

CHAPTER II : HISTORICAL NOVEL AS A GENRE

CHAPTER II

There has been a phenomenal growth of 'historical novel', since Walter Scott's introduction of this genre of fiction. When we think of historical novel, it superficially seems to be a contradiction in terms, for, as a history it demands good knowledge of the past and as a novel it needs imaginative power for its creation. History here does not mean merely a chronological sequence of the past events. Rather it is the totality of the past events interpreted to arrive at a general conclusion about the life and times. A writer needs great imaginative power to synthesize the past events and focus them through the life of a few imaginative characters.

This kind of novel has been described and defined by several eminent critics in literature. According to Paul Liecester, for example, "the historical novel is one which grafts upon a story, actual incidents or persons well enough to be recognised as historical".¹ John Buchan believes that, "the historical novel is simply a novel which attempts to reconstruct the life and recapture the atmosphere of an age other than that of the writer".² The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Literary Terms defines this genre as "a novel in which the action takes place during a specific historical period well before the time of writing (often one or two generations before, sometimes several centuries) and in which some attempt is made to depict accurately the customs and mentality of the period".³ In the opinion of Jonathan Neild, historical novel "is rendered historical by the introduction of dates, personages, or events to which

identification can be really given".⁴ According to Harry Shaw, historical novel is "a narrative in novel form characterised by an imaginative reconstruction of historical personages and events".⁵ Arthur Tourtelot believes that "the historical novel is simply a reconstruction of some segment of life in the past it creates, it breathes, and it is circumscribed by the small things in the lives of the characters."⁶

All the definitions mentioned above emphasize that the historical novel recreates past events and characters. The word novel is marked for fictionality. If we consider novel as an extended fictional prose narrative, then history can be regarded as all pervading story of human life. History is a continuous conversation between the past and the present. History means not only a chronological sequence of the past events, but it is the sum of the past. If this hypothesis is right, then a historical novelist needs a perfect understanding of the past events and a power of imagination to weave them skilfully into a work of art with some fictitious characters and events of his own creation.

The historical novelist selects certain events and characters from some segments of the past and with them reconstructs imaginatively, with fair proportion of self created events and figures the some total of that past to give it some general significance. But several problems may arise in the process of novelization of history, because a novelist can not create a historical novel by the mere placing of the past events and characters together. In this connection M.H. Abraham says "the historical novel not only takes its setting and some characters

from history and some events but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central character and narrative".⁷ Roger Detaller's comment is worth noting for further explanation :

Then what do we look for in the perfect historical novel ? In the first place, not a complete reproduction of the past — that were impossible from the very nature of the things, but rather satisfying imaginative reconstruction in which the values of this day, may find a responsible identity with the corresponding values of another. ⁸

A successful historical novel deals with the past but not exclusively. It must contain certain admixture of the present, but only in careful proportion, so as not to distort the past. Georg Lukacs subscribes to the thought by saying that "The historical novel therefore has to demonstrate by artistic means those historical circumstances and characters existing in precisely such and such a way. It is the portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interaction with acting individuals." ⁹

The discussion above clearly shows how the writer of a historical novel needs an outstanding ability in order to weave the history into the intricacies of the novel. The historical novelist has to take into account the spirit and atmosphere of history, which should appeal to the intellect of the reader. Historical novel as an imaginative narrative involves historically identifiable dates, characters and events. A statement from The New Encyclopaedia Britanica further illustrates this point :

The historical novel is a work of fiction that attempts to convey the spirit, manners and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity to historical fact. ¹⁰

But there is such a reconstruction of them that the history comes alive with new meaning and significance. While novelizing history, the historical novelist as a creative artist, must have perfect understanding of the nature of the past. After selection and organization of the major historical events and characters, it remains his responsibility to look after and maintain the degree of documentation in his narrative, to proceed with the value of historicity.

The historical novelist recreates the past events, personages and then transforms these realities into art endowing them with human feelings, values generalising on human predicament. A statement by H. Butterfield subscribes to the discussion so far, when he says, "On one side, therefore, the historical novel is 'form' of history. It is a way of treating past."¹¹

The nature of historical past is an important problem before every historical novelist. The concept of 'past' can be described dividing it as the remote past and the recent past. There are some critics, who plead in favour of the remote past, while there are some, who advocate the acceptance of recent past for the writing of historical novel.

In the adoption of remote past, as we have little knowledge of it, the novelist can enjoy free play of imagination, but in such case he may not be able to depict contemporary men, manners and society with perfect accuracy, and his novel may suffer from the loss of historicity. Both the remote and the recent past offer some advantages and disadvantages in their adoption by the writer in

writing a historical novel. "How old should the past be ?" is a question of interest for some critics. In the interest of this question Orville Prescott offers a certain deadline to the novelist and says :

An historical novel, according to my personal definition, is any novel in which the action takes place before the author's birth so that he must inform himself about its period by study. ¹²

But this definition is quite vague and indicates that it seems to be impossible to mark any certain deadline for the writing of a historical novel. However a historical novelist can divide the whole history into separate parts with the help of transition periods it is consisted of. Transitional periods can be considered as starting points or deadline for the span in between, and this period can be adopted by the historical novelist for his novel writing.

