CHAPTER 5

WILLIAMS AS A CRITIC OF THE NOVEL AND HIS DEFENCE OF REALISM

Williams’ literary theory is closely linked with his theory of culture involving a dynamic process which can clearly be understood through his concept of ‘structure of feeling’. In his attempt to provide a fully social theory of literature, he examines each element as part of a constantly interacting and interconnecting process. This provides him with the necessary means for examining history not just as a product but as a process. Through an effective use of the concept of ‘structure of feeling’, in particular, Williams attempts to analyse literary development in relation to social change. In this way rigid determinism usually associated with the sociological approaches gets replaced by an awareness of subtleties and complexities of the interrelationship which exists between the two. Williams argues that ‘structure of feeling’ “is a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process.” In fact a literary text can be taken as a concrete instance of the ‘structure of feeling’ of a particular society at a specific historical moment. Although it refers to the pattern of responses of the individual, it corresponds roughly to the culture of the time.
In Marxism and Literature Williams says that even if literary theory and cultural theory look separate and different from each other, they are closely linked with each other at the deeper level. Any development in the literary field will, according to him, have a vital connection with developments in the realm of culture. In order to understand the special emphases in Williams' practice as a literary critic, it is important to understand the key terms used by him frequently in various books devoted to literary criticism. Two important among these are: 'knowable community' and 'realism'.

While analysing modern literature, particularly the novel, Williams takes special notice of dichotomy between the social and the personal and that between form and content. He opposes the modernist trends in literature where this dichotomy is taken as something natural and favours the realistic mode of literature where there is a continual achievement of a dynamic interaction and balance between the 'personal' and the 'social'. In fact, Williams encourages realism 'in the Brechtian sense', an artistic method which seeks to expose apparent reality and thus, ideally suggests the possibility for change. The realistic novel, therefore, emerges as the standard for the most eloquent and powerful kind of literature. In their rejection of history, modernist writers tend to present the social phenomenon as static. Furthermore in literary approaches influenced by the modernist trend, content is subordinated to form and undue emphasis is laid on the formal aspects of literature. Modernist literature, according to Williams, lacks perspective and is also weak in its sense of the community. It
fails to grasp the full complexity and range of the interrelationships which get established and recognitions which emerge among characters. In his essay “Realism and Contemporary Novel” which was later incorporated in *The Long Revolution* Williams observes:

> The realist novel needs obviously, a genuine community; a community of persons linked not merely by one kind of relationship—work or friendship or family—but interlocking kinds. It is obviously difficult in the twentieth century, to find a community of this sort.\(^2\)

In the modernist literature, society is consciously absent and man is shown as a solitary figure, unable to enter into any meaningful and durable relationships with his fellow human beings. Twentieth century literature is full of lonely and solitary characters who have no ‘knowable community’ to speak of. They are neurotic or half-neurotic in the absence of emotional support they could have got from a ‘knowable community’. The ‘knowable community’ is a central notion in Williams’ literary theory. It enables him to make a sharp distinction between the realistic novel and the modernist novel. This term, therefore, needs to be discussed in detail.

In the assessment of modernist literature, Williams takes a position similar to that of Lukacs. Both favour literature of the realist tradition where ‘typical characters’ are shown in ‘typical situations’ and both adopt a severely critical attitude towards modernist literature which shows man as isolated from his social context. Man is shown here as being simply ‘thrown-into the world’ and his personality does not develop through his
multifarious contacts with this world. He neither forms nor is formed by his interaction with other persons as individuals or as groups. He remains strictly confined within the limits of his own existence. The literature of realistic tradition, too, shows the solitariness of man, but there is an essential difference between this solitariness and the 'basic solitariness' of man found in the modernist literature. In modernist writing, solitariness is a universal condition. Here the individual is imagined as a solitary being from his birth and is taken to be incapable of entering into any meaningful or durable relationships with others. Loneliness is the fate of man and it has to be taken for granted as such. In realistic literature, on the other hand, solitariness is not a universal condition. It is a specific social situation in which a human being is sometimes placed due either to his character or the circumstances in which he is located. Williams makes his position clear on this issue in *The Long Revolution*. "There is a formal gap in modern fiction which makes it incapable of expressing one kind of experience, a kind of experience which I find particularly important and for which, in my mind the word, realism keeps suggesting itself."

Williams, in fact, wants this gap to be filled. The balance between the social and the personal and between form and content, he feels, should be restored and it is possible to do so only in realistic literature. The literature of realistic tradition stands for balance and harmony between various elements which go into the making of literature.
The eighteenth century witnessed the development of realism as a whole form both in the novel and in drama. Some of its characteristics may be specifically mentioned. First, there is a conscious movement towards social extension i.e. inclusion of persons belonging to middle and lower ranks of society for special attention. In the early period of bourgeois assertion in history, a need was felt to extend the action of tragedy from ‘person of rank’ to common man or, as it was put, ‘your equals our equals’. The common refrain of this movement of social extension was—“let not your equals move your pity less.”4 Another feature of this new realism was a movement towards setting of the actions in the present or to make the action contemporary. In the preceding drama the action was set either in the historical or in a legendary past. The third defining characteristic was that there was an emphasis on secular action. The action was no more centered around metaphysical or religious themes. In its place, “a human action is played through in specifically human terms—exclusively human terms.”5

While discussing further developments in realism Williams tells us that in the late nineteenth century, there was an attempt to distinguish realism from naturalism. Earlier, realism had been established as a method in literature or art where we found an accurate representation or description of things as they actually existed. However, before the end of the century there was a separation between realism and naturalism. The term realism, Williams tells us, could no longer mean accurate representation of
things and events as they actually showed themselves in the objective world. This, in fact, became a distinguishing feature of naturalism.

