CHAPTER ONE

Theories of the Novel
An Overview

In this chapter we shall try to understand various views regarding the genre of the novel. We shall examine conflicting views about different aspects of the novel, namely, the definitional characteristics of the novel, the rise of the novel, realism and the novel, the link of the novel to other genres like epics and romances, etc. We shall take into account debates about modern and postmodern novels, their differences and their similarities. We shall also study diverse views about the novel arising out of different theoretical and conceptual positions like feminism and postcolonialism. Lastly, we shall theoretically examine the assumptions behind literary positions that tend to study the novel as part of the more encompassing category of ‘fiction’ rather than as a distinct genre. In this chapter our main effort shall be to try and identify the key areas of debate vis-à-vis the genre of the novel. Subsequently, in other chapters, we shall go into the details of some of these debates and try to resolve them.

PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Let us first look at some common definitions of the novel. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English defines the novel as a “fictitious prose narrative of book
length portraying characters and actions credibly representative of real life in continuous plot”.¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines the novel as a “genre of fiction (i.e. prose works created by the imagination), of considerable length and some complexity, in which characters (usually but not always human beings) interact with one another in a specific setting”. *The Encyclopedia Americana* explains the novel as a “twentieth century generic term for any type of prose fiction of book length in which characters and actions are presented in a plot as if representing persons and events in real life”. It can be argued, therefore, that the key features of the novel are: ‘prose’, ‘length’, ‘narrative’, ‘character’, ‘action’, ‘plot’, ‘realism’ and ‘fiction’. Examples, however, can always be cited of novels which are in verse (Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate*, 1986), are relatively short (Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and The Sea*, 1952), openly profess lack of action and plot (most modern novels), avoid narrative and characterization (most postmodern novels), rebel against realism (both modern and postmodern novels) or are non-fiction novels (Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, 1965; Primo Levi’s *The Periodic Table*, 1975; or V.S. Naipaul’s *Journey to Nowhere*, 1980).² As Mikhail Bakhtin says - “experts have not managed to isolate a single definite, stable characteristic of the novel – without adding a reservation, which immediately disqualifies it altogether as a generic characteristic”.³ *Collier’s Encyclopedia* also makes a significant observation about the novel by arguing that the novel “has taken so many shapes, particularly in the last hundred years, that any more precise definition would eliminate a good proportion of works called by the name”.⁴ Does it mean then, that while dealing with the novel we have to be content with the familiar maxim ‘exceptions only prove the rule’ and continue with, more or less, the same definition of the novel? Or, is it possible to identify certain key features, which capture the difficult and dynamic nature of the novel within the bounds of classification? It can reasonably be argued that defining the novel has become more difficult subsequent to modernist and postmodern innovations in the techniques of writing. Our main approach towards understanding the genre of the novel, therefore, shall include looking at elements of continuity between the early, realist, modern and postmodern novels.

---

³ Bakhtin, ‘Epic and Novel’ 54.
EMERGENCE OF THE NOVEL

Let us, however, begin at the beginning. The sharpest division among novel critics exists over the dating of the novel. Most critics agree that with the exception of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* written in Spain in 1605, the novel arose in the early eighteenth century in England with works such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722) by Daniel Defoe; *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift; *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747, 1748) by Samuel Richardson; *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *Jonathan Wild* (1743) and *Tom Jones* (1749) by Henry Fielding etc. Critics like Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Michael McKeon in *The Origins of the English Novel* 1600-1740 (1983), Lennard J. Davis in *Factual Fictions: The Origin of the English Novel* (1983), Marthe Robert in *Origins of the Novel* (1980) and Nancy Armstrong in * Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) offer very exciting and different theories about the origin of the novel but date it more or less to the same works. Jane Spencer in *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986) takes the origin of the novel a little back to Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688) arguing that “women’s role in the novel’s rise has been underestimated”\(^5\) and that in fact it was women who pioneered the genre. Firdaus Azim offers an interesting thesis in *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* (1993). She argues that the novel arose in the process of identifying/locating the European subject’s ‘self’ vis-à-vis the colonial/racial/gendered ‘other’ at a time when intense debates were taking place in England about language and subjectivity. She, too, locates the rise of the novel to Behn’s *Oroonoko*. Walter Allen in *The English Novel* (1954) traces the origin of the novel to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) arguing that it is “not so different in form from the conventional picaresque novel”.\(^6\) Contrary to these critics, who share a consensus over the rise of the novel form in modern capitalist England and have disputes only over a difference of a decade or two, there are those who trace the origin of the novel back to ancient Japan, China, Arabia, Greece and Rome. Gilbert Phelps in *From Myth to Modernism* (1987) argues that the novel has non-European origins in various national and linguistic cultures of the world independent and in spite of the colonizers. He traces the novel to twelfth century Japan and fifteenth century China.\(^7\) Mikhail Bakhtin traces the origins of the novel to second century A.D. to Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica*, Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon*, Chiriton’s *Chareas and

---


Callirhoe, Xenophon of Ephesus’s Ephesiaca and Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe. J.A. Cuddon traces the novel up to as far back as twelfth century B.C Egypt to works like The Princess of Backstaw, The Pedestrian Prince and Sinuhe. Thus, at two ends of the spectrum, critics are separated by nearly three thousand years in tracing the origins of the novel. Walter Allen has a telling comment to make about this unsettling difference in his ‘Introduction’ to The English Novel:

Literary historians, horrified it seems by the newness of the form, have commonly thought it necessary to provide the novel with a respectable antiquity.... In their eagerness to supply the novel with a dignified ancestry they have behaved rather like a man who, setting out to write a history of the motor-car, should think it proper to begin by devoting a third of his space to the evolution of the ox-cart.

This great divide in tracing the origin of the novel is based upon how novel critics approach or define the novel, on why they include certain works within the novel genre and exclude certain others, and of course on how they deal with questions relating to the ‘origin’, ‘beginning’ or ‘rise’ of the novel. These three terms are slightly different from each other and have been employed differently by critics for studying the novel. Although we can justifiably be accused of oversimplifying the differences between these concepts, let us broadly examine their variable usage by novel critics.

‘Origin’

The study of ‘origins’ gained currency in academics at the beginning of the twentieth century, which saw tremendous advances in linguistics, sociology and anthropology as disciplines of study. These disciplines along with psychoanalysis put a lot of emphasis on discovering ‘primitive’ origins of language, literature, culture and society. Subsequent developments in new criticism and structuralism also led to a special

---


See Bakhtin, ‘Epic and Novel’ 65. Bakhtin argues that the ultimate roots of the novel lie in the folklore. He argues that the novel was formed in the era of classic antiquity and Hellenism though it found its true expression in the new world during Late Middle Ages and Renaissance.


9 Cuddon, 601.

10 Allen, 13.
interest in myths, storytelling, fables, modes, motifs, narratives and folktales as universalist or transcendental categories for understanding all phenomenon. Major trends in linguistics, anthropology, psychoanalysis and structuralism involve a study of ‘prehistoric’ or ‘a-historic’ origins, which see all development or history as a continuation, or variation of essentially the same themes and features. A comprehension of origins and, thereby, the fundamental structures of all existence, for them, explains reality better than historicist or evolutionary accounts. Freud, for example, is invoked by Marthe Robert in *Origins of the Novel* to argue that, “the Oedipus complex is a universal human phenomenon, all fiction, invention and image making express it more or less explicitly… The novel is only one ‘Oedipal’ form among many others…”\(^\text{11}\) She goes on to argue that all writing is variation of the romance. The distinguishing feature of the novel is that it derives “the violence of its desires and its irrepressible freedom from the Family Romance”\(^\text{12}\) and therefore, re-enacts the Oedipal storyline. Gilbert Phelps in *From Myth to Modernism* uses ‘myths’ — basic stories of all societies — to understand the novel and its development in different civilizations and nations of the world. Such critics study ‘origins’ in order to discern some continuing structure or essence in the novel.

**‘Beginning’**

‘Beginnings’ is a notion, which has been used in a slightly different sense by critics like Michel Foucault and Edward Said. Rather than looking at history as distinct and variable stages of development, they too, view history as a continuum. Instead of absolute origins, however, they look for discernable beginnings, ruptures or transformations in the ‘knowable’ past. This past can be grasped ‘archeologically’ through the study of ‘discourse’. Discourse analysis is essential for interpreting or understanding all reality, particularly history. Nothing exists outside text and discourse, and neither does the novel. This approach, elucidated by Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and Said in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), is invoked by Lennard J. Davis in *Factual Fictions*. Davis argues that emerging in the Early Modern period, the novel is a discourse marked by a constitutive ambivalence towards facts and fiction. He links the beginning of the novel to journalistic writings, instead of romance, through an archaeological study of the discourse of journalism. He uses a method wherein the “first and preeminent notion in

\(^\text{11}\) Robert, 31.
\(^\text{12}\) Robert, 32.
any methodology of beginnings is that of the threshold”, and locates the emergence of the novel in the tensions and trends within journalistic writings. Roland Barthes, a structuralist and later post-structuralist, in his famous essay ‘Writing and the Novel’ (1953) examines the novel as a narrative characterized by the ‘serial story’ or ‘teleology’, and the use of ‘third person’ account, which together create a false sense of order, familiarity, universality and security among its readers. He argues that, “Narration is a form common to both the Novel and to History” and discusses the similarities between them. He argues that by virtue of sharing basic narrative functions of constructing false worlds, there exists practically no difference between cosmogonies, myths, histories or novels.

‘Rise’

Significantly different from these two notions of origin or beginning, is the notion of ‘rise’ used by historicists who reject timeless and universal standards in order to emphasize the periodicity of individuals, events, cultural phenomena etc. They include a sense of process in understanding the past, which is linked not merely to the present but also to the future. The future cannot precede the past and is always an outcome of it. Literary texts make sense only when they are located in their contexts. Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* argues that there exists a close social connection between the development of the novel and the English Middle classes. Watt argues that a wide range of factors, like greater social mobility, urbanism, greater sexual equality, decline of feudal patronage, rise of publishing houses, growing rates of literacy, developing notions of private leisure as well as the influence of materialist writings of Locke and Descartes leading to the rise of formal realism and the ideology of secular individualism, were responsible for the rise of the novel.

