

# **THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES**

**Dr. Aruni Mahapatra**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee**

**Lecture 07**

## **The Novel After Theory: Introduction**

Hello learners,

Welcome to the first lecture for the NPTEL course titled “The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches”. The agenda for this lecture has four parts. I will first generally introduce the course. I will then make a few comments on this module. I will then talk about one very influential narrative in literary studies, the narrative concerning the rise of the novel. And then I will end by hinting at some complications to this familiar story of the rise of the novel. As mentioned earlier, I'll begin by making a few prefatory remarks on how this course is designed, what are some intellectual assumptions and what are some intellectual expectations from a course of this kind. So, I'll do this by reflecting on each term in the title of this course. First of all, this is a course on the English novel. Definite article ‘the’ refers to a very particular body of writing which qualifies as the English novel. This body of writing has to meet certain conditions. It has to be composed in the English language.

They have to be written in prose and they have to be of a fictional nature. Hence, the emphasis on the definite article ‘the’, not just English novel, but the English novel. The definite article ‘the’ also connects the texts that we will be studying in this course to a particular academic preoccupation, which is the study of a certain group of texts which have been canonized in English literary studies as ‘Novels’. This explains the emphasis on the English novel.

In continuation with this emphasis on the definite article, the second word of this title, the ‘English novel’, also connects the body of text we'll be studying in this course to a particular location on the planet. A particular way of writing, but not just writing, indeed a particular way of thinking and feeling was inaugurated by the literary innovations that were produced by a small group of writers in England. This is a governing principle of this course. Hence, there is something unique about the novel as it emerged from a particular

time and place. The time was the 18th century and the place was the location of the globe that we today identify as England. Hence, there is some importance of the qualifying adjective 'English' before the word novel. The third term in the title, the English novel, refers to again some of the unique literary and formal innovations that a small group of writers produced in prose fiction. These innovations were unique to the novel as it developed in a particular time and place, but these innovations were powerful enough and were suggestive enough that writers, thinkers and intellectuals all over the world and in all times and places, including our own contemporary time, have felt inspired to continue those innovations.

So, the word 'novel' takes the formal innovations that were produced in one time and place, i.e. England in the 18th century, and studies them as they were practiced in other times and places, including our contemporary time. The subtitle has the words 'Interdisciplinary Approaches.' By the word 'Interdisciplinary', I refer to an institution of academic study. One discipline that this course is firmly rooted in is that of English literary studies, meaning the study of the academic and the professional study of English literature. This is a discipline in which I have been trained, in which I currently practice, and so a lot of the intellectual framing and the intellectual substance of this course will draw very heavily on the discipline of English literary studies. However, this is not in any way a way to confine the study of the English novel. Instead, the firm rooting in the discipline of English literature, it is an occasion to broaden and move into different directions and to learn from other disciplines, which brings me to the second word that is 'approaches.' This course will also innovate and try to think very broadly and very openly about the different means of approaching a body of writing.

As I mentioned earlier, this course is invested in the kind of formal and literary innovations that were produced in a particular time and place, i.e. 18th century England. However, this course is not limited to the innovations, the intellectual and emotional labour that was undertaken in that time. In fact, it remains radically open to other influences, and it will think very openly about the different approaches one can take to understand these subsequent later innovations as well. That said, this course will attempt to study the novel as it was practiced in different times and places using a wide range of theoretical approaches.

To that extent, this course will also make comments and interventions in the different modes and the most optimum possible mode of integrating a study of theory and literature. The different theoretical approaches that this course will integrate are very broadly divided

into five categories. It will begin with theoretical perspectives on gender. It will subsequently integrate perspectives on class. It will then study approaches based on disability. It will then go to scholarly approaches to the environment and finally it will look at histories of race in the contemporary world. Now, each of these words, gender, class, disability, environment, race; they refer to things that exist in the real world, that is, forms of human identity or means of creating inequality or difference between human beings. However, they also refer to modes of understanding texts, that is to say, an awareness of each of these categories as forms of relationship between individuals; as forms of inequality, as occasions for discrimination between human beings, as referents to social inequality, social difference. An awareness of these facts inspires different modes of reading literature.

In addition to that, it also makes us sensitive and attentive to the representation of these human differences within literary texts. That is to say, these human categories function both as extra literary realities as well as governing principles that decide how literary texts are shaped and how literary texts may be studied and interpreted in order to get the maximum possible engagement, appreciation and enjoyment from these texts. Among the many approaches, I mentioned a possible difference or contradiction between theory and literature. The past four to five decades in the discipline of literary studies, the professional study of English literature has witnessed the rise of a theoretical approach.