In the late nineteenth century naturalism emerged as a sharp reaction against supernaturalism and metaphysical accounts of human actions. It sought to describe human actions in exclusively human terms. Strindberg, the expressionist playwright defined naturalism as the method ‘which sought to go below the surface and discover essential movements and conflicts,’ whereas realism was the method which reproduced everything ‘even the speck of dust on the camera’. However, as Williams clearly shows, although the distinction between the two still stands, the terms of description have in the meantime changed. Naturalism has come to be seen as a method which merely reproduced the flat external appearance of reality with a static quality, whereas realism in the Marxist tradition, stands for that method and that intention which goes “below the surface to the essential historical movements, to the dynamic reality.”

Williams prefers realism to naturalism, and in his analysis of the film The Big Flame (made in the late 1960s) adds the fourth dimension—that of “consciously interpretative in relation to a particular political viewpoint”—to the already existing dimensions—the secular, the contemporary and the socially extended. The fourth dimension clarifies the link between his adherence to both realism and socialism. It has also an important cross relation with the drama of Bertold Brecht. Brechtian drama
has all the characteristics of realism save one—his dramatic actions are not set in the present. Much of his work is set in the past and the everyday reality is shown through past actions.

Before we enter into more details of ‘realism’ and modernist literature, it is necessary to have a brief look at the development of modernist drama. There are at least five factors which greatly influenced the drama after the middle of the nineteenth century. First, there was the radical admission of the ‘contemporary’ as genuine material for drama. It is in sharp contrast to the periods of Greek and Renaissance drama where the choice of material was overwhelmingly legendary or historical. Second, there was an inclusion of the ‘indigenous’ as part of the same movement. The exotic site for drama was rejected in favour of the contemporary indigenous material. Third, there was an increasing emphasis on ‘everyday speech forms’ as the basis for dramatic language. Highly ornate and figurative language was rejected in favour of simple and colloquial idiom. Fourth, there was an emphasis on ‘social extension’ i.e. there was a serious attempt to extend dramatic material to those areas of life which had gone unrepresented in the earlier periods. Today T.V. and films are alternative means of this type of social extension, since they address themselves to socially extended audience. As a result, the drama of working class life brought the working class to the center of dramatic action. John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is a classical example of this type of drama. Fifth, there was a move towards secularism. All supernatural and metaphysical agencies were gradually excluded
from the drama. Now drama came to represent human action played purely in human terms.

Although Williams acknowledges the confusion between 'naturalism' and 'realism', he recognises that the two movements sometimes overlap too. But Williams' preference for realism remains beyond question. Terry Eagleton has charged him with being "ideologically bound to the moment of nineteenth century realism." But a close study of Williams' work reveals the fact that this accusation is unjust and unwarranted. Realism for Williams is not only "accurate representation and the describing of things as they actually exist." Rather he offers a more comprehensive definition of it. John Eldridge and Lizzie Eldridge have this to say about Williams' preference for realism.

For this reason naturalism is attacked precisely because it only seeks to reflect that which is on the surface, the immediately accessible. Realism, properly understood, should be dynamic because it should go beneath the surface to give an insight into underlying social movements.

According to Williams, the novel belonging to the realist tradition "creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons. The balance involved in this achievement is perhaps the most important thing about it." This 'balance' is the beauty of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*.

Williams says that the twentieth century literature particularly the novel lacks this 'balance'. There is a 'formal gap' which reduces the larger than life characters into caricatures—the
characters with split personality. Modern literature gives a lopsided account of the relationship between the society and an individual. Either society is seen in terms of an individual or an individual is seen as a product of the society. Williams emphasises the importance of the realistic mode of literature where both types of reductionism are avoided. In this tradition of literature, neither the society nor the individual has priority over the other. The society is not a background against which the personal relationships are studied. Likewise individuals are not merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life. To quote Williams: “We attend with our whole senses to every aspect of the general life, yet the center of value is always in the individual human person—not any one isolated person, but the many persons who are the reality of the general life.”

Williams counters the deterministic view that the individual is made by society or society is made of the individuals. He lays greater stress on the process of interaction and synthesis between the two elements, each influencing and affecting the other. The unending process of interaction always continues. The comments of Dorris Lessing, when referring to the process of writing, are worth recording here.

The way to deal with the problem of ‘subjectivity’, that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvelous possibilities is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does, transforming a private experience——into something much larger——.
This statement is in tune with the parameters Raymond Williams sets for the realistic tradition of fiction. According to Williams, in the twentieth century, the seemingly realist novel faces a dichotomy between the 'social' and the 'personal'. On the basis of differences in emphasis, the 'social' can be further subdivided into the 'social descriptive' and the 'social formula' novels. The social descriptive category places its main stress on the way of life at a particular time and place, rather than on any individual person. In other words, the emphasis has been shifted from people to things. These novels, Williams says, present everything but 'actual individual life'. In the social formula novel, the writer abstracts a pattern from the observation of social experience and creates a whole fictional world according to this formula. The novels show isolated individuals pitted against a vile society. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Golding's *Lord of Flies* and *The Inheritors* are examples of this type of fiction. What, according to Williams, is missing here is real society and real persons. The characters created are merely functional. Similarly the personal novel can be subdivided into personal descriptive novel and the personal formula novel. In the personal descriptive novel, society is subordinated to individual perceptions. E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is a fine example of this type of fiction where the society is created merely to the extent that it meets the needs of certain characters. Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* and the
Power and the Glory also follow the same pattern. The settings of his novels are created to suit the needs of his characters. Here the society is an aspect of the character.

