
UNIT 5 THE NOVEL: 1960s AND AFTER

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

We have now come to the final unit in our course. A study of the nine novels prescribed has given us an overview of the development of the English novel. Let us now examine some of the recent developments in the novel as a genre, in this unit.

This unit provides a general introduction to the British novel and the novel written in English from the 1960s to the present day. It has been divided into three parts. The first deals with the development of the novel during the 1960s, the second with the 1970s, and the third part presents a view of the new novel since the 1980s. The last part also describes how fiction branched out in various directions during the last two decades of this century, giving the novel in the English language a truly international character.

By studying this Unit along with the first one, you get a comprehensive view of the major trends in modern British fiction and understand the variety it has acquired in the hands of its major practitioners.

5.1 THE NOVEL IN THE 1960s

The fast-changing socio-political, economic and cultural scenario during the 1960s led to a consequential decade of remarkable literary achievements. With the intensification of the Cold War between the two major super powers, America and the Soviet Union, Russia first sending man into space, the Americans landing on the moon, the rising nuclear threat, the Vietnam War, and the broadening of the Black Power and the women's movement, the face of reality and history was irrevocably altered. The "Swinging Sixties", as they are generally called, came to represent the international spirit of "new consciousness". The period was marked by generational and cultural rebellion and by unprecedented affluence. The breaking down of traditional concepts of ethics and morality, linear time, and book-based culture made way for a new mode of life. As a result, there emerged the culture of rock music and psychedelic colours, of radical theatre and alternative press, of liberal sex and off-beat social, cultural and political behaviour, and all these gradually acquired a new prominence. This marked the beginning of a "counter-culture" which contributed to the intensification of the postmodern trend. Under these circumstances, the medium, rather than the content, engrossed attention and the novel found its expression in a destabilised form. This question of form in literature and art attracted the critical attention of the artist, who was impelled to explore new styles of expression that suited the postmodern trends of life and art.

The impact of the changing world order may easily be identified in the literary output of the period. The philosophy of Structuralism and Deconstruction challenged the old modes of literary expression. Literature was now reduced to the problematics of language. Novelists were no longer concerned with resolving the hiatus between language and experience. They were more concerned with the issue of writing itself and with locating the world into the text and the text into the world. The writer could not locate her/himself in the text as s/he was her/himself being written by language. With the new popularity of literary theory, the traditional concepts of plot, character and chronology, practiced till the 1950s, were rejected. The British novel came to make acquaintance with "meta-fiction" that involved the intermingling of style, form and tradition, the interaction between literature and other

subjects, and the new focus on the problematics of language. This was, however, different from the French preoccupation with the meanings of signs or the American concern for meanings in historical extremity. British fiction, being acutely responsive to apocalyptic changes, still remained somewhat close to liberal realism. Its concern for humanism and fictional characterisation could be marked in the writings of Angus Wilson, Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark, Anthony Burgess and Iris Murdoch, all of whom continued to write well into the 1960s. British fiction opened its doors and windows to new experiences and newer modes of expression.

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1969) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) largely represent the British novel of the 1960s. The shift in stylistic mode was summed up by Lessing when she said that her novel "would walk through the way it is shaped". It put aside the parameters of the earlier narratives and made a new beginning with a complicated structure. The portrait of the woman painted as the central character broaches the issues of self and discourse, and the intermixing of historical, personal, political and aesthetic codes.

John Fowles established himself with his short novel, *The Collector* (1963), but made his real mark with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. "This is a work which," Malcolm Bradbury pertinently remarks in *The Modern British Novel*, "reconstructs and deconstructs the Victorian novel, and by implication all that goes with its continuing presence: its ideas of character and society, historical progress and evolution, chronological narrative and god-like storytelling". As the narrative weaves through its complex moorings, the central character, Sarah Woodruff, creates her own wavelength of discourse. She dictates tough authorial parameters for Fowles to negotiate within the terms of past and present and the female predicament of old and new. Fowles exposed fiction to new artistic challenges as he manipulated for his benefit the disparate roles of a theorist, a historian and a deft manipulator of sources.

Both Lessing and Fowles, as self-conscious artists, address the question of canon formation. They do not drastically change the conventional; rather they retain the spirit of British continuity with the past. They stand at the intersection of the novel and the anti-novel and herald a new generation of writers, announcing the arrival of experimental fiction. Prominent among those who took to such writing are Christine Brooke-Rose, Ann Quinn, John Burger, Eva Figs, Paul Scott, Angela Carter and Alan Sheridan. Brooke-Rose deserves a special mention, being a theory-oriented author. Her bold titles like *Out* (1964), *Such* (1966), *Between* (1968) and *Thru* (1975), represent a world of signs and interrelated complexities of the world and the text. She carried on her engagement with intertextuality and honed her art in *Textermination* (1991), a campus novel about the postmodern condition.