A novelist is at liberty to select or omit events or characters from the vast span of history. A skilled novelist selects some important events and personalities for his plot and makes them live again. The writer can play up certain events and play down some other to suit his theme and give significance to some historical characters. Even, the most important event in actual history may lose its distinctive primacy or an insignificant event may enjoy the position of supremacy.

After careful selection of historical facts and figures, the novelist moves towards the recreation of men, manners and social set up, mainly with the assistance of language. In the process of recreation the novelist should be alert

as the recreated characters need the atmosphere in which the original characters lived. The depiction of their customs and traditions should be believable and should enable the readers to recreate history while reading the novel.

Though, the factuality is an important element in the historical novel, a novelist is free to offer more or less significance to the facts and fictional episodes. A novelist has to cater to a wider audience, and as a historical novelist, he has additional responsibility to maintain the element of factuality to gain the confidence of the reader, because the reader shares the knowledge of history with him, and any attempt to violate the basic structure of the selected facts and figures would harm the credibility of the novelist. The novelist is free of course to paint the faces of his characters with the colours of his own choice. In this respect Fleishman says :

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 the fictitious ones.¹³

Dorris Marston rightly supports the issue of historical accuracy in the novel and says that whatever historic events the novelist uses as the setting for his story, he must be accurate in details, in time and in location, but, at the same time makes the novelist aware not to load his story down with too much information.¹⁴

So in conclusion, we can say that the historical novelist should combine facts and fiction judiciously and with fair proportion, though it is up to his own discretion to what extent he should mix historical facts with fictional episodes and characters. The treatment of characters is the next important issue to be

considered while considering the art of historical novel. In this connection Leisy's comment is worth noting :

Individuals are more important to him than economic movements of goods or people in the mass. To him, the work of women and wood choppers is as significant as that of military leaders or treaty makers. The everyday relations impress him. He dramatizes social processes, that is, as they bear on the life of the individual, and does it with something of the illumination and emotional power of the poet. ¹⁵

The historical novelist portrays the struggles of history by means of characters. The historical novelist weaves the fabric of his novel around a dominant historical figure in a particular period. The history of the whole period is projected through the struggles and emotional conflict of this dominant character. A good historical novel as an aesthetic creation of the past must have such a focal point. It should present interesting men and women in some kind of conflict, which should have bearing on the past as well as contemporary life. He has to make use of documentary and field sources like reports, diaries, published and unpublished documents, some non-literary sources like tombs, old buildings, monuments and even leaving men.

The selection of historical material and depiction of characters, reveal novelist's point of view towards the past. There are several reasons behind his interest in the past, which can be called as novelist's point of views. It may be that, as a historical novelist he wants to consider the superiority of the past to the present world to define the ways of life in the context of the past or he may want to escape into the past due to his frustration with the present world. In this

connection R.H. Pears has to say that the historian assumes past, which by virtue of its very pastness, becomes an aspect of the present.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Earnest E. Leisy, The American Historical Novel (Norman : Univ. Of Oklahoma, 1950), p.4.
2. Reproduced from Sir J. Marriot, English History in English Fiction (London : Blakie and Son, 1940), p.2.
3. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms.
4. Jonathan Neild, A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales (New York : Burt Franklin, Reprint, 1968), p.XXII.
5. Harry Shaw, Dictionary of Literary Terms (McGraw : Hill Book Company), p.184.
6. Arthur Tourtellot, "History and the Historical Novel", Saturday Review, 23 April 1940, p.16.
7. M.H. Abrahm , A Glossary of Literary Terms. (Banglore : Harcourt Brace and Company, and Prism Books Pvt. Ltd., 1993). P.133.
8. Roger Detaller, The Plain Man and the Novel (London: Thomas Nelsons and Sons Ltd., 1940), p.48.
9. Georg Lukacs, The Historical Novel, Trans by Hannah and Stanley (Harmondsworth : Penguin 1969), p.16.
10. The New Encyclopaedia Britanica, p.64.

11. H. Butterfield, The Historical Novel (Cambridge : Univ. Press, 1924), p.2.
12. Orville Prescott, The Undying Past (New York : Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1961), p.16.
13. Avrom Fleishman, The English Historical Novel : Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf (Baltimore and London : Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p.4.
14. Dorris Marston, A Guide to Writing History (Cincinnati OH 45242 : Writer Digest Div. F. & W. Corpn. Publishing, 1976), p.103.
15. Ernest E. Leisy, The American Historical Novel (Norman : Univ. of Oklahoma), p.6.