

# UNIT 8 NARRATION IN FICTION AND THIRD WORLD PREFERENCES

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## 8.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit carefully, you will be able to further understand the nature of narratorial practice and its role vis-à-vis an audience, particularly an audience like us located in the third world. The discussion in this Unit will help us to rethink our own position as readers in the third world and to relate *Tom Jones*, an eighteenth century British novel, to our own context in the twentieth century.

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## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

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### 8.1.1 Fielding as Narrator

On the surface, the novel has two voices to represent the opinion of Fielding : the narrator's voice and that of Squire Allworthy. The narrator butts in at many a point in the story in the form of 'I', where he talks more or less as the author. We can see this happening where he distinguishes between a dispassionate observer and one whose stance is clearly partisan. "I would not willingly give offence to men who are warm in the cause of virtue or religion"(130). Here, the narrator as author gives the impression that he is on a mission to establish a positive principle in society and stake his all for the furtherance of that principle, in his case "virtue or religion." The point is : what is that virtue or religion? Virtue and religion are projected, invariably satirically, by Square and Thwackum. Square allows his doctrine of the right to be coloured by narrow considerations of "favours" from Bridget. In the process, his pronouncements become shallow and ridiculous. Thwackum interprets religion to put up a defence for young Blifil and attack Tom's interests. Both Square and Thwackum lack what clearly is virtue or religion. In fact, in the phrase "virtue or religion," the two are seen as one principle — two names for the same thing. In such a case, aren't Square and Thwackum intellectual devices to put forth not acceptable or positive ideas but distortions that occur when virtue is sought to be pursued by men and women in given circumstances? When Square and Thwackum have been shown as straying away from the path of the right conduct, they are made targets of harsh criticism as well as ridicule by Fielding. As far as Fielding's own response to the question is concerned, it is that "both religion and virtue have

received more real discredit from hypocrites, than the wittiest profligates or infidels could ever cast upon them ... when poisoned and corrupted with fraud, pretence, and affectation, they have become the worst of civil curses, and have enabled men to perpetrate the most cruel mischiefs to their own species" (130-131). The narrator as author is quite severe as he considers "wittiest profligates or infidels" worse than hypocrites. In the same manner, words such as "perpetrate" or "most cruel mischiefs" suggest that the narrator-author does not much care for "objectivity" or "dispassionateness" as we understand the terms and instead expresses himself through passion and ardour to undermine hypocrisy. Also mark the use of words such as "worst," "most," "curses," "poisoned," "corrupted," etc. in this quotation. Fielding has preferred not to remain soft or elegant here.

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## **8.2 HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND NARRATION?**

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Let's understand the practice of narration in fiction. It has been an important topic of discussion in the criticism of the last two decades – eighties and nineties.

To narrate is to tell. This means that while reading a novel in which there is narration, the reader faces the teller of the tale at the level of imagination. For this act of telling on the part of the author, an audience is assumed, be it a gathering in a village, a cluster of listeners at the market-place in a small town or spectators assembled in a big hall to hear and watch a narrator perform. The events and episodes in the tale reach the reader through this narrator. Contrast this with a novel which doesn't contain a narrator, where in place of narration the reader comes across "description." Going through such a novel, the reader soon would lose himself or herself in the presented account of the main character, he or she would become unconscious about the presence of the author, even about the fact that it is a novel that is being read. In this sense, there is greater concentration on the part of the reader in the act of reading. You must have heard about expressions such as "totally absorbed in the novel," "suspense in the account unbearable," etc. A relatively crude example of "description" in this sense is the writing called "thriller." As would be obvious by now, the novel with a narrator, or the novel as a narrative, in contrast believes in constantly breaking the reader's concentration, telling him or her again and again, at regular intervals, that what is being read is a *novel* in which all happenings are unreal, imaginary, fictional and that they are open to a variety of interpretations even within the novel. The author of such a novel believes that in the presented account, there are truths — no single, over-bearing, all-determining Truth. *Tom Jones* is an example of this kind of a novel.

### **8.2.1 Fielding as Highly Conscious Narrator**

There are two prominent as well as distinct aspects of narration. One is that the audience under the arrangement of a gathering facing a narrator has its own set of preferences, expectations and aspirations. One can clearly see an actual process of the narrator moulding and remoulding the audience's response in the novel. The narrator seems to keep a close watch on the way the audience would react to the different comments in the novel — the way in which the reader would consciously or unconsciously construct the meaning of the narration. In one sense, the audience is involved by the narrator, as if under a plan, to act out an imaginary situation in which the role of the narrator is directional or directorial — to lead the activated minds of the audience towards a general, collectivised experience. It is a difficult thing for an author to do. In Fielding's particular case, the emphasis is on activating the audience's mind, along with offering specific clues to the solution. However, the struggle to make sense of the goings-on in the novel has to be carried on entirely by the reader.

