

From 'Novel' to 'Fiction': Some Generic Distinctions by Sahdev Luhar

ABSTRACT

Novel is not what Fiction is. There are some differences between Novel and Fiction. This paper is an attempt to unearth these differences. Novel is defined on the basis how close it is to realities, whereas Fiction is purely an art of imagination. The 'fragile' differences which one finds in 'primary' and 'secondary' imagination, the same kind of dissimilarities are there between 'fiction' and 'Fiction'. Whereas 'fiction' insinuates the idea of generic element, 'Fiction' is used to suggest generic form. The first alludes to 'quality', while the later to the 'form'. The 'fiction' refers to mental process, whereas the 'Fiction' is the product made of this mental process. Drawing references from some illuminating texts on the topic, the present paper discovers the five basic differences between Novel and Fiction.

Key Words: Narrative, novel, fiction, fictionality, generic quality, generic form.

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Generally readers tend to overlook the generic distinctions between 'Novel' and 'Fiction'¹. The term 'generic' refers to something based on particular literary genre; it hints at the basic differences drawn on the basis of style that differentiates one genre from the other. Novel is commonly defined as a 'narrative fiction' (Kapoor 1992: 85-97), whereas the Fiction is widely accepted as a modern equivalent rendering for the Novel (ibid). Derived from the Latin word '*figo*' which means *to fashion or form*, the term 'fiction' suggests a mental process in a transitive sense. A fiction thus implies a formless mental structure as opposed to the concrete world outside the mind. It can also be imagined as a covering term for different types of mental activities such as thinking, dreaming etc. This inference leads to a significant line of departure from 'Novel' to 'Fiction': whereas the 'Novel' may imply an absolute *product* made of imaginative activity, the 'Fiction' may refer to the *process* of imagination itself. It can be argued that the Novel and the Fiction are different from each other on the basis of the quality of reality, imaginative activities they engaged with, and capacity to take the readers to the world of enchantment.

Novel is commonly regarded as "extended works of *fiction* written in prose" (Abrams & Harpham 2013: 252). Malcolm Bradbury points out three essential qualities of the Novel: the formal guarantee of bestowing the reality to fictional objects, its dependence on recognition, and its relative formal contingency (Childs and Fowler 2006:157-158). Bradbury also agrees that though the reality is the chief feature of the Novel, it is not a stable object. Analysing the qualities of the Novel, Terry Eagleton remarks that:

The novel is a mighty melting pot, a mongrel among literary thoroughbreds. There seems to be nothing it cannot do. It can investigate a single human consciousness for eight hundred pages. Or it can recount the adventures of an onion, chart the history of a family over six generations, or recreate the Napoleonic wars. If it is a form particularly associated with the middle class, it is partly because the ideology of that class centres on a dream of total freedom from restraint. (Eagleton 2005: 2-3)

Eagleton's perception of the novel seems to agree with the diversified features of the Novel – a 'melting pot' of everything. It seems that this limitlessness of its character resists the exact definition of the term. This observation also points out the limitlessness of its subject-matter: anything that man can imagine, or anything can be its subject. In the same essay, Eagleton categorises the Novel as an *anarchic* genre, since its rule is not to have rule. The Novel form is not that anarchist who simply breaks the rules, but it breaks the rules as a rule. It is excitingly unpredictable, says Eagleton. He also finds the novel "the most hybrid of literary forms, a space in which different voices, idioms and belief-systems continually collide" (Ibid: 5-6). Unlike Bradbury, Eagleton believes that realism is "out of favour because the ordinary reader delights in the exotic and extravagant. The irony is that the novel as a form is wedded to the common life, whereas the common people themselves prefer the monstrous and miraculous" (Ibid: 5).

Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (1956), can be considered an authentic elaboration of features of the Novel which has for the very first time consolidated hitherto scattered studies of Novel. Watt's 'triple rise' thesis makes it clear that the rise of middle class, rise of literacy and rise of Novel are inseparable. Watt finds 'realism' – the 'position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses' – as a distinguishing feature of the novel (Watt 1956: 12). He elucidates:

The general temper of philosophical realism has been critical, anti-traditional, and innovating; its method has been the study of the particulars of experience by the individual investigator, who, ideally at least, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs; and it has given a peculiar importance to semantics, to the problem of the nature of the correspondence between words and reality. (Ibid: 12)

Along with realism, Watt identifies individualism, originality of plots, specificity of person and place, experience in time, concrete and particularity of objects, referential use of language as the prominent features of the Novel. Thus, the mimetic assumptions of Watt concerning the theory of Novel stresses on 'realism', 'plot', 'character', 'description', etc. as the primary features of the Novel, whereas the post-Jamesian assumption concerning the novel theory emphasizes the 'point of view', 'paradox', 'symbol', 'tension', poetic (re)presentation etc. as significant aspects of the Novel. The former assumption alludes to the nineteenth century realistic Novel, while the latter hints at the twentieth century neo-symbolist Novel. This makes it clear that a more sophisticated touch to the Novel was endowed in the twentieth century. 'Reality' has associations with Novel and Fiction avoids such association, it is necessary to analyse relationship between 'Fiction' and 'reality' at the outset only. In his essay "The Art of

Fiction,” Henry James (1884) writes that fiction can even create reality, or add to its worth, and that it deserves aesthetic status. He says, “Fiction is one of the *fine arts*, deserving in its turn of all the honours and emoluments that have hitherto been reserved for successful profession of music, poetry, painting, architecture” (James 1884: 2). He opines that fiction is not merely an entertaining description of life but it has potentiality to “compete with life” (Ibid: 1). It can redeem life by redefining, enriching and intensifying it as per the need of the fiction. One must remember that the Fiction does not replace ‘reality’; it is only the sense what constitutes ‘reality’ gets changed. As a matter of fact, the Fiction tries to unearth more profound realities that lay in the depth of human mind. This implies that the Fiction is a better measure for reality. Fiction attempts to produce a new reality based on the distrust about reality itself. Jesse Matz, in his *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction* (2004), indicates four possible ways through which a Fiction produces new realities:

Modern novelists tend, first of all, to concern themselves with the difference between appearance and reality. Second, they tend to wonder about the difference between subjective and objective perception. They search for the essential meanings, in the hope that these might replace the structures of disbelief and custom that modernity has destroyed. And finally the modern novelists begin to become self-conscious about the way fiction work as a form for meditation or interpretation of reality. (Matz 2004: 35)

Fiction generally tends to find out the nature of reality. It firmly accepts that there is a reality beyond the appearance; this appearance takes to reality. It tests the difference between what seems and what actually turns out. The results of such test can be diverse: despair, joy, revelation, etc. Fiction hardly provides the ‘objective’ reality that can be accepted as universal or permanent. Instead, it focuses on ‘subjective’ reality; it provides the personal point of view on the different aspects of reality. This enables the Fiction to test the different forms of reality – how reality gets changed from person to person. The Fiction tries to find out the essential meanings in everything. It ignores the triviality of outer reality and discerns the essence in it. Fiction also engages in the act of interpretation or meditation. That is why Matz says “... if reality is a fiction we make, then the fiction is the key to reality” (Ibid: 36). Yet it should be remembered that Fiction ignores the sturdy reality (product) and not its contents (process).

As all the novels are made of fictional elements, it becomes more impenetrable to trace the origin of the term ‘Fiction’. One might envisage the first half of the twentieth century (up to 1945) as the transitional era which marked a shift from ‘Novel’ to ‘Fiction’. It is commonly acknowledged that this period, marked by the modernist concerns in literature, the *avant-gardean* attempts for the artistic renewal of literary forms, and the reaction to realism, gave rise to the fictionalism replacing hitherto celebrated realism. It can be assumed that, in this era, the nuance of the term ‘Novel’ to *reality* seem indecent and hence this may have necessitated the use of the new term ‘Fiction’ which became a signifying feature of the Novel at that stage.

