Level: M1 Lit & Civ SII (2021-2022)

Module:HAL

Lecture 01: Colonial Period: 1607-1776

Summary of the colonial literature:

The literature of the colonial period turns back to 1607 when Captain Christopher Newport and approximately a hundred colonists founded Jamestown as the first permanent English speaking settlement in North America. Also, John Smith's efforts are worth to be mentioned for the survival of the new community in New England. In 1620, the Mayflower, carrying the Pilgrims, landed at Plymouth. The period ended in 1776 when the colonies got their independence.

The first American literature was neither American nor really literature. It was not American because it was the work mainly of immigrants from England. It was not literature as we know it- in the form of poetry, essays or fiction- but rather an interesting mixture of travel accounts and religious writings. The earliest colonial travel accounts are records of the perils and frustrations that challenged the courage of America's first settlers. William Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation* describes the hard conditions which the Pilgrims, on the board of Mayflower, received when they landed on the coast of America in 1920:

Being thus arrived in a good harbor, and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought them over the fast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element… But here I cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poor people's present condition; and so I think will the reader, too, when he well considers the same. Being thus passed the vast ocean… they had now no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodies; no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succor

If the American wilderness did not provide a hearty welcome for the colonists, it nevertheless offered a wealth of natural resources. "He is a bad fisher who cannot kill on one day with his hook and line, one, two or three hundred Cods" is a claim made by Captain John Smith in *A Description of New England* (1616). " A sup of New England's air is better than the whole draft

of old England's ale" is a testimonial given by Françis Higginson in his *New England's Plantation* (1630). Higginson adds:

Besides I have one of my children that was formerly most lamentably handled with sore breaking out of both his hands and feet of the king's evil, but since he came hither he is very well over (what) he was, and there is hope of perfect recovery shortly, even by the very wholesomeness of the air.

Poor Higginson did not fare as well as his son; he died the same year the New England's Plantation was published.

Other writers echoed the descriptions and exaggerations of Smith and Higginson. Their purpose was to attract dissatisfied inhabitants of the Old World across the ocean to the New. As a result, their travel accounts became a kind of literature to which many groups responded by making the hazardous crossing to America. The earliest settlers included Dutch, Swedes, Germans, French, Spaniards, Italians, and Portuguese. However, the overwhelming majority was English.

The English immigrants who settled on America's northern seacoast, appropriately called New England, came in order to practice their religion freely. They were either English who wanted to reform the church of England or people who wanted to have an entirely new church. These two groups combined, especially in what became the Massachusetts, came to be known as "Puritans", so named after those who wished to "purify" the Church of England.

The Puritans followed many of the ideas of the Swiss reformer John Calvin. Through the Calvinist influence the Puritans emphasized the common belief that human beings were basically evil and could do nothing about it; and that many of them, though not all, would surely be condemned to hell.

Over the years the Puritans built a way of life that was in harmony with their somber religion, one that stressed hard work, thrift, piety, and sobriety. These were the Puritan values that dominated much of the earliest American writing, including sermons, books, and letters of such noted Puritan clergymen as John Cotton and Cotton Mather. During his life Cotton Mather wrote more than 450

works, an impressive output of religious writings that demonstrates that he was an example, as well as, an advocate, of the puritan ideal of hard work.

During the last half of the seventeenth century the Atlantic coast was settled both north and south. Colonies still largely English- were established. Among the colonists could be found poets and essayists, but no novelists. The absence of novelists is quite understandable: the novel form had not even developed fully in England; the Puritan members of the colonies believed that fiction ought not to be read because it was, by definition, not true.

The American poets who emerged in the 17th century adapted the style of the established European poets to the subject matter confronted in a strange, new environment. Anne Bradstreet was one such a poet. Born and educated in England, Anne both admired and imitated the French poet Gauillaume Du Bartas and influenced by his poem La semaine, ou creation du monde (1578). When she wrote poetry, she did intend to publish it or being famous. Her brother-in-law took her book *The Tenth Muse Sprung up in America* and published it in England without her consent. By and large she could capture the colonial experience which established her place as one of America's most notable early writers.

Likewise, Edward Taylor, another important colonial poet, did not want his works to be published. He produced what is perhaps the finest seventeenth century American verse. He filled his works with vivid imagery. Here, for example, are Taylor's descriptions of the unworthy heart of man:

A sty of filth, a through of washing swill,
A dunghill pit, a puddle of mere slime.
A nest of vipers, hive of hornets stings,
A bag of poison, civet box of sins.

Unlike Bradstreet and Taylor, Michael Wigglesworth achieved wide popularity during the colonial days because he published his works. His gloomy poem entitled "The Day of Doom" (1662) is a

description of the Day of Judgment. It tells of the day when God will decide the fate of man. Most people will be sent to Hell; a few lucky ones will be chosen to go to Heaven.

