

CHAPTER – II

- i. Theory of the Historical Novel
- ii. Definitions of the Historical Novel
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II. i. : THE THEORY OF HISTORICAL NOVEL

Historical novel is the most popular and natural sub-genre of literature. It is popular as nowadays a number of well known novelists are interested in writing historical novels. In this regard, Sarah Johnson says:

".... historical fiction is getting the respect and attention it deserves."¹

Historical novel is natural in the sense that man likes to tell and also to listen to the stories which happened in the past. This story telling, in the course of time, is transformed into historical novel.

Gordon Kelly defines the historical novel as :

A Historical novel is a novel the action of which is laid in the earlier time.²

However, this definition minimizes the scope of historical novel. Sarah Johnson defines historical novel as,

Historical novel is a novel which set fifty or more years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience.³

This definition determines the time limit for the historical novel which is minimum 50 years prior to the author's life time. Sir Walter Scott who is revered as the father of historical novel, says:

Novel should be set at least two generations in the past.⁴

Usually literature is the outlet of human feelings, sensibilities and experiences. But for Sarah Johnson, not personal experience but research is significant in case of historical novels.

Historical novel is the combination of history and novel. History is a search of fact to inform the readers whereas novel is the illusion to recreate the readers. George Lukacs takes into consideration these two points and comments:

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.⁵

Here the words, 'artistic means' suggest novel as the means which gives much prominence to art rather than factuality. Artistically handling of historical circumstances and complex human relationship are the main points focused in this definition.

Historicity is the core of the historical novel. Nevertheless many historical novels have more fictional and less historical element. Many a time history is in its distorted forms. To explain this point further, Howard Past writes:

This is an era of many historical novels, few of them good and very few indeed which have more than a nodding acquaintance with a fact.⁶

A historical novelist chooses a historical incident or incidents and engages in certain kind of research to know whereabouts of the incident/incidents. While writing the historical novel, he must bring out accuracy in period, setting and location. But mere exaggeration of history cannot fulfill the genuine function of literature that is entertainment. In this regard Dorris Marston maintains:

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.⁷

Though, the above definition provides the idea of historicity in the novel, it lacks the imaginative aspect which is the spice of historical novel.

Alongwith the historical story, the novelist has to select the fictitious story so as to recreate the reader. The fine fusion of fact and fiction should be done in such a way that the reader will be informed by fact and amused by fiction simultaneously.

Any sort of distortion of history on the part of the writer is a serious flaw. In case of recent past, the reader is familiar with the history so, he cannot accept distorted history. If the past, handled in the novel, is remote past, writer cannot find out details about historical events, life style of those people so he has to imagine more in these areas.

In brief, historical novel, in which the threads of history and fiction are delicately woven should try its best to avoid anachronism and distortions of history.

II. ii . DEFINITIONS OF HISTORICAL NOVEL

Historical novel is a thought provoking genre of literature. Obviously many distinguished critics have given definitions of the historical novel.

In Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, historical novel is described as:

A historical novel is a novel in which the story is set among historical events, or more generally in which the time of the action predates the life time of the author.⁸

Here, it is presumed that the 'story' which means the imaginative story is fixed in the frame of historical events. The time factor is of vital significance as it must be before the writer's life time.

To reveal the concept of time more impressively, it is noteworthy to quote John Buchan. He says:

The historical novel is simply a novel which attempts to reconstruct the life and recapture the atmosphere of an age another than that of the writer.⁹

Historical novel takes the reader into the imaginary world where liveliness is so acute that the reader has the feel of the age. Recapturing the atmosphere of an age is only possible when the novelist minutely studies the socio-cultural aspects of the story. When the writer homogeneously depicts the social, cultural, religious and economic aspects of that certain age, historical atmosphere is automatically created.

To widen the scope of the historical novel one has to take into consideration its definition in The New Encyclopedia Britannica. It maintains:

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

This definition has fourfold aspects among which first is that historical novel should have imaginative story, secondly, it must bring out the social aspect of the past age which should be realistic and lastly, the novel must be historically accurate. In a nutshell, this definition clarifies the idea of historical novel.

To explain the genre of historical novel further William Rainbolt writes:

Historical fiction isn't history in the conventional sense and shouldn't judge such. The best historical novel is loyal to history but it is a history absorbed and set to music so to speak.¹¹

Rainbolt uses the expression, 'history, absorbed' with definite purpose. It means history should assimilate in the fictional story so neatly that history and fiction cannot be separated. This definition doesn't stick to history in the conventional sense.

While defining 'historical novel', Jim Hawes reflects:

Historical fiction is a fictional story that is based on a time, event or a series of events that have taken place in history. The players or characters in the story are either entirely fictional or they are based on a real person or persons in history.¹²

The definition advocates the close association between history and fictional story. The history is the core part mingled with illusion. The characters can be entirely fictional or those can represent the historical characters of a certain age. Writer has a choice while selected the characters. In any case history must not be distorted.

In this context, it is noteworthy to quote, Orville Prescott. He writes:

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.¹³

Though the first part of this definition is already discussed, second part is of vital importance. Prescott highlights the scholarly part. The historical novelist can sharpen his literary capacity only through deliberate study of historical events, historical character's life style, etiquettes and manners in those days, values prevalent in those times and socio-cultural ethos of that particular society. Such deep study of history can beget the plot of the novel that is all in all historical.

But mere study of historical facts is of no use unless illusory aspect is mingled in it. In this regard Lytton Strachey writes:

“ It is obvious that history is nothing more than the combination of accumulated facts. If these facts are assembled without artistry, however, the result is no more history than butter, eggs and parsley can claim to be an omelette.”¹⁴

Prescott's definition, with taking support of an example from every day life simplifies the concept of historical novel.

Thus, historical novel is explained through various coherent definitions coined by notable critics.

II iii. CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF HISTORICAL NOVEL

After discussing the theory and definitions of historical novel, it is proper to find out its characteristic features, which are as follows:

1. Historical novel is the most popular, yet contradictory literary genre which combines history and reality in the same web. History denotes search for truth whereas novel denotes fictitious aspect. In this regard, Brendan observes that

Historical fiction offers a way to take a field trip to a place along past

2. Historical novel, which is engrossed in nationalism or humanitarian aspect is the constant source of inspiration for the present as well as future generations. Here, past transcends the present and future.
3. History is preserved through historical literature. History written by historians is dull and drab. On the other hand, the same history becomes lively if it is fictionalized artistically.
4. Historical novel reflects the socio-cultural ethos of the chosen past. The picturisation of the historical character or event goes simultaneously with the socio-cultural ethos of the chosen past.
5. Mostly, self expression is the hidden purpose for writing the novel. However, while writing the novel, the novelist writes to assimilate himself in the chosen historical atmosphere.
6. The stance that the novelist takes about certain historical event or character has a deep impact on the historical theme that he handles. Consequently, the major historical event becomes minor in his hands and vice versa.
7. Research is the core of historical novel. To bring about the historical accuracy in the novel, the novelist has to search for the historical facts through past letters, monuments, sculptures, inscriptions, documents, records and engraved articles.
8. The historical novelist should have the imaginary element in his novel alongwith historical theme. Nevertheless, the historical facts must not be distorted.
9. Historical novel can entertain as well as preach moral values to the reader. When the reader has a ? tour in the past, he is acquainted with certain values useful in all time.

10. Historical novel creates the world which is unexperienced by the writer on realistic ground. That's why Deborah Cox says that First of all, you have to recreate a world you have never experienced.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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