And there has been a sort of conflict between approaches that focus on the text per se and approaches that read a literary text in light of scholarly approaches from other disciplines. So, I want to respect the history of literary interpretation by beginning our study of the English novel with a very, very influential and classic study of the novel, which may sound a little bit outdated but it will serve our purpose because it will guide our understanding of different scholarly approaches as well. The scholarly book with which I want to begin my study of the novel is Ian Watt's book, *The Rise of the Novel*. This book is entitled *The Rise of the Novel, Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*.

It was first published in the UK by Chatto and Windus in the year 1957. In the same year, it was also published in the USA by the University of California Press. The author Ian Watt was a professor and dean and held many senior leaderships as well as teaching positions at the American Stanford University. He passed away in the year 1999. He was a great colossus of English literary studies and I will spend a couple of minutes on his biography as well as career before I start to go a little bit deeper into the arguments and the claims Ian Watt made in this book.

Watt was born in Windermere, Westmoreland. He served in the Second World War from 1939 to 1946. In 1942, he was injured and captured in the Battle of Singapore and taken prisoner by the Japanese army. For a period of three years, between 1942 and 1945, Watt was a prisoner of war. And as a prisoner of war, he worked on the Burma Railway. This experience that Watt had was a very important and momentous experience, not just for Watt personally, but also in the history of the 20th century. The experience that Watt and other prisoners of war had as captives of the Japanese army later inspired David Lean's 1957 film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. That's a little bit of biographical details, and now I'll move very quickly into the book itself, *The Rise of the Novel*. I want to give learners a sense of the uniqueness, power, as well as the elegance of this book by reading the opening sentences. So, the first chapter of *The Rise of the Novel* is titled "Realism and the Novel Form."

Watt begins very powerfully with these words, "There are still no wholly satisfactory answers to many of the general questions which anyone interested in the early 18th century novelists and their works is likely to ask. Questions like, is the novel a new literary form? And what continues? And if we assume, as is commonly done, that it is, and that it was begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, how does it differ from the prose fiction of the past, from that of Greece, for example, or that of the Middle Ages, or of 17th century France? And is there any reason why these differences appeared when and where they did?" I want to focus for a moment on the clarity as well as the fundamental basis from which these powerful questions emerge. So it seems to what? There is a problem in current literary studies. The problem is that people seem to assume that with the prose fiction of these three writers, who are these writers?

Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. Something new happens. What is that new thing? A new literary form named as the novel is said to emerge. People or academics, there seems to be a scholarly consensus that the work of these three writers heralds a new literary form. However, people are not sure or there is confusion, there is lack of clarity on what that newness consists of? What was new about the novel? Was it truly a new literary form? With these questions, what begins this book and provides among the most powerful, the most convincing, the most persuasive answers to this question. And in fact, what answers today are still among the most influential and persuasive answers.

I'm going to very briefly give the names and dates of these three writers whom Watt names. They are Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. As you can see from the dates of these writers on the screen, they were active in the early and middle parts of the

18th century. Now, what is answer to what was new about the novel as it was written by these three writers? And how was it different? How was it demonstrably different from prose fiction that was published earlier? What gives two answers?

The first part of the answer is that these three novelists practiced and produced a kind of formal innovations, the name of that innovation Watt provides as 'Formal realism.' The second part of Watt's answer is that these three novelists were able to produce formal realism because in the 17th and 18th century, the reading habits of the common reader had sufficiently changed and therefore it was ready, the reading public was ready and more conducive to the kind of innovation that these three novelists produced. So, this is the two-part answer and I now want to read from the last paragraph of the first chapter of Watt's book, which is chapter one, "Realism and the Novel Form". I just read from the opening of the first chapter in which Watt asked, "what is new about the novel form? and in this last paragraph, Watt describes exactly- what is new about the novel form."

Watt writes, and I quote, "The narrative method whereby the novel embodies this circumstantial view of life may be called its formal realism. Formal because the term realism does not here refer to any special literary doctrine or purpose, but only to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel and so rarely in other literary genres that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself." So, you can see exactly what means by formal realism. Formal realism is an effect of a particular way of using language. What is that effect and what are these ways of using language? There are a set of narrative procedures. There is something about the way these three novelists used language, used the English language to be precise. There's something about the way these three novelists described characters, people, places and plots, which provided readers a sense that what they were reading was an authentic experience.