Another version of the postmodernist trend is to be found in the anti-novels of B.S. Johnson. He intersperses his text with typographical play, blank pages, and comic interruptions. His novels *Albert Angelo* (1964) and *The Unfortunate* (1969) thrive on chaos and disorder as they make bold experiments in form. This tradition of textualising chaos also finds expression in Eva Figs and Alan Burns. This decade, characterised by its experimental writings, also produced writers like David Cauter, John Berger, J.G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock.

A different view of modern British fiction emerges in the social novels of Angus Wilson—*Lake Call* (1964) and *No Laughing Matter* (1967). The latter relates the saga of a family from the first World War to the sixties, of "hire purchase hoovers and sleeping-frill salvation." In it Wilson presents the breaking patterns of society and the vacuity of existence in the modern day global village. This perspective is broadened further in *As If By Magic* (1973) when Wilson moves on to the Third world scenario and its subaltern images. He breaks, thereby, the provincial framework of the British novel.

One of the prolific novelists of this period, Iris Murdoch, is supposed to be writing yet another kind of novel defined by Robert Scholes as "fabulation". Her novels are more artistic, realistic and highly evocative. They are concerned with ideas and ideals and are reminiscent of the novels of manners, of romance, fantasy and historical roles. *A Severed Head* (1961), *An Unofficial Rose* (1961), *The Unicorn* (1963), *The Italian Girl* (1964), *The Red and the Green* (1965), *The Time of The Angels* (1966), *The Nice and The Good* (1968) and *Bruno's Dream* (1968) fall under this category. She continued writing into the seventies and drew parallels with Shakespearean theatre in her novels like *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*

(1970), *The Black Prince* (1973) and *The Sea, Sea* (1978). She turns rather philosophical in her novels written during the 1980s. In *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983) and *The Message of the Planet* (1989), Murdoch affords a fresh look at established institutions of religion, philosophy and art. Her novels offer realistic studies on the darker questions of life rather than struggling with complex textual codes.

Spark's co-religionist, Anthony Burgess, who came upon the scene rather confidently with *The Clockwork Orange* and *The Wanting Seed*, continued writing fables of the future in a satiric vein. The questions of language and overpopulation engross his attention. He also comes close to the science fiction writers like Kingsley Amis and Doris Lessing. He developed a different perspective during the 1970s and the 1980s as questions of art engrossed his attention. *MF* (1971), *Earthly Powers* (1980), *The End of The World News* (1983) and *The Kingdom of the Wicked* (1985) bear testimony to his ability to encompass issues related to structuralism, history and sin. Burgess, as a postmodernist novelist, is known primarily for his linguistic and technical skill.

The British novel had by now taken several new directions. Wilson and Fowles perfected realism, Murdoch refined the art of characterisation, Spark made her mark in plot construction, and Burgess showed ways to handle language. Two new roads to be taken were those of "neo-documentary" and "fabulation". David Lodge identified this new trend though he himself started with the realistic novel in *The Picturegrass* (1960) and *Ginger, You're Barmy* (1962). He took on a playful form in *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965) by dealing with the issue of contraception and parodying major novelists of the past. Being a critic, he also reflected upon the question of art and may best be taken as an experimental realist.

Margaret Drabble, Melvyn Bragg, Julian Mitchell; John Berger are some of the novelists still working in the realistic mode. Their writings show how deep the roots of realism have gone in British fiction. Their postmodernist tendencies are reflected in their resorting to experimentation and fantasy. The spirit of apocalyptic fantasy gets its expression in Angela Carter's *Shadow Dance* (1965) and her surreal work *The Magic Toyshop* (1967). All these novelists are self-conscious and this finds expression in their works. Elements of baroque and mimicry find expression in the new narratives of the 1960s. The writers are closely concerned with the question of discovering the truth and the characters play an important role in this regard.

5.2 THE NOVEL IN THE 1970s

British fiction loses its vitality in 1970s. It is not as virile as in the 1960s nor as ebullient as in the 1980s. Both stylistically and historically it is a "sagging" period when contrasted with the "Swinging Sixties". This is also the time when the novel in English rather than the British novel came to make its mark. Writers from the Commonwealth countries gained prominence. The founding of the Booker Prize in 1969 introduced the spirit of competition in the literary scene and literature became a marketplace commodity. The novel in English acquired a hybrid character and became more complex.

