The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches
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Lecture – 9
The Novel After Theory: Class

Welcome learners to the third lecture in this NPTEL course titled The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches. In the previous lecture, I spent a lot of time reading from the opening pages of this very, very famous novel, *Pamela*. And I promise to go into a little more detail about this opening as well as the intellectual and social issues that this opening connects us with issues of class and gender most primarily.

I'll begin by returning to that opening and by focusing on some aspects of Pamela's first letter to her parents, which opens this novel. I would like us all to focus on how ordinary Pamela is, that is to say, Pamela's concerns emerge from her very precarious employment situation. That is, her fate depends on the existence of other people, much more radically, much more completely than others.

One day, she was staring at bankruptcy and unemployment because one of her employers was on a deathbed. And it was only through a very random and a very arbitrary turn of events, that is, a mother making her son promise that he would take care of her servants as Pamela's former employer extracts a promise out of her son. It is this very arbitrary event that ensures that Pamela stays solvent, that she doesn't have to give up her job and go and live with her parents who are aging and not very well to do themselves and therefore to support Pamela would be an additional burden.

So, Pamela's concerns are ordinary. She may not be from an aristocratic family, but her concerns, the struggles that she faces, the challenges that she faces and the strategies that she comes up with in order to surmount those challenges, they are very human, and from the very first page, the novel proceeds with an assumption that it is worth reading about this very ordinary person's very ordinary challenges, that there's something about the way the novel describes this ordinary person that it makes us feel that there's something extraordinary about her situation. So that is the first thing to note.

The second is Pamela's honesty. If you go back and reread that letter very carefully, you'll find that while Pamela is grieving for the death of her former employer, Pamela is also as much concerned about her situation, her employment and financial situation. This kind of

honesty is of course natural. Grief for one's employer cannot but jostle for primacy with the fear for one's own survival.

So we see that and one reason for that honesty is the kind of document the novel opens with. That is, it's a document in which people are naturally invited and enabled to express themselves honestly. It's a letter that Pamela is writing to her parents. If this is not the ideal and optimum space for expression of complete honesty, then perhaps there is no other space. Pamela knows that she is writing a document which only the intended recipients will read.

The fact that thousands and millions of readers are actually reading this very personal and very intimate document is actually one of the conceits and one of the powers, most powerful features of the novel as a genre. Of course, Pamela is not a real person, so we can all read these very private and very intimate documents without any guilt of violating anyone's privacy. In fact, privacy in the context of this novel is created by this contract between Richardson's narrator, who is this fictional person named Pamela, and Richardson's readers.

The contract between Richardson's readers and this narrator is that even though we are privy to a lot of intimate details of Pamela's life and the news of her employer's death and this letter to her parents is very mild compared to the kinds of personal information that later will be revealed. Even though we are privy to all this information and there is a danger that we may be violating or encroaching upon someone's private space, it is in fact the opposite. It is in fact our ability to read and access and accumulate all of this data, all of this very private information, which actually creates the idea of privacy, the way privacy is understood in modern societies later today.

So, the novel actually creates the idea of privacy and the personal space through these kinds of exchanges. Further, I would like us all to also notice the detail with which Pamela describes the physical and material conditions in which she exists. I've already mentioned the detail with which Pamela mentions her employment situation. I would like you all now to notice the manner in which Pamela describes her immediate situation.

The sentence about tears blotting the paper on which she's writing, it's detail that connects the readers to the real-time situation, to the evolving material conditions in which Pamela is writing. To mention that her tears fall on the page and blot the letter is a choice. The narrator is making a choice. This information could be conveyed also by simply saying that I tried a lot, as Pamela mentions many times in the letter that I just read.

Pamela mentions that she was crying, she was sobbing, she was weeping. There are multiple mentions of the act of crying. However, all of those acts, all of those mentions, all of those words report an event, whereas this description of the letter, actually the paper on which the letter is written, being blotted by a few drops of tears that have fallen on it. That takes Pamela's account to another level of realism and intimacy.

