



## NOVEL AS AN EPIC

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### ABSTRACT :

“Novel” has emerged as the most forceful and convincing of all the genres of literature in recent years. It has been widely accepted as the most appropriate form for the exploration of opinions, ideas, convictions, incidents, episodes and experiences in today's world. The novel has evolved in an astonishing manner from its humble beginnings. Hegel describes the novel as “**modern popular epic**”. The main reason for the emergence of the novel as a major literary genre is because it is the only literary form which meets the needs of the world.

### INDEX TERMS :

*Novel, Epic, Genre, Literature, Appropriate form, Emergence, Literary form*

### INTRODUCTION :

*“It is only a novel..... or in short only some work in which the great powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature., the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.”<sup>1</sup>*

“Novel” has emerged as the most forceful and convincing of all the genres of literature in recent years. It has been widely accepted as the most appropriate form for the exploration of opinions, ideas, convictions, incidents, episodes and experiences in today's world.

***“People wonder why the novel is the most popular form of literature; people wonder why it is read more than books of science or books of metaphysics. The reason is very simple; it is merely that the novel is more true than they are.”<sup>2</sup>***

The novel touches human feelings and emotions which are common everywhere surpassing the barriers of gender, race, religion, region or ethnicity, etc. The novel deals with the fundamental issues of human existence.

## **NOVEL AS A GENRE**

The novel has evolved in an astonishing manner from its humble beginnings. It has displayed an unparalleled ability to adapt, innovate, spread and prevail. Poetry, which for many centuries held the supreme place in the realm of literature, has lost that position. Its appeal to the general public is negligible now and its place has been usurped by fiction.

Many critics are of the view that existing literary forms unfold the path for the new forms. G.W.F. Hegel, in a compilation of his lectures called *Aesthetics* (1842), states that the various art forms represent different stages in the history of the human consciousness. Thus the epic is an expression of an unorganized, heroic age, where an organic unity existed between the people, nature and society. The novel belongs to a later stage in which no harmony between the mind and matter (the outer world) exist. The novel epitomises the incongruity between the modern world and the art or as he says,

***“..... the poetry of the heart and the opposing prose of circumstances and the accidents of external situations.”<sup>3</sup>***

Hegel describes the novel as “**modern popular epic**”, and thus paved the path for other critics to point out the conformity as well as the contrast between forms of the epic and the novel.

Continuing this line of thought, the pre-Marxist George Lukacs, in *The Theory of the Novel* (1920) argues that

***“..... novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the imminence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”<sup>4</sup>***

According to Lukacs, men, in the epic are in harmony with the universe while men, in the novel, are alienated, dis-enchanted and estranged from the universe. The hero of the epic is never an individual in the strict sense and the theme is not about personal destiny but the destiny of a community. On the other hand, the hero in the novel is highly individualistic and self-indulgent and the theme deals with personal destinies. The novel is the epic of a world which has been “**abandoned by God**”<sup>5</sup>. Great novels emulate the epic by capturing the unity of its form and structure.

The main reason for the emergence of the novel as a major literary genre is because it is the only literary form which meets the needs of the world. Mikhail Bakhtin, the famous Russian philosopher and literary theorists of the twentieth century, in his path-breaking essay, “Epic and Novel” (1941), compares the novel to the epic. Bakhtin’s essay articulates his observations regarding the development of the novel as a genre is still in the process of

definition. According to him, the novel is the dominant genre of the modern world and he attempts to trace the process by which the novel replaced the epic as the major literary genre in English.

***“The novel is the only developing genre and therefore reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively; more rapidly; reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process. The novel has become the leading hero in the literary development of our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it.”***<sup>6</sup>

Bakhtin points out in the essay that the novel and the epic are radically different from one another in their representation and evaluation of time. While the epic recounts and glorifies the events of the heroic past, separated from the present time; the novel takes place in the present time and glorifies the future. Bakhtin argues that the basic contrast between the novel and the epic is that, the epic is unitary in nature. The only point of view in an epic is that of the epic poet and there is no room for any other point of view. On the other hand there is lot of room for ‘other’ points of view, in the world of the novel, which ensures “multiplicity”. (Bakhtin 7)

The novel is dialogic and open, the epic is (or was) monologic and closed. The novelist discourse is pluralistic while the epic discourse is individualistic, single-voiced, single-languaged and single-world viewed. Based on this strain of thought, Bakhtin develops not only a theory of the novel but also develops a theory of how the rise of the novel influences and indeed permeates and redefines other genres.

***“In many respects the novel has anticipated, and continues to anticipate, the future development of literature as a whole. In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness. It draws them ineluctably into its orbit precisely because this orbit coincides with the basic direction of the development of the literature as a whole. In this lies the exceptional importance of the novel, as an object of study for the theory as well as the history of literature.”***<sup>7</sup>

According to Bakhtin, the novel as a genre is unique in that it is able to embrace, ingest and devour other genres while still maintaining its status as a novel. Other genres, however, cannot emulate the novel without damaging their own distinct identity. He compares the novel to clay, a material which can be remodeled and the epic to marble, which cannot.

More recently, Christopher Hill, in *Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth Century England* (1985), observes that,

***“..... novel is to bourgeois society what the epic had been to feudal society.”***<sup>8</sup>

The novel thus is the most apt form for literary expression in the modern world.

“..... *the novel should become for the contemporary world what the epic was for the ancient world.*”<sup>9</sup>

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