In the personal formula novels, characters are created in accordance with the formula derived from the author’s experiences. A particular pattern is abstracted from the sum total of the experience and individual persons are created from this pattern. The world is created through the consciousness of a single character. This type of novel can also be termed as the fiction of special pleading—a narrative mode that describes only a few people from the perspective of one or a few characters. In James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, the world is actualized through a single character named Stephen Dedalus. And in Ulysses the world is actualized through three persons: Stephen, Bloom, and Molly. Their three worlds ultimately compose one world—the whole world of the novel. Joyce Cary’s The Horse’s Mouth, Kingsley Amis’s The Uncertain Feeling and John Wain’s Living in the Present are other examples of this type of novels. The paradox of these novels is that on the one hand they are the most real kind of contemporary writing and record many actual feelings and thoughts yet on the other hand their final version of reality is “parodic and farcical.” In other words, there may be accurate observation and description of the general life in social novels and there may be accurate observation of persons in personal novels.

In the social novels of this type the way of life is aggregation and in the personal novels it is a unit. Williams argues that “the
way of life is neither aggregation nor unit, but a whole indivisible process." 15 What is lacking in all these categories is the crucial balance. Williams underscores this point when he states:

Realism, as embodied in its great tradition, is a touchstone in this, for it shows, in detail, that vital interpenetration, idea into feeling, person into community, change into settlement, which we need, as growing points, in our divided time. In the highest realism, society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms. 16

Williams thus disapproves of the modernist trends in literature. He is strongly in favour of resolving the dichotomy between the ‘social’ and ‘personal’ and that between ‘form’ and ‘content’. This call for balance and relationships of a whole kind links Williams to Lukacs and his concept of totality. For Lukacs as well, the personal is not separable from the social and what the writer expresses is not just his own thoughts and feelings; he must be able to grasp society as a totality. Lukacs’ views on realism are worth quoting here:

The hallmark of the great realist masterpiece is precisely that its intensive totality of essential social factors does not require, does not even tolerate, a meticulously accurate or pedantically encyclopedic inclusion of all the threads making up the social tangle; in such a masterpiece the most essential social factors can find total expression in the apparently accidental conjunction of a few human destinies. 17

According to Williams and Lukacs, the writer of the realistic masterpiece must create ‘typical characters in typical situations’. The novelist/author who succeeds in creating types is a realist and the criterion of literary value is realism; only realist works of art, as Williams argues, are genuine works of art. Even for Marx realism
is not just one among the innumerable artistic trends but the "only mode of reflection of reality which is adequate to the specific powers and means at the disposal of the artist?" John Eldridge and Lizzie Eldridge rightly understand Williams' position with regard to the effectiveness of realistic mode fiction. To quote them: "Central to the problem is his view that the realist novel needs a community to relate to. In the twentieth century that is easier said than done because of the real changes that have taken place in the world."

Williams takes into account the changes which are taking place so he emphasises the need for a new realism. This realism in the novel, as in drama, will have to be dynamic and active. It will be a particular kind of response. Here its contrast with old and static realism is very significant. The old realism observed reality with passivity and offered no hope for change. Williams takes literature as an index of society. If there is a gap or imbalance in the functioning of society, it is bound to be reflected in literature. The tone and tenor of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel is different from that of the twentieth century novel because the society has changed considerably during this period. So the mode of literature has also changed. In the Victorian novel, characters determined the form and in the contemporary novel form determines the characters] The Victorian society made it possible for the novelist to imagine a genuine community: "community of persons linked not merely by one kind of relationship—work or friendship or family—but many interlocking kinds." So the
ordinary Victorian novel, according to Williams, ends on an affirmative note—the end suggesting union and formation of new relationships.

George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is a good example of the balance between the ‘social’ and the ‘personal’. Personal, family and working relationships interact in an indivisible process. On the other hand the links between persons in most contemporary novels are relatively “single, temporary, discontinuous.” There is, unfortunately no genuine community of an easily recognisable kind in the present century western society and this fact is clearly manifested in the contemporary literature particularly in the novel. But the change first occurred in the society, at least in that part of society most nearly available to most novelists, and only then there was a change in literary form. The twentieth century novel, according to Williams, “ends with a man going away on his own, having extricated himself from a dominating situation—, whereas the ordinary Victorian novel ‘ends with a series of settlements, of new engagements and formal relationships.” A novel in the realistic tradition creates a genuine community of its own or at least posits a need for one, if it is not visible in the existing social conditions. And it judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of qualities of persons. The essential growth is in the interaction which occurs among the individuals to communicate what has been learnt. And healthy interaction among people is possible only in a society which has a ‘knowable community’.
‘Knowable community’ is an important theoretical principle contributing to the understanding of Williams’ theory of culture and literature. The concept of ‘knowable community’, which has been invoked as a basic and binding principle in *The English Novel*, has to be understood in all its implications if we have to understand the subtle and delicate relationship which exists between the theory of culture and the theory of literature. John Eldridge and Lizzie Eldridge rightly observe: “This relationship between literary analysis and politics is implicit to both the concepts of ‘structure of feeling’ and to that of the ‘knowable community’. Both are used as tools of literary analysis which enable any critical examination to incorporate some form of social critique.”

In fact, Williams belongs to the post-structuralist rediscovery of situations of writing and discourse communities. In his study of the English novel, Williams finds an alternative tradition, or counter-memory which he calls the ‘knowable community’. This term describes a strategy in discourse rather than immediate experience or an organic community. He reverses the accepted wisdom that traditional communities exist and then historically are disrupted by the mass media. He argues that the experience of ‘face to face’ community is discontinuous and fragmentary. A community is knowable through a system of extended communication. Commenting on the novels written from 1840 to 1920, Williams says that there was something common among the novelists of this period. They described novel as a system of
extended communication. After the first decade of this century, film, radio and especially T.V. took over this place of importance. But the knowable community belongs essentially to the tradition of the novel. It is part of a traditional method in which “the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways.”

