

David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* : An Analytical Study

Tuhina Ganguly

A campus novel, also known as an academic novel, is a novel whose main action is set in and around the campus of a university. It is a new kind of genre which came into existence in the 1950s. At that time, many such novels were being written, both in America and in England. *The Groves of Academe* (1952) by Mary Mccarthy is considered to be the earliest example in this genre, although some, on the other hand, affirm C.P.Snow's *The Masters* (1951) to be the first.

The Groves of Academe, published in America contains all the characteristics of Campus novel. Its location is that of a fictitious college named Jacelyn College surrounded by pastoral environment. Indeed, it was found that the development of this genre in America was borne by the three powerful novelists - Mary Mccarthy, Randall Jarrel, Vladimir Nabokov. In England writers like Kingsley Amis in the fifties gave this genre a recognition. The word "Campus Novel" was first used with reference to the university of East-Anglia. Sociologically, there are certain causes that brought the campus novel into being. It came into existence in the 1950s where society was in a state of flux after the second world war. Old values were fading away and the new ones had not become apparent yet. This can be seen in the characteristics of Jimmy Porter, the hero of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Indeed, a classless group was slowly coming into being in that era, whereas in previous novels class-consciousness is hardly seen.

However, the novels dealing with schools and colleges were existing long before and they were called the precursors of the modern campus novels like James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). The dealings were same like campus novels but they also dealt with domestic affairs like any domestic novel. So they are more of domestic novels than proper campus novels.

Man's position in society is purely insignificant. Some think that he is essentially alone and some think that he is part and parcel of society. It is, indeed, great to see how David Lodge combines both the views in his writing skill. Born in 1935, David Lodge was a typical post war figure. The stormy years of London Blitz, the evacuation of inhabitants formed

his childhood background. He had to live through the turbulence and the anxiety of post Second World War. All these factors were reflected in his novels. In the novel, *Out of Shelter* Lodge has projected all the post war factors including rationing of food, high prices, unemployment and stringent economy. People wanted radical changes in society. Therefore, many committees were formed in quick succession. These committees were formed to recommend ways and means for bringing about stability and general well-being. Improvement in social conditions and domestic lives were seen. The situations was best shown in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. With this, the phase of 'Angry Young Men' came into prominence. The work of Angry Young Men have intensity of anger in them and give a satirical-humorous picture of society. But they lack in depth.

Lodge was a part of this group as the novelists of this group were nearest to him in time as well as in mentality. The main novelists of this group were Kingsley, Amis, John Wain, John Brin, Iris and Doris. However, the genre Campus novel continued down the decades with minor modification. Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) is taken by many critics as the first Campus Novel in England. Both moral and cultural disillusionment are pictured repeatedly in this novel. It can be taken as the epitome of campus novels as it is located within the college campus, including the characters like professors and the campus related activities.

The Campus novel is a satirical-cum-comic novel and this differentiates it from other kinds of novels. The presence of comedy relieves the bitterness of satire. The two are, most of the time found together. David Lodge shows the same attitude in his work as he considers the elements of comedy a very serious part of the novel. *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965) is the third of his novels and the first of his Campus novel.

The novel was finished within the next six months. In spite of the limited time, this novel is a well finished one. It gives no impression of careless writing. It was published in the same year 1965 and became a highly successful novel. The writer himself has observed :

...before, we set off, in March 1965... I had finished *The British Museum is Falling Down* and had it accepted. This is easily the shortest. period of time in which I have ever succeeded in writing a novel.(163)

Being a 60's novel, it highlights the mood of the contemporary society. This novel is about a young married couple Adam and Barbara Appleby. The fact that they are catholic, is significant as their religion forbids artificial contraception. It aims at giving a comic and yet true account of the difficulties faced by the couple.

The theme of the novel is the difficulties experienced by the Catholic church's attitude to artificial birth control. The Catholic church has been opposed to artificial contraception as they consider it equal to foeticide. Society became more and more permissive and the Catholic stand became more and more open to questions and criticism. It was hoped by many that this attitude will be relaxed in the second Vatican Council, But all these hopes came to nothing when Pope Paul VI was elected in 1963. Cardinal Heeman declared that their belief is purely significant to religious beliefs. The novel is written against a turbulent religious background with the turbulence disturbing not just the Roman Catholic's adherents but others as well.

The story is concerned with the young married couple – Adam and Barbara who have been married for four years and are parents of three children. They are earnest practising Catholics and this means that they donot use artificial methods to plan a family. Moreover, Adam has no job at present and hopes to have one as he finishes his Ph.D. thesis, he is working on.

Things become helpless when Barbara announces her pregnancy which she is actually unsure of. Adam works regularly on his thesis in the British Museum. Hardly any work progresses because of the continual interruptions. At one point of the daytime, he goes to meet the niece of a deceased minor Victorian novelist to collect an unpublished manuscript. The manuscript turns out to be valueless but the niece's daughter, Virginia discloses him about another manuscript.

After having attended an academic Sherry party, he meets Virginia again and collects the paper. While on his way back home, his old scooter suddenly breaks down and bursts into flame taking the manuscript with it. While he is trying to retrieve it, an American arrives whom he had earlier met often in the Museum and rescues him from the situation. This man is a visitor to this place and wishe to purchase books for the library of a new college in America. Subsequently, analysing the situation of Adam he offers him a good package.

Besides, Adam, after his return to the Museum comes across a good news – That the university under which he is doing his Ph.D. may offer him a job as well. He rushes back home in a jubilant mood and a third good news awaits him – the false news of Barbara's pregnancy. The book thus ends in happiness and security for them.

The whole novel is the story of just one day almost like Joyce's *Ulysses*. Lodge himself has pointed it out and he frankly acknowledges his debt to Joyce. He also admits that there was no deliberate imitation on his part as far as style is concerned.

Also the angle of globalised academic move can be seen in the novel, where a person coming from America wishes to offer a job to a man who is a student of a university in England. The American is incharge of a new library in a university over there. So a beautiful relationship is seen established between two people from different continents. Indeed, this novel has also observed Aristotle's 'the three classical unities' properly. Unity of time is the most remarkable feature as it includes characters.

In *Small World*, Lodge makes use of multiplicity of characters which easily shows the unity of time and hence avoid boredom. Whereas in the novel *The British Museum is Falling Down* the story concerns just one character with the time. As far as, unity of place is concerned, all the actions take place within the city of London. Of course, few changes of location for different episodes are prominently seen. Therefore, Lodge has himself called it a picaresque novel.

Next, unity of action says serious actions must not mingle with comic and this holds true for tragedy as well as for comedy. So, it can be said that the comedy is never disrupted in the novel. In the scene when the scooter bursts into flame along with the manuscript, a chance for serious mode could be seen but the comic mode is restored.

The unity of action has another aspect where it forbids a multiplicity of plots. Thus, Lodge keeps faith with Aristotle, which is not the case with Joyce in *Ulysses*. There is just one action in Lodge's novel, unlike Joyce's. The theme of the novel deals with the difficulties experienced by catholic couples in implementing birth control by artificial contraceptions. Besides the main theme, there are sub-themes too, like the activities related with the writing of a thesis, publishing articles etc.

Uses of parody and pastiches are also found and they form an important part of the novel. According to Lodge, it is a comic and self consciously literary novel. He describes the novel :

The British Museum is Falling down, a
comic and self-consciously literary novel
containing a good deal of parody. (*The
Craft of Fiction* 167).

As far as the title of the novel goes, Lodge is very particular about choosing names for his book and characters. The title of this novel earlier was chosen *The British Museum Had Lost its Charm* - a line extracted from a song of George and Ira Gershwin. But this title was not given the permission so another title, with its nursery rhyme association was selected - London Bridge is Falling Down. Here in the place of 'London Bridge' 'British Museum' has been used and presented as title. The names of the characters are also picked up with some association, like the name of Adam Appleby is full of significances. At first, it has definite link with Biblical Adam, and secondly, the apple of knowledge.

Besides, in any alphabetical list of names, Adam's name is bound to be very near at the top. The usefulness of this becomes apparent when he sees an official notice about publications which concerns academic appointments and promotions to be offered to candidates in alphabetical order. This assures his promotion. Thus, Adam's name has a double significance - Biblical and worldly.

The main location here is the scholarly environment of the museum and not a college campus. But as American says, "It is the greatest library in the world" where the scholars and professors continuously meet with each other. Also the characters here are all academic characters except for few belonging from outer area just to avoid monotony.

The activities described here are all academic related including the sherry party. Lodge always mentions about a sherry party almost in all of his novels because he believes that it is the best platform to hold an exchange of talks, views and informations about professors and people concerning academics.

Except for the theme of 'Birth Control' everything in this novel conforms with campus novel. Hence, his novel is particularly successful as campus novel. David Lodge, being a modern writer writes this genre

in different style and form. In the novel he deals with great variety and completeness and his attitude is purely comical.

He has written many novels over the last 60 years and is considered as one of the most important novelists of the second half of the 20th century. From all viewpoints, David Lodge is amongst the best writers so far in this genre 'Campus Novel.'

Works Cited

Lodge, David. *The British Museum is Falling Down*. New Delhi : Penguin

Books, 1981.

_____ *The Craft of Fiction*. New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1992.