Readers are brought much closer to Pamela's own experiences. And this is something that Pamela does in order to earn the trust of her reader. Of course, her parents wouldn't doubt that Pamela was lying or that Pamela didn't actually cry when she mentioned that she was crying. That's not the case. In fact, it is for other readers, readers who are more likely to question whether Pamela actually experienced the kind of things she experienced.

So, we as readers who don't have any familial connection to Pamela, we are brought that much closer. We are enclosed in a very trusting and intimate bubble in which we believe and we feel and we understand exactly what Pamela has experienced. I also want to notice and highlight Pamela's instructions to her parents on how they must retrieve the four guineas. This is a choice that Richardson makes in order to convey to readers exactly where Pamela can be placed in the economic and social ladder of 18th century England. Not all of Richardson's readers would have the same relationship to wealth or coins.

Most of Richardson's readers would have treated these four gold coins as valuable. But not so valuable as to go to this extent of hiding them, making sure that the carrier cannot hear them chink or clink against each other, and to also give instructions to her parents on how they must carefully unpack and unbox the multiple layers in which they have been enclosed, so as to ensure their safe and undetected delivery. So, this is information that conveys to Richardson's readers that Pamela is very much a person of the real world.

And she is a person who occupies a particular station in the economic hierarchy. That is to say, she is not very wealthy. And this situation of not being very wealthy is not just a fact. It is a circumstance that shapes Pamela's narrative. It shapes how Pamela experiences the world. It shapes how Pamela writes about that experience. And it shapes our experience as readers because we are reading about the challenges and the travails and the fate of a very ordinary person. The newness of Pamela is something that comes through this very unpretentious description of how she treats money and how very valuable these four guineas are to her.

I mentioned in the first lecture that the prose fiction that became very popular in 18th century England was unique because it had a lot of lower class and working-class

protagonists. That is to say, the protagonists in literary texts and most prose fiction before 18th century England featured protagonists and characters from very elite backgrounds, that is, nobility, aristocracy, royalty, etc. Whereas in the 18th century, we find a lot of prose fiction texts which deal with the fate of lower class, working class, criminal, semi-criminal sort of protagonists. And there are many examples. To take the work of Daniel Defoe, for instance, we have characters like Moll Flanders, Roxana, etc.

There is one difference between these characters we find in the novels of Daniel Defoe and Pamela. The difference is that when Defoe or Fielding or many other 18th century novelists describe these working class characters or protagonists from a lower economic or class position than the typical protagonist or the typical reader and writer of novels, there was a hint of condescension. What I mean by that is that there was an unspoken assumption and awareness shared both by the narrator and the reader that these working-class characters were not the ideal subjects of literature, but an exception was being made because there was some kind of narrative value to be had by reading about the fate of these working class and lower-class protagonists. We see none of that condescension, none of that justification being provided in the case of this novel and this protagonist, both of which are named Pamela. Richardson's narrator does not make excuses for Pamela's not being wealthy, not being from a very elite background, not being from a typical elite novelistic or literary royalty.

Pamela is what she is. And the novel unapologetically describes this character with all of the implications of her being from the class that she is from. Now, the key tension in the novel emerges soon after the situation that Pamela describes in the first chapter. As you recall in the first letter, Pamela explains the situation, which is that her former employer has died, an aging woman, and her servants have now been transferred to her son, who is now the new master. And this man, whose name is Mr. B has promised to take care of all his mother's servants and has included a special mention and a special assurance to Pamela that he would take care of her. Now, from this very noble and edifying promise, a very unpleasant situation emerges, which is that Mr. B begins to view Pamela as a kind of property and like his other material property, wishes to extract and exploit Pamela. He wishes to exploit Pamela sexually and makes many advances on her. There are many characters, other characters who view this as natural and who view this kind of assault on Pamela as nothing remarkable, nothing criminal and very, very natural. One character in the novel puts it thus, that is, when Pamela refuses, resists and is very upset and is very, very distressed at the kind of assault she faces from Mr. B, one character responds thus:

> "Why? What is all this, my dear? But that our neighbour has a mind to his mother's waiting maid. I don't see any great injury will be done to her. He hurts no family by this."

By having a character articulate this sentiment, Richardson describes three levels of hypocrisy in the novel, which correspond directly to hypocrisy in the society of 18th century England. That is, gentlemen or men who owned property had certain privileges. They had the freedom to pick and choose the bodies of women around them. That was one level of hypocrisy.