The English novel in the 1840s is important as a form of communicating what can be known of work, desire, speech and intellectual life: a form of needed communication. Williams says that the novel may be shaped by the development of industry and the cities, and the continued transformation of the country. The novel can also be shaped by the project of the novelist. However, the main argument, Williams says, is that the novel itself actively shapes experience. In other words, there is an understanding of connections between individuals and the political, social and economic structures of history. The novelist in “defining the society rather than merely reflecting it; defining it in novels, which had each its own significant and particular life.” This is the reason that Williams has great regard for George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence and Charles Dickens. These novelists use the novel as a medium to record the changes which had been long in the making: the Industrial Revolution, the struggle for democracy and the growth of cities and towns, and these changes reached a ‘point of consciousness’ when these novelists happen to write (from 1840 to 1920). People became aware of these social and historical changes which ‘altered not only outward forms—institutions and
Williams suggests several significant factors, which contributed to the ‘crisis of the knowable community’, such as “the industrial revolution, urban expansion, the institutionalization of urban culture, legislation on public health and factory working hours.” These facts of change can easily be seen in the study of English novelists from Dickens to Lawrence.

These novelists shared a common ground: they all explained the meaning and substance of the community. It includes the examination of relationships in a particular society and the manner in which they are manifested concretely in fiction. The concept of ‘knowable community’, in fact, has an important bearing in the study of these novelists. Ordinarily it is presumed that the reader and the author share a common knowledge that social relationships are a reliable index through which people can be known. But the rapid changes have transformed the society beyond recognition and now the people are only potentially knowable. The complex urban society has its own set of problems and it has created fragmentation within societies. Thus a split takes place between knowable relationships and an unknown, unknowable overwhelming society. The society is no longer a passive background against which the drama of human life is unfolded. Rather, the society has become an agency, even an actor, a character and even “a process that entered lives, to shape or to deform.”

Arguing further, Williams says that the knowable is not an objective category alone i.e. it is not only what is there to be
known. It also includes the observer’s desire and need to know. It then incorporates both social fact and the consciousness of the author. The novelist does not simply register the details of ‘the social crisis’ but he subjects them to an intricate process of redefinition. He/she has to create from his/her own resources, “forms adequate to the experience at the new and critical stage it had reached.”

While discussing George Eliot’s novels Williams makes a sharp distinction between ‘knowable’ and the ‘known community’. “The knowable community is this common life, which she (George Eliot) is pleased to record with a necessary emphasis. But the known community, creatively known, is something else again—an easy contrast, in language, with another interest and another sensibility.”

The ‘uneasy contrast’ is the tension between the idiom of the writer and the language of her characters. It is important to note that this tension was primarily related to the changes that were taking place in the society. As a result of these changes, an alternative knowable community occupied the space into the English novel. George Eliot’s novels include rural workers and the craftsmen and their way of speaking. It is noticed that there is a contrast between these voices and the educated tone of the implied narrator. The actual historical pressure of these voices is part of the emergence of a complex society. It is no longer possible to look and see the workings of the society. There is a need in such a developing and complex society to have an overall sense of it.
The phrase ‘knowable community’ has a kind of irony because what is being shown is how much of the society is ‘deeply unknowable’. The part of what is unknowable is the emergence of the future. The idea of a ‘knowable community’ implies a contrast with one that is already known. In the novels of George Eliot the distinction between a knowable and a ‘known community’ is very clear. Though George Eliot extends the plots of her novels to include the craftsmen, the labourers and the poor yet simultaneously she is writing for another audience, with different interests and values. Through this method she wants to draw the attention of this known community (his readers) to this community. According to Williams it leads to a defensive treatment of the knowable community, Williams quotes from Adam Bede to substantiate his argument:

In this world there are so many of these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness—. I am not ashamed of commemorating old Kester: you and I are indebted to the hard hands of such men—hands that have long ago mingled with the soil they tilled so faithfully, thrifty making the best they could of the earth’s fruits, and receiving the smallest share as their own wages.31

Williams points out that George Eliot is addressing an important problem i.e. who is speaking to whom, in what voice and tone and for what purpose? In Williams’s view Eliot serves as a prototype to this problem. A similar problem is faced by other novelists also and Williams is no exception to it. As a writer and teacher he had to grapple with this problem in Cambridge. But he takes recourse to an alternative and continuing cultural tradition
with which he identifies and which is seen as an antagonistic relationship to what he called ‘official English culture’. Williams feels that it is education which creates an awareness of the problem and provides the possibility of contesting and countering elitist versions of knowledge and culture. As a result of education and mobility, the writer/novelist of this tradition becomes more aware of the fact that the knowable community is different from the known community.

Thomas Hardy is also writing at the crucial time when great changes were taking place. Alan O’Connor rightly observes: “Hardy is both a participant and an observer of this world. This is the reason for the range and variability of his writing and also his eventual bitterness and withdrawal.” He depicts the knowable community of his Wessex novels in the context of their whole way of life. He is aware of his metropolitan reading public but also of the real changes that are taking place in rural areas. He is a ‘man of the borders’ especially in his links with town and country. The changes which are taking place in the wider society relating to economy, communication, and politics are bound to affect the rural society. Williams is impressed with Hardy’s awareness of connection between the town and the country. He quotes a beautiful paragraph from *The Tess* to show how the coming of the railway has established a direct commercial link between the country and the city.

