

# NOVELS, SOCIETY AND HISTORY

## CHAPTER COVERAGE

- The Rise of the Novel
- The Novel comes to India
- Novels in the Colonial World
- Women and the Novel
- The Nation and its History
- Important Terms



### The Rise of the Novel

- (i) The novel is a modern form of literature. It is born from print, a mechanical invention.
- (ii) Novels produced a number of common interests among the scattered and varied readers. As readers were drawn into the story and identified with the lives of fictitious characters, they could think about issues such as the relationship between love and marriage, the proper conduct for men and women, and so on.
- (iii) The novel first took firm root in England and France. Novels began to be written from the seventeenth century, but they really followed from the eighteenth century. New groups of lower-middle-class people such as shopkeepers and clerks, along with the traditional aristocratic and gentlemanly classes in England and France now formed the new readership for novels.
- (iv) As readership grew the increased earnings gave the authors independence to experiment with different literary styles.
  - (A) Henry Fielding, a novelist of the early eighteenth century, claimed that he was 'the founder of a new province of writing' where he could make his own laws.
  - (B) Walter Scott remembered and collected popular Scottish ballads which he used in his historical novels about the wars between Scottish clans.
  - (C) The epistolary novel used the private and personal form of letters to tell its story.
  - (D) Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, written in the eighteenth century, told much of its story through an exchange of letters between two lovers.

#### (a) The publishing market :

- (i) For a long time the publishing market excluded the poor. Initially, novels did not come cheap. But soon, people had easier access to books with the introduction of circulating libraries in 1740. Technological improvements in printing brought down the prices of books and innovations in marketing led to expanded sales. In France, publishers found that they could make super profits by hiring out novels by the hour.

- (ii) There were several reasons for novel's popularity. The worlds created by novels were absorbing and believable, and seemingly real. While reading novels, the reader was transported to another person's world and began looking at life as it was experienced by the characters of the novel. Besides, novel allowed individuals the pleasure of reading in private, as well as the joy of publicly reading or discussing stories with friends or relatives.
- (iii) In 1836 a notable event took place when Charles Dicken's "*Pickwick Papers*" was serialized in a magazine. Magazines were attractive since they were illustrated and cheap. Serialization allowed readers to relish the suspense, discuss the characters of a novel and live for weeks with their stories – like viewers of television soaps today.

**(b) The World of the Novel :**

More than other forms of writing which came before, novels are about ordinary people, they are about the everyday life of common people.

- (i) Charles Dickens wrote about the terrible effects of industrialization on people's lives and characters. His novel "*Hard Times*" (1854) describes Coketown, a fictitious industrial town, as a grim place full of machinery, smoking chimneys, rivers polluted purple and buildings that all looked the same. Here workers are known as 'hands', as if they had no identity other than as operators of machines. Dickens criticised not just the greed for profits, but also the ideas that reduced human beings into simple instruments of production. Dickens focused on the terrible conditions of urban life under industrial capitalism. His "*Oliver Twist*" (1838) is the tale of a poor orphan who lived in a world of petty criminals and beggars. Brought up in a cruel workhouse, Oliver was finally adopted by a wealthy man and lived happily ever after.
- (ii) Emile Zola's "*Germinal*" (1885) on the life of a young miner in France explores in harsh detail the grim conditions of miners lives. It ends on a note of despair, the strike the hero leads fails, his co-workers turn against him, and hopes are shattered.

**(c) Community and Society :**

The vast majority of readers of the novel lived in the city. The novel created in them a feeling of connection with the fate of rural communities.

- (i) British Novelist Thomas Hardy, wrote about traditional rural communities of England that were fast vanishing. Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) is about a successful grain merchant Michael Henchard who becomes the *Mayor of Casterbridge*. Though successful but he is no match for his manager and rival Donal Farfrae. Where Michael is both unpredictably generous and cruel with his employees. Farfrae is regarded for his smooth and even tempered with everyone. Hardy mourns the loss of the more personalized world that is disappearing, even as he is aware of its problems and the advantages of the new order.
- (ii) The novel uses the vernacular, the language that is spoken by common people. By coming closer to the different spoken languages of the people, the novel produces the sense of a shared world between diverse people in a nation. Novels also draw from different styles of languages. Like the nation, the novel brings together many cultures.

**(d) The New Women :**

The most exciting element of the novel was the involvement of women. the eighteenth century saw the middle classes become more prosperous. Women got more leisure to read as well as write novels. And novels began exploring the world of women – their emotions and identities, their experiences and problems.

