NONINTERVENTIONIST HUMANISM IN FIELDING’S TOM JONES

Md. Nazmul Huda
Assistant Professor, Dept. of English Language and Literature
International Islamic University Chittagong.
Email: parrotiiuc@yahoo.com

Abstract:

Peaceful and happy maintenance of life principally rests upon a sound human society. However, a society possesses both good and evil forces with the evil force predominating. It cannot be changed into a good one without rigorous, repeated and concerted attempts of correction. There are two plausible ways of social reformation. One is to alter the mind of the vile persons; another is to eliminate all of them from the society by exercising punishment upon them. The second one can never be a reasonable, commonsensical method, for, by the continuous process of counseling, motivation and forgiveness which is Fielding’s attitude towards human nature, many of the degenerated people may be converted into righteous ones. And the society may categorically undergo a superb, radical change. Again, our society is basically full of ideological and religious factions, where observing and assessing a social figure or phenomenon from liberal, humanistic point of view is hardly justified. This diversity of opinions leads to disarray, restiveness and discontent. The study of Henry Fielding’s novel, Tom Jones may stand contributory to the restoration of concord and quiet in our social milieu as well as to analyze literary issues from the objective point of view. This article aims at assessing Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones from a moderate perspective. An attempt has been made to exhibit Fielding not to endeavour in producing entirely decent or obnoxious figures; rather, he plainly renders them life-like and portrays them as realistic. For example, he sketches Tom Jones as a naive individual erring every now and then. The narrative, though treated this way, seems, as a matter of fact, to be framed with a premeditated rationale, which is to edify didactic instruction in the mode of travesty. Moreover, to accomplish the assignment of edifying exhortation and to keep the tale multihued and spectacular, Fielding exerts realism, haunting intrusion on the part of the author, mock-epic paradigm, and irony accruing out of incongruence between appearance and reality. By means of authorial interrupting description in the course of the plot, Fielding entangles his devotees in the evaluations of ethical verdict. With irony and mock-epic technique, alongside offering himself scopes to deal with his light-hearted burlesque, he presents prospects for his esteemed readers to evaluate the total characterization. Hence, it is quite reasonable to pronounce that the nub of Tom Jones is a pageant of munificent human temperament. He firmly believes that if a society is to be decent, its inmates must be reformed, too, through a very liberal modification rather than force, psychological tyranny and strong vigilant team guarding constantly.

Key Words: Liberal, human nature, realistic, idealize, contrast, appearance, reality and ethical strain.

Introduction:

Preoccupied with the individual as well as societal restructuring, Henry Fielding portrays the true, contemporary picture of human susceptibilities in the guise of a narrative of a foundling. Since earlier novelists traditionally used to idealize characters in their novels, Fielding’s attempt to mirror the characters through realism was a tremendous surprise to the then literary arena. In the shade of telling a story of a foundling, Henry Fielding shares his profound reflections on life with his readers. Having a fairly tolerant outlook towards human beings, he conceives that a man may have both good side and evil side of character. Consequently, as he endeavours to reform the people of society with his keen experience as a judge, so does he look at human
follies and vices with his sympathetic eyes to correct the individual as well as society. In fact, he has tremendously striven to squeeze good attributes out of a man seemingly looking perverted. Unlike us, Fielding is optimistic regarding a sinful soul with his steadfast conviction that anytime it may turn from its bad pligt to a good one. *Tom Jones* recording alteration of a degenerated man to the path of goodness shows how he falls remorseful for his previous life. Since our society is predominated by evil force in most cases, Henry Fielding seems to think that it is not logical to correct our society through the sheer elimination of all bad people from it. Rather, he wants to mean that social reformation is a gradual process through celestial forgiveness and sagacious motivation instead of force and vindictiveness.

**Realism:**

Henry Fielding does not create an ideal, imaginative world in his novel, *Tom Jones*; instead, he presents real, natural and fallible human characters to pass through difficult socio-economic ordeals for self-realization and amendment. He simply mocks at the follies and vices of human beings without making them feel mortified and disgraced. As a renowned critic opines:

“His realism is of a moderate quality, and does not go to the excess of a bitter preference for the cruel truths which convention neglects, his pursuit of reality was never prompted by rancour or hatred”(Cazamian, 1965, p. 861).

