealing and inspirational by investing feelings and emotions in the historical characters. The novelist makes historical personages come alive in the pages of novel. The writer dramatizes the character from the history and the historical figure live again in the novel.

Another major difference between history proper and historical fiction is the narrative methods and point of view. In a history book the author himself is the narrator. He narrates the events and also provides explanation. It is a matter of fact narration devoid of any feelings. It gives credibility to the historian. On the other hand the novelist uses different kind of narrative methods in historical fiction. Sometimes the novelist himself may narrate the events in the novel or he may use a character from the novel. The character who narrates the story maybe historical figure or an imaginary character invented by the novelist. This lends an air of authenticity to narration. As historical figure narrate the story, the past comes alive before the readers mind. Another major feature of historical fiction is the portrayal of

the lives of the common people from the past. Standard history books do not deal at all with the lives of the common people and the poor. It is just about the aristocrats and their battles. Man in the street is lost in the books of history. But in a historical novel these common people get to express their voice. We come to know about their livelihood, their struggle and frustration through the historical novel. In a sense, a historical novel portrays a way of life that is somewhere lost in the pages of history.

Major Historical Novelist in English

Sir Walter Scott is a very versatile writer and originator of classical historical novel in English. So he is considered the father of English historical novels. Walter Scott wrote many novels, short stories, poems and plays during his lifetime. In all, he wrote 27 historical novels. George Lukacs praises Scott for individuality of characterization and realistic depiction of history in his novels. He credits Sir Walter Scott for inventing and perfecting the historical novel. In his classic book *The Historical Novel* he highly praises Scott in these words,

“ the true historical novel emerges with the work of Sir Walter Scott, whose novels of the Scottish clan portray the disintegration of archaic social forms in the face of capitalist transformation. Scott went beyond dressing modern characters in kilts, and instead drew his characters in such a fashion that the various details of their personalities were linked with the basic conditions of their existence. The varied experiences of the protagonist across the social landscape in Scott creates a portrait of forces.” (Lukacs, 1989)

Some of his important historical novels are *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy*, *Old Mortality*, *The Lady of the Lake*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *A Legend of Montrose*. Scott's best novels are those which deal with the Scottish history. We find a conflict between the peasant Scotland and modern England. In fact, it is a conflict between a modern, commercial world and an old traditional way of life that was on verge of vanishing. Walter Scott was a born storyteller. We find a very realistic description of the incident from medieval Scotland in his novels. He sympathizes with the peasants of Scotland, the poor, the soldiers and the craftsman. He wrote about common people in his novels which is a rarity in the historical novel. He has mastery over Scottish dialect and extensively used it in his novels. He was greatly influenced by William Wordsworth theory that the true nature resides in common people and the poor. Walter Scotts greatly influenced later writers of historical fiction such as Leo Tolstoy. As Per Sir Edward Albert,

“Scott added a life giving force a vitalizing energy an insight and a genial dexterity that made the historical novel an entirely new species. (Albert,1923)

Charles Dickens is the best known novelist of the Victorian age and his novels mainly deal with social problems and concerns of Victorian England. But he also wrote two historical novels. One of them is *Tale of Two Cities*. The novel deals with the events and incidents leading to French revolution from 1775 to 1790. The setting of the novel is Paris and London. The novel gives graphic representation of anarchy prevalent in 19th century England and France. He gives graphic description of the storming of Bastille by the peasants and other historical events. The novel deals with the two main protagonists Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton. His second historical novel *Barnaby Rudge* is a mixture of private and public life. It tells the story of the hero Barnaby. The novel is about the anti catholic Gordon riots of 1780. The attack on new Gate Prison and the other violent events warns of the consequences for society of intolerance and becoming caught up in the mob mentality. Dickens has given a very vivid description of these turbulent periods using his imagination.

George Eliot wrote a historical novel entitled *Romala* in the 19th century. The novel is set in 15th century Florence. The main character of the novel is Tito. He reaches the Florence after a shipwreck. The novel gives graphic description of life in the 15th century Florence. The novel deals with many historical events during the Italian Renaissance in the Florence

William Thackeray is best known novelist of the Victorian age. His best known historical novel is *Henry Esmond*. The novel deals with the social and political movements in the 17th and 18th century England. The novel covers all the significant and important events and movements in the 17th and 18th century England such as Glorious Revolution, the war of Spanish succession and the reign of Queen Anne. While dealing with politics of the era, Thackeray also depicts the social life in the 17th and 18th century England. There are real as well as invented characters in the novel.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen the historical novel is a very important sub genre of novel. The writers of historical fiction try to give justice both to history and literature. There is just and artistic blending of facts and fiction in historical novel. The historical fiction is not just about the kings and their battles. We find that novelist also gives voice to the common people of the period through his novels. A bygone age, a past way of life comes alive once again when we read and enjoy a historical novel.

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