- (i) The novels of Jane Austen for e.g. *Pride and Prejudice* gives us a glimpse of the world of women in general rural society in early-nineteenth-century Britain. They make us think about a society which encouraged women to look for 'good' marriages and fine wealthy or propertied husbands.
- (ii) Women novelists did not simply popularise the domestic role of women. Often their novels dealt with women who broke established norms of society before adjusting to them. In Charlotte Bronte's "*Jane Eyre*", published in 1874, young Jane is shown as independent and assertive. While girls of her age were expected to be quiet and well behaved, Jane at the age often protests against the hypocrisy of her elders with starting bluntness.

**(e) Novels for the Young :**

- (i) Novels for young boys idealised a new type of man : someone who was powerful, assertive, independent and daring. Most of these novels were full of adventure set in places remote from Europe. Books like R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) or Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894) became great hits.
- (ii) G.A. Henty's historical adventure novels for boys were also widely popular during the height of the British empire. They aroused the excitement and adventure of conquering strange lands. They were always about young boys who witness grand historical events, get involved in some military action and show what they called 'English' courage.
- (iii) Love stories written for adolescent girls also became popular in this period, especially in US, notably *Ramona* (1884) by Helen Hunt Jackson and a series entitled "*What Katy Did*" (1872) by Sarah Chauncey Woolsey, who wrote under the pen-name Susan Coolidge.

**(f) Colonialism and After :**

The novel originated in Europe at a time when it was colonising the rest of the world. The early novel contributed to colonialism by making the readers feel they were part of a superior community as compared to fellow colonialists.

- (i) The hero of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is an adventurer and slave trader shipwrecked on an island. Crusoe treats coloured people not as human beings equal to him, but as inferior creatures. He rescues a 'native' and makes him his slave. He does not ask for his name but arrogantly gives him the name Friday.
- (ii) In the twentieth century, writers like Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) wrote novels that showed the darker side of colonial occupation.

The colonised, however, believed that the novel allowed them to explore their own identities and problem, their own national concerns.

**➤ The Novel Comes to India**

- (i) Stories in prose were not new to India. Banabhatta's "*Kadambari*" and Vishnudatta's "*Panchatantra*" are good examples. There was also a long tradition of prose tales of adventure and heroism in Persian and Urdu, known as Dastan.
- (ii) The modern novel form developed in India in the nineteenth century. The development of the vernaculars, print and a reading public helped in this process. Some of the earliest Indian novels were written in Bengali

and Marathi. The earliest novel in Marathi was Baba Padmanji's, "*Yamuna Paryatan*" (1857), was followed by Lakshman Moreshwar Halbe's "*Muktamala*" (1861).

- (iii) Leading novelist of the nineteenth century wrote for a cause. Indian novelist wrote to develop a modern literature of the country that could produce a sense of national belonging and cultural equality with their colonial masters.
- (iv) Translations of novels into different regional languages helped to spread the popularity of the novel and stimulated the growth of the novel in new areas.

**(a) The Novel in South India :**

Novels began appearing in south Indian languages during the period of colonial rule. Quite a few early novels came out of attempts to translate English novels into Indian languages.

- (i) O Chandu Menon, a sub judge from Malabar, tried to translate an English novel called *Henrietta Temple* written by Benjamin Disraeli into Malayalam. But he quickly realized that his readers in Kerala were not familiar with the ways in which the characters in English novels lived so, he gave up this idea and wrote instead a story in Malayalam in the 'manner of English novel books'. this delightful novel called *Indulekha*, published in 1889, was the first modern novel in Malayalam.
- (ii) Kadukuri Viresalingam (1848-1919) tried to translate Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* into Telugu. Later he wrote an original Telugu novel called *Rajaskhara Caritamu* in 1878.

**(b) The Novel in Hindi :**

Early Hindi novels were actually translated and adapted from English and Bengali under the influence of Bhartendu Harishchandra, the pioneer of modern Hindi literature.

- (i) The first proper modern novel was written by Srinivas Das of Delhi. Srinivas Das's novel, published in 1882, was titled *Pariksha-Guru*. The characters in the novel are caught in the difficulty of adapting to colonised society and at the same time preserving their own cultural identity. The novel tries to teach the reader to remain rooted in the values of their own tradition and culture, and to live with dignity and honour. In the novel the characters take to new agricultural technology, modernize trading practices, change the use of Indian languages, transmitting both Western sciences and Indian wisdom. The young are urged to cultivate the 'healthy habit' of reading the newspapers. But the novel emphasises that all this must be achieved without sacrificing the traditional values of the middle-class household. with all its good intentions, *Pariksha-Guru* could not win many readers.
- (ii) Devaki Nandan Khatri's *Chandrakanta* is believed to have contributed immensely in popularizing the Hindi language and the Nagri script among the educated classes of those time.
- (iii) It was with the writing of Premchand that the Hindi novel achieved excellence. He drew on the traditional art of Kissa-goi (storytelling). Many critics think that his novel *Sewasadan*, published in 1916 lifted the Hindi novel from the realm of fantasy, moralising and simple entertainment to a serious reflection on the lives of ordinary people and social issues. *Sewasadan* deals mainly with the poor condition of women in society. Issues like child marriage and dowry are woven into the story of the novel.

**(c) Novels in Bengal :**

In the nineteenth century, the early Bengali novels lived in two worlds. Love stories based on historical or past events. Another group depicted domestic life in contemporary settings. The domestic novels portrayed the romantic relations between men and women, and social problems.

Novels changed the old public form of entertainment such as Kabirlarai (poetry contests), musical stories and dance performances to a private world of reading. Novels were read individually, they could also be read in select groups.

- (i) Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's first novel *Durgeshandini* (1865) stunned people to realise that the Bengali novel had achieved excellence so quickly. Besides the ingenious twists and turns of the plot and the suspense, the novel was also relished for its languages. Initially the Bengali novel used a colloquial style associated with urban life. It also used 'Meyeli', the language associated with women's speech. This style was quickly replaced by Bankim's prose which was Sankritised but also contained a more vernacular style.
- (ii) By the twentieth century, the power of telling stories in simple language made Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) the most popular novelist in Bengal and probably in the rest of India.



### **Novels in the Colonial World**

The history of the novel in different parts of India had many regional peculiarities, but there were also recurring patterns and common concerns.

#### **(a) Uses of the Novel :**

- (i) Colonial administrators found 'vernacular' novels a valuable source of information on native life and customs. Such information was useful for them in governing Indian society, with its large variety of communities and castes. The new novels in Indian languages often had descriptions of domestic life. Some of these books were translated into English, often by British administrator or Christian missionaries.
- (ii) Indians for e.g. Viresalingam, used the novel as a powerful medium to criticise what they considered defects in their society and to suggest remedies.
- (iii) Novels also helped in establishing a relationship with the past. Through glorified accounts of the past, these novels helped in creating a sense of national pride among their readers. Novels also helped in creating a sense of collective belonging on the basis of one's languages.
- (iv) With the coming of novels, language variations entered the world of print for the first time. The way characters spoke in a novel began to indicate their region, class or caste. Thus novels made their readers familiar with the ways in which people in other parts of their land spoke their language.

#### **(b) The Problem of Being Modern :**

Novels often spoke to their readers about the real world. Social novelists often created heroes and heroine with ideal qualities, who their readers could admire and imitate. In many novels written during the colonial period, the ideal person successfully deals with one of the central dilemmas faced by colonial subject : how to be modern without rejecting tradition, how to accept ideas coming from the West without losing one's identity.

- (i) Chandu Menon portrayed Indulekha as a woman of breathtaking beauty, high intellectual abilities, artistic talent, and with an education in English and Sanskrit. Madhavan, the hero of the novel was also presented in ideal colours. He dressed in Western clothes. But, at the same time, he kept a long tuft of hair, according to the Nayar custom.
- (ii) The heroes and heroines in most of the novels were people who lived in the modern world. Under colonial rule, many of the English-educated class found new Western ways of living and thinking attractive. But they also feared that wholesale adoption of western values would destroy their traditional ways of living. Characters like Indulekha and Madhavan showed readers how Indian and foreign lifestyles could be brought together in an ideal combination.

**(c) Pleasures of Reading :**

- (i) The novel became a popular medium of entertainment among the middle class. Picture books, translations from other languages, popular songs sometimes composed on contemporary events, stories in newspapers and magazines – all these offered new forms of entertainment.
- (ii) The novel also assisted in the spread of silent reading. Individuals sitting at home or travelling in trains enjoyed them. Even in a crowded room the novel offered a special world of imagination into which the reader could slip, and be all alone. In this, reading a novel was like daydreaming.