In effect, Fielding harbours an optimistic, liberal view upon human beings who, he thinks, are not beyond correction. He desires to depict things as he sees them. His experience is of a certain easy indulgence in manners; to him, men should be given scopes to be rectified by encouragement of the innate positive impulses in lieu of bitter criticism. Such humanistic view probably originates from the Socratic philosophy, “to know the good is to do the good” (Stumpf, 1933, p. 44) Fielding likes his hero to know, to experience, then, to suffer, and eventually to be transformed. If somebody does not know the true nature of goodness, it’s a wonder how he can perform the good. This stands out as a very broadminded philosophical notion.

**The Ethical Strain:**

Readers of *Tom Jones* may apparently think the characters shallow and resolve that his issues are noticeably trivial; however, there is historical locale of Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. As a novelist in the eighteenth century, an age in which society necessitated novels to be morally written, Fielding had to war with the anticipations of his days since many figures of the novels in his days were too good to be true. A renowned critic comments upon the ethical tune in *Tom Jones* in detail: “Both Fielding and Richardson were moralists and used the novel in order to demonstrate by actual examples what they considered right and wrong behavior.... For Fielding, at the heart of right moral lay what he called ‘good nature’” (Allen, 1955, p. 52).

*Shamela*, his first novel, for instance, was written with an objective to lampoon Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, which Fielding felt hypocritical and manipulative. *Shamela* stems from the word “sham”. It is obvious that he censured sham of every mode. Equally clear is “his hatred of cant and humbug, something he shares strongly with Pope. Both poets hate a hypocrite more than anything else” (Stephen, 2000, p. 19).

The view Fielding nurtures regarding moral seems palpable. The hero Fielding constitutes in *Tom Jones* is categorically not a man without blemishes, but one making intermittent blunders. Fielding looks at human makeup as a mixture of the good and the evil; *Tom Jones* is necessarily a good person- vigorous, yet honest. Though he is stained with some grievous mistakes leading him to his vicissitudes, he is at length made purgated by his candor, friendliness, and intrinsic admiration for others, which Fielding counts as the dazzling side of human susceptibility. It is a pity
that Dr. Samuel Johnson, a celebrated critic, once exclaimed to a devotee, “I am shocked to hear you quote from so vicious a book [Tom Jones]” (Bosswell, 1836, p. 293). Nevertheless, Arnold Kettle, one of the critics who bestows soaring approbation upon Fielding, says that Fielding . . . is not complacent but he is fundamentally confident that the problem of human society, that is to say, his society, can and will be solved by humane feelings and right reason. It is this broad and tolerant confidence which gives Tom Jones its particular tone and which also alienates those critics who feel less confident in social man than Fielding, whose optimism they mistake for insensitiveness. (Kettle, 1950, p.76)

Confident of his goal, Fielding clearly states, in his preface to Joseph Andrews, that “the goodness of his (Adams’s) heart will recommend him to the good-natured” (Fielding, 1910 p. xxxii). As a matter of fact, his intention is to defend what is good. As revealed by Magill, “Fielding saw his task as a novelist to be a ‘historian’ of human nature and human events, and he felt obligated to emphasize the moral aspect of his work” (Magill, 1989, p. 876). Although readers may be apprehensive with what Tom’s identity is, Henry Fielding appears to be more concerned with what Tom’s aptitude is. In other words, Fielding always keeps preoccupied with the moral facet in this novel. This is a salient fact we would not ignore in Tom Jones. Therefore alongside the pivotal aspect of the suspense about the parentage of Tom Jones, readers should converge their attention on the author’s concern. By pointing to Tom Jones’s childlike learning from experience, the author attempts to present the reader a glimpse of the potency and Achilles’ heel of human nature; therefore, all funs and ridicules about human nature in his book are tinted with a deliberate purpose of giving the reader a moral message. As revealed in the Masterpieces of World Literature, Fielding tries to “laugh mankind out of its own weaknesses” (Magill, 1989, vol. I, p. 1000).

That nobility of heart matters more than nobility of birth is exposed, too, in the character of Tom Jones. However, it can equally be true that nobility of birth cannot always guarantee nobility of heart. This novel covers a good number of characters of noble birth, who prove deceitful, egotistical, evil, and even gruesome, such as Lord Fellamar, who tries to rape Sophia Western; Lady Bellaston, who attempts to do Tom a great deal of evil after losing her fancy to him; Blifil, the most repulsive character, who makes false witness against Tom often; Bridget, who produces Tom and obscures the fact till her death. There are, on the other hand, esteemable, benevolent people having no high birth, such as Mrs. Nightingale, and Partridge.

