

## HENRY FIELDING AS THE PRECURSOR OF ENGLISH NOVEL: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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### Summary

The main aim behind the present paper is to throw ample light on Henry Fielding's contribution in the realm of English fiction. Henry Fielding is generally regarded as 'the father of English novel'. Although the novel started with Daniel Defoe, who wrote realistic fiction in first person narrative, it was Henry Fielding who gave a regular and proper shape to the novel in the eighteenth century. Like Daniel Defoe, Fielding also practiced realistic novels with a deep interest in the portraiture of contemporary life. In his works, *Joseph Andrews*, *Tom Jones*, *Jonathan Wild*, and *Amelia*, he has dealt with the evils of contemporary society. In other words, he also acts as a social reformer who wants to purge evils from society. After going through his works, one gets a very wide and extensive picture of English social life. He has rightly been called the precursor of the English novel in the real sense of words.

**Key words:** English novel and Henry Fielding, precursor, reformer, realistic.

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### 1. Introduction

Novel as a literary genre, gained popularity in the eighteenth century, but its genesis and origin can be traced back to 612 B.C when Epic of the Gilgamesh came into existence. Homer, a notable Epic writer, produced *Iliad*, and *Odyssey* during his time period from 700 BC to 800 BC. He started writing epic poetry, a long narrative dealing with serious subject-matter. Treading the footprints of Homer, Virgil wrote two epical poems-*Beowulf*, and *Aeneid* which were followed by John Milton who wrote *Paradise Lost* in ten books, followed by the eleventh book, *Paradise Regained*.

After epics were practiced by a number of literary men, in the 12th century, the writing of romances gained popularity. It was also called chivalric romance and flourished between 1000 AD and 1450 AD. The writers during this period shifted their interest from Epic writing to deal with the subjects like bravery, honour, adventure and courtly love. They also assimilated some features like magic, spell, necromancy and enchantment to change the interests and eagerness of the readers. Malory's *Morte d' Arthur* (1470) is an illustration of chivalric life centred on King Arthur's legend.

Geoffery Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is written both in poetry and prose. It embodies 24 stories. Besides he also wrote *Troilus and Creseyde*. It is remarkable for its socio-religious aspects of life instead of the farfetched reality of romances as done by his predecessors. Boccaccio's *Decameron* started the tradition of prose tales of amorous adventure before Malory and Chaucer. With the advent of new literary style, Burlesque, the popularity of romances was still in fashion till 1600. *Don Quixote*, by Miguel de Cervantes, has been written to mock the seriousness of chivalric romances. It also illustrates a new type of fiction-picaresque novel which started with the publication of *Lazarillo de Tolmes*. Picaresque tradition was a source

of inspiration for the writers to come in subsequent centuries which is evident through the writing of Mark Twain (*Huckleberry Finn*), and Saul Bellow (*The Adventures of Augie March*).

In the sixteenth century, Aphra Behn wrote *Oroonoko, or The History of the Royal Slave*. The main thematic concerns and Ideas of the novel are encouraged by the quest of adventures life by knights who search love of a beautiful lady. John Bunyan also wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, a religious allegory based on the pilgrimage of Christians. With its compact plot, art of characterization and narrative strategy followed by the writer, *Pilgrim Progress* is a model for the future generation of writers.

After the downfall of dramatic activities in literature, there was the starting of prose in literary field. The eighteenth century is called as an age of prose and reason. Periodical Essay and novel are the two important gifts of this period. In fact, Periodical Essay by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele was a mini-rehearsal of Periodical Essay resulted due to various factors-the rise of middle class, reflection of the temper of the age, appeal to the women, avoidance of religious and political controversies and interest in trade and commerce.

In nutshell, Periodical Essay was the mirror of the contemporary society. Several other factors also contributed a great deal in the growth of a Periodical essay-decline of drama, ready-made material, rise of common people and, last but not the least, there was no cramping limitations of classicism.

With the beginning of Periodical essay, the stage was set for the emergence was of novel writing. The novelists of the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift paved the way for new genre. Daniel Defoe dealt with a new type of genre, picaresque novel, based on the life of adventure. It goes to his credit that he gave a regular shape to English novel as Walter Ellen points out: "the relation Defoe bears to the artist is that of a forger, but he was forging not work of art, but transcript of actual experiences."

