

Q: Discuss the characteristic features of the modern novel with reference to James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf.

Or,

Distinguish the modern novel from the traditional novel.

Ans. Modern novel belongs to the modernist movement. This movement gained momentum and intensity in the 1920s. The catastrophe of World War-I shattered all traditional values and raised doubt about the adequacy of the traditional literary modes to express the harsh realities of the post-war world. In the meantime, the new developments in psychology and philosophy brought about a radical change in the technique and treatment of the theme of the novel. French philosopher Henri Bergson came up with a new concept of time, maintaining that time is a continuous flow and not a series of point. It led to the suspicion of the old kind of plot in the traditional novels which carried the characters forward in a precisely chronological order. There developed in the modern novel a new kind of narrative texture that moved backward and forward with new freedom. Therefore, we have in the modern novel more of a structure rather than a plot. This is magnificently exemplified in the novel 'Ulysses' by James Joyce.

Closely linked to the views of time is the new kind of the multiplicity of consciousness derived from the works of Freud and Jung. Their works show that in our consciousness the past always exists in the present colouring the nature of our present response. As such, to reveal the truth about a character, the novelist must tell everything that has happened to him or her. This results in a new kind of stream of consciousness novel that undertakes to produce the continuous flow of the mental process of one or more characters. At the end of 'Tom Jones'(1749) by Henry Fielding, for example, the wicked are punished and the virtuous are rewarded, and Tom marries Sophia. But, the modern does not have such an ending. D.H. Lawrence's 'Sons and Lovers', for instance, should have ended with the death of Paul's mother, but it does not end there. Paul wants to go to darkness until he is exhausted. In the typical modern novel, the narrative does not come to an end.

A traditional novel narrates things directly. But, in a modern novel, the incidents or other things are narrated suggestively. In fact, suggestiveness is a characteristic feature of the modern novel. The modern novel is full of images and symbols which are both public and private. Modern novels like 'Sons and Lovers' by D.H. Lawrence, 'A Passage to India' by E.M. Forster and 'To the Lighthouse' by Woolf have symbols which have great private significance.

To conclude, the modern fiction achieved remarkable development both in form and technique in the hands great writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and E.M. Forster. All these writers of fiction show a much deeper quest for the inner world of the characters than what we have seen in the traditional fiction.