Of course, graciousness of heart is not coupled with class. That nobility of heart possesses moral superiority is firmly trusted by Henry Fielding. His hero, Tom Jones, offers an ostensible instance to this point. Before the revelation of his true birth, he remains a foundling, a bastard, a status of the most ignoble birth. Nevertheless, he appears to be a true gentleman, for “though he did not always act rightly, yet he never did otherwise without feeling and suffering for it” (Baker, 1973, p. 130). Although he errs sometimes, his superb conscience and his magnanimity are present; he may be entrapped to stay with women, but to seduce a young woman, however low her social dignity may be, appears to him a very repugnant transgression. Since he acts with munificence of heart- candidness, integrity, empathy, and altruism, which are the key values in human beings- he embraces bliss eventually.

**Interruption during Narration:**

A remarkable issue to note is that Fielding disposes of the technique a novelist usually adopts to let his readers forget the reality and as such automatically think that they are with the characters of the novel they are perusing. In Tom Jones, Fielding, with a view to imparting a moral lesson to the reader, frequently steps aside from his narrative and remarks on his characters and their actions.
Through using such words as “I” and “my reader” in his intrusive narration, he momentarily pulls the reader out of his story, offering his reader opportunities to assess and make his moral evaluation concerning the events:

But perhaps the reader may wonder why Lady Bellaston, who in her heart hated Sophia, should be so desirous of prompting a match which was so much to the interest of the young woman. Now, I would desire such readers to look carefully into human nature. . . . (Roscoe, 1841, p. 240)

In fact, these authorial details make it implausible for the reader to overlook many of Fielding’s moral instructions in the novel. In this connection, Martin Stephen points out, authorial intrusion “allows Fielding to point the reader gently in the direction in which he wants him or her to go” (Stephen, 2000, p. 192). Besides the moral lecturing, his authorial intrusion serves another function as well, which is to remind the reader of the previous plots, so that the reader may see it less exhausting to follow the intricate fictional development in Tom Jones. For example, when it is worthwhile to bring up a character who has showed up in one of the previous books, the authorial voice appears to utter:

“My reader may please to remember that Jenny Jones had lived some years with a schoolmaster” (Rhys, 1908, p. 41).

Furthermore, when the author feels a requisite to shift from one scene to another, he speaks:

“the reader may now, perhaps, be pleased to return with us to Mr. Jones, who, at an appointed hour, attended on Mrs. Fitzpatrick” (Roscoe, 1841, p. 240).

Henry Fielding, by way of using authorial intrusion, also hopes to lure his enthusiastic readers to pass on to the subsequent chapter:

“At last Mrs. Fitzpatrick . . . began to relate what the reader, if he is desirous to know her history, may read in the ensuing chapter” (Baker, 1973, p. 375).

The Architectural Constitution and Characterization:

Launching his calling as a playwright, a journalist, and a lawyer, Henry Fielding fortuitously chose to be working on fictions on account of the adjournment of the theaters in London. The proficiency he obtained from his earlier dramatic works facilitated him in expertly gripping intricacy of plots in his novels, such as vibrant conversation and stunning action. Fielding is chiefly reputed for Tom Jones in half a dozen of his novels. Thackeray, a novelist in the Victorian era, exclaimed that the plot of Tom Jones was a perfect one (Johnson, 1961, p. 95). Coleridge, a Romantic poet, even looked upon the plot of Tom Jones as one of the three most perfectly planned plots in the history of literature (Coleridge, 1856, p. 521). And it is safe to say that the publication of this novel, at least, drove the eighteenth century fiction almost to the midway of that century (Mckillop, 1956, p. 118).

Divided into eighteen books, the structure of Tom Jones is a unique one, of which the first six books are set in the country, another six on the road, and last six in London. In other words, the dealing with six for the beginning, six for the middle, and six for the end corresponds to the design invented and suggested by Aristotle in Poetics. Suspense is aroused in every chapter of the books, and the readers’ attention is detained so that they may want to continue on to the next chapter. Coleridge rightly puts remarks pregnant with eulogy: “What a master of composition Fielding was! Upon my word, I think … Tom Jones, the most perfect plot ever planned” (Coleridge, 1856, p. 521). It is invariably true that this is a novel “alive with characters and incidents” (Elwin, 1902, p. 146).
Not interested in idealizing characters in *Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding leaves them plainly clear-cut. His plot is knotty, but his portrayal of characters is not so. They are exclusively made natural with their own roles and speeches. In other words, his characters are simple-minded, but not tedious in any way whatsoever; rather, they are found fairly appealing to view.