**APPROACHES TO THE NOVEL**

While none of these concepts can simplistically be associated to some exclusive method, Frederic Jameson offers further insight into the concepts of looking at all things past in the ‘Preface’ to *The Political Unconscious* by arguing:

---

... traditional dialectics teaches us, the historicising operation can follow two
distinct paths, which only ultimately meet in the same place: the path of the
object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things
themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and
categories by which we attempt to understand those things.\(^\text{16}\)

The novel has been studied in both these ways. While some have examined the novel in
terms of its historical origins, others have interrogated the novel form through different
concepts and categories. For instance, Mikhail Bakhtin in ‘Forms of time and of the
Chronotope in the Novel’ (1937-38) uses Einstein’s mathematical category of
‘chronotope’ to come to terms with the novel. He gives the name chronotope (time-
space) “to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationship that are
artistically expressed in literature”.\(^\text{17}\) Bakhtin views the chronotope as a formally
constitutive category of literature, which has intrinsic generic significance. It is the
chronotope that gives character to each genre and thereby, defines it as well as
distinguishes it from other genres. Bakhtin studies chronotopes that occur in the novel,
like ‘the road’, ‘the path of life’, ‘mystery’ etc., which are produced in time and are
reinforced by tradition.

**Nation, Colonialism and the Novel**

Critics with post-colonial concerns examine the novel through categories like
colonialism, imperialism, eurocentricism, racism, nationalism or orientalism. Marthe
Robert in *Origins of the Novel* argues that the novel became a dominant genre “mainly
due to its encroachments on neighbouring territories it surreptitiously infiltrated,
gradually colonizing almost all literature”.\(^\text{18}\) Or, “similar in many respects to the
imperialistic society from which it sprang... it is irresistibly drawn towards the universal
and the absolute, towards generalisation of events and ideas”.\(^\text{19}\) Edward Said in *Culture
and Imperialism* argues that “imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such
degree that it is impossible... to read one without in some way dealing with the other.”\(^\text{20}\)
Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983) correlates the rise of the novel with
the rise of modern nationalism. The nation, he argues, acquires a historical place and


\(^{17}\) Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’ 84.

\(^{18}\) Robert, 4.

\(^{19}\) Robert, 4.

\(^{20}\) Said, 70-71.
status only after becoming conscious of nationalism. The novel, for Anderson, along with the newspaper, plays a significant role in "re-presenting" the imagined community of the nation. The novel, as a genre, acquires a coherence, which is marked by its function in creating a "nation-idea". While some post-colonialists try to uncover the prejudices and stereotypes propagated by the novel, some study the role played by the novel in building the institution of colonialism, others link the form of the novel to the 'form' of colonialism.

**Gender and the Novel**

Feminist critics look at the novel from the perspective of gender and explore links between the novel and the role/status of women in history. Nancy Armstrong in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* argues that the novel arose in the modern age in an era of individualism, which, unlike popular perception, was heralded by women. While men continued to retain their political/public identity, it was women who developed an individualism signified by differences in emotional natures. Armstrong argues that the rise of the novel was based "upon a struggle to say what made a woman desirable" and the novel, during the early eighteenth century, contributed to changing the criteria for determining the individuality of females. Rosalind Miles in *The Female Form* argues, "women and the novel have been particularly important to one another", with the novel being the only form in which women "have contributed on anything like equal terms with men". Miles demonstrates how the practice of the nineteenth century in which women writers had to disguise their female identity in order to make their novels acceptable, was, in fact, a reversal of the early eighteenth century practice when male authors did the same in order to get their novels published. From the 1960s onwards, feminist critics have taken a lot of interest in the novel arguing that the novel is a genre 'of', 'for' and 'by' women. Some important critics who have elaborated this claim are Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Sandra Gilber and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Patricia Stubbs in *Women and Fiction* (1979) and Terry Lovell in *Consuming Fiction* (1987). There are debates and contrary views held.

---

24 Miles, 2.
however, by feminist critics of the novel. For instance, Jane Spencer, in *The Rise of the Women Novelist*, while accepting that women novelists played a very important and path breaking role in the development of the novel, argues that the proliferation of women writers did not necessarily mean greater power for women in general. Giving an explanation, which she herself calls ‘paradoxical’, Spencer argues that women writers were rising in numbers in the eighteenth century but “women’s condition in general was deteriorating.” She argues, “Women’s writing is not the same thing as women’s rights.”

**Print, Other Media and the Novel**

Some critics also tend to see the development of all literature in terms of media – oral, written, performance, print, radio, film and internet, with each media affecting or displacing the other, throwing up its own genres and causing related mutations in the formal characteristics of those genres. It is first and foremost the media and as a consequence the genre that dominates particular epochs, with other forms getting marginalized but never disappearing entirely. The novel, therefore, is seen as a genre of the print culture of the modern age, coming into its own in the book form by the eighteenth century. Ralph Fox in *The Novel and The People* (1937) writes, “...the novel as an art in its own right, with its own rules, with its universal acceptance and appreciation, is a creature of our own civilization, *a creature, above, all, of the printing press.*” Pierre Bourdieu, in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), argues that literary works are produced in a ‘complex institutional framework’ comprising of publishers, critics, agents, and academics etc., which collectively determine the creation of a work of art. A novel, therefore, must not be assessed ‘internally’ but in terms of these factors of literary ‘production’. John Sutherland in *Bestsellers* (1981) argues that more than two thousand new novels are put out in the British and American markets every year. An author in a market is “merely a rate of production... a brand-name [and a] standardized product.” He argues that “the novel is necessarily tied to the wheels of progressive technology, commercial management and the dictatorship of the consumer.”

