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The Classical Novel, On a Fall Morning In Iowa City

Chandrabhas Choudhury

Panel: The Classical Novel/Film

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Chandrabhas Choudhury

The Classical Novel, On a Fall Morning In Iowa City

The IWP writer Chandrabhas Choudhury was in a state of great distress as he walked with long strides from the Iowa House Hotel up towards the Old Capitol Building on the morning of Friday, the 9th of October 2010. He did not see – or if he saw, he did not register – the red and yellow leaves of fall that now rustled beneath his feet, and that only lately had been green leaves above him; nor, mired in his inner discontents, did he respond to the overtures of all the attractive girls winking at him from behind their sunglasses. The only two things in his sights were his destination – the Iowa City Public Library, where he was due to speak in a few minutes – and his dismay.

Because it was private and unspoken, his distress and the reasons for it could be picked up by nothing but fiction, which has a way of looking inside human minds that human beings themselves can never achieve, and this is its value in the world. To keep it short: Choudhury was distressed because he was unprepared. Or rather, he **had** prepared a lecture, but he had prepared wrongly, and so to the world it would seem that he had been slacking off and had not prepared at all. Only fiction (which excels at sympathy) would understand that he actually **had** prepared, only he had prepared wrongly.

What was his error? Choudhury had unfortunately long been misconstruing the nature of his invitation to speak at the panel. Instead of applying himself to the subject of the persistence of the classical novel in modern times, he had instead for weeks now, with the habitual carelessness and the susceptibility to exotic suggestion that was at the root of his nature, been writing up his thoughts on the abiding relevance of the classical **navel**. This was less absurd than it might seem. For thousands of years it has been believed in Indian yogic thought that the navel is the centre of the consciousness, and it is therefore central to any Indian poetics of fiction. Choudhury had imagined that the presiding powers of the IWP, with their usual exquisite delicacy and their characteristic attention to the local contexts of writers from different parts of the world, had been wanting illumination from his proudly Indian self on this hitherto obscure subject of the **navel** and its relation to fictional realisations of consciousness, but he'd been wrong. It was the **novel** they wanted to hear about, and he'd only realised this two hours ago. In a panic, Choudhury had gone to all his friends at the IWP, hoping they might be of some help to him. This was because, on principle, he never wrote more than a thousand words a day, and now, with so much tension in the air, he couldn't possibly manage more than four hundred words – an introductory paragraph, perhaps, and a swift conclusion. But if his friends (all smart people) would be so good as to contribute to his project a paragraph each off the top of their heads, each one taking the argument of the previous one a step further, then he might have something.

However, his friends, in the usual manner of life, disappointed him deeply. The Israeli writer Touche Gafla offered no help other than playing Kate Bush's "Babooshka" for Choudhury as a way of unlocking his creative energies; the answer to all the problems presented to Touche lay in some rock song or another. The Mauritian Farhad Khoyratty, a university professor by profession, said that, after a decade of dealing with truant students, he had no sympathy for ludicrous excuses about navels (which, with his characteristic cross-cultural agility, he said were also a kind of orange with their origins in Brazil). The Pakistani writer Husain Naqvi was unable to help, because this was not the slender window of lucid time when he was both not asleep and not at a bar (it strikes the narrator that there are three negatives in this particular sentence, while there are four in the opening sentence of that latest

and much-lauded take on the classical realist novel, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, and that if only one other "not" could be found from somewhere, this would be a sentence not unworthy of America's greatest living writer of classical prose). And Choudhury found himself quite unable to approach the Icelander Solvi Sigurdsson, because it had been Solvi's birthday the day before and he hadn't given him a present. As for Pola Oloixarac...well, ever since Pola had started attending those belly-dancing classes with the other IWP girls, she wasn't the same person. If at all there was a subject on which she might now conceivably be of some help, it was that of the (now unwanted) *navel*.

So there was Choudhury, on his own, walking to the Iowa Public Library without a lecture in the bank, feeling like a character from one of his own stories, typically a person who is in deep trouble, and is feeling the pressure of time on his pulse. Indeed, the same pressures that proved so satisfying in fiction, and gave him the greatest pleasure to construct, proved now, when transferred to real life, to be agonizing beyond belief. He resolved to be kinder to his characters from this point on, but then saw instantly that he was making one of those terrible conceptual fallacies that are always being pointed out by theorists of fiction: that of confusing characters in a novel with real people.