Unlike the idealized protagonists depicted in novels, Tom Jones is a natural human being. Despite his occasional erring, he is essentially good-hearted. Up to the fourteenth year of his age, he was indicted of robbing an orchard, stealing a duck, and pick-pocketing Master Blifil. Irrefutably, his rash and friendly disposition accounts for many of his predicaments. But, all of his exploits are practically controlled with kindness and bounty. He robbed the orchard and stole the duck, for he wanted to help the poor gamekeeper, Black George. Anderson, the highwayman, stimulated pity in Tom’s heart; He gave him all his money on discovering that the robber left his wife and children starving at home. Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, as a mirror of life, is obviously composed to give vent to the truth about the hero, as spoken by the novelist below:

As we determined, when we first sat down to write this history, to flatter no men, but to guide our pen throughout by the directions of truth, we are obliged to bring our hero on the stage in a much more disadvantage manner than we could wish. . . (Baker, 1973, p. 78)

Being a deceitful scoundrel, and a realistic administrator of his self-interest, Blifil’s nature is quite unlike that of Tom Jones’s. And that is why our revulsion towards Blifil is incited.

However, as for the virtuous girl, Sophia, she astounds us by her personality which is divulged meticulously as she stood firm against the match with Blifil, thereby keeping her steadfast promise to Tom Jones. She professes her love by saying:

“I am determined to leave my father’s house this very night” (Baker, 1973, p. 227).

Fielding’s sketch of Squire Western appears, perhaps, to be the most outstanding of that of others’. His adoration for bottle, predilection towards uncouth language, and hysterical mania universally make him an eccentric figure who “keeps up our interest in him to the very last page” (Elwin, 1902, p. 149).

The distinctive features of all the major characters were vividly brought to light via a very insignificant event of Sophia’s pet bird as Sophia was thirteen and Tom was fifteen. Sophia got the little bird from Tom as a gift which she dearly adored, took care of, tutored to sing, and prevented from flying away with a tiny string round its leg. Deceitfully convincing Sophia to trust the favourite bird to him, all on a sudden, Blifil released the bird. After seeing this, when Tom heroically got onto the tree to reclaim the bird, the branch broke and Tom plunged into the water of the canal underneath, while the bird flew away and was grasped by a hawk. Making pretext, Blifil opined that he liberated the bird because it was inhuman to imprison it. Observing Sophia’s pitiable predicament Mr. Allworthy, a kind-hearted man, assured Sophia of a more lovely bird, on the contrary, her father, Mr. Western “chid her for crying so for a foolish bird; but could not help telling young Blifil, if he was a son of his, his backside should be well flead” (Rhys, 1908, p. 105). Fielding’s attitude to the aforementioned characters can properly be assessed in the following passage:

“Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, for example, illustrates the moral superiority of a hot-blooded young man like Tom, whose sexual indulgences are decidedly atoned for by his humanitarianism, tenderheartedness, and instinctive honor.
(innate as opposed to acquired through training). Serving as foils to Tom are the real sinners in the novel—the vicious and the hypocritical” (Guerin, 1922, p. 26).

Comic-Epic Approach:

Abram says “a mock-epic or mock heroic poem imitates the elaborate form and ceremonious style of the epic genre, but applies it to a commonplace or trivial subject matter” (Abrams, 1988, p. 18). Therefore, ostentatious in language and detailed in devices, the mock-epic technique presents a petty issue in a lofty style. The purpose of such heroic delineation of characters is to produce ludicrous effect. In Book I, after giving a description of the top of a hill encompassing Allworthy’s house, Henry Fielding comments:

“. . . and how to get thee down without breaking thy neck I do not well know. However, let us c’en venture to slide down together; for Miss Bridget rings her bell, and Mr. Allworthy is summoned to breakfast, where I must attend, and, if you please, shall be glad of your company”. (Baker, 1973, p. 31)

The sign of mock-epic mode stands articulate, too, in the extract below:

His wig was in an instant torn from his head, his shirt from his back and from his face descended five streams of blood, denoting the number of claws with which nature had unhappily armed the enemy. (Baker, 1973, p. 60)

The above mentioned ideas like the ‘flying wig’, ‘the stripping shirt’, and ‘the five streams of blood’ are indicative of a fight, but Fielding terms the horrible fighter as a wild animal furnished with “claws which nature had unhappily armed the enemy.”

Another example of mock-epic style may be drawn from Tom-Molly-Squire event in which philosopher Squire is seen behind a blanket as Molly is attempting her utmost to profess her trust in Tom.