Ontologically the ‘Novel’ alludes to ‘reality’. Since its inception in the eighteenth century, the Novel has depicted the reality. This reality became bolder in the following century that made

Novel synonymous to reality. In the nineteenth, it proved to be a 'faithful copy' of reality – mirroring everything regardless of its importance. The Novel, in the nineteenth century, focused on the 'contemporary' issues and became a vehicle to expose immediate realities of the time. This made readers realise that fiction is mirror-like and faithfully reflects their actual world. From 1880s/1890s onwards to 1920s/1930s, the novelists felt that realism had outlived its usefulness. And this period erased the notion concerning the universal nature of reality. In the twentieth century, instead of focusing on the outer reality, the writers focused on the inner working of consciousness which can be termed as 'psychological realism' but it was not exactly reality. Thus, the continuous onslaught on realism made the people to realise scantiness of the term 'Novel'.

Probably at this juncture, the term 'fiction' came into prominence.² The modern era was a transition period for the novel; it witnessed the rebirth of 'Novel' in the form of 'Fiction'. The closing decade of the modern age erased the realistic associations of Novel and gave a new silhouette to traditional Novel. There has been the reshaping of the Novel in the modern era. It has witnessed the reshaping of plot and procedure, character and theme. In the modern age, the Novel became more ambiguous; it forsook the realism for fictionality and continuity for discontinuity and fragmentation. The focal point in the Novel shifted from the mimetic constituents to the multiple and extremely subjective narrators, representation of the consciousness, the non-linear representation of time, and the reliance on myth, symbolism, leitmotiv and literary allusions. It employed new techniques and theories to bring in the 'formal' innovation. With the change in the perception of 'reality', the characters also got changed. The characters were not in exterior flux; they were caught in the strange process of (self)consciousness. The acclaimed foundation of heroism, virtue and adherence to social norms that constitute a character were attacked and replaced by the absurdist experience familiar to the modern milieu. The chief character is not a hero in the modern novel; instead it is chiefly less accomplished, less intellectual, and worse than normal human being. Poetically dense language is used in the modern novel. The modern novel wanted to shock the reader by making familiar unfamiliar and by describing an event in a way that surprised the reader. For all these alterations, there was a need of an umbrella term that could accommodate the 'old' as well as 'new' features of the Novel bestowed upon by the modern age.

One must note that the term 'Fiction' was not coined in the modern age; it was in vague since sixteenth century as a synonym to Novel – one of the earliest proclamations is found in John Colin Dunlop's *History of Fiction* (1814). Illustrating the characteristics of fiction, Dunlop says –

But even if the utility which is derived from Fiction were less than it is, how much are we indebted to it for pleasure and enjoyment! It sweetens solitude and charms sorrow – it occupies the attention of the vacant, and unbends the mind of the philosopher. Like the enchanter, Fiction shows us, as it were in a mirror, the most agreeable objects; recalls from a distance the forms which are dear to us, and soothes our own griefs by awakening our sympathy for others. By its means the recluse is placed in the midst of the society; and who is harassed and agitated in the city is transported to rural tranquility and repose. (Wilson 1888: 3-4)

A fiction, as Dunlop suggests, aims at imparting the pleasure and enjoyment. Dunlop's conception of fiction as mirror-like representation of the "most agreeable objects" portends the realist portrayal that a *novel* makes. Fiction plays the role of enchanter who shows something in order to amuse. It has the capacity of relieving the readers of his grieves and endowing them with 'tranquility and repose'. Fiction is not merely a concept but a philosophical construct (Sainsbury 2010: 82-83). For James Wood, "fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude" (Wood 2008: xiii). Though a fiction may seem an *artifice*, it does not mean that it is not representation of fact. It may convey straight forward fact or truth to the readers. Greg Currie defines its nature suggesting that "a work is fictional if and only if it is the product of a fictive utterance" (Currie 1990: 35). Yet a single utterance does not make fiction, a whole series of utterances together makes fiction. Offering a modest improvement to Currie's definition, R. M. Sainsbury suggests that "a work is fictional if and only if it results from some interconnected utterances, a reasonable number of which count as "fictive", that is, produced with distinctively fictive intentions" (Sainsbury 2010: 7). A *fictive intention* intends a potential audience to make-believe something. In this context, Kendall L. Walton's notion of "games of make-believe" can certainly improve one's understanding of fiction. He believes that "appreciating painting and novels is largely a matter of playing games of make-believe with them of the sort it is their function to be props in" (Walton 1990: 53) For Walton, "props" are the generators of the fictional truth. According to his theory, a text props in a game of make-believe is fiction. The reader or audience makes the use of it as the children make use of some objects in their play and doubtlessly consider them real.

