

Tom Jones - As a Comic epic in Prose. ①  
P.G. Eng - Sem - 1 - cc 4 N Aapne

Henry Fielding, as a matter of fact, is the first English novelist and holds a prominent position in the history of English novel. He is the genius who gave it a proper shape, bade farewell to the fantastic world of the Romance and planted it on his own soil. He is the pioneer of the realistic novel and is rightly called the father of this genre. He enjoys intimate knowledge and variegated experiences of human life and human nature. His novels reveal his personal experiences and hold a true mirror to his age. His Tom Jones is the masterpiece of his fictional art and paints an elaborate picture of life and manners of the 18th Century England. It has been described as a comic epic in prose by some critics, though with certain reservations for it demonstrate most of the epic elements. Let us analyse it in a brief.

As it is evidently obvious, when Fielding took to fictional writing, the novel as a literary form, was in a <sup>state of</sup> bad shape and grave disrepute. It was, in no way, a respectable genre for the general attitude and the taste of the ~~age~~ reading public were dominantly refined and classical. Hence, Fielding, a man of exceptional creative power, felt it profitable to relate novel to some traditional literary genre in order to make it acceptable to the men of letters. Therefore, he announced his famous thesis of novel being a comic epic in prose. He clarified that like drama, epic is also divisible into two categories of Tragedy and Comedy. He further, points out that just as an epic may be comic or tragic so it also be either in prose or in Verse. A prose epic, that is the novel, may have all the essential elements of a Verse epic except one, the metre.

As we see, the the action of a serious epic is comprehensive, having a large variety of character

all the minutiae of human nature through their individual conduct and behaviour. A critic comments that Tom Jones should be considered as a 'history of human nature'. Byron proclaims the author of this novel 'the prose Homer of Human Nature'.

Fielding has deliberately refrained from including the members of the high aristocratic class in his portrait gallery. He believes that a uniformity of good manners and artificial convention of this class obscure the distinguishing idiosyncrasies of individuals that affords but little scope for delineation of human nature. So, he concentrates on the world of middle and lower classes. His characters are squires, doctors, parsons, lawyers, businessmen, innkeepers, clerks, servants etc. who express their thoughts and feelings with an artless frankness that shows the glimpses of their 'particular humours'. But it cannot be denied that they belong to England of 18th Century who are rational and practical in their attitudes, untroubled by ideals, eschewing heady passion or enthusiasm. That is Fielding's philosophy of human nature gives to the extraordinary potentiality of humanity for the highest of good or the deepest of evil. There is neither a great saint nor a great sinner among his characters. His people are morally mixed beings, compound of both good and evil. They are neither the paragons of excellence nor the monsters of depravity.

The characters of Tom Jones have one trait in common. They are thoroughly typically English and display English humanity. But it cannot be undermined that Fielding has taken pains to reveal, under the local and temporal form, that universal human nature which is essentially the same at all times and all places. Therefore, this novel, though smeared with English colours, is not merely a national epic, an epic of England, but also an epic of humanity, an epic of the life of all humanity.

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hero and the heroine cross each other's path on their way to London without ever meeting. Right persons arrive at the right moments and everything happens as desired. It is in this way that Fielding introduces elements of marvellous obviously violating verisimilitude as the supernatural intervention in Homer and Virgil.

The fighting scenes in Tom Jones are also introduced in the manner of the serious epic. For example we find the duel of Mrs. Patridge with her husband because she suspects illicit relation between him and Jenny Jones and the Molly's Seagrave's churchyard battle. They are certainly mock battles in imitation of the battles in an epic. In fact, as Fielding is writing a variant of the epic, he has not introduced heroic persons and sublim thoughts. His actions are light and ridiculous and his characters are of inferior rank and meanness. In the very beginning we see that Tom Jones is a foundling, an unheroic hero of the novel. Mr. Patridge is a barbar and Molly is first daughter of the poor game keeper. The noble is about the love affairs and not the narration of the heroic exploits of national significance.

However, to narrate this light and ridiculous events and characters in Tom Jones, Fielding has used the exalted epic style and diction. The use of Homeric similes is frequent. The application of the grandiloquent epic style to inferior characters makes one feel that Tom Jones is more of a parody or burlesque of the epic rather than a new genre, a comic epic in prose. As a matter of fact, style and content must not be separated and, an imitation of life and manners, must be in style equally homely and familiar. Fielding's abandonment of simplicity of style diminishes the

the readers' belief in the authenticity of the narrative.

Thus, we see that Tom Jones, with some deviations and Latitudes, due to the strains of the classical attitude of the age on Fielding, conforms to the novelist's theory of the novel being a comic epic in prose.

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