After that, the literary scene saw the emergence four wheels of novel-Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett and Laurence Sterne a new era of novel writing commenced. With the advent of these novelists, the literary scene took a new turn and direction. Things which were delineated by the earlier novelists with some hidden motives came to surface and forefront among these four wheels of novelists.

Of all the four wheels of novel during eighteenth century, Henry Fielding is generally regarded as the precursor of English novel in the 18th century. Although Richardson started writing fiction prior to Fielding, but it goes to the credit of Fielding that he rendered meritorious services to English novel. Being a dramatist in the early phase of his career, Fielding achieved a worldwide recognition as a novelist due to his memorable portraitures. He has very minutely noticed the shortcomings and weaknesses of Richardson's works and tried to remove these limitations in his works. His works are not the product of his wide observation or sound philosophy. In fact, Fielding was a sentimentalist who created pathetic scenes for their own sake and degraded tears and mysteries into manner.

Fielding's novels are, no doubt, the novels of character as he has extensively contributed in the field of realism, satire, irony, humour and common sense morality of the age. Moreover, his plots are also well-knit and organized. He primarily deals with three types of plots-picaresque, dramatic and epical. On the one hand, in Jonathan Wild, and Joseph Andrew the picaresque element is predominant, but there is a fusion of epical and dramatic elements in his masterpiece, *Tom Jones*. One of the chief features of his characterization is his depiction of life-like and realistic characters. He deals with typical English men and women, but his excellence resides in the characterization of male portraits.

## 2. Main part

In English literature, realism is generally considered contrary and opposite to Romanticism and idealism. Whereas, Romanticism focuses on imaginary and farfetched objects, realism has its close and intimate link with the reality prevailing in the contemporary society. As a full fledged literary movement, realism has its genesis in the mid nineteenth century in France, and later on, it spread to the other parts of the world.

Realism is generally hailed as a literary movement in art, and its prime motive was to root out the imaginative or what we call fantastic elements in literature. In other words, it has a close connection with reality surrounding us.

Without any shadow of doubts, the authors used the technique of realism in literature to illustrate story elements-setting, character, themes, imagery, figurative language, similes and metaphors. By virtue of realism, an author delineates things without artificial touch of language.

The main purpose served by realism is to describe life without romantic subjectivity and idealization. In other words, it presents what takes place in actuality and, hence, it authentically portrays the common place characters of everyday life. The main purpose served by realism is to foreground what is a real and moral that is generally relativistic and intrinsic for the people as well as the society. This type of realism enables the readers to face what is real as it takes place in our surrounding rather than in a Romantic or imaginary world.

It goes without saying that the real beginning of novel in England took place in eighteenth century. The seeds of realistic novel were sown by Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift in the eighteenth century. But, it is a fact that they dealt with the imaginary sea journey and adventures life of the protagonists. With a passage of time, the taste of the readers changed as their inclination was towards the up and downs, joys and sorrows of characters' everyday and contemporary life.

The novels of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne and Tobias Smollett cater to the needs of the readers. Their works set the stage for the realistic outlook of individuals. The chief and the recurrent features of their works comprise sympathy, compassion and kindness for the common people. For this, they focused on men in street who had become the focal point of a new world. They have dealt with common men with the touch of contemporary environment. Their characters appear to be life-like and convincing.

Henry Fielding contributed a great deal in the evolution of early phase of English novel. The first and foremost contribution in this direction is his solid and plausible realism. Having focused on realism as a keynote factor, Fielding has shown a great interest in presenting the life of his contemporary period. He has very keenly and minutely delineated everyday life of the ordinary individuals. Thus, he has portrayed a very striking picture of his own time in his novels.

Unlike Richardson, who depicts no heroes and a few villains-Fielding's characters are men with strength and weaknesses as well as merits and demerits. Henry Fielding's range of his portrait gallery has not often been exceeded. Unlike Richardson, who has described the feminine heart, Fielding's prime concern is to depict the masculinity of time. Here, he does not share ground with Richardson as he does not show Richardson's relative bloodlessness.