In *The Rise of the Fictionality*, Catherine Gallagher ascribes 'fictionality' as the hallmark feature of the novel. Gallagher assumes that through the novel "fictionality became manifest, explicit, widely understood, and accepted" (Gallagher 2006: 338). She claims that there is a historical connection between novel and fiction, and both are mutually constitutive. For at least two centuries, the novel has been also acknowledged as a literary genre which tried to hide its fictionality behind realism or verisimilitude by making certain kinds of referential truth claims. She argues that "if a genre can be thought of as having an attitude, the novel has seemed ambivalent towards its fictionality – at once inventing it as an ontological ground and placing severe constraints upon it" (Ibid: 338). The eighteenth century novelists apparently liberated the fictionality to convince the readers of the *actuality* (literal truth) of their subject matter. The same eighteenth century novelists seem to "have imprisoned and concealed the fictionality by locking it inside the confines of the credible" (Ibid: 338). Thus, it can be said that the novel has discovered as well as obscured fiction or fictionality. For Gallagher, both the processes of revealing and concealing fiction are one and the same.

The term 'fiction' has variously been used. It is commonly used to refer to something "which is fashioned or framed; a device, a fabric, ... whether for the purpose of deception or otherwise" (Ibid: 338); it has been also employed to mean "something that is imaginatively invented" (Ibid: 338); the term received a new usage at the turn of the seventeenth century that describes it as

“the species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters; fictitious composition (Ibid: 338)”. In this latter sense, the term ‘fiction’ received a greater importance in the eighteenth century which outmoded the earlier meaning of “deceit, dissimulation, pretense”. Gallagher opines that “whereas an older generation of literary critics had taken fiction for granted as a transhistorical constant and viewed the novel’s achievement as the addition of realism, more recent scholars have correlated the simultaneous appearance of fictionality and the novel” (Ibid: 338).

Unlike Gallagher, Richard Walsh (2007) reviews the rhetorical nature of fiction. He believes that fictionality is a distinct rhetorical resource which functions directly as part of the pragmatics of serious communication. He puts it as –

Fictionality... functions within a communicative framework: it resides in a way of using language, and its distinctiveness consists in recognizably distinct rhetorical set invoked by that use. I assume that narrative fictionality is worth distinguishing from narrativity in general. That is to say, I want to grant full force to the claim that all narrative is artifice, and in that very restricted sense fictive, but I maintain nonetheless that fictional narrative has a coherently distinct cultural role, and that a distinct concept of fictionality is required to account for this role. It is best explained in functional and rhetorical terms, rather than in formal terms: true, there are formal qualities strongly associated with fiction, but they do not supply necessary or sufficient conditions of fictionality. To say instead that fictionality is a functional attribute is to say that it is a use of language; to say that it is rhetorical is to say that this use is distinguished by the kind of appeal it makes to the reader’s (or the audience’s) interpretative attention. No model that treats fictive discourse as framed by formal, intentional, or ontological disavowal can meet these criteria for a concept of fictionality. ... The rhetorical distinctiveness of fiction, then, is consistent with a communicative continuity between fictional and non-fictional uses of language. Fictionality is a rhetorical resource integral to the direct and serious use of language within a real-world communicative framework. (Walsh 2007:15-16)

These views of Walsh clarify three points: (a) fictionality functions in a communicative framework and lies in the use of language; (b) there is a difference between narrative fictionality and narrativity in general – the fictional narrative has a distinct cultural role, whereas the narrative in general is not more the fictive artifice; and, (c) fictionality lies in a communicative continuity. He proposes ‘fictional world theory’ and ‘speech act theory’ to locate his theory within the framework of relevance which has popularly come to be known as *Relevance* theory. Whereas the fictional world theory focuses on the referential act, the speech act theory engages with Gricean “conversational implicature” which focuses on the communicative act. The avowed object of these theories is to prepare a conceptual basis for a pragmatic theory of the fiction that works in accordance with the principle of relevance rather than truth.