He also saw, though, that if there was any stream of literature – and we're talking here of fiction, poetry, drama, essays, and various avant-garde movements that have still to work out their identities – if there was any stream of literature that allowed for this kind of envisioning of a character as a living, breathing individual, as real and as present as one's family or girlfriend or cat, then it was the realist novel. It was also the realist novel that, for the first time in the history of literature, dared to imagine, at extraordinary length and in vivid detail, a protagonist who was typical and not exceptional, and yet highly individualized, presented in his or her everydayness. In other words, the distinction of the classical novel form was precisely that it allowed the reader, through the magic of the extended and elaborate illusion that it was able to spin from mere words and narrative sleight of hand and a wealth of sensory detail, to imagine that he or she was watching a life (or even *living* an alternate one) and not reading a book. The persistence of the form and its many conventions as a perennial template for fiction was connected to the fact that here, finally, was a form that allowed you to forget the very question of form. The sprawl of the classical novel was like a kind of comfortable armchair, or pint of AmberBock beer, that broke down the self-consciousness – the awareness that this was a book – that both writers and readers had previously brought with them, like a second skin, to the experience of literature.

Indeed, it seemed to Choudhury (as he nimbly avoided a US Bank frisbee that sailed out at him from somewhere) that one of the greatest and most durable satisfactions of the classical novel was the way in which it dramatised the passing of time. How the novel loved to play with time! Whole years could be made to pass with a single precise sentence, or the events of a single day could be made to fill up an entire book. Hundreds of things could be done with tense structures, cuts, and flashbacks, and at particularly delicious or fulfilling moments the reader, too, could stop time by closing the book for a few minutes. The realist novel gave both writer and reader the power to control time, which was denied to them by life.

Choudhury was by now consumed by realist-novel-love: it seemed to him that Dickens was walking alongside him, that it was Willa Cather just ahead, withdrawing some cash from the ATM, that Naguib Mahfouz was smoking a cigarette on the patio of the restaurant he was passing, and it was Irene Nemirovsky who gave him a brief nod, from behind her sunglasses, as she passed. It seemed to him – oh, if only he had some paper at hand, to record these zinging thoughts that were now raining upon him like Iowan autumn

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leaves! – that the most characteristic experience of human consciousness was that of the workings of memory. The realist novel, through the deployment of repetition, echoes, leitmotifs, and contrast, allowed the reader to powerfully experience memory **within** the field of the literary work, suggesting a connection between an incident on page twenty to another on page two hundred, and thereby stoking, without a pressuring hand, emotions just as strong as those from one’s own life.

In its attention to inwardness, to the patient tracking of the leaps and bends and flows in the thoughts of characters (thought Choudhury, lost in himself at a traffic signal), the realist novel schooled the reader in life. It taught him or her that that which is the most silent may yet be the most dramatic, and created in him or her a yearning for a greater engagement with the back-story of the world – or, if the world proved disappointing and somehow unnovelistic, then once again with novels. And further: although the realist novel strove to be a comprehensive representation of life, in the most capable hands it somehow proved to be an even stronger and more potent presence than the reality from which it mined its details, because, for one, it could eliminate the inessential, which life couldn’t, and two, it could be inflected with the storyteller’s personality and tone, and become not just the world but *a way of looking* at the world. After reading a good novel, the reader was always looking – for a little while at least, while he or she remained within the force field of the work – to heighten his or her own life to the same level of significance and meaning. The realist novel both bowed to life, and raised its music up a couple of notches.

Choudhury stopped for a moment outside the Public Library, and contemplated turning the other way into Bread Garden Supermarket instead, where he could hide himself amidst all the shelves of soup and the rows of microwave meals, the racks of vegetables and the salad bar (and also perhaps get himself some lunch). He felt the sun warm upon his face, and looked up at a blue sky in which he could see precisely one cloud. He saw that his deeply dire situation was once again something that only the novel could adequately record: a state of **contingency**, of being alive at a particular moment in time, and feeling a particular set of pressures and sensations. The realist novel was both chronicle and snapshot, coiling its nimble fingers equally ably both around an era and upon a moment.

But what of it? All these thoughts were useless, useless. He saw that if only he had half an hour to sit down and write up the reflections of just the last five minutes (how silverquick was thought!), he would have, even at such short notice, made a success of his lecture. (Choudhury was given too often to thinking a little too well of himself.) But alas, there was no time. He was done for.

Choudhury was innocent of the fact that, all this time (and as you and I know), a story was hanging above him like a small cloud (the first requirement of characters in fiction, of course, is that they never realise they are characters in fiction). And the story was recording his thoughts anyway, in all their rambles and tangles, occasionally editing a word or eliminating a redundancy, because it wanted to be a better story than Choudhury was a thinker.

And Choudhury didn’t know that, in the digital age, the story could take care of itself, and reproduce itself, and circulate itself – it needed no mailman, no agent, no publisher. Even as he walked into the hall where he believed he would soon be undone, the story was writing itself out rapidly on the blank pages of a handout, and when Choudhury glumly picked up the sheets to look at what the others had prepared, he was astonished to find that – astonished to find that – really astonished to find that – despite having done no writing at all, he was a presence in them and not an absence. Really amazed. Blinking in confusion, and eating two kinds of pizza one slice above the other to save time, Choudhury took a few moments to register the amazing good luck of this day and, indeed, of his life.

He had, once again, been saved by a story.

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