In his work, *Joseph Andrews*, Henry Fielding has delineated the whole cross section of English society of contemporary England London. Not only does he deal with the aristocrats like Lady Booby, but also middle class and lower class people. Like a true realist, Henry Fielding represents things in true hues and colours. The reality that the readers came across in *Joseph Andrews* is not pleasant; rather it is full of astounding and selfishness. It is presented

by Fielding through the insensitive hardness that is evident through stage-coach passengers in Book-1 of the novel.

All the passengers, except the poor postilion, who shows compassion and sympathy towards naked and miserable Joseph, everyone on the stage-coach is bereft of humanity and sympathy towards him. The hardness of heart has been presented through the surgeon who is called to attend on wounded Joseph, but is indifferent towards him as Joseph is only a foot passenger. Parson Truliber is not showing any kindness towards his teachings against beggars and refuses to lend Parson Adam even single penny. He says in this connection: "I know what charity is better than to give it to vagabonds." But, in spite of it, we have some glimpses of charity and kindness in the midst of repressive inhumanity. The figures delineated by Fielding-Parson Adams, Betty, the chambermaid, poor postilion, Mr. Wilson and four peddlers act and behave following the Christian commandments.

As a precursor of English novel in the eighteenth century, Henry Fielding occupies a prominent and towering place in the depiction of concept of

morality. As a moralist, Fielding was far ahead of his contemporary novelists. He portrayed morality as an approval or adherence to principles that govern ethical and virtuous conduct. There are some critics who hail Fielding as vicious and corrupt, and therefore, the charge of immorality leveled against Richardson also echoes against Fielding.

On the other hand Strachey, calls Fielding as "a deep, accurate, scientific moralist". But, none of his works, *Joseph Andrews*, and *Tom Jones* strikes the modern sensibility as 'low' or 'immoral' either in purpose or in narration. The fact is that behind his authentic and realistic portrayal of life lays his broad moral vision. He wanted to correct the follies, weaknesses and foibles of mankind by exposing their serious mistakes as he asserts in this connection: "I have endeavoured to light at mankind, out of their follies and vices."

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, was the main source of inspiration for Fielding to propound his views on morality. He wrote *Shamela* (1741) as a counterblast to *Pamela*, but he found *Pamela*'s concept of virtue as affectation and a commodity exchangeable for material benefits. According to Fielding, the concept of virtue does not only encompass chastity only as he thinks that chastity without goodness of heart is without value. He finds a real virtuous man as disregardful of material benefits and is without an affectionate as he says in this context: "a delight in the happiness of mankind and concern at their misery, with a desire, as much as possible, to procure the former and avert the latter."

In fact, Fielding's concept of morality covers wide range in comparison to Richardson's idea of moral vision. Fielding thinks that we should not compare and contrast the idea of morality with chastity and external decorum. According to Fielding, it is more comprehensive as it takes into consideration every aspect of human behaviour and individuals' purpose or is objective, feeling and aims play a significant and vital role.

The concept of morality presented in *Joseph Andrews* is very broad and extended.

The readers come across an opportunist society where the people change their view point and perspectives in order to fulfill their selfish motives and aims. The author has presented the concept of morality in different hues and colours absorbed in hypocrisy as we witness vividly in *Joseph Andrews*. The passengers on the stage-coach do not show any moral vision when they hear wounded Joseph's cry from a ditch. Only the poor postilion on the stage-coach shows compassion and sympathy towards miserable Joseph who was robbed of his clothes and whereabouts.

Joseph was lying naked, and the poor postilion, after getting no positive response from others, says: "who hath been since transported for robbing a henroost, voluntary strips off a

great coat, his only garment". He would like to live in shirt in that chilling weather, rather than suffer a fellow-creature to lie in so miserable a condition. This reminds us of William Wordsworth's idea in his poetry that if there is any essential morality, it can be seen in the lives of common people- farmers, shepherds, peasants and fishermen.