“He had a nightcap belonging to Molly on his head, and his two large eyes, the moment the rug fell, stared directly at Jones; so that when the idea of philosophy was added to the figure now discovered, it would have been very difficult for any spectator to have refrained from immoderate laughter. (Baker, 1973, p.149)”

Chapter IV of Book II represents the same effect which the mock-epic method produces:

As fair Grimalkin, who, though the youngest of the feline family, degenerates not in ferocity, from the elder branches of her, and . . . is equal in fieriness to the noble tiger himself. . . . With not less fury did Mrs. Partridge fly on the poor pedagogue. (Baker, 1973, p. 60)

Contrast between Appearance and Reality:

Primarily irony signifies the contrast between appearance and reality. As to its elaborate definition, Abrams says: “In most of the modern critical uses of the term “irony” there remains the root sense of dissembling or hiding what is actually the case; not however, in order to deceive, but to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects” (Abrams, p. 97). Again, in irony, expressions communicate the contrary meaning. Occasionally it is corresponding to the “ambiguous language intended to conceal part of its meaning from part of the audience” (Knox, 1913, p. 43-44).

Most of the critics think that the striking mood in Tom Jones is ironical. Ample uses of irony have been made as an instrument to satirize the contemporary society to produce light-hearted rhetorical effects and therewith to correct the society. Often, on the one hand, the novelist praises a character, on the other hand, he actually laughs at his greed, selfishness, or other darker aspects. As
regards Bridget and Deborah Wilkins, when Fielding calls them “good women”, it produces ludicrous effects and the readers blush out of this wit.

A good number of ironic statements are manifest in such a vein that they are likely to be true and likely be not. Bridget’s “prudence” may be taken as an instance. She is truly far-sighted, because she always keeps vigilant against men’s snare although this sort of foresight is not proper for her, because she does not look lovely. On the other hand, she is thought unwise, for she has committed a sinful act in producing a bastard. As a matter of fact, ironically, she sounds prudent enough to obscure her own self as the mother so that nobody can ascertain the covert till the close of the narrative.

Tom Jones abounds with irony and ironical occasions. As when Henry Fielding asserts that Mrs. Deborah Wilkins was terribly frightened as she catches sight of her master in his shirt and swears, she, has never viewed a man without a coat in her long life of fifty-second year. In fact, we know that she is telling a lie.

Irony may result from startling responses, as Hutchens remarks: “the employment of unexpected reaction can also give rise to the effect of irony” (Hutchens, 1967, p. 44). Sophia’s father spoke out: “he loved her (Sophia) more than his own soul and that he would send to the world’s end for the best physician to her” (Baker, 1973, p. 179). As soon as he comes to know that Sophia’s disease is love, he gives vent to emotional outburst: “How? In love! In love without acquainting me! I’ll disinherit her; I’ll turn her out of doors, stark naked, without a farthing” (Baker, 1973, p. 179). Such ironical eccentricity provokes laughter.

While Captain Blifil- pondering over the estate which he had every prospect to inherit following Allworthy’s death- confronts a sudden, premature death, and “took, therefore, measure of that proportion of soil which was now become adequate to all his future purpose” (Baker, 1973, p. 73), the readers furthermore find efficient manipulation of irony of situation.

Conclusion

Concerned with human deportment and intents, Henry Fielding depicts human nature of his time though the title of his masterpiece is regarding the tale of a waif. Instead of idealizing human beings in his novel, he speaks about the human nature realistically. Under cover of the story of a foundling, the novelist parades his subtle experiences concerning human life and his mellow reflections on it. Fielding’s concept of human beings is very liberal. That is why he has tremendously striven to bring forth noble traits from a man who apparently looks evil. He has shown how a degenerated man may turn to goodness and how he feels remorseful for his past actions. Henry Fielding is found having a mind full of forgiveness which is universally divine. Most of the twentieth century critics deem him as a social reformer whose earnest strife is to recommend goodness and innocence for the betterment of mankind.

Works Cited


The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, often known simply as Tom Jones, is a comic novel by English playwright and novelist Henry Fielding. It is both a Bildungsroman and a picaresque novel. It was first published on 28 February 1749 in London, and is among the earliest English prose works to be classified as a novel. It is the earliest novel mentioned by W. Somerset Maugham in his 1948 book Great Novelist and Their Novels among the ten best novels of the world. It totals 346,747 words divided into Tom Jones, comic novel by Henry Fielding, published in 1749. Tom Jones, like its predecessor, Joseph Andrews, is constructed around a romance plot. Squire Allworthy suspects that the infant whom he adopts and names Tom Jones is the illegitimate child of his servant Jenny Jones. When Tom is a young