Seymour Chatman, in *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (1990), compares the commonality between literature and cinema and

25 Spencer, xi.
29 Sutherland, 12.
compares the commonality between literature and cinema and proposes that today it is essential to understand this commonality before the distinctiveness of the cinema or the literature of our times can be discerned. George P. Landow, in *Hypertext* (1992), argues that, "over the past several decades literary theory and computer hypertext, apparently unconnected areas of inquiry, have increasingly converged."\(^{30}\) The post-structuralist conceptions of Jacques Derrida or Roland Barthes about texts being open-ended, fluid, perpetually unfinished, multilinear, multisequential, intertextual, etc. have found their true form, without wilful intent, in the electronic medium of computer hypertexts. Page-bound texts in books are no longer capable of giving expression to the de-centred multivocality of today’s times. The new medium of Internet is, therefore, throwing up its own new literary forms currently unfolding in the world around us.

**Epic and the Novel**

Some critics also approach the development of the novel by arguing how existing literary forms pave way for the new. They look at the generic, formal and thematic concerns of earlier genres and connect them with the characteristics of the new ones. One major tendency of this approach is to compare the novel to the epic. G.W.F. Hegel argues, in a compilation of his lectures called *Aesthetics* (1842), that art forms characterize stages in the history of consciousness. While epic is an expression of an unorganized heroic age, symbolizing an organic unity between people, nature and society; the novel belongs to a later stage in which the symmetry between mind and matter is shattered. The novel, therefore, strives for a unity, which is denied to it by the very nature of reality. For Hegel the modern age itself is antithetical to art. The novel embodies the contradiction between art and the modern world or what he specifically calls the contradiction between “the poetry of the heart and the opposing prose of circumstances and the accidents of external situations.”\(^{31}\) Hegel calls the novel ‘modern popular epic’, thereby, laying the foundation for almost all future critics of the novel for seeing continuity as well as opposition between forms of the epic and novel. Using Hegelian categories, the pre-Marxist Georg Lukács, in *The Theory of The Novel* (1920) employs a method, which he later called ‘abstract synthesis’, to come to terms with the novel. He finds it essential to constantly compare the novel with the epic. Lukács argues that in the epic men are at home in the universe without having a sense of themselves as


unique individuals, while the novel is an expression of 'transcendental homelessness' or man's alienation or estrangement from the world. For Lukács the "novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality". Further, "The epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life". Unlike the novel, the hero of the epic is never an individual in the strict sense and its theme is not about personal destiny but the destiny of a community. The material of the novel has a "discrete, unlimited nature" while that of the epic has a "continuum-like infinity." The novel is the epic of a world which has been "abandoned by God" and which tells the adventures of interiority. Its hero is always a seeker who tries to reconcile the paradoxical nature of the world. Great novels sometimes have a tendency to overlap with the epic and capture its unity. Mikhail Bakhtin in 'Epic and Novel' contrasts the epic, a genre which has completed its development, with the novel which is "the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding." He argues that the contrast between epic and novel has been made primarily to criticize 'epic heroisation' on the one hand and simultaneously to elevate the status of the novel vis-à-vis contemporary literature on the other. The epic world, for him, contains a single, unified worldview, while the novel contains possibilities of multiple realities. The hero of the epic does not exist outside his destiny or fate, while the hero of the novel is an individual dealing with the "inconclusive present-day reality". Bakhtin argues that the novel and the epic are characterized by two rival impulses of 'novelness' and 'epicness' which can dominate literature from time to time and need not occur in any strict historical sequence. Ralph Fox in The Novel and the People also compares the novel to the epic calling it, "The epic art form of our modern, bourgeois society." Christopher Hill, in Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth Century England (1985), observes that the "novel is to bourgeois society what the epic had been to feudal society". He argues that the key

32 Lukács, Theory 56.
33 Lukács, Theory 60.
34 Lukács, Theory 81.
35 Lukács, Theory 88.
36 Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel' 53.
37 Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel' 66.
38 Fox, 72.
what the epic had been to feudal society". 39 He argues that the key values of the epic are military courage, honour and chivalry, and from the seventeenth century onwards "no significant poet" 40 has written epics. Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* devotes one whole chapter called ‘Fielding and the Epic Theory of the Novel’ to debunk Fielding’s classification of *Joseph Andrews* as “a comic epic poem in prose”. He argues against the tendency to read the novel vis-à-vis the epic by saying:

... it is surely evident that... the epic is, after all, an oral and poetic genre dealing with the public and usually remarkable deeds of historical or legendary persons engaged in a collective rather than an individual enterprise; and none of these things can be said of the novel. 41