They reached the feeble light, which came from the smoky lamp of a little railway station;--- The cans of new milk were unladen in the rain, Tess getting a little shelter from a neighbouring
According to Williams, Hardy’s novels point to the experience of actual societies in change and conflict and not to some “seamless abstracted country way of life.” What is important for Hardy is not the opposition between the country and the city but the interaction between the two and the consequent changes in each sphere. It makes Hardy a ‘regional novelist’. His novels exhibit a tension between the knowable and the unknown community and they are centred on the ordinary process of life and work. He depicts concretely the pressure which his characters experience and undergo. Hardy stays very close to his characters—Henchard, Tess or Jude—and affirms them in their struggle and defeats. They engage the attention of the readers because these characters signify the problems of real people in a real world in a particular time and space. These characters need neither the defence of their author nor the patronage of their readers. John Eldridge and Lizzie Eldridge make an interesting observation of Williams’ analysis of Hardy’s work:

Despite the pressures of mobility experienced by Hardy, his major novels are rooted in the ordinary processes of life and work, and it is this which Williams heralds as Hardy’s most significant achievement. For it is this ‘ordinary’ culture which Williams is himself attempting to restore through his revaluation of the literary ‘tradition’.
Besides George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, Williams extols D.H. Lawrence especially for the importance he attaches to language in his work. To show how D.H Lawrence makes a highly effective use of language, Williams quotes the following from his story *Odour of Chrysanthemums*:

> It was half-past ten, and the old woman was saying: ‘But it’s trouble from beginning to end; you’re never too old for trouble, never too old for that—’ when the gate banged back, and there were heavy feet on the steps. ‘I’ll go, Lizzie, let me go’, cried the old woman, rising. But Elizabeth was at the door. It was a man in pit-clothes. ‘They’re bringing ’im, Missis’, he said.③

Williams recognizes the greatness of D.H. Lawrence in the latter’s use of language. His language is at one with the language of his characters. The new language and the new feeling come together and what finally comes out is a community: a man feeling with other people speaking in and with them. Williams is deeply impressed by D.H. Lawrence’s use of language in his early works—especially his short stories, the first three plays and *Sons and Lovers*. Williams observes: “What I really find is a sort of miracle of language.”④ George Eliot and Hardy also tried to achieve the same effects in language but they could not approximate the height achieved by D.H. Lawrence. What accounts for the successful use of language is not Lawrence’s technical manipulation of the language from the language of description and analysis to the colloquial and informal kind of language. His success actually lies in the fact that he is feeling with his characters within a particular flow. The sentence—‘It is half-past ten’, in the
above quoted passage includes what the old woman says and what the novelist also wants to say in an ‘unbroken sequence’. The same effect is produced in *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in Love*, *The Rainbow* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. What is experienced and expressed in these novels is not only closeness and sympathy but also “conflict, loss, frustration and despair.” Lawrence could write about the loveliness of the countryside and he could contrast it with the ugliness of the towns. But he preferred to write about the things which concerned him the most—the things which frustrated the instinct of community. It was, for Lawrence, the spirit of possessive individualism that had fostered the ugliness of English towns and cities. Where other novelists learn in feelings and ideas by criticising, altering or rejecting, Lawrence learns most closely in his language and the organisation of it and finally in the substance of the novel.

In *Sons and Lovers* Lawrence dramatises the ill effects of possessive and unhealthy relationship between the mother and the sons. Gertrude, a woman of sophistication, marries Morel and lives happily for some time. Morel is a heavy drinker and a liar and he is sometimes brutal in his treatment of his wife. He resists her efforts to change him. Gertrude concentrates all her energies on her children—three sons and a daughter. Morel is excluded and scorned by his wife and children. Paul, her second son grows into a young man and falls in love with Miriam, an intense but a reserved and rather spiritual girl. Gertrude becomes possessive and jealous of Paul’s relationship with Miriam. Eventually Paul meets another
woman Clara Dawes, a married woman full of ‘blood and instinct’. Gertrude suffers a long and painful illness which Paul relieves by administering morphine. After his mother’s death, Paul begins a new life. D.H. Lawrence writes with closeness and continuity and with the live experience of the mother, the son and the life they live and the result is a great novel of everlasting importance. Williams says that the greatness of D.H. Lawrence lies in his ability to feel with his characters and to obliterate the gap between his language and that of his characters. John Eldridge and Lizzie Eldridge aptly sum up Williams’ position regarding the novels of D. H. Lawrence:

Williams sees in Lawrence a writer who links with the nineteenth century tradition in his condemnation of industrialism, who sees its acquisitiveness as debasing human purpose to ‘sheer mechanical materialism’. Individuals become mechanical, disintegrated and amorphous, a condition of mind which contributes to the ugliness of industrial society. It is a product of human energy being forced into a competition of mere acquisition. What Lawrence termed ‘the instinct of community’ had, he claimed, been frustrated by industrialism.39

Williams’ assessment of Dickens’ novels is also very significant. For Dickens there exists a close relation and connection between art, society and human life. Unlike George Eliot, Dickens draws on popular culture which includes both what is provided for the majority and what is made by them. At the same time he is not unaffected by educated culture or culture of the elites. He is a genius who is involved in both. This makes for an interesting case so far as the challenge of creation of ‘knowable community’ in his novels is concerned. In Dickens, there is a great sense of immensity of the city in which people are pulled and swallowed up. The city is indispensable for human beings. There is the city of the day and the
city of the night. There is the fog that really hangs over the city but which also stands as a metaphor for opaqueness and obscurity. Yet social relationships are established in this precarious world. Dickens reveals the relationships and the institutions in which they are formed: the school, the workhouse, the country house, the family, the law courts and the prison house. The size of the city is enormous and much will remain unknown in the city.

According to Williams, Dickens insists upon the possibility of mutuality and neighbourliness in such a world. He could write a new kind of novel—fiction uniquely capable of realising a new kind of reality—just because he shared with the new urban popular culture certain decisive experiences and responses. He takes and transforms certain traditional methods into a dramatic method which is uniquely capable of expressing the experience of living in cities. John Eldridge and Lizzie Eldridge sum up Williams' analysis of Dickens in the following words: “In his study of Dickens he explicitly rejects the critical criteria established for analysing novels belonging to the so-called ‘great tradition’. Instead Williams insists upon the ‘newness’ of Dickens’ work, in which a new kind of reality is realised: the reality of a new kind of city.”40

His method is a breakthrough in the novel from which other novelists of cities—Dostoevsky and Kafka learned in their own way. As Williams points out: “He is a new kind of novelist and that his method is his experience.”41 Despite his superb dramatic method, he is criticised for creating ‘flat’ and wooden characters
who never grow. These characters are not slowly revealed but are directly presented. There is too much sentimentalism, supernaturalism and the characters, most of the time are reduced to caricatures. There are eccentric characters too. For instance, Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. Dickens is also criticised for writing language of persuasion and display instead of controlled language of analysis and comprehension.

