



THE ROMANTIC HERO AND THE HEROINE OF THE NOVELS: WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

The most common theme of most of the novels written in the world in any language is love and romance in which a hero and a heroine appear as the main characters. These are called romances and the happy ending is the one formal novel feature of the romance novel that virtually everyone can identify.

All romantic novels contain eight narrative elements;

a definition of society, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform; the meeting between the heroine and the hero; an account of their attraction for each other; the barrier between them; the point of ritual death; the recognition that falls the barrier; the declaration of heroine and hero that they love each other; and their betrothal.¹

All these elements were visible in great novels such as Emma, Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre and in many more in the English literature. This is true despite the time, country, language and culture that the novels appear. Almost all seem enjoying the romantic relationship between an ideal male and a female in the novels that they read. Therefore, it is interesting to find out the root of this hero and heroine who appear constantly in novels and make the readership emotionally attached to them.

English literature was always influenced by the ancient Greek literature. For example the tragedies and the comedies in the ancient Greek literature influenced the dramatists of the western world through out the history. Even though Oedipus, Antigone, Electra and the other Greek tragedies are considered master pieces even today, the ancient Greek novels did not receive much attention. However, the characteristics of ancient Greek novels display the role that they played in influencing the novelists in other contexts in selecting themes.

The first elements of Greek novel emerged in the first century B.C. There were five ancient Greek novelists whose works were considered as novels. The novels and the novelists are Chaireas and Callirhoe by Chariton, Ephesiaka by Xenophon of Ephesos, Daphnis and Chloe by Longus, Leukippe and Cleitophon by Achilleus Tatius and Aithiopika by Heliodorus. These novelists belong to the period between the first century BC and the fourth century AD.

From the beginning of the Greek novel, there were characteristics of romance novels in those. The Classical Oxford Dictionary defines the Greek novel as "a romantic composition in rhetorical prose, of considerable length."² This proves that the ancient Greek novels had the elements of romances.

All the five Greek novels mentioned above have a stereo-typed plot and all five have a similar context. The plot and the themes are repeated. In these, a handsome young man and a beautiful young woman fall in love at first sight. Somehow they get separated and launches into a series of adventures which take them into different places. They undergo shipwreck, meet pirates and bandits, attract the unwanted sexual attention of third parties and believe one another dead. However, they remain faithful to one another and are eventually re-united to pass the rest of their lives in wedded bliss.³ Within this context, variation seems to be possible. For example Chariton and Xenophon make their lovers marry before the adventure but Achilleus and Heliodorus make them marry after the adventure; however, the main plot remains the same. This is identical to the above mentioned elements that appear in the modern romances.



However, these ancient Greek novels are always criticized for poor characterization. For example, the Classical Oxford dictionary says “poverty of characterization renders the love scenes tedious in their artificial sentimentality.”⁴ This happens because of the stereotypical characters that appear in these novels. For example the hero is always an extremely handsome male and the heroine is always an extremely beautiful woman. Within the stereotypical plots there is a limited environment also to make the characters more natural. The advantage that the modern romance writers has is that they have a more educated readership who can understand the variations. Therefore, more complex characters and plots appear in the modern romances.

The main focus of the Greek novelists is individuals. All the stories have individual heroes and heroines whose experiences are non- social. The reason behind this is that the individual was emphasized above the collective during the period that these novels were produced. This is quite strange compared to the themes selected by the Greek tragedians, comedians and the epic writers. They always emphasized heroism and all others come behind. The possible reason for the Greek novels to have more domestic and individual themes could be that there was not a unity among the Greek states during the Hellenistic period. Therefore, people did not encounter collective efforts and heroic deeds. Due to such political and social factors, the novelists seemed to find it easy to discuss domestic and personal issues in their works. The modern romances do the same. They also discuss the personalized individual themes which are related to the domestic and social lives.

All the five Greek novels that are being discussed have love and adventure as the main theme. “The novels offer compensation, in both the adventure and the romantic section;”⁵ however, the theme of adventure is included to provide excitement to the story. Apart from these main two themes, defloration of a man by a woman, human sacrifice, chastity, cannibalism and super natural elements can be seen as sub themes. Eroticism too has a prominent place. “The novel was innovative in the importance it affords to erotic theme, elevating love to the supreme value in human life.”⁶ In all five, marriage also is given an important place. The hero and the heroine get married in all of them. This is due to the fact that social life, domestic life, morals and values were considered important by the Greeks. In modern romances also similar themes are discussed and in most of them the hero and the heroine get united.

The theme love is always associated with learning in the ancient Greek novels. The hero and the heroine are immature at the beginning of the novel and they become mature gradually through experiences that they under go. The main characters are almost childish at the beginning. Human beings around them, their society and culture teach the immature couple what life is. In certain novels such as Clitophon and Leucippe, the novelist has included dialogues which are almost similar to rhetorical speeches to educate the young couple. This is hard to be seen in the modern romances; however, the couple goes through a process of learning through out the novel in different kinds of encounters that they come across.

Sexuality is also discussed very often in the Greek novels. The sexual standards in the novels seem very clear. They emphasize the female chastity and give more relaxed freedom to the male. He can have pre-marital sexual relationships to gain experience, but the woman remains pure. This is because the ancient Greek society is a patriarchal society which valued the female chastity. This too is not different from what we encounter today. Most of the modern romantic heroes and heroines behave in the same way and especially in the Eastern novels, female chastity is given a prominent place.



The ancient Greek novels evoke thrill and excitement through themes and various types of encounters that the main characters come across. The experience of the hero and the heroine are close to the real life situations. Mostly they encounter love and danger. This makes the reader view the experiences of the main characters through their own experiences. Even through the modern romances hardly discuss the real adventure that the ancient heroes and heroines went through, a series of experiences are discussed from which the main characters gain a lot of experiences and the maturity.

At the same time the Greek novelists bring out a happy ending on all occasions even though it is impossible in the real life situation. There is a wider purpose of giving a happy ending to the novels than mere consolidation. Throughout the plot the characters go through suffering and feel that there is no end for it, so they become victims of malicious powers. Ultimately they discover the meaning and purpose of their suffering i.e. to understand life and good and evil. In order to achieve happiness, they should go through suffering. The other purpose of giving a happy ending is to make 'good' win over 'evil.' By offering the happy ending, the novelists offered a spiritual comfort to the readers as well. The modern romances too have happy endings quite often though not always.

The elements that were discussed under the ancient Greek romances are quite similar to the romances that appeared afterwards and which are written even at present. The most significant similarity is the ideal hero and the heroine and their love which is venerated by the readership. Therefore, it is possible to say that the roots of the romantic hero and the heroine of the modern romances lie within the ancient Greek novels. As ancient Greek literature always influenced the world of literature, the ancient novels must also have influenced the novelists who appeared later.

References

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