Franco Moretti, in *Modern Epic* (1996), uses Hegel’s definition of the epic to argue that well known novels like *Ulysses* or *Hundred Years of Solitude* are in fact epics, which have been wrongly classified as novels in a novel-centric literary world. 42 Joseph Frank in ‘Spatial Form in Modern Novel’ (1945) also classifies *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as epics. 43

**Romances and the Novel**

Another tendency in novel criticism is that of reading the novel in relation to romances. The term ‘novel’ stabilized in common use only by the late eighteenth century. Before that, almost all early English novelists labelled their works differently, but defined them almost inevitably against the romance. For instance, Samuel Richardson writes, “... What a duce, do you think I am writing a Romance? Don’t you see that I am copying Nature...?” 44 And, Henry Fielding writes, “... I think it may very reasonably be required of every writer, that he keeps within the bounds of possibility...”. 45 Clara Reeve in *The Progress of Romance Through Times, Centuries and Manners* (1785) distinguishes between romance and the modern novel. She says that the word ‘Novel’ was first used to distinguish works in prose fiction from the ‘Romance’. While the ‘Romance’ is a heroic fable, which deals with fabulous persons

40 Hill, 324.
45 Qt. in Allott, 42.
While the ‘Romance’ is a heroic fable, which deals with fabulous persons and things in lofty and elevated language, the ‘Novel’ presents a picture of real life and manners in contemporary times in order to deceive the readers into believing that everything is real. Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism discusses the genre of the novel by counterposing it against the romance. He argues that the novel creates “real people” while the romance gives rise to “stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes.”

This difference in the conception of characterization is the main difference between novel and romance. Undercutting all generic categories, however, he argues, “there is hardly any modern romance that could not be made out to be a novel, and vice versa.”

Hubert McDermott in Novel and Romance (1989) places the works of Richardson and Fielding in a continuing tradition of fiction, instead of distinguishing between the novel and romance. He argues against any break in the literary tradition of prose fiction. Geoffrey Day in From Fiction to the Novel (1987) argues that unlike popular conception “the Novel is but a modern modification of the same ingredients which constitute the romance…” Critics of the novel, therefore, either view the novel as a genre which develops in opposition to the themes and concerns of the romances and is, therefore, notably different from the romances, or they see a continuity between the novel and the romance and thereby, analyse their similarities.

**Realism and the Novel**

Another important factor in characterizing the novel is the category of ‘realism’. Ian Watt argues that “the lowest common denominator of the novel genre as a whole...[is] formal realism.” He asserts that realism differentiates the novel from all previous fiction. The novel as a form challenges all literary traditionalism, both of classicism and medievalism. Its new modern temper is critical, anti-traditional and innovating, its method — that of getting to the truth through individual experience. According to Watt this individual experience or the circumstantial view of life, when expressed in a narrative, is called formal realism. Walter Allen writes, “From its very nature the novel demands a greater or less degree of realism, of fidelity to the facts of the world as men commonly see them.”

---

46 Frye, 304.
47 Frye, 305.
49 Watt, 35.
50 Allen, 23.
that "the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel – the merit on which all its other merits... helplessly and submissively depend." Lionel Trilling in 'Manners, Morals, and the Novel' (1950) says, "The novel... is a perpetual quest for reality...". Realism is seen to be so crucial to the novel that George Lukács in his *Studies in European Realism* (1930) practically studies all developments and trends in the novel through changes in the approach to realism. He treats realism as almost synonymous with a good novel. Realism for him can achieve a comprehensive description of the totality of society. It is notable for us that university papers in novels all over the world are most commonly classified into the early/proto-realist novel, the realist novel, the modern novel and the postmodern novel.

Many critics, however, argue against studying the novel in terms of the concept of realism. Marthe Robert uses psychoanalysis to argue that the truth of the novel relies upon the success of the delusion/fantasy it can pass off as reality. She argues that the novel has "a compulsory content and an optional form", the compulsory content being that of Family Romances. Michael McKeon argues that the development of the novel follows the resolution of the romance genre into a contest between "romance" and "historical" elements, or what he calls "the double reversal of romance idealism by naïve empiricism and of both by extreme scepticism." This dialectics brings about the historicist revolution and therefore, the tendency of accurate description in prose writing.

*Modern and Postmodern Novels*

The modern novel opposes traditional realism and its components, like chronological plots, continuous narratives omniscient narrators, ‘close endings’, etc., in favour of experiments of various kinds like an emphasis on impression, subjectivity, point-of-view, stream of consciousness, non-chronological and discontinuous narratives, fragmented forms and self-reflexivity. Frederic Jameson in 'Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism' states that:

---

54 Robert, 32.
The target of their [the modernists'] attack becomes the very concept of reality itself... The objection is thus, clearly, a critique of something like an ideology of realism, and charges that realism, by suggesting that representation is possible... tends to perpetuate a preconceived notion of some external reality to be imitated...

