

Narrative Mode and Fiction
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Lecture - 57
Future of Fictional Writing - I

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on narrative mode and fiction. We are discussing a new module today entitled "Future of fictional writing." So when we talk of future of fictional writing, we have to look at the experimentations and the new hybrid genres that have come up, that have appeared in recent times. As V. S. Naipaul says.. we all know that V. S. Naipaul is a famous post-colonial novelist. (refer time: 00:58)

He says that the new millennium calls for a kind of writing which deals with a new form of narrative characterized by experiments and innovations in fiction. So we also need to understand right, we are right at the end of this course, we need to understand that genre evolves through the needs, the requirements of the contemporary time.

What the reader wants, what the reader expects, so the question of horizon of expectations comes, the structure of feeling becomes very important. And so sometimes, like we have seen in our earlier lecture, it is very difficult to contain the human, you know, ethos or the human emotions, feelings, in a particular form or structure that becomes archaic, just like epic, or medieval romance became archaic after a point.

So we needed the aid of a new genre, the novel, to tell the story of the contemporary man, the dilemma of the contemporary human existence. So we see that experimentation has always been there, hybridity has always been there, the treatment of time, how my story travels in time changes from generation to generation, from, you know, across decades, across you know, across space.

So in history, and in different histories and in different geographies new genres evolve, new genres emerge. What Virginia Woolf calls as the common reader is more interested today in pop fiction, what they call as the pop fiction. What is a pop fiction? something that helps us to kill time and take care of boredom.

If we look at the larger scenario, what happens with scientific and technological innovation or revolution is that we have everything at one click, the world becomes smaller. We are living in a global village. We are, you know, technologically savvy.

We have you know, access to all kinds of gadgets. So basically, it is a situation of being spoiled with choices, it is the problem of plenty.

And and life is very much outwardly driven. We do not have time for anything. Life is very easy and yet, life is also very hectic. So I mean, killing time becomes important. And you know, doing something to pass away the boredom also becomes a necessity for the modern and postmodern generations of people. So pop fiction leaves no trace of the effect of the work after, you know, another novel has been read.

So it is kind of, it has a very fleeting, an evanescent impact on the reader. It stays with us only for as long as we are reading it after that. The impact is not much. This also could be connected with the largest scientific or technological scenario, where so many inventions happen in a row at such high frequency that the earlier invention is made redundant thereby. So once we have something called YouTube, I mean it makes kind of the radio redundant, right?

Similarly, once we have our own computers turned into laptops, mini versions, we have the smartphones that serve as the watch, the video player, so we have access to YouTube, [and] we can [also] call people. So each gadget has multiple functions, which thereby renders a status of redundancy to the earlier, more cumbersome avatars. So the radio is something that is almost a bygone.

And then television is also being replaced largely by computer and laptop. So it is a generation I mean, or several generations it has been now that are already sitting in the time machine, right? So the genre also changes. Literature, art, artwork is a reflection of society in many ways. So that also has to adapt to the situation of this fast life where, like I was saying, pop fiction does not leave much trace in our minds.

It does not make us think, because in life also too many things are happening very fast at great frequency, leaving us no time to ponder, to deliberate or further cogitate on what is happening. This can be contrasted very well, the phenomenon called pop fiction could be contrasted with serious novels, where the subject is usually serious you know, the subject is of serious consideration, which is made by a serious reader and interpreter. The reader and interpreter taking the work all too seriously and the reader engaging with the task of decoding the hidden meaning, the purported hidden meaning or message, if any, in the work of fiction. So there is a pursuit on the part of the reader too. There is the reader's journey involved in reading the novel. That is how it has been in the traditional sense of novel writing or novel reading. (refer time: 07:45)

Now deconstruction theory, that was first proposed or theorized by Jacques Derrida has blurred the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction as well as between the said and the non-said. Now deconstruction, postmodern phenomena -- all these are very overlapping too.

We have to understand postmodern phenomena tells us that the difference between the real and the simulacrum is dissolving to the point that, you know, it is very difficult to trace back the original referent. The simulacrum does not hide the real. It hides the fact that there is no real. The simulacrum itself is real. So fiction flows into nonfiction. Fiction flows into life. Life flows back into fiction.

The gap, you know, with metafictional device, this gap, or this, you know, let us say the seams, the boundaries are fast dissolving, if not already dissolved.

So when these experiments are compared with, let us say, the classic novel emerging from the realist nationalist traditions in the 18th and 19th century, there seems to be no scope today for you know, another let us say, Tom Jones by Henry Fielding, or another work with Balzac, another let us say, War and Peace by Tolstoy or Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels, because all these works, we know are fraught with realism.