But this hostile criticism comes from those critics who misunderstand Dickens’ essentially dramatic method. Williams views Dickens from a different perspective and understands his dramatic method through the ‘belief of his time’. Williams observes a definite pattern in the novels of Dickens. To quote Williams: “An individual moral question has become a social question and then, decisively, a creative intervention. This seems to me the essential pattern of all Dickens’ work.”

The ‘creative intervention’ is that Dickens’ morality is in the form of his novels: a form based on ways of seeing people in their world and their society. For Dickens these complicated ways of seeing are more important to his achievement than his separable attitudes to money, poverty, family and other known social questions. Dickens is always responding to the real contradictions—for him city is the ‘life’s blood’ and also a monster that devours all human virtues. But Dickens goes on to see that what in the end matters is not the disorder of change but the kind of new order that is made to emerge from it. His main concern always was to keep human
recognition and human kindness alive through these unprecedented changes which were taking place in the society.

Dickens shared certain decisive experiences and responses which together constitute what could be called the new popular urban culture. His creative method comes out of the new reality of the new kind of city to which he responded within the broad framework of this new popular culture. He is a novelist whose method is dictated by the new experience of the city. He is capable of dramatising the experience of living in cities through his novels. In his novels, he describes the city through an image of the fog—the obscurity, the darkness and opaqueness—which prevents people—men and women—from seeing each other. The city is shown as at once a social fact and a human landscape. The city is not distinguishable from the quality of life that it offers. It is the hallmark of Dickens' originality that he is able to dramatise social institutions and consequences which are not accessible to ordinary physical observation. He takes them and prevents them as if they were persons or natural phenomena. Sometimes he chooses the image of a dense cloud or the fog through which people are groping and looking for each other. Sometimes as the Circumlocation Office or Bleeding Heart Yard, where a way of life takes on physical shape. Sometimes as if they were human characters, like Shares in *Our Mutual Friend*, and of course the *Great Expectations*. This account for his moral naming of characters: Gradgrind, McChoakumchild, Merdle etc. It also connects with a perception that the most evident inhabitants of
cities are buildings. There is at once a connection and confusion between the shapes and appearances of buildings and the real shapes and appearances of the people who live in them. Williams quotes from *Little Dorrit* to drive home his argument:

Like unexceptionable society, the opposing rows of houses in Harley Street were very grim with one another. Indeed, the mansions and their inhabitants were so much alike in that respect, the people were often to be found drawn up on opposite sides of dinner-tables, in the shade of their loftiness, staring at the other side of the way with the dullness of the houses.

Everybody knows how like the street, the two dinner-rows of people who take their stand by the street will be. The expressionless uniform twenty houses, all to be knocked at and rung at in the same form, all approachable by the same dull steps, all fended off by the same pattern of railing— who has not dined with these? 43

In his novels like *Oliver Twist*, *The Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, *Dombey and Son* and *Little Dorrit*, the description of the city with its dirt and squalor is beyond an easy parallel. The city is described through potent images of fog, smoke and cloud. It is the city which perpetuates crimes, promotes exploitation of the poor by the rich. Here human beings are subordinated to monetary gains. It is the city which stunts the humanity of most of the individuals who live in it and reduces them to the status of things. Under the pressure of circumstances in which they have to live in the city, their personalities are not only distorted and disfigured, they are also rendered static as if cast in fixed moulds. No wonder Dickens who is seriously committed to the rendering of the new human experience with real authenticity, creates only flat and rounded characters who look like caricatures. Their eccentricity
and deviant behaviour is also due to the ‘vicious city’ they live in. The presentation of unrounded and eccentric characters was not Dickens’ fault. He showed what he experienced in his society. The very society that was undergoing great changes.

Society for Dickens was an agency, an actor or a character. It could be seen and valued through persons. It is not a framework in which characters are defined not as an aggregate of known relationship. It was not just a code to measure, an institution to control, a standard to define or to change. According to Williams, “society was a process that entered lives, to shape or to perform; a process personally known but then again suddenly distant, complex, incomprehensible, overwhelming.”

Williams’ discussion of the dramatic method of Dickens and of his characters in terms of his notion of ‘knowable community’—how it is visualised by the novelist at the particular juncture, when he is writing, to what extent it is present or absent under the specific conditions imagined in the work—forms an important part of the literary theory he was gradually evolving through his basic concept of culture.

According to Williams, Dickens seems to suggest that human spirit is more powerful than any system. On the basis of his firmly optimistic belief in human resilience, Dickens also creates situations, when despite the dense fog; there are vital moments of recognition and interventions among human beings. He seems to be stating that it is not so much through violence and revolution
that we can change the society, it is love and piety that can change and transform the society in a real way.