Wigglesworth, Taylor, Bradstreet, Bradford and others are early colonial writers whose writings were influenced by their experience in England and the New World.

II- The First Settlements:

The literature of the first American settlements was, in a double sense, a literature of discovery – first, a hopeful discovery of the potentialities of the New World, and, later, a sometimes disillusioning discovery of the reality. The more hopeful discoverers were by temperament promoters who came to the colonies, saw with their own eyes all the good things that had been promised them by men who had never been abroad, and went back home to urge emigration upon others. The "good news from Virginia" which Alexander Whitaker announced to his fellow countrymen was an account of a land of plenty. Fowl and fish abounded, crops flourished, and good wood was everywhere; and if the devil plagued the settlers with such troubles as had been reported, his pestiferousness was that of a serpent whose head had been crushed and whose body would soon cease to writhe. In a like manner Francis Higginson praised New England, adding persuasive testimony concerning the salubrity of colonial air and warming the imaginations of dwellers in a chilly country of depleted forests with his promise of " good living for those that love good fires." Of course the first settlers in Virginia starved, those of New England were frozen out, and Higginson was dead of tuberculosis before the public had a chance to read his account of his "cure." Yet both Higginson and Whitaker were honest optimists, and there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of their enthusiasm.

Other promoters appear to have been more devious, among them Captain John Smith. Some years after an unhappy experience with the lazy settlers of Jamestown, he wrote his *Description of New England* as an appeal to independent, zealous, and adventurous souls who could be moved by the love of fame or country to settle a land where "if a man work but three days in seven, he may get

more than he can spend, unless he will be excessive." Smith knew from experience that the plantations needed only those "worthy, honest, and industrious spirits" for whom he explicitly called. However, his emphasis upon gain and good living and the pleasures of fishing was hardly a realistic preparation for the rugged conditions that had to be faced. When he was glorifying his own personality rather than promoting immigration, he took an entirely different line. Then he wrote of the threat of Indian tortures and his own stern presence of mind. The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles exaggerated of the Jamestown colony that was no inducement to adventure for any but the hardiest people.

William Bradford wrote more honestly than Smith. His *History of Plymouth Plantation* is a classic of plain statement and accurate details. The pilgrims of the "Mayflower" were not only the first but the humblest of the successful New England settlers. Bradford's account of their experience, written for the benefit of posterity rather than for any contemporary audience, is so moving in its simplicity and directness that it has made them more familiar in popular history than are their more important brethren of the Bay Colony. It has also helped unintentionally to keep alive the partly erroneous notion that most if not practically all of the New England settlers crossed the Atlantic for religious freedom rather than for the beaver, fish, and wood which figured so largely in the promotion literature and actually in economic life. Codfish, furs, and ships' stores were mixed in with the zeal for a pure religion as inducements to the colonization of New England. The early literature of discovery is interesting not only for its narratives and descriptions but for its revelation of mingled motives. In spite of the popular impression, its authors wrote for a variety of reasons. It is clear that they made different appeals to different kinds of readers.

Whatever the forces that pulled – or sometimes pushed—the first settlers toward the New World, the result was the beginning of a great migration. The year 1607 marks the start of settlement in Virginia by a group made up mainly of gentlemen-adventurers and their bond servants. In 1620,

the austere Pilgrims stepped on the New England shore at Plymouth; in 1630 the more prosperous and worldly Puritans came to colonize Massachusetts Bay.

The writings of the first settlers, like all literature, must be read with imagination. Some of their significance may be found on the surface. Some must be sought beneath. But in them and in the writings of the later emigrants are revealed most of the qualities of the saints, the adventurers, and the security-seekers, and all the other men and women who built a new nation in the New World.

II- Emigrant Poetry and Prose:

The people who left seventeenth century England for the New World were not, frankly, much interested in the fine art of literature. They were more intent upon making a home for themselves in the wilderness, establishing their families, and starting a new life. The Puritan leaders of the New England colonies believed with George Herbert that religion stood tiptoe in their native land, "ready to pass to the American strand." So they recruited their followers for the purpose of taking flight with their religion even though it might lead them into a primitive country – so primitive that the first deputy governor of the Bay Colony could not even be provided with a writing table during his initial winter in Massachusetts. Yet many of these leaders, and some of their wives, were people of good education who brought with them the unquestioning respect for literature which was an important part of their Renaissance heritage. Some of them accepted the growing Puritan belief that literature should be composed in a "plain style" suited to the understanding of ordinary people. Others held to the notion that writing, both in poetry and in prose, should reflect the erudition and rhetorical ingenuity of the author. Almost all of them found their literary practices affected by the circumstances of their relationship to the new country and to the homeland they had left.