**Women and the Novel**

- (i) Many people got worried about the effects of the novel on readers who were taken away from their real surroundings into an imaginary world where anything could happen. They advised people to stay away from the immoral influence of novels. Some parents kept novels in the lofts in their houses, out of their children's reach. Young people often read them in secret.
- (ii) Women did not remain mere readers of stories written by men; soon they also began to write novels. In some languages, the early creation of women were poems, essays or autobiographical pieces. In the early decades of the twentieth century, women in south India also began writing novels and short stories. A reason for the popularity of novels among women was that it allowed for a new conception of womanhood. Stories of love – which was a staple theme of many novels – showed women who could choose or refuse their partners and relationship. Some women authors also wrote about women who changed the world of both men and women.
- (iii) Rokeya Hossein (1880-1932), a reformer wrote a satiric fantasy in English called *Sultana's Dream* (1905) which shows a topsy-turvy world in which women take the place of men. Her novel also showed the need for women to reform their condition by their own actions.
- (iv) It is not surprising that many men were suspicious of women writing novels or reading them. This suspicion cut across communities. Hannah Mullens, a Christian missionary and the author of *Karuna of Phulmonir Bibaran* (1852), reputedly the first novel in Bengali, tells her readers that she wrote in secret. In the twentieth century, Sailabala Ghosh Jaya, a popular novelist, could only write because her husband protected her.

**(a) Caste Practices, 'Lower-Castes' and Minorities :**

- (i) *Indulekha* was a love story. But it was also about an issue that was hotly debated at the time when the novel was written. This concerned the marriage practices of upper-caste Hindus in Kerala. In the story Indulekha

rejects Suri Nambuthiri, the foolish landlord and chooses Madhvan, the educated and handsome Nayar as her husband, and the young couple move to Madras, where Madhavan joins the civil service. On the other hand Suri Nambuthiri finally marries a poorer relation from the same family and goes away pretending that he has married Indulekha Chandu Menon clearly wanted his readers to appreciate the new values of his hero and heroine and criticise the ignorance and immorality of Suri Nambuthiri.

- (ii) Novels like Indirabai and Indulekha were written by members of the upper castes, and were primarily about upper-caste characters. But not all novels were of this kind. Potheri Kunjambu, a 'lower caste' writer from north kerala, wrote a novel called *Saraswativijayam* in 1892. mounting a strong attack on caste oppression and stresses the importance of education for the upliftment of the lower castes.
- (iii) In Bengal too a new kind of novel emerged that depicted the lives of peasants and 'low' castes. Advaita Malla Burman's (1914-51) *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (1956) an epic about the Mallas, a community of fisherfolk who live off fishing in the river Titash. While novelists before Burman had featured 'low' castes as their protagonists. Titash is special because the author is himself from a 'low caste'. fisherfolk community.
- (iv) Over time novel were written by people on the basis of their personal experience. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-96) was one of the early Muslim writers to gain wide renown as a novelist in Malayalam. Basheer had little formal education. Most of his works were based on his own rich personal experience rather than on books from the past. Basheer's short novels and stories were written in the ordinary language of conversation. With wonderful humour, Basheer's novels spoke about details from the everyday life of Muslim households.

## ➤ The Nation and Its History

- (i) The history written by colonial historians tended to depict Indians as weak, divided, and dependent on the British. People educated and working under the English system wanted a new view of the past that would show that Indians could be independent minded and had been so in history. For these people novel provided absolution. It is, the nations could be imagined in a past that also featured historical characters, places, events and dates.
- (ii) In Bengal, many historical novels were about Marathas and Rajputs. These people produced a sense of a pan-Indian belonging. They imagined the nation to be full of adventure, heroism, romance and sacrifice – qualities that could not be found in the offices and streets of the nineteenth-century world. Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's (1827-94) *Anguriya Binimoy* (1857) was the first historical novel written in Bengal. Its hero Shivaji gets the courage and tenacity from his belief that he is a nationalist, fighting for the freedom of Hindus.
- (iii) The imagined nation of the novel was so powerful that it could inspire actual political movements. Bankim's *Anandmath* (1882) was a novel that inspired many kinds of freedom fighters.
- (iv) Many of these novels also reveal the problems of thinking about the nation.

### (a) The Novel and Nation Making :

Imagining a heroic past was one way in which the novel helped in popularizing the sense of belonging to a common nation. Another way was to include various classes in the novel so that they could be seen to belong to a shared world.