Williams holds George Eliot in high esteem. Her novels which have their settings in the past have disconnection and disharmony between the idioms of the novelist and the recorded language of the characters. She is seriously aware of this break in the texture of her novels. Unlike Dickens she even did not have any tradition or precedent to seek inspiration from. So she has to create every time new forms on her own under the pressure of conflicting actions and methods and while writing she has to resolve a conflict of grammar, the conflict of ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘they’. Here George Eliot’s contrast with Dickens is significant. Dickens could base himself on an existing social formation, an urban culture with a directly communicating grammar. For George Eliot, the social formation was yet to emerge. But she overcomes all these handicaps and develops the idioms of individual moral analysis into a world in which morality is both individual and social. She did not believe as others have done, that personal relationships and social relationships are two different categories. On the other hand, she strongly believes that there is no private life which has not been ‘determined by a wider public life’. In other words, the quality of a way of life registers itself in the qualities of persons. Her merit as a novelist lies in the fact that she sees society at a deeper level beyond its political abstractions. She sees her society as vicious and her favourite metaphors for society are: ‘network’, ‘web’ and
‘a tangled business’. These metaphors signify social relations in her novels. To quote Williams:

The network, we might say, connects; the web, the tangle, disturbs and obscures. To discover a network, to feel human connection in what is essentially a knowable community, is to assert a particular social value: a necessary interdependence. But to discover a web or a tangle is to see human relations as not only involving but compromising, limiting, mutually frustrating.45

Her novels illustrate not only the common criticism of individualism which the tradition was establishing, but also the general ‘structure of feeling’ which was equally forceful and determining. She extends the real social range of the novel—its knowable community. The plots of her novels are extended to include persons from every walk of life. She records this knowable community or the common life with a necessary emphasis. This achievement of creating a knowable community in the sense of a body of shared values brought into vibrancy through qualities of individuals who are at once superbly individualistic and also embody the quirk of a shared faith is not a minor triumph. In her later novels the knowable community—the extended world of an actual rural and then industrial England comes to be known primarily as a problem “of how the separated individual, with a divided consciousness of belonging and not belonging, makes his own moral history.”46 This fact accounts for ‘the unease’ and the divided construction of her later novels. But these novels—Felix Holt, The Radicals and Middlemarch—are integrated works of art.
in their own ways despite the divided consciousness of ‘belonging and not belonging’.

A comparison of George Eliot with Trollope is taken up by Raymond Williams in his book *English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* and some of the points underlined through this comparison are quite significant. Trollope may look a better novelist if both the writers are judged through a casual application of traditional literary canons. His novels are well organized, have thematic unity and the unity of tone. But the merit of George Eliot lies in the ‘creative disturbance’, she is able to communicate through her novels. This disturbance is also found in Hardy. The novels of Thomas Hardy and George Eliot have no unity of tone, no unity of form and language and no organisation. Since these novelists responded most deeply to rapid changes taking place in the society, “their novels”, says Williams, “are the records of struggle and difficulty, as was the life they wrote about.” The sincerity and commitment with which she writes constitute the strength of George Eliot’s novels.

Raymond Williams does not approve the idea of ‘pure art’ and since George Eliot’s novels are deeply rooted in social reality and every sentence of her novels reverberates with what individuals and groups in her time felt and experienced, they are rated as significant artistic achievements by Williams. He shares with George Eliot the belief that ‘personal’ relationships and ‘social’ relationships are not two separate categories. They are to be seen in terms of an interrelationship. Another important point
about George Eliot’s novels which Williams underscores is that they are transitional between the Victorian novels i.e. novels ending in ‘a series of settlements’ and the modern novels where a single person is shown as going on in life on his own with divided consciousness of ‘belonging and not belonging’. In the later book of George Eliot which falls into this category to a large extent, value has to be created by individual effort through a process which begins with awareness of collapse of values and emergence of a new consciousness after this breakdown of traditional values.

*Middlemarch* is a good example of this change in the art of fiction which has started manifesting itself through George Eliot’s writings. There is a knowable community in the novel but it is knowable in a new sense. Something else is happening in this novel, what George Eliot calls “the double change of self and beholder.” It is a new thing in the novel which affects her essential method. There is profound unease and dislocation. The dislocation is not of an overt kind but very deep and substantial. It is dislocation of consciousness where the knower has become a separated process in itself. And consciousness becomes a fictional method. This method has been achieved by her out of profound disturbance and tension through which the society was passing. This shows George Eliot’s serious and sincere commitment to social reality which is recorded faithfully in her novels.

An important feature of Williams’ literary theory which emerges from his analysis of the works of various novelists—D.H. Lawrence, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Charles Dickens—is
that he is the rare Marxist critic who attaches great importance to
the element of language in a work of art. In *Marxism and
Literature*, he emphasises the need for the development of thinking
about language, since there was little Marxist work on language
before the twentieth century. In other words, the focus on language
simply repeats in different terms the emphasis on the centrality of
communication to social reproduction which had been a part of
Williams' position from the beginning.

In his notion of language as a 'constitutive activity' Williams
is powerfully influenced by the Russian philosopher Volosinov
whose book *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* (1929), he
happened to read by chance. Volosinov held that meaning was
necessarily a social action, dependent on a social relationship.
Williams shares Volosinov's emphasis on the social relationship
which makes his ideas a useful and necessary corrective to
Saussurean insistence on the arbitrariness of the sign. This was the
theory of 'useable sign'. In Saussure language is a system (lange
and parole) of signs and the relations between the sign (signifier)
and its meaning (signified) is arbitrary. For Williams language is
the articulation of active and changing social experience. Alan
O'Connor rightly points out that for Williams "language is a social
institution but of a very special kind: it pervades all other social
institutions and the social self." The signs of which language is
made take their meanings from the social context in which they are
changed and modified with the passage of time. Language, thus, is
to be seen as a persistent kind of creation and recreation. It is a dynamic process through which social reality can be grasped.

Human beings are born into a language system but this system, as John Higgins also suggests, is always ‘an active social language’. Language always has a creative as well as a systematic character, and language is therefore just “as much a part of human individuation as it is of human socialisation.” The following observation of Williams will make his position more clear.

We then find not a reified ‘language’ and ‘society’ but an active social language. Nor is this language a simple ‘reflection’ or ‘expression’ of material reality. What we can have, rather, is a grasping of this reality through language, which as practical consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity, including productive activity.