Novelists like Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence etc. are some major modernist novelists of the early twentieth century. Subsequently, the 'Postmodern' novel emerged as a reaction against the modernists. In 1955, through his two essays, the French writer Robbe-Grillet announced a new type of writing called the nouveau roman, rejecting all kinds of writings that had gone before. He argued for the death of plot, action, narrative, character, author’s privilege etc. and said that such things had no place in the novel. Many writers like Nobakov, Beckett, Kafka, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco and Marquez have written novels, which have variably been called new fiction, anti-fiction, metafiction, surfiction or postmodern fiction. Brian McHale, in Postmodernist Fiction (1987), suggests a possibility of mimetic relations between forms of postmodernist fiction to advanced, late capitalist systems. Frederic Jameson, too, calls postmodernism “the cultural logic of late capitalism” in a book called by the same name, although he says that the novel is the weakest of the newer cultural areas and is considerably excelled by its narrative counterparts in film and video.

McHale differentiates between modernist and postmodernist fiction by arguing that:

... the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as... How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?... What is there to be known; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?

Whereas:

... the dominant of postmodernist fiction is Ontological.... That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like ... which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my

---

selves is to do it...what is a world? what kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?⁵⁹

Raymond Federman, a novelist and critic, known more in recent times for his assertion about the ‘Death or End of Postmodernism’ writes in *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays* (1993) that postmodernism is “all about: A Supreme Indecision!”⁶⁰, which turns its back on the representation of “Reality”, “Life”, and “Man”.

Critics also argue that modernism and postmodernism do not occur in any sequence but exist simultaneously. Brian McHale in a later work called *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992) writes that “modernism and post-modernism are not successive stages in some inevitable evolution from less advanced aesthetic forms, but rather alternative contemporary practices, equally ‘advanced’ or ‘progressive’, equally available, between which writers are free to choose”.⁶¹ Elizabeth Dipple in *The Unresolvable Plot* (1988) argues that “the difference between modernism and postmodernism remains obscurely difficult to talk about”⁶² and in fact argues for continuities and similarities between the two, and therefore also argues that the development of the novel should be seen in two phases only, i.e., the realist and the experimental. Remarkably, some critics, while dealing with the development of the novel, find categories like the modern and the postmodern completely useless, and stick to the older concept of ‘realism’. Lucien Goldman in *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (1964) criticizes Robbe-Grillet’s ideas about *nouveau roman* to argue that writers like “Nathalie Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet are among the most radically realistic writers in contemporary French literature”⁶³ because they seek to represent a different human reality of our times in self-admittedly different, rigorous and radical ways. David Lodge in *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (1971) insists on a precise overlap between realism and the novel. The novel, he argues, is not dead, therefore, realism, too, lives on. George Levine in ‘Realism Reconsidered’ (1974) argues that despite claims to anti-realism, realism as a way of looking at the world, a kind of metaphysic continues to thrive in the modern novel. Realism, he argues, has been a central mode of the novel which has been

---


“radically revised” by writers according to newer challenges and transformations. Raymond Williams in *The Long Revolution* examines realism to propose a “possible new meaning of realism.” He argues that everyday, ordinary reality is now conceived differently, and although new techniques have been developed to describe this new reality, the intentions of novelists remain wholly realist.

**Ideology of the Novel**

Critics have also examined the novel, as a genre, ‘ideologically’. Walter L. Reed in *An Exemplary History of the Novel* (1981) argues that the novel as a genre resists institutionalization or getting incorporated into the official systems of genres. “The novel,” for Reed, “is a deliberate stranger to literary decorum; it insists on placing itself beyond the pale of literary tradition. Its ethos of opposition is fundamental and should not be ignored.” Reed singles out the novel’s sense of itself as an “outsider” to be one of its most basic features. Lennard J. Davis in his most unusual study of the ideology of the genre of the novel in *Resisting Novels* argues that out of “the million titles that have no doubt been printed since the beginning of the eighteenth century, only a handful come to mind as being capable of fostering social change”. The novel, he argues has had no radical political effect and has completely failed the working classes because it is incapable of representing groups or collectives. It is strongly oriented towards the isolated person, whether in character, dialogue, plot or in the process of reading itself. He argues that this politically conservative nature of the novel can be changed only by the readers, and “resisting” the novel is one step towards “reforming” the novel.

**Fiction and/or the Novel**

In our times, the study of literature through the categories of ‘forms’ or ‘genres’ has become a hotbed of disputes among literary critics, with many arguing against the division of literature into genres. A-historical tendencies within literary theory emphasize the study of novels in terms of features or themes, which are unique not merely to the novel but can also be found in other prose writings produced in different times and places in history. Rather than the genre of the novel, therefore, it is these features and

