

The Novel in the Twenty-first Century, Text and Context

University of Allahabad, November 29-December 1, 2009

Closing Statement: Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

We could begin by asking a couple of questions:

(1) What changes in culture, society, and politics have taken place in the 21st century, which should find, or have found reflection in the Novel?

(2) Is it at all necessary that the Novel should reflect such changes?

Unfortunately, since the modern novel was born in the Age of Reason, it has been taken for granted that the spirit of inquiry and questioning, which powered the Enlightenment, must have found its voice in the Novel too. This assumption was often expanded or further generalized by "socially conscious" critics that there is, or should be a perceptible connection, or even cause and effect relationship between the "socio-political reality" and the Novel.

However, we now acknowledge that there need not be, in fact there cannot be a one-to-one correspondence between the social reality and the creative artifact. Even Lucien Goldmann, the most influential among the Marxist theorists who articulate the view that "the true subject of cultural creation are, in fact, social groups and not isolated individuals"¹ concluded that novelists try to grasp "in its most essential way, the reality of our time."²

The stress therefore is not on individual events or tendencies, but on the "essential reality" of our time. Goldmann goes on to say that there exists a human reality, analogous to cosmic reality which the writer tries to explore. Goldmann concludes by saying that "on the level of content, that is to say, of the creation of the imaginary worlds...the writer has total freedom"³.

I am not quite sure that all this revisionist Marxist talk of the collective consciousness, or social groups which create the Novel though the actual act of writing is done by the

¹ Lucien Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, Trs. Alan Sheridan, London, Tavistock Publications, p. ix.

² Goldmann, p. 133.

³ Goldmann, p. 159.

individual subject, is very different from the deterministic assumptions that we were brought up on more than five or six decades ago.

When I was a student, the received wisdom was that the Novel has become shorter, more compressed, less burdened by details and ancillary facts, etc., because "modern life" always moves in the fast lane and the reader has no time to read big fictions. It's true that our teachers were brought up on huge pre-war novels like Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe* (10 vols.); *The Enchanted Soul* (7 vols.); Jules Romains' *Men of Goodwill* (27 vols.); not to mention the slightly less huge but denser Marcel Proust (*Remembrance of Things Past*) and James Joyce (*Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*). But it was a merely facile assumption--linking apparent social conditions to literary production.

We can see that life is faster today, but novels, especially popular novels which are read by people who are always in a hurry, have become fatter, stuffed with not only events and characters but also details, something which the novelist of our "fast" generation was taught to avoid like the plague. Today we enjoy A. S. Byatt all the more because her novels are large, and are stuffed with facts. Alex Clark, reviewing her new novel *The Children's Book* in *The Guardian* describes it as "staggeringly detailed and charged recreation of the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the First World War"⁴. Vikram Seth is perhaps a nearer example in geographical terms. And both are "literary", not "popular" novelists.

Perhaps we might echo Mikhail Bakhtin and say that since the Novel is the youngest of all literary forms, it is still evolving. Thus it could be quite legitimate for us to inquire about the new features that may have evolved today. But what do we mean by "new features"? Surely, a novel that talks of the Internet, the cyber cafe, Google, the text message, Chat Room, or Twitter, or "The End of History" following the demise of the Soviet Union doesn't necessarily qualify as a "new novel"?

We might also ask: Why should we regard the Novel as a baby among the genres when it has a three hundred-year-old history? How long do genres take to "mature"? What signs of "immaturity" or "artistically uncertain feet" can we detect in the novels of today, and against what notional or ideal criterion of "maturity" should we judge the Novel of today? And we might also ask: How long did the English dramatic verse take to mature?

⁴ Alex Clark in "The Guardian", May 9, 2009.

In order to get some answers here, can we inquire into what might be called the "Technology of the Novel"? By "Technology", I mean ways of ordering the facts, ways of narration, methods of dialogue construction, techniques of delineating the character. Do we still go by the notion of "Flat" and "Round" characters? Or are there different ways of now understanding how a "Complex" character should be created? Henry James claimed, or at least pretended that the Novelist was actually a "Dramatist." Do we accept or reject this claim or pretence in regard to James or in regard to the Novel in general? Then there is the time-honoured question of "Realism" and "Verisimilitude". Do we think differently about these things than, say, James Joyce or Thomas Mann?

Let me quote from John Burrow's rather seminal book on the history of Modern European thought:

But essentially, with some modifications in its expressive languages, the post-war avant-garde was still recognizably the pre-war one. In a sense, the latter is still ours. Experiment has become the norm; its different idioms are to pre-war Modernism what schools of art in the seventeenth, eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries had been to the mimetic techniques established at the Renaissance: essentially variations. Post-modernism in literature, for all the critical volubility expended on it, looks more like a gloss on Modernism than its grave-digger. Modernism is our tradition⁵.