To put it more directly, language is the most deeply known community and it is a shared dynamic activity through which human relationships can be gauged. Williams strongly opposes the orthodox idea that “thoughts exist before language and are then expressed through its medium.” He argues that if language is to be understood as a medium then it needs to be grasped as a medium which -- far from being neutral or value free -- is in itself, the concrete embodiment of social, political and ideological conflicts. Language is never merely a system; it is always a social practice. And it is in that notion of language as a social practice that the radical aesthetics of modernism—which so stressed the potential defamiliarising effects of language use—joins the revolutionary theory and practice of Marxism. No doubt, Williams takes the lead in this enterprise.
For Williams, language is not a medium; it is “a constitutive element of material social practice”, even indeed, “a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality.” In fact, the recognition of the real constitutive force of language in human society has been neglected by the two alternative views of language available to orthodox literary theory. Here language is either seen as ‘instrumental’ or ‘systematic’, ‘expressive’ or ‘formalist’. Williams does not agree with the Formalist and the New critics who attach a great importance to language and the formal elements of a work of art but who never take into account the social and historical context in which a work of art is produced. The Russian Formalists and New critics overemphasised one element of language (form) at the cost of the other (content). They reduced language to what they saw as its basic elements to ‘signs’ within a totalised ‘system of signs’. For Williams “language is a socially shared and reciprocal activity, already embedded in active relationships, within which every move is an activation of what is already shared and reciprocal or may become so.” Williams thus avoids the extremes of New criticism and accords judicious importance to both the language and the social and historical context in which a work of art is produced. Williams rightly agrees with Volosinov on this point: “Meaning is always produced; it is never simply expressed.”

Williams feels deeply convinced that the realm of art is not delinked and detached from the realm of social reality. A good piece of literature cannot be produced in a vacuum and it always
deals with the live issues of a society. This does not, however, mean that literature should be reduced to propaganda or 'tendency literature'. The critique of propagandist literature is not a case against 'commitment' but a case for serious commitment to social reality. So Williams avoids the extremes of 'pure art' and tendency literature. He strikes a healthy balance between these conflicting and contradictory notions. The claims of objectivity, 'neutrality', and 'simple fidelity to the truth', Williams would frankly admit, are never realised in practice. He was aware of his own perspective being 'committed'. Bourgeois critics behold the author as an individual opposed to the society. Williams on the other hand, believes that an individual is a social being. What is needed is, the discovery of the truly social in the individual and the truly individual in the social. Thus an author is a part of society and he does not have an independence existence of his own. George Eliot too recognises the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the society. She shares the perspective of Williams on this issue and much of the beauty of her novels emanates from this fact.

Through his detailed analysis of the novels of George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, Raymond Williams conveys to us in sharp and concrete terms what the key-term 'knowable community' signifies and enables us to understand how a literary work gives us a vantage point from where we can see the two realms of art and society deeply interlinked and interfused with each other.
Commentators and critics have offered their own evaluations of *The English Novel*. J.P Ward, for instance, notes that the book is “in effect an answer to Leavis’ influential book (*The Great Tradition*).” Jon Thompson also feels that Williams’ propensity in the book is merely to “offer an alternative version of Leavis’ *The Great Traditon.*” Fred Inglis describes the book as the “unacknowledged correction by Williams the class-warrior to Leavis’ *The Great Tradition.*” While Alan O’Connor describes *The English Novel* as “a record of his lectures on the English Novel,” he does not mention its direct opposition—intentional or unintentional—to Leavis. Terry Eagleton appreciates the theoretical substance of the book as a whole. In his *Criticism and Ideology* he observes:

*The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* puts this notion (structure of feeling) to superb use: the novel, for Williams, is one medium among many in which men seek to master and absorb new experience by discovering new forms and rhythms, grasping and reconstructing the stuff of social change in the living substance of perceptions and relationships.

In *Politics and letters* Williams admits: “At certain points, *The English Novel* is deliberately a symmetrical inversion of Leavis’ *The Great Tradition.*” He avers that both books begin with Jane Austen, but soon part company. Leavis marginalizes Dickens, who is central for Williams. Leavis prefers George Eliot’s later novels, and *Women in Love* of Lawrence, but Williams’ preference is for both early Eliot and early Lawrence. Hardy is a negligible figure for Leavis, but for Williams he is central to the tradition as a whole. A close look at the book acquaints us with the
fact that *The English Novel* is much more than this type of inversion of Leavis’ preferences. The inversion is, of course, at times quite deliberate as Williams himself informs us. The book, however, goes beyond the simple and limited fact of inversion of specific preferences. In fact, a more fundamental disagreement is being worked out here. This directly concerns the central idea of form. This does not merely offer an alternative canon, but it is a challenge, through the idea of form, to the principles of canonical selection itself and ultimately to the very idea of criticism at work in Leavis’ study. Commentators have been only partly right in seeing Williams’ study as merely offering some alternative points of interest on the same map of the novel. *The English Novel* is in the end less concerned with the pronouncement of local judgements regarding the inclusion or exclusion of particular novelists, and “more interested in challenging both the principles of evaluation at work in the novelistic canon, and in the idea of criticism underlying these principles.”

To sum up, in Williams’ analysis, the public and the private, the personal and the political, are interwoven inextricably. Although film and television displaced the novel from its previously unchallenged position of artistic dominance, Williams maintains that the development of the novel from Dickens to Lawrence still provides us with the strongest connections, “the deepest sense of the problematic, in community and identity, in knowable relationships.” In his criticism of the novel, the keywords which characterise his literary and dramatic analysis
such as 'structure of feeling' and 'knowable community' remain central and the practical implications of these theoretical concepts are most clearly revealed in his discussion of the works of the major novelists in works like *The English Novel, The Country and the City* and *Modern Tragedy.*
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