---

67 Davis, *Resisting Novels* 227.
themes, which have become the main object of study for many contemporary literary critics. The earlier a-historicists, i.e., liberal humanists found permanence in 'human values' in all literature; now structuralists, new critics or stylists stress upon slightly more complex yet eternal and universal categories like – 'myths', 'narratives', 'discourse', 'linguistic elements' for studying the novel. Anti-genre tendencies have been further strengthened by developments in myth-criticism, post-structuralism and narratology. The strongest attack against genre-criticism came in the mid-twentieth century from Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism (1957). Frye argues that all prose genres in literature, including the novel, must be dealt within a single category of prose fiction. He uses concepts like 'myths', 'modes', 'symbols' and 'archetypes' to analyse all literature. Fiction, he argues, should be studied as a form, instead of the novel. Fiction has four strands binding it together, namely: novel, confession, anatomy and romance. A "novel-centered view of prose fiction" must be replaced by a more "relative" view of forms as a complex combination of these various strands. Wyne C. Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) and David Lodge in Language of Fiction (1966) also prefer the concept of 'fiction' in comparison to the 'novel'. Booth examines novels in terms of subtle differences in rhetorical functions like "authoritative telling", "impersonal narration", "author's voice" etc. While Lodge argues that a novelist is a "verbal artist" whose basic medium is language, therefore, any understanding of the novel requires a detailed study of the "language" of prose fiction.

Today, historicist critics, i.e. those who view historical development as a progress over the past, with discernable and classifiable stages of development, find it practically impossible to study the genre of the novel without first asserting the importance of studying genres. Frederic Jameson in The Political Unconscious (1981) finds it essential to first outline two incompatible tendencies of genre criticism before devoting his attention to the study of novels. He calls these tendencies, the semantic and the syntactic, respectively. The semantic being one in which a given genre is understood in terms of some ultimate vision or essence and the syntactic approach being one, which tries to understand a genre in terms of its laws and limits, or as a model. The former tries to emphasize the 'why' of a genre while the latter tries to emphasize its 'how'. Discussing

---

the shortcomings of both these tendencies, Jameson argues that it is necessary to invent a "new historically reflexive, way of using categories", which will both classify as well as describe. Michael McKeon in his anthology, Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach (2000), argues that his main purpose for putting together a collection of important essays on novel theory is to "rectify" the imbalance created by "literary theory" over the past few decades in undermining history as well as questioning literary categories, so much so, that "in common academic usage there's a tendency to conflate 'the novel' not only with 'fiction' but also with 'narrative'". Critics of the novel can thus broadly be subdivided into those who accept the novel as a genre and thereby believe in the historicising principle, or those who are anti-genre/anti-historicist and therefore study all prose fiction as a single category.

**METHODODOLOGY**

Thus, on the whole, the novel as a genre is shrouded in paradoxes. There exist many irreconcilable and opposing views about different aspects of the novel. Obviously, all the paradoxical views about the novel cannot simultaneously be true. In the course of our thesis, therefore, we shall try to sift out the nature of the novel from among these conflicting views. Before getting on with this task, however, let us briefly state that there exist two basic approaches to finding out the characteristics of any occurrence in history — studying 'origins' and studying 'developments'. The genre of the novel can be understood in each of these ways. We can either try to discern the generic features of the novel by identifying characteristics that are symptomatic of its emergence and rise; or we can seek to understand the novel by locating attributes that have prevailed or sustained in the genre across its multifarious development and spread. Ideally, the basic results of both these types of studies must match and we believe that the veracity of any generic definition of the novel can be tested by comparing the similarities in the inferences of both these approaches. In the course of our entire examination, therefore, we shall devote ourselves to approaching the novel in both these ways.

It is also significant to note that both these approaches often find differential treatment in different literary methods and lead to different results and inferences. As we

---


have already discussed, the study of 'origins' tends to find preference with a-historical methods premised upon essentialized, continuous or eternal views about human history, because for such methods an understanding about the basic building blocks of society is crucial as well as sufficient for explaining and comprehending subsequent social and literary phenomenon. Similarly, the notion of 'beginnings' finds preference with a-historical methods that acknowledge change but remain highly essentialized because they look at the world through the prism of 'essential' parameters and concepts. These parameters tend to diffuse margins and give a sense of universality to all phenomenon. Methods that presuppose that change and progress are the pillars of human history prefer to study 'developments', because for such methods essential explanations are not enough to explain qualitative shifts brought about in social history, whose each stage has its own set of distinct characteristics. This is not to imply that developments are not studied by a-historicists, or that historicists do not study origins, but that both these approaches occupy a greater and less degree of priority vis-à-vis these respective methods of study. Let us understand this point in greater detail.