One of the earliest enterprises of the Puritans was the preparation of the first book to be printed in the English colonies. It was a translation of the Psalms which would be accurate in substance, plain in style, and thus more suitable for singing in their sober churches than was the version by

Sternhold and Hopkins which they had used at home. *The Bay Psalm Book* was to have a long and powerful influence on the literary consciousness of the ordinary people of New England, for some of their most popular poems in later generations, from Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom* to the anonymous "Yankee Doodle", were to be composed in its common meter.

While the congregations were being taught to sing that the Lord to them a shepherd was, Mrs. Anne Bradstreet was privately carrying on a different literary tradition in a series of learned "quaternions" on the four elements, the four humors, the four ages of man, the four seasons, and the four monarchies of Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome. She was self-conscious in her awareness of her "foolish, broken, blemishes Muse" and of the neighborly criticism which held that her hand was better fitted to a needle than to a pen. But she was no unschooled amateur. She had loved literature since her childhood and had steeped herself in it. Her verse was so filled with memories of the Earl of Lincoln's library, in which she had spent part of her girlhood, that the learned woman-hater Nathaniel Ward called her a "right Du Bartas girl" whose work rivaled the French poet Du Bartas's *The Divine Week*, which, in its English translation was one of the most popular epics of the English Renaissance. Her early poems made her the only woman who belonged to the ambitious school of Giles and Phineas Fletcher and to that of Warner, Drayton, and Daniel. Her compositions would have been remarkable even had they been composed in England rather than in the wilderness in which Mrs. Bradstreet lived and brought up her growing family.

As time went on, Mrs. Bradstreet's literary recollections faded. As her family increased to the eight children she bore and brought up to maturity, she had less time for prolonged exercises in poetry. She had learned to practice the Puritan art of meditation and write out its results in brief notes in prose and verse, and she practiced the same art in writing more poetic less pious "Contemplation." In these she copied the cadences of Edmund Spence, inspirer of many poets, and the Elizabethan concern over mutability. Yet she also showed a relaxed, sensuous enjoyment of her own natural

surroundings and a keen appreciation of the power of the imagination as a means of escape from the fate of "living so little while we are alive." Far removed, in space and in sympathy, from the new fashions of the Stuart Restoration, she could write love letters to her husband and verses on the burning of her house that are as fresh in their homely sincerity as is the stanza of her "Contemplations" in which she expresses her springtime delight in the New England sun. Had the "Tenth Muse" written her later verse in England rather than in America, she could have been the main feminine forerunner of the Romantic movement of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

The literary effects in America of the political events in England may be illustrated by a comparison between the settlers' accounts, at different periods, of their own troubles, John Mason, writing his history of the Pequot War in 1637, was almost as straightforward and matter-of-fact as William Bradford was in the account of the Plymouth Colony which he prepared for posterity. Later during the period of the Commonwealth in England, some New Englanders became aware that certain brethren who remained at home looked upon the emigrants as escapists who had avoided the trials and the bloodshed of the revolution by taking refuge in a land of good hunting, warm fires, and clear air. Edward Johnson was one of the Puritans in exile who told those English Puritans they were wrong. He tried to correct any illusions that the Puritans of the resistance in England might have had concerning the ease and security of life in the colonies. *His Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Saviour*, written and published during the Protectorate, not only defended the ethics of the emigration as a "Christian calling" but maintained that the calling was to a life of hardship and danger exceeding that of the faithful who remained at home. Like other Americans who were writing to impress an English audience, he adopted a style which was self-conscious, formal, and quite different from the plain style which the Puritans considered ideal for ordinary communications.

The literary style of the earliest American writers, in fact, seems to have been determined by a practical considerations of the sort of impression each writer wanted to make upon a selected group

of readers. If the Puritans placed unusual stress upon plainness in writing, they did so because they were unusually interested in influencing the minds of plain people. It is worthy to note also that whoever penned the account of Bacon's rebellion in Virginia wrote almost as plainly as any member of the New England religious sect to which he obviously did not belong. Writing for a limited and sympathetic group of readers and with no thought of publication, he was informal and direct, and only an occasional sentence or phrase shows that he was humorously aware of the involved elegancies which characterized so much of seventeenth century English prose. Yet he and his fellow Virginians, if rarely given to literary composition, were as conscious as the Puritans of their cultural background.

These representative writers of the emigrant period looked upon themselves as Englishmen. It did not occur to them that they were deviating from the tradition of English literature. They all bore the mark of the new country and would hardly have written exactly as they did had they remained in England. In a variety of ways, the new country altered them.