Premchand's novels are filled with all kinds of powerful characters drawn from all levels of society. Unlike many of his contemporaries. Premchand rejected the nostalgic obsession with ancient history. Instead, his novels look towards the future without forgetting the importance of the past. Drawn from various strata of

society, Premchand's characters create a community based on democratic values. The central character of his novel *Rangbhoomi* (The Arena), Surdas, is a visually impaired beggar from a so-called 'untouchable' caste. The very act of choosing such a person as the 'hero' of a novel is significant. As we read the story we wonder about industrialization and its impact on society and people. The story of Surdas was inspired by Gandhiji's personality and ideas. *Godan* (The Gift of Cow), published in 1936, remains Premchand's best-known work. It is an epic of the Indian peasantry. The novel tells the moving story of Hori and his wife Dhanai, a peasant couple and the problems faced by them in retaining their dignity.

**(b) Conclusion :**

- (i) Over the course of its history in both the West and in India, the novel became part of the lives of different sections of people. Developments in print technologies allowed the novel to break out of its small circle of readers and introduced fresh ways of reading. But through their stories, novels have also shown a capacity to include and focus on the lives of those who were not often known to literate and middle-class circles.
- (ii) Bringing together people from varied backgrounds produces a sense of shared community by bringing in both the powerful and the marginal peoples and cultures, the novel throws up many questions about the nature of these communities. Novels produce a sense of sharing, and promote an understanding of different values and different communities. At the same time they explore how different groups begin to questions or reflect upon their own identities.

**➤ Important Terms**

1. The great European scholar Goethe died in ..... 1832 A.D.
2. The Communist Manifesto was published in ..... 1848 A.D.
3. Dostoevsky's novel *Brothers Karmazov* published in ..... 1879 A.D.
4. 'Anand Math' by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was published in ..... 1882 A.D.
5. The great Soviet fiction writer and a critic of modern European culture  
Dostoevsky died on ..... 1881 A.D.
6. 'Germinal' the novel of French novelist Zola published in ..... 1885 A.D.
7. British novelist of realism William Morris died in ..... 1896 A.D.
8. French representative poet Arthur Rimband died in ..... 1891 A.D.
9. The prominent French representative poet Stepane Mallarme died in ..... 1898 A.D.
10. Tolstoy's Fiction 'Resurrection' was published in ..... 1899 A.D.
11. John Ruskin, British novelist of realism died in ..... 1900 A.D.
12. French Communist novelist Zola died in ..... 1902 A.D.
13. Maxim Gorki an inspiring Soviet writer published his famous novel 'Mother in ..... 1907 A.D.
14. Italian poet Marinetti published new manifesto of poetry in..... 1909 A.D.



# GLOSSARY

1. **Commonality** : Sharing of an attribute, common features.
2. **Serialised Novel** : A novel whose story is published in instalments in a magazine or journal.
3. **Epic** : A long poem narrating adventures or achievement of heroic figure or a nation.
4. **Nostalgia** : Having a feeling of homesickness - sentimental yearning of the past.
5. **Novel** : Fictitious prose - Story published as a complete book.
6. **Manuscript** : Author's copy; document written by hand.
7. **Gentlemanly Classes** : Class of well-based people. People of good social position and wealth.
8. **Ballads** : A poem or song narrating a story in short stanzas.
9. **Epistolary Novels** : Novels written in the form of series of letters.
10. **Grain Merchant** : A merchant or trader who deals in grain.
11. **Vernacular** : The language spoken by common people.
12. **Hypocrisy** : Insincerity.
13. **Colonialism** : Policy of acquiring or maintaining colonies.
14. **Slave Traders** : A traders who buys and sells slaves.
15. **Native** : Original inhabitant; indigenous.
16. **Primitive** : Ancient; at an early stage of civilisation.
17. **Barbaric** : Primitive; savage.
18. **Domestic Novels** : Novels that depict the inner world of domestic life in contemporary setting, deal with social problem and romantic relationship between men and women.
19. **Historical Novels** : Novels based on historical events.
20. **Kabir-lari** : A Bengali word meaning extempore poetry contests.
21. **Bhadralok** : A Bengali word meaning a gentleman.
22. **Jatra** : Dramatic performance in open theatres very popular in rural society of Bengal.
23. **Colloquial** : Belonging to ordinary or familiar conversation; ordinary spoken language not formal or literary.
24. **Meyeli** : Language associated with women's speech.
25. **Pen-Name** : Fictitious name used by an author only for the purpose of writing without exposing one's identity.
26. **Satire** : A work or composition which ridicules or exposes folly or vices. Ironical writing.
27. **Fantasy** : Fanciful composition or writing involving imaginary characters.
28. **Autobiographical pieces** : Pieces of literature written by an author to narrate the story of his/her own life.
29. **Mallas** : A community of fisher folk who live off fishing.
30. **Protagonist** : Chief person or character in the plot of story. Main character of a novel or book.