That scope is not provided by the current society. No one has the time or even the expectations from a fictional work have drastically changed. So another author, another realist author is not likely to be born in a society such as the one we are currently experiencing. It is believed that the novel as a form has become seriously deficient in the 21st century.

We were talking about I mean, we could look at this question of deficiency in different ways. We could call it deficient, but we could also call it as brevity, brevity being a very powerful device, the apodictic message, something that Milan Kundera also mentions. Under such you know, general apprehensions the fact that a novel has become very inadequate, it has become seriously deficient, under such misgivings and apprehensions V. S. Naipaul has recently announced the death of fiction. He calls it as the death of fiction.

(refer time: 10:51)

The argument about novel writing has now shifted from offering a narrative to the reader conveying directly what the author wishes to convey about one's own world. So in this, there seems to be a prominent over-emphasis on the individual author's subjectivity, and also in a way, an overlap with the essayistic writings. We see that the

same emphasis on author's subjectivity, talking about one's own world is an approach that is true of essayistic writings. (refer time: 11:33)

In fact, essays as a form and the novel as a form - both of them emerged almost simultaneously in the 19th century Europe, particularly in England. The novel initially combined the essay and the narrative in such a manner that it became a medium of expression of the author's thoughts and emotions. It is only later that novels were seen as drifting away from views, pronouncements and analysis towards focusing exclusively on the experiential aspects of life.

In fact, the novel as a form has undergone a host of phases and stages, in order to finally reach the stage that we see it in today. So novel, as we all know, is always novel, it is not quite old, it is experimenting, it is renovating, and it is always left incomplete without a necessary you know, well-determined closure. And it still remains open and rich ground of experimentation, right? (refer time: 12:44)

So previously, fiction performed the role of taking into account not merely incidents and events, but also situations which project life in its complexity. And this is precisely the tendency of realism and naturalism in fiction. The traditional novel form may take us so close to the happenings of life- and this is something that is observable in the naturalist novel of the 19th century- such that we are unable to grasp the forces that have been at work beneath the surface.

It almost looks like life and metafiction is basically a getaway from this impression that literature is or art is natural. (refer time: 13:41)

This now forces us to examine our approach to the novel, under which we expect it to tell us about ourselves. However, there is a shift like I was saying in the modern, modernist tradition, fiction in the 20th century has been multicultural as well as multilingual. And this aspect becomes all the more visible in the postcolonial period. And this was a major shift in the paradigm, right? (refer time: 14:14)

So when we have you know, cacophonies, voices coming from different levels, different corners and quarters of the societies, from the the new world, the developing countries, the post-colonial world, which carries, obviously carries its own baggage in terms of experience, subjecthood, you know, narrative style, language, a new... you know so many different versions of English, broken English.

So there is a host of experimentation happening, where fiction writing no longer remains a privilege of the Western world. We have with us a major body of third-world

writing in the second half of the 20th century, right? The presence of the post-colonial subject accentuates the possibility of what Mikhail Bakhtinian said in his essays quite some time back.

Bakhtin describes the notions of polyphony or many voices, heteroglossia, or the coexistence of different varieties within a single language, so commingling of different dialects basically, and then the carnivalesque or celebration of the folk or the localized cultures, which are enthused with humor, with chaos that is necessarily a getaway or a move away from the official and hierarchical structures.

So these are the symptoms of the novel that are further emphasized with the postcolonial experience, the experience of the colonies or the colonized, you know, countries coming into the horizon. So it is important to understand the nature of postcolonial fiction, in order to make an intelligent speculation regarding the future of the novel. (refer time: 16:24)

With the advent of new theories in the last few decades of 20th century, there has been a strong tide of instability in the realm of fiction. So this instability has come mainly with theories of post-structuralism and deconstruction and, and of course, also postmodernism; they all go parallel, they almost are coeval, they are happening almost at the same time.

Many of our theorists are simultaneously deconstructionist, post-structuralist and post-modernist, right? This is accompanied by the newly emerging view, something that Roland Barthes proposed for the first time, the fact that the author is dead, and the text performs for itself. (refer time: 17:17)

So in other words, when we say the author is dead, the meaning of the text is determined by the reader's interpretation of the meaning, such that the signification, the meaning is not pointed and unilinear, and kind of deterministic in any sense or total in any sense. It is not dependent on the sole intention that the author had when he or she wrote the artwork, created the artwork, produced the artwork.