The second was that for women there were, there were two levels. Elite or women from elite backgrounds, such as Mr. B's, had to play along with these desires, mainly because they did not have any other hope of securing financial stability other than marriage. Finally, working-class women like Pamela did not even have that hope. So, the most that they could do is tolerate the violence and the atrocities that came their way, especially from people like Mr. B. And the most that they could hope was that if they tolerated, quietly suffered, they would be allowed to continue working.

So, these were the three levels of hypocrisy and Richardson is very critical, like a true social realist. He is very critical of these double and triple standards that persisted. For Richardson's narrator, which is mostly Pamela, but sometimes other people, depending on who's writing the letter. These hypocrisies created a problem that was tragic enough to warrant novelistic representation. So, on more than one occasion in the novel, the readers are provided graphic details of how Mr. B physically assaults Pamela and almost violates her.

Pamela's harrowing near escapes are not merely tragic, though they produce very obvious feelings of horror, pity and catharsis. Instead, Richardson's novel genuinely disturbs the reader. We are as harrowed, we are as disturbed and almost as stressed as Pamela herself. So it's a very discomforting read.

The novel creates a sense that Pamela's vulnerability communicates a fundamental problem with the world, not just hers, but ours as well. And by ours, I mean contemporary readers of Richardson, that is, everyone who inhabits the social universe of 18th century England. That universe has a problem, that social universe has a problem, if people like Pamela are vulnerable to the whims and fancies of her employer. The problem emerges from two things, that is class and sexuality.

Wealthy landowners like Mr. B felt desire for poor servant girls like Pamela. The existing social norms of 18th century England legitimize Mr. B's impulse to simply exploit Pamela, use her for sexual pleasure and abandon her. So, this is a problem. This is the fundamental contradiction in the society of 18th century England which creates this novel.

Richardson's novel *Pamela* provides an imaginary solution to this real problem. Pamela resists Mr. B and describes that resistance in words. These are spoken in her exchanges with Mr. B, but more importantly, these are written. She writes about her travails, just like the opening letter I read, and these subsequent letters together make the novel *Pamela*. Pamela also writes letters to Mr. B which have the cumulative effect over many pages and significant passage of time of making Mr. B see her as a human being.

He proposes marriage to her and at that point Pamela agrees. The reformation that Pamela's words produce and which Richardson's novel records and describes for readers like us, is Mr. B's education in the procedures of what can be called modern love. These can be called courtship, romance, seduction, sensitivity, or respect for women as human beings and not just bodies, and a whole range of other terms depending on the context.

Understood in terms of sexuality, marriage and class, then we can define the English novel based on our understanding of *Pamela* so far. A novel can be defined as a long piece of prose fiction about a poor woman by a middle-class man. This is *Pamela*. And from this, if we extrapolate to define the novel in general, we can define it thus: the novel is a tract of prose fiction that trains readers in a certain form of enjoyment.

It's an enjoyment that derives from watching how a particular genre achieves its goal of domesticating male sexual desire for female into middle-class love, a love that culminates in marriage. Such an understanding of the novel, as inaugurated by *Pamela* and developed into much more sophisticated forms by other writers, leads to two problems. The first problem lies in the underlying assumption about the ahistorical and supposedly unchanging nature of sexuality. If you go back and reread the definition I just provided in the previous slide, you will notice how it assumes that the nature of sexuality remains the same across historical periods, whether in 18th century England or in 21st century India. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with such an assumption. All cultures have their own unique idiosyncrasies. However, in this case, the enjoyment and appreciation of the English novel requires the reader's turn a blind eye to some very important historical

developments. In addition, the definition that I just provided also leads to another problem.

The second problem is that it fails to account for how and why so many women writers began to write novels that gained a lot of respectability as well as financial and marketable success. Now, coming to the problem with this idiosyncrasy. All cultural forms have certain idiosyncrasies. They require us to think in certain ways in order to enjoy a certain cultural form. However, in the case of the English novel, the enjoyment and appreciation of the English novel requires.