Moreover, the above cited incidents also throw considerable light on the contrast between the attitude of the rich passengers and that of poor postilion. We can differentiate the behaviour of poor postilion and the rest of the passengers in the stage-coach on the basis of morality. In addition to it, Parson Adam is also an embodiment of the idea of morality as discussed by Fielding in *Joseph Andrews*.

The present novel has been written in a picaresque tradition, and the journey undertaken by Joseph and Parson Adam is fraught with hypocrisy and vanity of people at every juncture. Parson Adam plays a significant role in uniting Joseph and Fanny which shows his compassionate and considerate approach towards his fellow-beings. He knows very well to sympathise with others' feelings which reflect him a kind hearted person. He is embodiment of diverse virtues-simplicity, kindness, generosity and courage.

Fielding depicts the idea of morality in a positive manner as for him at the centre of a right morals lays when he called good nature you also defines the concept of morality as a delight in the happiness of mankind and a concern at their misery, with a desire as much as possible procure the former and avert the latter, and he does all this with a constant regard to desert. The key note of generosity of Fielding is that he lays the stress all the time on action as well as on doing.

Henry Fielding's contribution also cannot be underestimated in the field of humour and irony. We generally define humour as the quality of action, speech or writing which generates amusement. It is also the faculty of receiving what we say is ludicrous and amusing. In common terms, humour arises from the incongruities of life from the writer ought awareness of the difference between what is and what to be.

Henry Fielding is commonly regarded as the father of English novel who is famous for humour and irony. He has used his humor not in a narrow way, but in a broad and extensive manner. Fielding's humour is the product of the coarsest farce to the astonishing heights of the subtlest irony. It is a fact that *Joseph Andrews* begins as a parody of Richardson's *Pamela*, but it turned out to be a great success. In this book, humour is presented and produced a number of characters namely Parson Adam and Mrs. Slipslop. Both of them are a great source of comedy and humour. In order to present Adam as a comic character, the novelist has portrayed him as a ridiculous one.

To present Parson Adam as comic character, the author says: "He possesses a comical face, with bearded chin and deeply wrinkled cheeks, a fist rather less than the knuckle of an ox, with a wrist which Hercules would not have been ashamed of. His legs are so long that they almost touch the ground when he drives on his horse's back. He usually wears a tattered old cassock and a periwig on his head.

In the same way, the character of Mrs. Slipslop has also been depicted with comic light when the novelist puts it as:

"she was not at this time remarkably handsome; being very short, and rather too corpulent in body, and somewhat red, with the addition of pimples in her face. Her nose was likewise too large, and her neither eyes too little; nor did she resemble a cow so much in her breath as in two brown gloges which she carried before her."

The central concern of Henry Fielding in the novel is to break the walls of hypocrisy and affectation. In the preface of the book, the author asserts that affectation is the main source

of the ridiculous that originates from vanity and hypocrisy. Fielding aspires to mock at mankind out of its follies and foibles. The novelist has applied irony and satire as the powerful weapons to enrich humour in the book.

In *Joseph Andrews*, one can witness plenty of humour, but that does not mean Fielding never takes into consideration farce. Farce is an exaggeration of situation and characters which produces comic element and situation. It also encourages raucous laughter. The present novel is full of farcical situations-the quarrel scene at the inn, Joseph's falling from his horse. Joseph's sitting by the fire side while the hostess of the inn rubbing his knees.

The study of all these incidents reveals that an undercurrent of irony can be seen running when the patriot behaves in a cowardice manner boasting of his patriotism. Even Adam also shows ironical humour when he advises Joseph on modernisation and philosophical acceptance of misfortune, but gets worried himself after receiving the news of his own son drowned in a river.

In the field of art of characterisation, too, Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* is full of humour. The central characters of the book-Parson Adam and Joseph Andrews are full of humorous attributes. Parson Adam, being an embodiment of morality and humanity, is also depicted as an eccentric, forgetful and absent-mindedness. The most striking example of this is how he ignores taking his favourite penmanship at home when he goes to sell his sermons in London. That is evidence of his eccentric forgetfulness nature and absent mindedness. Besides, he also shows some peculiar expressions and funny affectations. Without losing his dignity, the element of humour is present in his portraiture. The depiction of Adam's physical appearance speaks volumes of Fielding's art of characterization as a comic writer.

