Lecture Notes on

Rise of English Novel- Eighteenth Century Literature

B.A. English (Honours) Part 1

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This concise lecture note has been designed for Under Graduate course prescribed for Part 1 English Honours students by Magadh University. This note briefly focuses on the rise of Novel as a literary genre in eighteenth century English literature and is divided into following important parts:

1. An Introduction to the term “Novel”.
2. Types of Novels.

1. Introduction:

Until the seventeenth century the word ‘Novel’ meant a short story of the kind written and collected by Boccaccio (1313-1375) in his “Decameron.” By about 1700, it had got a context which The Oxford Dictionary describes as a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length in which characters and actions are representative of real life and are portrayed in plot of more or less complexity. In other words, a Novel as we understand it today, is a story longer, more realistic and more complicated than the Italian ‘novella’ as written by Boccaccio and other writers of his time.

The novel is now the most widely read of all kinds of literature, and one is surprised to find that it is fairly new. Indeed, it was not until the eighteenth century that people began to read and write the sort of books that we now call “Novels.” By about 1770, the reading of novels had become a fashion- almost a ‘mania’ with ‘upper class’ women. The novel had become what cinema became in 1920’s and 1930’s: a gateway into the world of Pleasant dreams.

It was, in large measures, the product of the Middle ass ideas and sensibilities, a patterning of imagined events set against a clearly realized social background and taking its view of what was significant in human behaviour from agreed public attitudes. Many currents came together to produce the English novel. Elizabethan prose tales, picaresque stories, and accounts of urban world represented one. The
character writers of the seventeenth century developed a technique of psychological portraiture which was available to Addison and Steele in their creation of Sir Roger de Coverley, Sir Andrew Freeport, Will Honeycomb and the rest of the portrait gallery in “The Spectator.” Certain Spectator’s papers, the writings of Defoe, and Swift’s ‘Gulliver’s Travels’ provided the most immediate and obvious background for the emergence of the English novel, and the story of the novel in the modern sense of the term probably begins here.

Antony Burgess observes in his book “The Novel Now,” that though novels had been in existence since a long time there was in comparison with the traditional forms of literature, still a sort of upstart quality about them. There were people who, despite high examples set by Cervantes, Flaubert and Henry James regarded novelist as the lowest form of literary practitioners. The novelists according to them did not ennoble the world but presented it as it was, with all the meanness, dirt and sexuality. Added to this fact, some of the novelists like Richardson and Dickens were men of poor education as they never went to Universities and had never been taught Greek or Latin. They were neither scholars nor ‘Gentlemen’ and this added to the negligence of novels in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

Samuel Richardson was called The Father of English Novel. Thomas Nash wrote the first English novel- The Unfortunate Traveller.

The greatest theme of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novelist is the relation between gentility and virtue. The life and the colour of the Novels, the vivid picture of characters and accounts of scenes on the road, the sense of English countryside helps to give it freshness and vitality. Any novel must have length for the author to build up characters, background, and atmosphere by whatever techniques or method he chooses to employ. The most important of these techniques are narrative, conversational, letters and stream of consciousness.
2. TYPES of NOVELS

1. Picaresque Novel.
2. Sentimental or Epistolary Novel.
3. Domestic Novel.

1. PICARESQUE NOVEL

This form originated in Spain. The word Picaresque came from the Spanish word “Picaro’ which means a rogue. Cervantes was a Spanish writer who wrote a novel called “Don Quixote’ (1605) and with it begins the history of the Picaresque novel. “The Unfortunate Traveller” is the best example of the picaresque novel in English.

This term is applied for any long story in which a number of separate events, sometimes comic or violent, were joined together only by the fact that they happened to the chief character. It basically deals with the adventure of the Hero, who moves from one place to another in English, Daniel Defoe was the first to write a Picaresque novel.

Henry Fielding drew on the picaresque tradition to set his characters on the road by involving them in a great variety of adventure. Smollett made the picaresque novel quite popular. He was aquainted with the French and Spanish Picaresque novels. He had also translated a few and took the hero on series of adventure on land and sea. According to Edwin Muir, this genre is a very striking class in English fiction. This novel type is realistic in manner, episodic in structure and satirical in aim.
2. SENTIMENTAL NOVEL

It is also called as Epistolary novel. Epistolary came from the word “Epistle” which means letter. This kind of novel is written in form of series of letters. Here the main character corresponds with others through letters. Samuel Richardson, the father of the English novel. His famous novels are “Pamela or Virtue Rewarded”, “Clarissa Harlowe” and “Sir Charles Grandison.” one striking feature of his novels are that all are titled after the name of the protagonist. His works are largely the reflection of man himself and in spite of their faults, they are of immense importance for development of the Novel.

3. DOMESTIC NOVEL

In this type of novel, the writer deals with the social life of the people and with the daily lives of the characters. The beginning is made by Fanny Burney but the most popular exponent is Jane Austen. Frances or Fanny Burney is another important figure in the history of domestic novel. Her novels are written with fine simplicity of style and show her to possess a considerable narrative faculty and a great zest for life. Her observation of life was keen and close, and her description, of society are in a delightful satirical vein in many ways like that of Jane Austen.

4. GOTHIC NOVEL

The term ‘Gothic’ originally referred to ‘Goths’- a Germanic tribe, then came to signify ‘Germanic’ and then medieval. Towards the end of the eighteenth century grew the Novel of Terror or Gothic Novel better known as Gothic Romances. The English romantic movement which found its supreme expression in poetry, was reflected in a somewhat cruder and more primitive manner in the novel, where it helped to inaugurate a new literary genre- the thriller. The first terror novel emerged with Horace Walpole’s “The Castle of Otranto.”

The extraordinary change that emerged in the last quarter of the eighteenth century is difficult to define, the Romantic movement was essentially complex and changes in sensibility had long been in progress.
*** List of Activities for Students:

1. Prepare a list of different English writers of the eighteenth century and their novels.

2. Did women writing emerge in this age? If yes, write a note on it.

3. Discuss the major themes of the majority of novels written during this age.

4. What difference do you feel between novels written during first half of the eighteenth century and in the later half of the age?

References:
