

Romance and Fantasy : A Foil to Realism

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“I like that idea of fantasy, of mudding up the actual and the impossible until the reader is not sure which is which, and I have sometimes tried to do it when writing myself”. (*Two Cheers for Democracy* 215)

Forster has mixed both myth and fantasy, which are very close to romance, in his narrative with the only intention to view the reality in relation with mythology, supernatural and a living past. By introducing fantasy a reality which is incomprehensible to the intellect fantasy adds symbolism to the structure of the novel. The novel attains different layers of meaning which the novelist weaves the incidents with myth, supernatural and living places in the texture of the narrative. Fantasy may appear as opposed to reality but it is through fantasy that the reality cannot do otherwise except being abstract. Fantasy asks “something extra” (*Aspects of the Novel* 113) from the readers which no other aspects demand. As it is often concerned with something that is improbable, marvellous, extraordinary and supernatural, extra attention is needed to grasp them. To Forster, it is a side show inside the main show. He felt that fantasy “implies the supernaturals but need not express it”. (117) Sometimes the supernatural looks as natural and the natural as supernatural. So, what is important in fantasy is the technique of presentation. Forster himself points,

A superb theme for a fantasy, but all will depend on the handling. It is treated with a mixture of realism, wittiness, charm, and mythology, and the mythology is most important. (122)

Fantasy, therefore, “is not only make-believe, it is also make-belief”. (Stone 125) It is akin to Aristotle’s concept of the ‘marvellous’. It is foil to reality to highlight and study it in depth. It is a device of using something strange, and real and supernatural or even absurd to study the complex, multi-dimensional and mysterious human reality. Fantasy pierces the surface of reality to dig out the hidden layers of consciousness for better and increased awareness of life. It works both horizontally and vertically – horizontally in enlarging the range of human experience and vertically in going deep down to explore the hidden layers of meaning. It is not a

technique of escape from the reality but a sound device of presenting the complex human reality artistically. It is used by the artist to enrich the symbolic aspect of the work of art in hand and to add an allegorical dimension to it. It is like a boring machine that cuts across the layers of consciousness to reach the deeper and deeper springs of life.

“Realism of Presentation” (Lewis 56) is the art of bringing something close to us. It makes the subject palpable and vivid by sharply observed or sharply imagined details. It is by dint of this very device that even most fictitious stories are, at times, presented in a most convincing manner. A highly fantastic and superficially life-like story like *Gulliver’s Travels*, for example, is called realistic only because it has to do with the actual problems and values of life. For Macaulay, this realism of presentation was the chief factor that distinguished Dante from Milton. Moreover, this not only differentiated two particular poets but also the medieval and classical work.

“Realism of Content” (60), on the other hand, is the primary thread which provides raw material to the artist to weave out the fabric of his work of art. And these two types of realism can be kept both isolated and united. We can have realism of presentation without that of content as in medieval romances, and realism of content without that of presentation as in French and some Greek tragedies. Similarly, we can have them together in a work of art as in *War and Peace* and neither of the two may exist in a work of art as in *Candida*.

‘Naturalism’, therefore, came to the literary scene already loaded with meanings derived from philosophy, science and fine art. Naturalism in drama has experimented by Strindberg, for instance, in *Miss Juilee*. But, it was all the times tied with the apron-strings of Realism, “Naturalism does differ from Realism but is not independent of it. The most appropriate image to convey the relationship might be that of Siamese twins who have separate limbs while sharing certain organs. What the Realists and the Naturalists have in common is the fundamental belief that art is, in essence, a mimetic, objective representation of our reality” (Lilian 23). It is clear that romance, realism and naturalism together with myths and fantasy are the crucial forces in the shaping of a great work of art. It is also apparent that romances do have realistic tints and vice versa. As such a line can be traced out, something like the ‘line of wit’, to denote that these elements have been operating in various genres of English literature right from the medieval times down to the present days.

To begin with Chaucer, who streamlined the English language, we find that he followed the “Rose tradition” in his *Romances of the Rose*. It is a collection of the tales of adventure circled around lady love. Throughout in the story rose is the symbol of success in lady love. His stories often take place in dreams because dream was an important item in rose tradition. Chaucer actually exposes the absurdity of the tradition and thus celebrates the virtues of real life. In his *The House of Fame* Chaucer is transported, in dream, to the house of fame where he finds Satan attending his court. Many people came there in search of fame. The poet, in fact, gives us a vision of men and women in the world who are slaves to their ever growing sense of possessiveness. In his *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the whole of the Cock-hen-sequence, and the hot, mild and cold exchanges of ideas, explore the different social perspectives of the medieval world in a mock-epic style. The fantasy of the poet is played against the realistic, contemporary, social setting of the age. Chaucer shows a strong sense of reality and of course, the moral dimensions of human relationships. Thus it is obvious that Chaucer's poetical self was half fictional and half-actual.

Others during the 14th century, who could assimilate within their compass these forces, were William Langland and Thomas Malory. It is particularly for his realistic prose-style that Malory is called the father of the art of prose fiction. Christopher Marlowe, too, introduces supernatural elements like spirits and ghosts in his *Dr. Faustus*. His hero mortgages his soul for the acquisition of knowledge. Although it appears fantastic, Marlowe, in fact, cracks his bitter remarks on the towering human sense of possessiveness.

Ben Jonson, though does not use the marvellous in actual terms, goes on exaggerating the issue so much that it becomes almost fantastic. In the exposition of *Volpone*, for example, he exposes the moral decadence of the contemporary society and shows how lust thrives at the expense of spirit.

Among the Jacobean playwrights, John Webster, who examines the skull beneath the skin, is worth mentioning. His two well-known plays *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are full of horrible physical realities drawn from the Italian bed-sheet of vices, villainies and perversions. Webster, through both these plays, presents his satirical vision of disillusionment. And for this in his *The Duchess of Malfi* we find the use of supernatural elements like witches and ghosts. The fairies are used just to lead the characters whereas the witches and the ghosts are employed

to take revenge from the enemies. On the other hand, the terrible realism of life reaches its climax in the murder scene of the Duchess where the Jacobean characters are delighted to see the hideous crime with their naked eyes.

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is an equally memorable piece of art using fantasy as a means to expose the absurdities of human life. Through the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms the artist satirises the animality and the excessive rationality respectively in man. In spite of having human figure the Yahoos are devoid of thinking whereas the Houyhnhnms, having intelligence, though horses, are the masters of man. Swift, thus, uses the element of romance as a technique of shock-therapy.

Like Ibsen, Shaw was also aware that realism of detail was less important than the application of intelligence to reality. The description of the great Sphinx is, in fact, the consolidated portrayal of supernatural forces of life that make improbable probable. Shaw does employ fantasy, too, with fine efforts and effects in the Don Juan- episode of *Man and Superman*. The concept of superman is itself an example of romance world. He did not even hesitate to employ symbolism in *Heartbreak House*. His dramas, therefore, are the concrete objectifications or externalisation of his philosophical notions. Moreover, his jokes are actually truths incarnate because they are intended to correct the evils of the society.

In W.B. Yeats' *The Countess Cathleen*, a philanthropist sells her soul to the devil to provide food for her people in time of famine. Yeats appears to be highly interested in the old fairy stories and the folklores of the Irish people, as it is through them that he conveys his real sense of national integrity. Synge, too, presents the real picture of the Irish peasantry, their language and other tales describing the custom of their society in his plays. His strength, like that of Cervantes', lies in the juxtaposition of the most earthly realism with the highest flights of fancy. We forget the wild improbability of the story of *The Playboy of the Western World* only because of its realism of presentation. Synge's world is not the great world of modern living, but a small pre-civilized world of the imagination. And within this small world his characters are completely convincing and alive.

T.S.Eliot, famous for his poetry and criticism, uses the elements of romance and realism in his *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*. *The Family Reunion* conveys the illusion of reality and is deliberately written in a plain manner in order to convince the audience of the reality of what they are listening to. *The Cocktail Party* moves in the ultra modern atmosphere of wine and women but, at the same time, it exposes the

damaging results of the sex - obsessions of husbands and wives. The play proceeds on purely psychological planes of reality. And finally realism became an important trend in modern drama. After taking its shape in France under the influence of science and fidelity to truth, it first turned into symbolism whose English champions were W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot.

The 'Theatre of the Absurd' popularly known as "Metaphysical Theatre" or "Philosophical Theatre" is the last trend of modern drama. Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Ionesco, Graham Greene etc. are the champions of this trend. Kafka's *The Trial* deals with the search of a sensitive Jew for a homeland which is always denied to him. The home in this novel is a symbol of Church as an imperfect bridge between the individual and God. To many readers, it is a highly imaginative and engaging comedy filled with buffoonery and fantasy. But to more serious students of literature it is a vast symbolism and a first rate psychological study of modern consciousness. Absurdist are rather in search of the meaning of human life. They are not wandering uselessly because they are artists and art is never meaningless. Modern theatre is not intended to establish the absurdity or fantasy of life, rather to determine the significance of it.

Thus, either consciously or unconsciously, every work of art embodies these forces in some way or the other. Moreover, the artists have often taken help of one element in order to celebrate or highlight the other. For example, Cervantes has very beautifully shown in his *Don Quixote* that it is through the exposure of the atrocities of romance that we can better realise the consequences of realism. Shakespearean romances can be studied as myths of immorality for here he explores reality using romance as a technique of discovery. In other words if a work of art is entitled as 'romance and fantasy', it does not mean that it contains no flash of realism. In fact, all the creative writings, in some way or the other, are the artist's individual vision of life. They are not devoid of realism. They are actually pregnant with it.

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