In the diction used by Fielding in the novel, *Joseph Andrews*, the author shows burlesque which gives rise to mock-heroic manner in the novel. It, further, results in plenty of humour. We find the evidence of Homeric terms in the scene where the fierce struggle between Parson Adam and hog's blood is delineated by the author. The epic style is also visible in the way Joseph and encounters with the dogs which are let loose on Person Adams. Much of the comedy and laughter is the result of the dissimilitude between the high style and the comic situations.

All this reflect Fielding as a mastercraftman in the field of every type of humour-farce, satire, irony, characterization and parody. But, the spontaneity of these is the natural trait of Fielding's humour. Comparing and contrasting Fielding's humour with Richardson, S.T Coleridge has rightly summed up when he says: "there is a cheerful sunshiny, breezy spirit that prevails that prevails everywhere strongly contrasted with the close, hot, day -dreamy continuity of Richardson". Fielding's treatment of humour and irony has the ability to hold a firm grip on readers' attention due to which he has rightly been given the title of 'a laughing philosopher'.

Among the four wheels of novel during the eighteenth century, Henry Fielding acts as a social reformer of the age. In order to bring social reforms, he adopted the methods of irony, satire and scathing criticism of the evils rampant in the society. For this, satire was the suitable medium that could bring social reform by portraying the abuses in the society. Like Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, Fielding also aimed at bringing social reform through satire in his works. For this, he took recourse to realism that was also a hand medium to depict the follies and foibles of the society.

In this regard, we can call Fielding as the pioneer of modernist movement in English novel. His novels can be called as the panoramic study of the contemporary society. He was also a role model for the subsequent generations of English novelists. The main purpose of satire is to expose the weaknesses and limitations of society or an individual so that the person concerned may know his or her weaknesses in order to improve them. Fielding depicts a



microscopic view of the contemporary society with its selfish motives and lust. In other words, we can call Fielding as the spokesman of his age. After going through Fielding's works, the readers become witness of characters who are living their life according to their own style and temperament, but it all is the essence of humanitarianism which Fielding has filtered through his own vision.

Henry Fielding's main concern in the book, *Joseph Andrews* is not to describe man, but manners, not an individual, but species. Henry Fielding's main target in the book is to attack the nature and temperament of women as he depicts them as snobbish and passionate. The idea of sensuality has best been depicted through the females- Lady Bloody, Mrs. Slipslop and Betty. Being an aristocratic lady, Lady Booby wants to possess Joseph, a young man to satisfy her sensual desires which speaks of hypocrisy that was so deep rooted among the aristocrats who are delineated with an undercurrent of irony.

Mrs. Slipslop is also equally and uniformly sensuous treading the footprints of her mistress. Even Betty, the chamber-made, also shows her inclination towards Joseph when he comes to the inn in a miserable and pathetic condition. Through these female characters, Fielding has tried to project the amorous side of eighteenth century females.

Through his satirical observations, Fielding has presented a society full of inhumanity, callousness, indifference and narcissistic aspects. The most striking example is the stage-coach scene that throws ample light on the hardness and rigidity of the society. The inhumanity and stubbornness of the age has been depicted through the poor postilion when the lawyer on the stage-coach says: "Go on Sirrah, we are confounded late."

Similarly, the reaction of the lady on the stage-coach is also not very much cordial and sympathetic as she says: "O, Jesus, o naked man! Dear coachman, drive on and leave him." The old gentleman cries at this sight, "Robbed, Let us make all the haste imaginable, or we shall be robbed too." All these give evidence of unsympathetic attitude towards a man belonging to lower strata of the society.

### 3. Conclusion

In this way, after making a close and incisive study of Henry Fielding's novel, *Joseph Andrews*, we can safely and rightly aver the fact that as a precursor of English novel, Henry Fielding emerged as a real craftsman of his age. He has contributed a great deal in the evolution of English novel in the eighteenth century by introducing solid and convincing realism in the contemporary society. He has depicted the whole cross section of the society by dealing with individuals belonging to aristocratic society, middle class gentry and lower strata of the society. All this, earn him rightly the title of 'as a precursor of English novel' in real sense of words.

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