This may sound like an extreme position. But all positions against popular opinion sound extreme when encountered for the first time.

Okay, let's look at the question of the twenty-first century novel from the perspective of what the "popular" readers and critics and makers of the "popular" novel are doing. A recent review in The Washington Post came out strongly and with unashamed admiration in the defence of John Grisham's newest book, *Ford County* which is a collection of stories. The reviewer said:

"Real" writers, whoever they may be, have traditionally held him in low esteem...Grisham can't write his way out of a paper bag. Of course he does have that weird, mesmerising thing that keeps the reader turning pages, but there you go: Grisham writes page-turners! And so the "real" writers rest their collective case.

⁵ J. W. Burrow: *The Crisis of Reason: European thought, 1848-1914*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 253.

The reviewer, Carolyn See, concludes:
No matter what your literary scruples, you absolutely can't stop reading⁶.

In the same paper, and also in The New York Times Book Review recently, Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol* was castigated for political reasons, but The New York Times Book Review gave it two pages, including one on the front page⁷.

A lady called Anne Rice earned a huge reputation as a writer of vampire novels in the 1970's and 80's. Now she has repudiated all those novels and has become something like a born again Christian. Did this dampen the readers' appetite for vampires? Not at all. There is now a lady called Charlaine Harris writing even gorier vampire novels in the twenty-first century. There is also a novel called *Dracula, the Un-Dead*. Written by Dacre Stoker, who is described as a greatgrand nephew of Bram Stoker, and a professional writer Ian Holt. Reasonably well written, it provides some new twists to the original story and is selling very well⁸.

Talking of the undead, the real underworld, and mystery, and death, we have now a novel called *Drood* which is a stunning solution to Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*; it is also an interior biography of Wilkie Collins, the narrator, and Charles Dickens⁹.

An interesting trend of recent years--or maybe not so interesting as annoying to "high brow" readers--is the increasing admission of "popular" novelists in high level Book Fairs. They are invited; they give talks; they sign books--just like any "real" writer. I won't say that this means the critics are, however grudgingly, admitting or tolerating them in their high salons. But it does seem to me a healthy trend, a blurring of the lines between the "popular" and the "literary". But I can't predict its implications for the Novel in general, although I can't resist noting that there's a lot of great writing in which the line between the "popular" and the "literary" ceases to exist.

Another interesting phenomenon from our point of view is the emergence, in very recent past, of a number of extremely sophisticated Pakistani fiction writers. Although he has published only short stories so far, Daniyal Mueenuddin's

⁶ "Short and Sweet", review of John Grisham's stories *Ford County*, The Washington Post, Nov. 6, 2009.

⁷ New York Times Book Review dated September 30, 2009; the reviewer was Maureen Dowd.

⁸ *Dracula the Un-Dead*, by Dacre Stoker and Ian Holt, New York, Dutton, published October 2009. (424 pp).

⁹ *Drood*, by Dan Simmons, London, Quercus, 2009. (775 pp).

collection of stories *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*¹⁰ has been described by Michael Dirda in The Washington Post as likely to be the first widely read book by a Pakistani writer beside Indian writers such as Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry and others. Another novelist who has brought off an improbable coup in writing like a civilized Salman Rushdie is Mohammed Hanif whose very first novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* is likely to become Pakistan's most significant, if savagely satirical, response to Pakistan's decades of army rule.¹¹

Some time ago, Tony Judt lamented in an essay that the American intellectual was doing nothing to resist George Bush. He was angry that the "liberal intelligentsia" of the U.S.A. had, in recent years, "kept its head below the parapet". He asked, Why was there hardly a murmur against the "administration's sustained attack on civil liberties and international law...from those who used to care most about these things?"¹² Well, the American people, if not the American intellectual gave their verdict in due course. But it was a novelist who gave the most nuanced response. I mean *A Most Wanted Man* by John Le Carre¹³. It's a novel which powerfully brings out the sadness, the pity, and the illegality of America's "war on terror" and the utterly mindless heartlessness of the so-called strategy of "rendition" of suspects.

John Le Carre's novel is about the illegal exercise of power in pursuit of so-called "National" goals. Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*¹⁴ is apparently a historical novel about Henry VIII and Charles Cromwell. But its sub-text is the illegal exercise of power for personal goals. These two about sum up what the novel of today should perhaps be about.

¹⁰ *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, by Daniyal Mueenuddin, New Delhi, Random House, India, and W.W. Norton & Co., 2009.

¹¹ *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, by Mohammed Hanif, New Delhi, Random House, India, and New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

¹² Tony Judt, "Bush's Useful Idiots", in The London Review of Books, 21 September, 2006.

¹³ *A Most Wanted Man*, by John Le Carre, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2008.

¹⁴ *Wolf Hall*, by Hilary Mantel, London, Fourth Estate, 2009.