So together, the effect and the use of these narrative procedures came together and what describes this innovation as formal realism. Now, between this opening and this ending, what provides a detailed explanation of what realism was, how realism can be best understood, and what were the intellectual as well as social contexts in which this kind of realism was practiced. So before 'what' provides an intellectual history of realism, 'what' describes, what is the popular connotation of realism? For most popular readers, for most non-academic readers of novels in the 18th century, the word 'realism' was a sort of antithesis of 'idealism.' And therefore, in the content of these stories, people found, their contemporary readers of these novelists, i.e. these readers found a lot of socially very low content, that is, characters from the working class or the criminal class or the urban, the

seedy urban underbelly, for instance. And what writes, the realism of the novels of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding is therefore closely associated with the fact that Moll Flanders is a thief, Pamela, a hypocrite and Tom Jones, a fornicator. So you can see how realism can connote a particular kind of story that is being told, not a story about a particular kind of person, not a very elite, aristocratic or respectable person, but someone of a very dubious moral character, a very questionable social standing and so on. For what, however, this sort of definition of realism, realism as defined by the social class of the character, is less interesting.

In fact, the most useful way of defining realism is not by referring to the social class of the characters, but by understanding realism as the method, as the manner in which these novelists described these characters and understood in this way, realism can help us understand how the novel is the product of a more dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life than had ever been attempted before. After this, Ian Watt undertakes a study of the analogies and differences between realism as it was understood in philosophy and as it was practiced by these 18th century novelists. The key difference between Classical philosophy, that is, the philosophy as written in ancient Greece, and the way realism was practiced in these 18th century English novels, was that of the difference between the 'Universal' and the 'Particular.'

In Classical Platonic philosophy, truth was accessed by referring to universal concepts, universal forms. There was a very clear hierarchy in which the particular details of the world, the natural world that were accessible to human beings through our senses like the eyes and touch and sight, that particular detail or that information about the particular aspect of the natural world was to be distrusted. It was untrue. What was true, according to these Platonic philosophers, was the universal truth, was eternal, timeless, unchanging concepts. Now, when it comes to these 18th century novelists, exactly the opposite is true. How so? For novelists, it is the particular, that is the way of accessing the truth. Novels are concerned with individual apprehensions of reality, how one individual experiences reality through their senses. That is the concern of the novelist. That is the mode in which the novelist accesses and creates the truth. So, in Watt's overview, we learn of a contrast between two bodies of writing. There is, first, a traditional classical body of philosophy, which I just summarized very roughly by giving the example of Platonism, and then there is a new body of philosophy, philosophers such as René Descartes, David Hume, John Locke, and so on.

Now, both these forms of philosophy are in contrast. There is also a contrast between novelistic forms of writing and pre-novelistic literature, as well as literary criticism and theory as practiced by the contemporaries of these novelists. So, there is a contrast and that contrast shapes the understanding of realism as Ian Watt would like to propound it. I have already summarized this very briefly, but Watt provides analogies between the concepts that new philosophers were describing in their writing and the literary practice of these three 18th century English novelists. To begin with the example of the first new philosopher that Ian Watt describes, I'll quote from René Descartes' very, very influential book, *Discourse on Method*. René Descartes in this book writes, "cogito ergo sum, which means, I think, therefore I am." This quote is taken in the history of ideas to refer to a milestone in modern philosophy, And the milestone took the form of establishing how the pursuit of truth is an individual matter. How one thinking mind, the ability to ask questions, the ability to perceive, the ability to think, how the ability to think gives an individual a unique kind of power, the ability to understand the truth.

Now for Ian Watt, novelists and the novel form is an intellectual machine that embodies this impulse and generalizes this impulse. It's not that novelists describe philosophers, rather novelists create a way of describing reality which has a philosophical inclination. There are four analogies between the ideas of these new philosophers that Ian Watt identifies and the way novelists describe reality. Very broadly, they can be summarized into four heads. The first is plot, second is character, third is proper names, and the fourth is memory or consciousness as it evolves over time. I will now describe each of these four categories in some detail. Previous imaginative writing, i.e. 'Prose fiction' before the English novel became popular. They retold stories. They took the plots from mythology, history, legends or previously influential and popular forms of writing.

In this respect, novelists made a very clean and radical break with previous forms of imaginative writing. Their plots had nothing to do with mythology, history, legend, or previous writing. Instead, the plots of these novels had to do everything with individual experience, either wholly invented or were based on contemporary events. Second, the analogy between philosophical writing and these 18th century novelists had to do with the kinds of characters these novelists placed at the center of their novels.

