**ENGH SEM 4: HCC-T-8**

Contributor: Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay, Department of English

Fantomina: the literary background

What we call the novel today was born out of various other forms of prose writing prevalent during the late Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline and the Commonwealth and Restoration periods – the essay, the letter, the prose pamphlet, the memoir and the travelogue, the diary. The periodical papers in the early decades of the 18th century amalgamated these into fictional forms that went by various names – histories, romances, adventures, lives, tales, memoirs, expeditions etc. It was thus a hybrid form that widened and narrowed through the century and towards its end came to mean a popular fictional narrative embodying a philosophical discourse within a realistic portrayal of life. But the term ‘novel’ had originally designated a short tale of romantic love, where realism was understood as a method by which the universal human patterns of thought and interaction was expressed through representative present-day individuals in a specific social and cultural context. In the early decades when Behn and Haywood wrote, the novel was heavily under the shadow of the prose romance tradition of the 17th century, and the Restoration comedy of manners nearer in time. Its first duty was to entertain a reading public reared on crude sentimentalism and inhabiting a growing urbanity confused between a hypocritical mix of Catholic and Protestant moral standards. Against this social backdrop, male novelists like Defoe and Swift engaged in greater questions of politics and empire, while women like Haywood focused on the apparently serene but really explosive domestic problems of sexual choice and gendered power inequities. The importance of these novels/romances lies in the fact that they bring up a cultural history involving people below the status of greatness, seen in their daily, immediate perspectives, and that they cast important light on the long marginalized voices of women in the early 18th century. By the 1730s, the wheels of rapid socio-economic change begun since the mid-17th century had effected in major shifts in male and female roles, and in the class system which allowed more mobility but finally settled rigid distinctions between classes.

Ian Watt, speaking of the origin of the novel, emphasized the triple rise – of the middle class, literacy, and the novel at the opening of the century. Literacy and increased economic volatility created a reading public across classes; aristocrats and literary elites, merchants and middle class ladies to domestic servants, all consumed novels. Its rampant consumption revolutionized the literary market, and guardians of public taste, especially those with a classicist bent like Pope and Dr Johnson attacked its rotting effects on the morals – Dr Johnson wrote that only “the young, the ignorant, and the idle” read novels. Most readers of the novel were young, and they sought from their reading to derive useful information and advice about the decisions regarding love and social progress that lay ahead. Here they found a space for yearnings, fantasies and subconscious desires otherwise repressed in their ordinary, dull lives dictated by puritan moralists; thus the restrictive pull of realism was lesser felt by the novelist. In the patriarchal literary scene, writing and reading of novels by women, especially young and poor, was considered a sign of moral decadence potent enough to threaten the hardworking, pious lives expected of them - the sentimental effects of the circulating libraries satirized in comedies of the time are a point in proof. Fewer women than men were literate, but a larger proportion of women read novels. They sought to find pleasure first – in a story well told, but also identified with characters, their ‘fictional others’, who might take a course liberated from drudgery and routine, and create a fantastic outcome of a situation to compensate for the obvious in reality. One chief concern for these female readers was the exploration of practical consequences in matters of courtship and marriage, and the novel offered situations where they could see their inhibited desires exercised, against a background of social and historical change. This endowed the novel with a peculiar cultural power that produced ideas and questions originating in cosmopolitan London and radiating to the country.

The women novelists of the late 17th and early 18th centuries are led by Aphra Behn, Frances Burney, and Eliza Haywood. Though they apprehend many of the key concerns of mid and late century women novelists like Sarah Fielding, Frances Sheridan and Ann Radcliffe, their work has long been seen in derogatory eyes, as being merely sensational, lacking in moral or philosophical concern. But the novel had really received new orientations in its development from the gender of these early authors – they related the romance with the novel through female desire, enabling alternative viewpoints on social discourses run from patriarchal fortresses. They blended romantic and realistic elements in the novel in a way that changed its history, positing it as intermediary between the 17th century romance and the late 18th century, ideologically informed, fictional narratives that counted as ‘literature’. The romance had as its central focus an elevated status of the woman and her concerns, and told the story from a female viewpoint. While these are partially retained by Behn and Haywood, the woman’s story at the centre of the narrative is treated by them as a site of contention in the gendered power conflicts of a new bourgeoisie. Eliza Haywood wrote many short tales of passion, usually narrated in the third person, and often introduced with a maxim about the power of love. Within the formal structure of the romance, the tales interrogate the position of woman in a society of mercantile values and rude violation of the deference to woman that the feudal framework of romances so upheld. Thus they emerge from the shadow of the romance and become a new form, in radical and vibrant interaction with the polemics of their own time.