A clear-cut line of demarcation between ‘Fiction’ and ‘Novel’ is drawn by Childs and Fowler (2006). As the editors of *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, elaborating the difference, they note:

Although often used synonymously with novel, it [fiction] is a more generic and inclusive term. Novel has a narrower historical and ideological content than fiction – novel did not exist in Greek and Roman culture, but works of prose and fiction did. Equally, allegories in prose (like Pilgrim's Progress) are works of fiction, but not novels. 'Novel' is thus a genre term, while 'fiction' is a generic term. 'Fiction' can more easily designate hybrid forms than 'novel'; it can include artistic intentions and formal characteristics in prose works..., which indicate either simple unawareness of novels (e.g. the Satyricon) or a deliberate questioning of the assumption of the novel-genre (e.g. Tom Jones). Thus, by virtue of this high level generality, 'fiction' can be opposed to 'novel' by both writers and critics alike. (Childs and Fowler 2006: 88)

Though Childs and Fowler distinguish between 'Novel' and 'Fiction', they draw this distinction on the qualitative line, and not on the generic. Fiction has been the distinguishing quality of the literature since its inception. So, the claim that these writers make can be considered true to some extent. It must be remembered that the term 'Fiction' as a *genre* and a *generic* quality hints at different things. As a genre it hints at formalistic constitution in prose, whereas as a generic element it hints at the quality of fictionality found in all types of narratives.

Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the 'Novel' has disappeared in the modern times and it has been replaced by the 'Fiction'. Hence, it would be better to prefer the term 'fiction' as a replacement for 'novel'. One can discover the following dissimilarities between 'novel' and 'fiction':

1. Novel hints at a quality of 'realism', Fiction infers the trait of fictionality. Fiction is always bordered on the quality of imagination. It may show different shadows of reality (that can direct to reality) but not the reality in exact sense.
2. Whereas the Novel is a constrained term, Fiction is more extensive and stretchable. Novel is a reminiscent of realism, a 'well woven plot' and art of characterization (the mimetic assumptions) only. Generally other aspects have been discounted from its connotation. But the term 'Fiction' stresses on the essential structuring features such as 'point of view', 'symbol', 'paradox', 'tension' 'poetic emphasizing', 'narrative techniques', 'figurative language', etc.
3. While the Novel may suggest an absolute *product* made of imaginative activity, the Fiction may refer to the *process* of imagination itself. This sense denotes that the Fiction is a mental structure or a mental activity; it deals with the shaping of material which is inherently formless. Thus, Fiction shelters different versions of mental activities. It actively engages the mind in the production subjective understanding of these mental activities. It produces subjective understanding in a sense that the Fiction presents what was there in the mind of a writer but it is the individual task of the readers to comprehend what is reality and what is not.
4. As the Novel distinguishes itself through 'unquestionable' credibility, the Fiction may differentiate itself with various degrees of plausibility. Fiction needs to lessen the gap

between fictions and lies. When this gap is eliminated, the Fiction becomes credible. However, it should be remembered that Fiction does not suspend the readers' doubts, but stimulates it, in order to establish specific rhetorical effect on the mind of readers.

5. The Novel imparts a sense that the characters exist in the continuous time and one can locate them in the physical world, while the Fiction does not impart such sense. Novel appears as an unblemished mirror to the world. But the Fiction avoids such claim by munificently employing eloquent and figurative language and diverting attention to the fictionality.

Thus, it should be remembered that there are some essential differences between Fiction and Novel. They are not one and the same.

Notes:

1. The capitalised term 'Fiction' is employed to suggest generic form, whereas the non-capitalised term 'fiction' insinuates the idea of generic element. The first alludes to 'form', while the later to the 'quality'. The term 'Novel' is capitalised frequently to stress its generic origin.
2. This assertion is not merely a *rational* myth. It can be proved through the rigorous study of different novel theories that came out in post-1950 era. The clues are clearly apparent in Nicholas D. Paige's *Before Fiction: The Ancient Regime of the Novel*.

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