One outstanding name among these novelists is that of the Trinidadian novelist V.S. Naipaul. His part documentary and part fictional venture, *In A Free State* (1971), represents a multicultural scenario encompassing the US, Britain and Africa. Other novelists who distinguish themselves come from diverse backgrounds: South African writer Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974), Indian novelist Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975) and Paul Scott's *Staying On* (1977) won the Booker Prize and brought forth yet another view of imperialism and multicultural reality. Fiction was now getting more varied. This variety was carried further by John Berger in *G* (1972), Nicholas Mosley in *Impossible Object* (1968) and David Storey in *Saville* (1976).

The fiction of the 1970s returned to "fictions of identity" where empire is created afresh. J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) deals with the Indian Mutiny of 1857 while his other novel, *The Singapore Grip* (1978), deals with the Japanese invasion of Malaya. Paul Scott's "Raj Quartet", consisting of *The Jewel In the Crown* (1964), *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Tower of Silence* (1971), and *A Division of The Spoils* (1975), represents a different view of experience in India. His books have complex perspectives on history and express subjective viewpoints, against the Indian backdrop of 1942-47. This strain of writing

continued with greater force during the 1980s and 1990s. It is in this context that we may take into account the novels of the post-colonial experience. Remarkable novels in this respect are Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975), Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) and more recently Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997).

Another view of history may be found in the novelist's perception of the European Cold War. Le Carre's *The Naive and the Sentimental Lover* (1971), *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974) and *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977) consider the important questions of the British establishment and its identity. Le Carre's influence was, however, not limited to the domain of Cold War fiction as his novels may also be taken to be keen interpretations of the British psyche in turmoil. Darker pictures of contemporary history appear in the surreal works of J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974) and Michael Moorcock's *The Condition of Muzak* (1977).

Another shade of writing in the 1970s may be seen in Margaret Drabble's *The Needle's Eye* (1972) where she takes up the question of moral decay. In *The Realms of God* (1975) she takes archaeology as a metaphor for understanding British society. In *The Ice Age* (1977) she again refers to the issue of social decay. Drabble's fiction is modelled upon the realistic fiction of the last century.

A.S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) is a clear improvement on her previous works in which she undertakes the ambitious project of writing a multilayered novel. Byatt continues to write even today and she has emerged as one of the most respected names in new British fiction.

Discovering new modes of perception came to be the most engaging concern of the new novelists. Maureen Duffy, and Angela Carter are some of the prominent writers who explored the feminist perspective and took recourse to magic realism. In *The Infernal Desire Machine of Dr. Hoffman* (1972) Carter revives fairytale machinery and erotic themes, and in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) she becomes utopian in visualising a future America. Fantasy and fairy story creep into her work to give it a postmodernist stance. This may be seen again in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) when she presents a bizarre world of clowns, animals, humans and mythic figures.

Beryl Bainbridge is another important writer in this regard. She dwells upon the elements of surprise and comic fantasy. She possesses the ability of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange, and successfully creates the atmosphere of make-belief. Feminist perspectives emerge in the writings of Penelope Fitzgerald, A.L. Barker, Susan Hill and Rose Tremain among other. Fay Weldon's *Down Among the Women* (1971) and *Female Friends* (1975) are radical representations of the feminist discourse which continues further in *Praxis* (1978), *Puffballs* (1980) and subsequent works.

In the mid-1970s, writers like Martin Amis and Ian McEwan showed their keen interest in the grotesque and the overtly fantastic. Amis in *The Rachel Papers* (1973) and McEwan in his collection of short stories *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) show their talent in handling these themes. Amis shocked further in *Dead Bodies* (1975) and created revealing portraits of those subjected to drugs and sex. Both these writers perceive the grotesque only through the normal pattern of life. Amis, in his novel, *Success* (1978) is engaged with the narcissistic self. In the grotesque and fantastic portrayals of Amis and McEwan, we have strains of satire and morality. McEwan's first novel *The Cement Garden* (1978) uses this technique and carries it to its extreme. In *The Comfort of Strangers* he continues with this mode as he conceives an imaginary city. McEwan and Amis are two important practitioners of postmodernism in British fiction. Their works may be appreciated as grim records of the contemporary crises.