The second aspect of the narrative relates, away from the nature of the audience, to the person the narrator is — his mental make-up, imaginative capability as well as purpose. This is to mean that not everybody, even when she or he has the required mental make-up, sensibility and value-system, can be a narrator, that not everybody can state through the spoken or written word that which would relate to the group of people whom the moral teacher is to guide. Particularly, the imaginative capability of the narrator has to be of the dramatic kind under which the teller of the tale extends the scope of feeling as well as thought to a variety of characters, men and women constituting the tale. A person having the skills of an actor using a monologue would be a competent narrator. This capability would substantially affect the sense of purpose of the narrator since the narrator would invariably alert, even disturb the audience — yes, the narrator is out to effectively communicate an experience and such an experience has to be morally acceptable. What I mean is that the moral guide cannot afford to merely critique an existing system of beliefs and that there is to be a valid point of view from which to critique. The situation is so tight that even 'pure entertainment,' if there can be one, would have to follow the rule of propriety — that it may not be correct to laugh at anything and everything. In this context, the author's 'genius' and 'judgement' are key-concepts. In Fielding's own words: By genius I would understand that power, or rather those powers of the mind, which are capable of penetrating into all things within our reach and knowledge, and of distinguishing their essential differences. These are no other than invention and judgment; and they are both called by the collective name of genius, as they are of those gifts of nature which we bring with us into the world. Concerning each of which many seem to have fallen into very great errors: for invention, I believe, is generally understood a creative faculty; which would indeed prove most romance-writers to have the highest pretensions to it; whereas by invention is really meant no more, (and so the word signifies) than discovery, or finding out; or to explain it at large, a quick and sagacious penetration into the true essence of all the objects of our contemplation. This, I think, can rarely exist without the concomitancy of judgment: for how we can be said to have discovered the true essence of two things, without discerning their difference, seems to me hard to conceive (437).

From here, we move on to the actual practice of the narrator in the novel. The narrator as a person and a conscious member of society fulfils the specific purpose of enlightening and educating his audience which is his community. He may directly talk to the assembled people to share his personal views with them or indirectly through characters in the tale who present their point of view in their dialogue. For instance, we can straightaway identify the view of the author from that of the character in a given situation. If the situation gives an ironical colouring to an opinion, what in effect happens is that a kind of doubt has been sown in the mind of the reader. Irony, then, is a mode through which an author 'disorients' the reader, to shake up the complacency of the audience about an established notion. All this is deeply narratorial which means that the author introduces the element of dialogue into the mind of the reader. In the process, the narrator enjoys immense freedom, he is not bound to the logic of happenings and can break the tempo of the account abruptly. As already suggested, the novel is popularly seen as casting a spell on the reader, putting him or her to sleep. However, what we do not realise is that that is only one kind of the novel. Another kind of novel believes in waking up the reader, breaking the spell over him or her and freeing them from the effect of the tale. This breaking of the spell is deemed necessary since the reader can grasp the content of the work only when he or she is wakeful, whenever he or she is 'distanced,' alienated from the presented account. In such a case, the story in the novel is pushed behind and the narrator stands face to face with the audience using all his tricks as a stage-performer to communicate with them. In the bargain, he may also take liberties with the story — the chain of events — and give unnatural-looking, 'unrealistic' twists to it. As we have seen, this suits his purpose. Thus, the audience can be truly taken for a ride in the course of events which cease to be important in themselves, which are there in the

tale because the narrator has chosen to include them. Why does the narrator choose so many times to violate the norms of direct, all-consistent and harmonious account? The answer is that the tale is of secondary importance, the primary issue being the establishment of a perfect rapport with an audience that is highly curious, involved and active at the imaginative level.

### **8.2.2 Fielding's Partisanship**

Once these two aspects of the narrative act have been grasped in their correlation, we can assess the full range of Fielding as a narrator, an intelligent communicator as well as a teacher in the true sense of the word. We should not forget that the eighteenth century reader of literature looked up to the author as a guide and philosopher. That is why Fielding can straight away address his reader in the following manner: "I am in reality the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein. And these laws, my readers, whom I consider as my subjects, are bound to believe in and obey, with which they may readily and cheerfully comply. I do hereby assure them, that I shall principally regard their ease and advantage in all such institutions" (88).