Rather, according to a poststructuralist such as Roland Barthes, meaning emerges through the reader's subjective interpretation or intervention to the artwork, so that a text can live its own life, carrying multiple, endless meanings, accommodating all of them as correct interpretations. And then a text is able to interact with other texts, regardless of the authors, as something that you know, T.S. Eliot very famously proposes in his essay, Tradition and Individual Talent.

So every reader constructs the meaning based on their own subjective sociocultural experiences, thereby implying that meaning is not absolute, and that the text remains open for the subsequent generations of readers to read and decode. (refer time: 18:47)

Now Christopher Evans argues in his book, *The Micro Millennium* that the electronic age would make books, (to quote him), "begin a steady slide into oblivion" (unquote). More than ten years before Christopher Evans' book, Roland Barthes, who is a literary critic and theorist, had published his essay that I was talking about, *The Death of The Author*, and Barthes critically elucidated, explained how the author who is shaped by history and society does not or cannot exist, regardless of independence of textual constructions.

And to quote Barthes, "it is language which speaks and not the author" (unquote). These two concepts have impacted writings and writers today. (refer time: 19:46)

So we see that the internet and electronic media have indeed cast a dark question mark over the publication of books. Connection to the web, access to blogs and social networking websites such as Facebook makes it easy for everyone to write and be published with a click of a computer mouse. E-books make it possible to download a library of books for personal reading. (refer time: 20:13)

In this context, Michel Foucault would remark, (I quote him), "The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full-stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network." So here we are talking necessarily about intertextuality, right?

Here we are talking about the literary history, right? The history of literary traditions, which enable, once again, new.. formation of new genres, formation of new styles, which entails you know, revisiting something that has become archaic, according to the expectations of the current reader and current social values. (refer time: 21:13)

Barthes' essay *Death of The Author* could also be said to construct the reality of the modern day author, who is constantly struggling for relevance and respect in a world that is glutted with, that is super-saturated with published text. So a reader that is spoiled with choice, as I was saying, is powerful enough. And yet, there is a paradox where the reader we see is not a consumer with too many real choices or meaningful choices.

The reader has to decide under or within constrained factors. So while authors are rightly no longer constructed as textual gods, one needs to ask this question, has Barthes contributed to the denial and devaluing of the author in the first place? The picture or

the image of the struggling author becomes very prominent here, right, especially in today's context. (refer time: 22:24)

While print technology has made publishing possible in the first place, the 21st century has brought writers to an important and often difficult intersection, where the value of writing is progressively decreasing in a society that is already text-saturated. It is becoming more and more difficult for writers to find traditional publishers for their work. Writers first need to persuade the gatekeepers.

Gatekeepers here in the sense of the editors; and need to persuade that their work is publishable, worth publishing. And this decision of which book gets turned down, which will get turned down, what is you know, good, good writing and should be published is generally filtered through the prism of marketability. Good writing that is not essentially marketable, is liable to get rejected.

So this also takes us back to the general postmodern conditions that we are in.. where no work is appreciated or noted for its use value. We want to own knowledge for power, and we want to exchange knowledge for something. So only when knowledge or new work, a new you know, work of art has a market value is it noticed, is it appreciated for its exchange value precisely. (refer time: 24:01)

So the internet provides writers with another place for their writing. Internet has become the alternative platform for writing, giving a voice, giving a vent to one's imagination, creativity, and you know, opinions and so forth. Many see the internet as part of their writing apprenticeship, somewhere that people could scribble without having to go through the process of gatekeeping.

And they hope that the internet will lead to, lead them to the process of you know, traditionally being recognized as an author someday through the process, through getting their books published. So while writers have proven themselves this way, and earn a living through writing, more often it has led to writers giving their writing away as free content for internet sites, in order to make it available to the larger audience just to become a little known, or more familiar name.

Despite Evans' prediction that the Internet would cause books to slide into oblivion, books are still going strong, one has to own that. So while the internet and Kindle versions have changed the face of publishing today, they have not altogether changed the importance of books to the publishing world. (refer time: 25:35)

So Professor Josie Arnold writes, (I quote Arnold), "The greatest difference between print and electronic discourse is the empowerment of the reader through interactivity"

(unquote). The internet and its forms of social networking is a way of building greater understanding of writing, not only as a vehicle of expression, but also as an important life tool. (refer time: 26:02)

Here we could quote Le Guin, who rightly says, (I quote), “The technology is not what matters. Words are what matter. The sharing of words. The activation of imagination through the reading of words” (unquote). So technologies like the Kindle, cell phones, brain-computer interface or BCI, and virtual worlds, such as Second Life, have altogether change the possibilities within fiction and how they might continue to evolve the future of fiction writing. I would like to stop our lecture here today and let us meet with another lecture and another round of discussions. Thank you.