A review of British fiction during the 1970s shows that it has lost its vitality in comparison to other fictions. The two issues of *The New Review* and *Granta* magazines, published in 1978 and 1980 respectively, painted a rather uninteresting literary scenario. The assessment was that British fiction had turned parochial and it lacked readers. While the postmodernist experiment was acquiring newer grounds elsewhere, Britain was lagging behind. In fact, the very face of fiction was changing as such. A new crop of writers, born elsewhere but living in Britain, came to the forefront. With this phenomenon, British fiction acquired variety in viewpoints and styles and became "multicultural".

5.3 THE NOVEL SINCE THE 1980s

The English Novel:
1960s and after

After the "winter of discontent" following the oil crisis, international recession and the coming of Margaret Thatcher to power in the 1980s, Britain felt the need to forge ahead in social, economic, and cultural arenas. The moral, social, and personal codes of the 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s had to be replaced by new myths and money. The free market had come to stay, and literature was a commodity and the writer, a salesman of his/her wares.

The 1980s covers the period between Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979 to her exit from office in 1990. It was a period of consequential happenings everywhere in Europe as the world and worldview were changing very fast. The British novel in the 1980s was largely concerned with the prevailing state of the nation and the world around. Margaret Drabble's novels *The Middle Ground* (1980), *The Radical Way* (1987), *A Natural Curiosity* (1989) and *The Gates of Ivory* (1991) realistically portray this gloom. Similarly, the portrayal of a fragmented British society under "Mrs Torture" attracts the attention of Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* (1988). This continues further in Peter Ackroyd's *Hawkesmoore* (1985), Paul Bailey's *Gabriel's Lament* (1986), Michael Moorcock's *Mother London* (1988). These novels remind one of the gothic spirit and the Dickensian portrayal of society. Other novels that represent this world of moral decay and highly commercialised culture are Geoff Dyer's *The Colour of Memory* (1989), Justin Cartwright's *Look At It This Way* (1990), Ian Sinclair's *Downriver* (1991), Angela Carter's *Wise Children* and Jim Crace's *Arcadia* (1992).

Another fictional perspective may be seen in the novels that represent the end of empires. These include Barry Unsworth's novels like *Pascal's Island* (1980) which deals with the aftermath of the Ottoman empire, *Stone Virgin* (1985) which considers the fate of imperial Venice, *Sugar and Rum* (1988) which deals with the death of Liverpool as a commercial centre. This theme of lost empires also attracted the attention of William Trevor, Molly Keane and Isabel Colgate in their novels *The Silence in the Garden* (1988), *Good Behaviour* (1981) and *The Shooting Party* (1980) respectively.

Some extremely complex experiments were undertaken at this point of time. We have a pictographic novel, *A Humument* (1980), by painter Tom Philips. This is based on W.H. Mallock's novel *A Human Document* published in the Victorian age. In *Nice Look* (1988) David Lodge went to Victorian England, as did A.S. Byatt in her novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990). A novel with a similar style was Lawrence Norfolk's *Lempriere's Dictionary* (1992) in which an eighteenth century dictionary project is hampered by strange circumstances and stranger characters. The question of fictional archaeology loomed large over the practitioners of fiction during and after the 1980s.

As style underwent drastic shifts, the geography of the new fiction also widened. Africa emerged in the fiction of William Boyd, South Africa in the novels of Christopher Hope, Arabia and Europe in the writings of Anita Brookner and Julian Barnes, and Arabia in the books of Hillary Mantel. Travel writing also came to the forefront with Bruce Chatwin, Paul Theroux, Colin Thubron and Jonathan Raban. Novelists of multicultural origins came to project richer and diverse versions of the complex human predicament. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth from India, Timothy Mo from Hong Kong, Kazuo Ishiguro from Japan, Ben Okri and Buchi Emecheta from Nigeria, and Caryl Phillips from St. Kitts in the Caribbean, composed this scenario of unprecedented variety. With their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, they enriched fiction in English and made it truly international.

5.4 LET US SUM UP

This Unit discusses the changed face of fiction in the last four decades of the twentieth century. It underlined the creative exploration of writers who enriched traditions and broke new ground, placing the novel at the intersection of moral, social and philosophical speculation.

5.5 QUESTIONS

1. How does realism get expression in British fiction of 1960s?

The Prime of Miss Jean
Brodie

2. Attempt a note on the novel in the English language with special reference to the development during the last two decades of our century.

5.6 SUGGESTED READING

1. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, Penguin, 1993.
2. Alan Massie, *The Novel Today: A Critical Guide to the British Novel 1970-1989*, London : Longman, 1990.