Further, Fielding seems to idealise his role as a friend and teacher on the strength of what he calls the governing "principle" of not merely the writer-reader relationship but of the very act of perceiving and living, in honest as well as courageous terms, in a given society. According to Fielding, this principle "presides, governs, directs, judges, acquits, and condemns according to merit and justice; with a knowledge which nothing escapes, a penetration which nothing can deceive, and an integrity which nothing can corrupt."

A significant aspect of Fielding as a narrator is that he is far from "objective, as we understand the term. Instead, Fielding is unashamedly partisan. Not only that Fielding distinguishes quite clearly between good and evil but he also knows the dangers of keeping his views to himself. How does the author communicate to the reader that there can be two or more kinds of 'objectivity' and that the same set of 'facts' can be made to appear different by two narrators or presenters? Fielding responds to this question with a rare sense of clarity. He says:

For let a man be never so honest, the account of his own conduct will, in spite of himself, be so very favourable, that his vices will come purified through his lips, and, like foul liquors well strained, will leave all their foulness behind. For tho' the facts themselves may appear, yet so different will be the motives, circumstances, and consequences, when a man tell his own story, and when his enemy tells it, that we scarce can recognise the facts to be one and the same (379).

To narrate, then, is to widen the range of interpretations and to make the reader feel that the world in which he or she lives is not rigid as destiny or fate but is amenable to change – that a number of differing views are possible about a situation or an issue with the narrator taking a position other than that of most characters in the text and also occasionally the author. What I imply is that the presence of multiple voices introduces a sense of clash among different social attitudes which (the clash) has a definite bearing on the world itself – the arena of such clashes.

## 8.3 RELEVANCE OF TOM JONES TO US

We look at the western texts from the reigning viewpoints in the English-speaking western societies. However, we have become aware of this fact only in the last couple of decades. The question is : How much aware are we of this and what exactly is the nature of our awareness. Earlier till the nineteen seventies, we in the English Departments in India had not realised that concepts such as 'human predicament,' 'the suffering anguished individuals,' etc. were closely related to the specific social conditions and the broad politics of the upper stratum of those societies.

Let me say a few things about the country we belong to, a democratic society and polity that has emerged out of the imperialistic stranglehold through struggle. That can hopefully define for us the nature of our socio-cultural life and the viewpoint that we could adopt in reading literature. All of us know that India was a colony of England till 1947. The British exploited us and managed our affairs in their interest. "Affairs" is a vague term; it would perhaps be better to say that apart from subjugating us socially, they also ruled us ideologically and culturally for almost two hundred years. This is what I mean by India having been a colony.

This colonial past still hangs heavy on us. The question is, in what form?

It is no doubted accepted today that our perspective of literature has to be our own, of the society and country to which we belong. We are an underdeveloped economy and society and live in our day from one crisis to another. We cannot consider ourselves equivalent to western capitalist societies in resources and facilities. Nor can we say that we are free from our orthodox and rigid notions of caste, creed and tradition. But more negative than these in our behaviour are the preferences we cherish for things western — languages, literatures, philosophical-ideological viewpoints, political prejudices. It can well be said that the powerful decision-making section of our society mentally belongs not here but to the west and it is this section which is a role-model for the rest of our society.

This phenomenon of crises and distorted preferences is not peculiar to our country and can in fact be noticed in a more or less pronounced form in all those societies which have suffered exploitation and subjugation at the hands of an imperialist power. It is these countries, ex-colonies all, of which India is one, which constitute the third world, as against the first world (the developed western societies put together) which historically played the role of oppressor and victimiser.

### 8.3.1 Concept of 'The Third World' and its Usefulness

What does the third world signify as a concept and to what extent can we use it to understand the worth and relevance of the English novel? The question is connected with history in the sense that over a period of time, particularly between the eighteenth century and the twentieth, the world has moved towards a division between the economically dominant countries and those whose strength in economy has gradually declined. In fact, economy does not work independent of social and ideological spheres which means that the economic progress of a country or a group of countries owes a great deal to the broader social development that took place there. We all know that the process of colonisation in the western world set in a few centuries ago and resulted in the emergence of a peculiar pattern of happenings. We do not have the space here to explain the causes of these developments but one thing can be certainly identified as an important feature of the modern world — the existence of a large number of ever-weakening societies as a direct consequence of the exploitation by the developed nations of the west. These weak and economically-dependent societies constitute the third world today, most of whom

suffered as colonies of one or other country of the west till the recent past. Needless to say that subservience to the mighty first world is the single most determining feature of this third world which is at the receiving end not merely economically but also politically, ideologically and culturally.