A-historicists believe that human society has certain basic, permanent or lasting features, and those factors that undergo change are never as important or consequential as those that remain the same. Systems of thought such as religion, liberal humanism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, myth-criticism, etc. could qualify as predominantly a-historical approaches which display remarkable ease in answering questions relating to origins or beginnings. Almost all religious ideologies, for instance, confidently offer detailed descriptions about the origin of the universe or of human beings, with much more surety than any scientific method. Sociologists or anthropologists often explain the social and historical relevance of these religious accounts by arguing that they are 'allegorical' rationalizations of history. The significance of myths, too, is argued in similar terms. Another such example is Freudian psychoanalysis, which comprehends all individuals and their relationships through the application of the same concept of the oedipal-myth. Methods such as narratology or stylistics also use 'universally applicable' categories like language, narrative and rhetoric to understand all literature. However, a-historical accounts display severe shortcomings in explaining or coming to terms with developments or changes, and exhibit a marked weakness in drawing up classificatory distinctions.
For instance, Freudian application of the oedipal-myth does not require taking into account distinct changes brought about in stage-wise development of human relationships ranging from pre-agrarian communes, joint family set-ups, and nuclear families to the ongoing disintegration of the family system. Edward Said’s new-critical work, *Orientalism*, does not explain the links between the historical spread of colonialism and the discourse of ‘orientalism’. Rather, Said offers a sweeping account of ‘orientalism’ as employed in pre-colonial times up to contemporary times, by non-colonial cultures as well as by imperialist and neo-colonial powers like the United States and Europe. In his essay ‘Writing and the Novel’, the structuralist and later post-structuralist critic, Roland Barthes, underscores the lack of any fundamental difference between genres as diverse as ‘cosmogonies’, ‘myths’, ‘histories’ or ‘novels’ because he finds them similar in their basic ‘rhetorical function’ as ‘narratives’. Linda Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, discusses the traits of recent writers like Italo Calvino, Salman Rushdie, Timothy Findley, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and others to suggest that, “The one thing, however, that we must never forget is that metafiction is not new....Rather it is part of a long novelistic tradition...”73, or, as she says elsewhere, “...narcissism can be argued to be, not an aberration, but the “original condition” of the novel as a genre.”74 Thus, we can say that a-historical views of history suffer from a fatal methodological flaw of being unable to explain change or to demarcate or classify differences.

On the other hand, historicists approach the rise or emergence of any phenomenon in society in a fundamentally different way. Broadly speaking, they tend to explain origins by detailing tendencies and trends that demarcate development and change. For instance, they believe that in order to understand ‘free verse’ it is important to understand preceding genres like ‘lyric poetry’ and ‘dramatic monologue’. Instead of focusing upon ‘absolute’ origins, however, they always focus upon ‘historical’ origins. They also try to examine the ‘why’ of all changes, since they view the movement of history as having a complex logic of cause and effect. Historicists, for instance, do not date capitalism or nationalism to any precise year or decade, rather, taking a cross section of time as their template they focus upon detailing and demarcating the

74 Hutcheon, *Narrative 8*.
distinctive characteristics and factors associated with the rise of the two. Similarly, with regard to the novel, historicists are relatively more comfortable in dealing with a ‘set’ of tendencies and a ‘range’ of early works, instead of any precise ‘first’ novel or a generically ‘perfect’ novel.

The problem of whether they should first assume certain works as novels and then study their characteristics, or first fix the characteristics of the novel and subsequently study specific literary works separately, is a perpetual methodological problem for them. This predicament of historicists in dealing with origins finds appropriate expression in the ‘chicken and egg’ maxim. Historicists often solve this problem by approaching history ‘dialectically’, i.e. treating the movement of history as an outcome of continuous conflicts between contradictory social and historical forces, or through a process of what is commonly understood in Hegelian terms as a ‘synthesis’ of ‘thesis’ and ‘anti-thesis’. Of course, historicists have their own differences and disagreements, and do not see eye to eye on all issues. All historicists, for instance, do not believe that historical developments have a dialectical basis, or that dialectics has a material basis. For instance, Raymond Williams’ concept of the dynamics of ‘residual’, ‘dominant’ and ‘emergent’ forces in society offers a model for understanding as well as classifying the process of historical change, but it is not based on dialectics. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of ‘dialogism’ comes close to the Marxist concept of ‘dialectics’; but is focused more upon the dialogic movement of history based on the development of ‘discourse’, rather than that of ‘material forces’. To put it briefly, we can say that origins for historicists are always linked to understanding developments, while all developments are understood by a-historicists through the essence of origins or through the stasis of the same universal parameters.

As far as we are concerned, we shall try to understand the genre of the novel by following a historical method premised upon a materialist conception of the world. In our opinion, the main areas of debate about the novel revolve around its rise, the relevance of realism vis-à-vis the genre of the novel, and the trajectory of the development of the novel. We shall, therefore, devote different chapters of our thesis to investigating these aspects of the novel in detail. Additionally, we shall address other debates regarding the novel within the scope of these chapters. The dispute over the dating of the novel is integrally linked to how the novel is defined as a genre. Thus, while trying to trace its rise, we shall also try to delineate different characteristics of the novel, and as a corollary, while delineating its characteristics, we shall try to find
answers to disputes about its rise. We shall make an effort to determine the extent to which the novel bears resemblance to genres like the epic and the romances, and whether its rise should basically be viewed in continuation or opposition to these genres. Besides, we shall interrogate the relevance of gender, nation, colonialism and class vis-à-vis the genre of the novel. In the course of our study we shall try to investigate whether realism comprises an integral generic characteristic of the novel, or whether it signifies only a stage in the novel's development. Towards this end we shall extensively examine various views forwarded by critics and novelists about realism in the novel. We shall primarily cover the realism debates in a chronological manner. We shall also try to understand and identify the characteristics of different stages of the novel and delineate modern and postmodern techniques of writing. We shall make an effort to identify aspects which undergo change across the development of the novel. Accordingly, we shall also try to identify features that endure and sustain in the course of its developments. Furthermore, we shall investigate the development of the novel vis-à-vis the print medium.