Based on the definition I just provided, if you want to enjoy and appreciate the English novel, it requires that we as readers turn a blind eye to two important historical developments. The first is the growing importance given to women's spaces and experiences in English fiction beginning in the 18th century. From a passive object of socially sanctioned male power, women's spaces become an expression of human agency.

And this is the transition that we will be tracing between *Pamela*, a novel that I have been discussing in these two lectures, and the first novel that I choose for in-depth analysis, which is *Pride and Prejudice*. The second is the growing popularity and respect gained by women writers beginning in the late 18th century. In her 1987 book *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, the scholar Nancy Armstrong asks, "I know of no history of the English novel that can explain why women began to write respectable fiction near the end of the 18th century." Those of you who recall my first lecture will immediately notice how closely this quote mirrors the opening sentence of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*.

Ian Watt began his book, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, by stating that there are still no convincing answers to whether the prose fiction that began to be written and that became popular in the 18th century in England was a new form. So was the novel a new genre? That's what Ian Watt was asking. And Ian Watt answered by saying that the novel is a new genre because it creates ‘formal realism’. Similarly, Nancy Armstrong asks, "Why women began to write respectable fiction near the end of the 18th century?" And Nancy Armstrong says further that there is no current or published or existent history of the English novel that can answer this question. So what does this mean? This means that Nancy Armstrong is dissatisfied with previous attempts to write the history of the English novel because of how they treat this development, the fact that women began to write respectable fiction near the end of the 18th century.

So, I had promised that I will reveal some limitations and some incompletenesses in Ian Watt's thesis and this is where we finally do that. Armstrong quotes from Ian Watt's book in which Ian Watt writes why women began to describe domestic spaces and generally personal relationships in the novel. Armstrong writes about Ian Watt, "When it comes time to account for Jane Austen, historical explanations elude Watt and he falls back on a commonplace claim", and now Armstrong quotes Watt, "the feminine sensibility was in some ways better equipped to reveal the intricacies of personal relationships and was therefore at a real advantage in the realm of the novel." This kind of an assumption about the essential feminine privilege that certain women writers have is a very problematic one.

And let's think a little bit about what's wrong with this claim. This claim assumes that there is a certain link between possessing a certain kind of body, having a certain kind of emotional sensibility, and the ability to write about certain things. To be specific, Ian Watt in this sentence that Armstrong has quoted tends to or seems to assume that women writers, because they are women writers, are better able to write about personal relationships.

Now, is this a fair claim to make? Let's think a little bit about it. Armstrong's claim is that this sort of a claim is not unique to Ian Watt, but actually plagues much criticism and especially historical writing about the English novel. Armstrong further writes, "definitive histories of the novel presuppose a social world divided according to the principle of gender and neither can possibly consider how such a world came into being and what part the novel played in its formation."

In other words, Armstrong's critique of contemporary and much published histories of the novel, which tend to assume that feminine spaces and women writers had a unique connection, seem to encourage an assumption that women's spaces were insulated from the political and social world. But such insulation does not pre-exist the writing. Instead, the writing creates such insulation. I will reflect and further expand on this claim in my next lecture.

But essentially, I would like us all to spend some time and reflect on the claim that Armstrong is making. The claim specifically is that when we read a novel like *Pamela*, and we assume that it is describing something essential or something eternal about desire or sexuality and how desire, sexuality and power are played out in domestic spaces, we

are giving into a certain ideological work, the ideology is that female sexuality and sexuality in general exists before it is written about.

It is first written about by male writers and then written about by female writers, which is then accepted as an expression of human or universal truth. The claim Armstrong would like to make and which I think we should all remember going forward is that this claim about the essential or unchanging nature of human agency as understood from the description of sexuality is not universal. In fact, it is a claim that's being made by certain writers. Richardson in *Pamela* would like to claim that this is an expression of sexuality and domesticity.

Similarly, other subsequent writers who wrote about domestic spaces were received and were celebrated as essential and universal expressions, but they were in fact particular expressions. And Armstrong's claim is that the writing of the English novel has tended to create this very ideological claim about the universality of domestic spaces. We will reflect on this and understand the politics and the conflict behind these kinds of claims in the subsequent lecture.