But are these weak nations aware of their dependent position today? My answer is that many of them having gone through nationalist struggles against imperialist powers and tasted more or less partial successes in their respective confrontations have such an awareness and, therefore, do feel hamstrung by a number of constraints.

### 8.3.2 Inter-relatedness between societies

Literature is an important human product and is greatly influenced by its time and place. What I mean is that literature is produced by men and women who live in a specific social set-up whose pressures and compulsions they constantly bear and to which they always react and respond as the situation allows. In other words, literature is a manifestation of such a reaction and response. Assuming that this general principle applies to all societies, I would say that the literature of our society and time is a form of our responses expressed in language. The question is : Can the responses of another country and society be related to us in our time?

The obvious answer to this would be in the affirmative but there arise a host of problems the moment we consider the kind of relationship that gets established between one society and another at the cultural-literary level. But I wish to face this question squarely and understand the nature of links we may establish between Fielding's *Tom Jones* and us.

To understand for us in India the significance of *Tom Jones* as a text, we have to consider that the work belongs to England in 1747, the year in which it was published. The implications of the mention of the specific year are that *Tom Jones* should be viewed as a comment on the specific situation prevailing in England in 1747 and that the text is an act of immediate cultural intervention at the hands of its author. Both "comment" and "intervention" are important because the purpose of the text was to share a point-of-view and an understanding with its reader and to make her or him aware of the topsy-turvy state in which the society found itself at the time. Fielding does not seem to be comfortable or happy with his social environment and is faced with a host of nagging questions such as morality, honour, true religion, fulfilment, and so forth, and whether it is possible to realise all or any of them in the given situation. For instance, what is the fault of Tom that right from the beginning, he has to be at the mercy of somebody? Insofar as inner qualities and attributes are concerned, Tom has them in ample measure — in fact, he is better endowed in this respect than anyone else in the novel.

For us today, Tom would appear to be a literary device through which the writer confronts us with certain features of the English society of the time when the novel was written — bad roads, bad law-and-order situation, callous upper classes, dishonest teachers, immoral clergymen, self-seeking and insensitive city-dwellers, and so on.

In another sense, *Tom Jones* captures the unfolding historical contradiction of England in the eighteenth century. This means that it is not a text *per se*, but a literary happening that takes us closer to the reality of England at the time. This is how Raymond Williams would look at *Tom Jones*, a text that should be placed in society and history and through which we should see the broader reality of England. For instance, don't we see here a new kind of relationship between what Williams calls the country and the city?

### 8.3.3 Tom Jones and its social backdrop

What picture of the social contradiction — the antagonism between the merchant capital and landed gentry — does Fielding's *Tom Jones* represent? And does this contradiction affect the way Fielding captures the basic traits of his characters? My answer is that Fielding, concerned as he is with the fate of traditional norms, finds the staying power of the landed gentry greatly weakened. He has realised as an author and a responsible citizen of his country that odds are almost totally against Squire Western, otherwise a powerful social figure. Western's moral position has been eroded to the extent that he cannot but appear a ridiculous figure — a bumbling idiot — in the novel. But he is rather a poor example of a whole class losing its hold on the society. The better example is Squire Allworthy. Though right unto himself, Allworthy doesn't effectively control his own immediate environment. Mark the way his servants and ordinary neighbours treat him. Fielding combines in Allworthy's presentation the traditionalism of a squire and the rational, open-minded, exploratory view of a progressive bourgeois. But we have to go by the use his rationalism is put to, which is to uphold the value of tradition in a new context, something changed and modified to suit the present. It appears that Fielding is to a great extent sympathetic towards Allworthy — whenever Allworthy faces discomfiture, Fielding's tone changes to that of friendly concern.

On the other hand, the rising middle class asserts itself quite vigorously. This powerful social section intervenes in its society with an unprecedented gusto which has behind it the serious involvement, ruthlessness as well as the amorality of a merchant-capitalist.

