Chapter 8
Novels, Society and History

❖ The Rise of the Novel

- Novels emerged as a new literary genre in many parts of the world.
- The novel first took firm root in England and France. New groups of lower middle class people such as shopkeepers and clerks, along with the traditional aristocratic and gentlemanly classes in England and France, formed the readership for novels.
- Earnings of authors increased, which freed them from financial dependence on the patronage of aristocrats and gave them independence to experiment with different literary styles.
- The novel allowed flexibility in the form of writing.

❖ The Publishing Market

- People had easier access to books.
- Technological improvements in printing brought down the prices of books and innovations in marketing led to expanded sales.
- Novels were both personally and publicly read as they described worlds that were both absorbing and believable.

❖ Community and Society

- The Novel created a feeling of connection with the fate of the rural communities.
- It used vernacular languages that are spoken by common people and created a sense of shared world between diverse people in a nation.

❖ The New Women

- Women got more leisure to read as well as write novels. They drew upon their experiences, wrote about family life and earned public recognition.
- Many novels, like that of Jane Austen (Pride and Prejudice), gave a glimpse of the world of women in rural society in early nineteenth century Britain.
- Women novelists not only popularized the domestic role of women but also showcased the women rebel. Writers such as Charlotte Bronte (Jane Eyre) dealt with the new rebel women.

❖ Novels for the Young

- Novels for young boys idealized a new man: someone who was powerful, assertive, independent and daring.
- These novels aroused the excitement and adventure of conquering strange lands.
- Love stories written for adolescent girls also first became popular in this period.
Ramona (1884) by Helen Hunt Jackson, and Sarah Chauncey Woolsey’s What Katy Did (1872) along with R.L. Stevenson’s Treasure Island and Rudyard Kipling’s Jungle Book (1894) became great hits.

 Colonialism and After

- The early novel contributed to colonialism by making the readers feel they were a part of a superior community of fellow colonialists.
- The view of the colonised people as primitive and barbaric holds true in works such as Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe.
- Later in the 20th century, writers such as Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) wrote novels that criticized colonialism.

 The Novel Comes to India

- Some of the earliest Indian novels were written in Bengali and Marathi.
- 1857: Baba Padmanji wrote Yamuna Prayatnam
- 1861: Lakshman Moreshwar Halbe’s Muktamala was published
- Indian novelists wrote for developing a modern literature of the country that could produce a sense of national belonging.
- Translations helped spread the popularity and growth of the novel.

 The Novel in South India

- 1889: O. Chandu Menon’s novel named Indulekha was published. This was the first modern novel in Malayalam.
- 1878: In Andhra Pradesh, Kandukuri Viresalingam wrote a Telegu novel called Rajasekhara Caritamu.

 The Novel in Hindi

- Bharatendu Harishchandra, the pioneer of modern Hindi literature, encouraged many poets and writers to recreate and translate novels from other languages.
- 1882: Srinivas Das published his novel Pariksha-Guru (The Master Examiner). Pariksha-Guru reflects the inner and outer world of the newly emerging middle classes under the colonial rule.
- The writings of Devaki Nandan Khatri created a novel-reading public in Hindi. His novel Chandrakanta was hugely popular.
- Premchand’s writings brought about excellence in the Hindi novels. He began writing in Urdu and then shifted to Hindi.
- 1916: Premchand’s novel Sewasadan lifted the Hindi novel from the realm of fantasy, moralizing and simple entertainment to a serious reflection on the
lives of ordinary and social issues. *Sewasadan* deals with the poor conditions of women, dowry and the hegemony of the Indian upper classes.

- **Novels in Bengal**
  - There were two kinds of Bengali novels that emerged in the 19th century: one was based on historical issues and the other was based on social problems and romantic relationships between men and women.
  - The new *bhadralok* found himself at home in the more private worlds of reading novels.
  - Initially, the Bengali novel used a colloquial style associated with urban life; it also used *meyeli*, the language associated with women’s speech. This style was replaced by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s prose, which was sanskritised but also contained a more vernacular style in it.
  - By the 20th century, the power of telling stories in simple language made Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) the most popular novelist in Bengal and probably in the rest of India.

- **Uses of the Novel**
  - Colonial administration found ‘vernacular’ novels a valuable source of information on native life and customs. Such information was useful for them in governing Indian society, with its large variety of communities and castes.
  - Books were translated into English, often by British administrators or Christian missionaries.
  - Indians used the novel as a powerful medium to criticise what they considered defects in the society and to suggest remedies.
  - Novels presented a glorified account of the past, which in turn created a sense of national pride among the readers.
  - Novels created a sense of collective belonging on the basis of one’s language.
  - The novels made their readers familiar with the ways in which people in other parts of their land spoke their languages.

- **Indian Women and the Novel**
  - Women not only read novels but also started to write.
  - Novels allowed for a new kind of conception of womanhood. Women in South India began writing novels and short stories.
  - Ideas of a liberal environment and reform for women were presented in many works such as Rokeya Hossein’s *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmara*. 
• Many women authors such as Hannah Mullen and Sailabala Ghosh Jaya wrote in secret.

❖ Caste Practices, ‘Lower Castes’ and Minorities
• Novels such as Indirabai and Indulekha were written by members of the upper castes, and were primarily about upper caste characters.
• 1892: Pothere Kunjambu, a ‘lower caste’ writer from Kerala, wrote a novel called Saraswativijayam, which mounted a strong attack on caste oppression.
• From the 1920s, a new kind of novel emerged that depicted the lives of peasants and ‘low castes’.
• Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer (1908-94) was one of the early Muslim writers to gain wide renown as a novelist in Malayalam. Basheer’s short novels and stories spoke about details from the everyday life of Muslim households, poverty, insanity and life in prison.

❖ The Nation and its History
• New educated minds wanted a new view of the past that would show that Indians could be independent minded and had been so in history.
• 1857: Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay’s (1827-94) Anguriya Binimoy was published, and it became the first historical novel written in Bengal.
• These novels produced a sense of a pan-Indian belonging. They could inspire actual political movements and raised questions about nation and nationality.

❖ The Novel and Nation-Making
• Novels included all kinds and classes of people in its narrative so that they could be seen to belong to a shared world.
• Writers such as Premchand wrote novels that looked towards the future without forgetting the importance of the past. His works such as Rangbhoomi and Godan (1936) depict a community based on democratic values.
• Rabindranath Tagore wrote about the condition of women and nationalism in his novels such as Ghare Baire (1916).

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