The plot, which I just described as either wholly invented or based on contemporary events, had to be acted out by real people. That is to say, it had to be acted out by particular individuals. Individuals who were born, who lived, who had struggles, who lived in contradictory, dichotomous and ambiguous circumstances, individuals who struggled with

social conflicts, individuals who had moral and intellectual dilemmas, individuals who were relatable, who were as real as the people writing the novels and as the people reading the novels. Therefore, in this sense, these individuals were not universal types, but particular human beings. When it comes to characters, these novelists described real people. The plots that they invented or borrowed from contemporary events had to be acted out by particular people in particular circumstances. In doing so, they were inspired most directly by the philosophers such as Locke and Berkeley. To illustrate this point, I'll read a brief quote from the philosopher John Locke's book, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in the year 1689. John Locke writes, "It is the senses which at first let in particular ideas and furnished the empty cabinet of the human mind."

So, John Locke was one among others, but probably the most influential of philosophers to underline the importance of the individual mind's ability to perceive sensory data and the role of this sensory data and information in creating the truth, truth as well as knowledge. Now, it's interesting for Watt that there was a contrast between the philosophical writing of, say, John Locke and Hume and many others, and the kinds of ideas that practitioners of creative writing were putting forward. So, to give a sense of this contrast, I'll read a quote from Shaftesbury's essay, the book actually, *Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, published in the year 1709. Shaftesbury is, of course, the published name of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury writes, "The mere face painter indeed has little in common with the poet, but like the mere historian, copies what he sees and minutely traces every feature and odd mark." Shaftesbury continues, "It is otherwise with men of invention and design."

So, you can see that in this quote, Shaftesbury is drawing a clear contrast between those forms of creative writing which focus on the individual details, the particular details, that is the mere face painter, right, and there are some other forms of art which do not focus on particularity but describe universal, timeless, unchanging, eternal ideals. So, the contrast here is between the face painter, who is too obsessed with the individual details of the face and the poet who is more concerned with timeless and unchanging ideals. For all writers who would like to produce good art, Shaftesbury says that they should be like the poet, meaning they should ignore particular details and focus on universals. Similarly, in the case of proper names, earlier prose fiction published allegorical names, names which gave a little summary and allowed readers to anticipate the actions of character. However, in the novels, the names were unique. They named real people whose future actions could not be predicted simply by a word which connoted their name. Therefore, it strengthens this idea



that novels are about real people and are as unpredictable as real people are in real social environments.

Finally, consciousness and memory. David Hume writes in his book, *Entreties on Human Nature*, “Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects which constitute our self or person.” These are all the ideas that find expressions in the prose fiction of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. The nature of time as it is expressed in the novel is that of an arrow that moves in one direction i.e. forward. The novel is a genre that is founded on the fundamentally unidirectional nature of time.

To give a sense of how all of these four categories are embodied in one line or in one small bit of information, I'll take an example from probably one of the most influential novels of the 18th century, that is *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady* by Samuel Richardson. Richardson tells readers that Clarissa died at 6.40 p.m. on Thursday, the 7th of September and this is a kind of detail which could be true for a real person. In fact, that is exactly how Richardson would like his readers to think about his character, a real person, even though everyone knows that this is a fictional character. So, to summarize, here is what the novel does based on what we have learned about contemporary philosophy. Both the novelist and the philosophers aspire towards form of authenticity. Novelists seek to produce, in Watt's words, “a sense, a form that purports to be an authentic account of the actual individual experiences of individuals.”

So far so good, and this is probably the most influential and the most persuasive of statements and ideas that you can find in Ian Watt's very, very influential work, *The Rise of the Novel*. I want to end by quoting from a later section of Ian Watt's book, where Ian Watt makes a comment about female sensibility. Here Ian Watt is making sense and trying to understand why the experiences of women became so important for the novel. Not only did the experiences of women become important, but women writers themselves also came to acquire a great deal of importance. And here Watt writes, and I quote, “Now, if you read the sentence clearly and carefully and critically, you'll find that there is an assumption here about feminine sensibility that is a certain biological or psychological state of being and a certain literary or stylistic way of writing.” There is an assumption being made that certain kind of human being is better equipped or more able to produce a certain kind of writing which will have more truth. That is, women can write about personal relationships and they will be taken more seriously or their writing will be more persuasive. Now, I would like

to, in the subsequent lecture, I will return to this moment and I will discuss the perils and some of the pitfalls of essentializing gender categories.

To what extent, can we assume that having a certain kind of body or mind will ensure that the writing produced by that individual will be more persuasive? I will also ask this question, do male and female sensibilities take shape before or after the writing is produced? That is to say, can we assume that female sensibility exists and from that sensibility, writing about personal relationships emerges? Or is it the case that writing about personal relationships creates male and female sensibilities?

I will situate these questions in the work of one theorist and one literary scholar, distinctions about which I will also speak more in the subsequent lecture. The theorist is Michel Foucault and the literary scholar is Nancy Armstrong, whose work *Desire and Domestic Fiction* I will speak about at greater length in the next lecture.

Thank you!