In still another way, *Tom Jones* tells us in our context that tradition and orthodoxy should be subjected to critical examination and seen for what they are in reality. Jones stands in our context to all the entrenched social interests and exposes their stagnation, hypocrisy and irrelevance. Even as a foundling, Jones gains close intimacy with Sophia Western, a true lady in the making who in the conventional sense is supposed to marry the best person in the neighbourhood. This would suggest that a marriage between a bastard and a young beautiful woman from the upper social stratum is unthinkable. But such a marriage has been placed at the centre of the novel. The argument put forward by the author in favour of such a marriage is that if it satisfied the requirements of love, honour, mutuality and spontaneity, it should be regarded acceptable. That is how Sophia understands the question. Fielding seems to be saying that the most important person to take a stand on this issue is Sophia the individual and none else. It is quite clearly stated that Sophia would not have anyone — her father, aunt or the impressive-sounding neighbour — impose upon her a husband. On Jones's side, the consideration once again is individual choice. Marriage based on deep emotionality between a man and a woman and their serious commitment to each other is the only precondition of an acceptable partnership in matrimony.

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## 8.4 LET US SUM UP

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Fielding is an enemy of sanctimoniousness. You would have noted that *Tom Jones* as a text goes entirely against myth and myth-making, that the author, in fact, takes pleasure in exploding myths. Consider the myth of mother, daughter, son or father that existed in the English psyche in the eighteenth century. In the context of *Tom Jones*, Sophia and Tom are going to work under the pattern of none of them. There is so much of healthy individuality in them (on the plane of an idea) that they are simply Sophia and Tom. The notion of relationship as understood in their environment is not to affect them one bit. Another question that the novel deals with is that of morality. There may be difference of opinion among critics regarding Fielding's stand on morality — some have felt that he propagated immorality and licentiousness while others thought that he moralised. It is

indeed difficult to explain Fielding's view of good behaviour, gentlemanliness, honour or love. While all such issues are at the centre of *Tom Jones*, Fielding takes great care to avoid a generalised answer. Why? Perhaps because in Fielding's opinion, there can be no generalised answers on significant issues. According to popular notion, the bastard in history represented inhibited social behaviour, revengefulness and sense of insecurity. The bastard also stood for raw sensuality since he had his origin in 'nature' which was free from society-based notion of legitimacy. Thus, the bastard in popular perception was authentic material for villainy. On the other side, the legitimate child, the one born in wedlock, was considered normal, dutiful and socially responsible, someone who carried the burden of social virtues. It was accepted that the legitimate child would grow to play the role of a hero in a given social set-up. Fielding deliberately reverses this thought-pattern and makes it the subject of his comic representation. We in the third world could learn to critique such thought-patterns as racist, casteist or retrogressive, traditional and orthodox.

Although most Fielding criticism has dwelt upon Fielding's "Christian" virtues of love, fellow-feeling, kindness, honesty and moral courage as seen at work in the behaviour of Mr. Allworthy and to a lesser extent in that of Tom, what has been largely overlooked is that Fielding doesn't let go of any opportunity to poke fun at Christianity as believed and practised in England. Or else, how do we reconcile Fielding's representation of the gypsies with the rest of the novel? There is also a minor remark on an Indian practice and we hardly notice in Fielding's tone any prejudice, condescension or ill-will against an 'oriental' society thousands of miles away from England. Also, the episodes relating to the Irish people are as comic, fast-paced and raucous as the ones where distortions of behaviour among the English have been shown. This sense of unsparing critique of a system and structure with an intellectual gusto, rarely witnessed elsewhere in English fiction, is something that we could make a part of our mental make-up.

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## 8.5 GLOSSARY

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- Voices :** Opinions that emerge in the course of a novel in the form of responses. The conflict between voices in an important part of a work.
- Third world :** Those countries which constitute neither the developed capitalist world nor the socialist world. The third world countries are ex-colonies and have remained under-developed. They have a number of common features.
- Intervention :** This refers to the attitude of the author. Under the interventionist frame-work, the author boldly critiques his society with a view to changing it. Intervention stands opposed to reflection or depiction in a work.
- System and structure :** Human beings live and operate within them. Broadly, they denote society. However, system and structure tell us of an established set of rules and codes which are open to examination and analysis. Some authors understand them as Fate.

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## 8.6 QUESTIONS

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1. How far can a reader from a third world country relate to the events and happening in Fielding's *Tom Jones*? Give a reasoned answer.



2. A reading of Fielding's *Tom Jones* can help us understand the problematic nature of our own society and ethos. Do you agree? Give reasons in support of your answer.

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## 8.7 SUGGESTED READING

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All page numbers with respect to quotes from *Tom Jones* refer to the Penguin Classics edition, Henry Fielding: *Tom Jones* edited by R.P.C. Mutter, 1985.

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