Chapter-II
Definitions of Modernism, Postmodernism, Realism, Socialist Realism and Social Realism & Profile of Vikram Seth.
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Vikram Seth "a poets' poet" who has strong musical ear and command over English language is a major modern Indian English novelist. He was born in Calcutta in 1952 to Prem Seth, Bata Shoe Company executive and Leila Seth, a judge. He is the oldest of three children. He has a younger brother and a sister. He was sent to Dhoon School, a prestigious boarding school for boys, at the age of six. As a young student he was very shy, "incapable of looking people in the eye".

In 1992, Vikram Seth was invited to Dhoon School to give "Founder's Day Speech." Vikram Seth confessed that he had terrible feeling of loneliness and isolation during his six years stay in the school... He was teased and bullied by classmates and seniors because of his deep interest in studies, reading and his lack of interest in games beside his unwillingness to join any gang or group.

After passing his 'O level' examination, he got a scholarship to Ton Bridge School in Kent, England. From Kent, he soon went to Oxford University on another scholarship and earned a degree in philosophy, economics and politics. Not content with all this, he went to study at the Stanford University, U.S.A. for a Ph.D. in Economics. He spent the next 11 years but was unable to complete his thesis. He was in fact a student of economics and did not choose to study literature.
He spent two years (1980-1982) in China, where he studied poetry and Chinese language at Nanjing University. There he worked on this doctoral thesis on the demographics of seven villages of People’s Republic of China. He also got a diploma in Chinese language and he reflects upon his Chinese experiences in his book From Heaven Lake.

Vikram Seth admits that if he would not have become a wanderer then by this time he might have became an economist. It was while in China, that he discovered that he was “more interested in poetry than economics”. His first collection of poems entitled Mappings came in 1981, and these poems were written in 1970s while he was a student first in England then in California, U.S.A., when he was disappointed in love. He started composing poems in earnest. These poems are sentimental but memorable.

In fact, he was drawn first to be economist of all things. He spent many years of life as an economist and demographer. At last composing poems and writing distracted him and it gave him immense pleasure. Finally he feels that in creative writing he has found his metier.

Later, he published The Humble Administrator’s Garden (1985) and also a travelogue entitled From Heaven Lake: Travel through Sinkiang and Tibet (1983), which is about hitchhiking, slogging through rivers and across leech-riden hills, traveled through Sinkiang Province of China and Tibet to Nepal, from Heaven Lake to Himalaya. His another collection of poems All You Who Sleep Tonight (1990) reflects the contemporary life realistically and poignantly.
His another collection of poems entitled *Beastly Tales From Here and There* (1991) displays his versatility as a poet. It is an animal fables in verse, which can be enjoyed by all young and old. His fifth anthology of poems is *Three Chinese Poets* (1992). All the volumes of his poetry are published under the title *The Collected Poems* in 1995. He also wrote a libretto called *Arion and Dolphin* (1994), that was specially commissioned by the English National Opera.

In 1986, while still at Stanford, he wrote a novel entirely in rhythmic verse in the form of sonnets entitled *The Golden Gate*, which is a story about modern life in San Francisco, California. He had been discouraged by many of his friends, but when the novel was published, it was widely appreciated and it sold over one-lakh copies. The story is told with wit, restraint and intelligence. At times he is witty, frivolous, spoofy, mocking, lyrical and profoundly weighty with equal ease and it is technically unique. It is a postmodern novel.

His second novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993) catapulted him into fame, selling over 10 lakh copies. With 1,349 pages, the book is the single largest novel in English. The novel is set in the backdrop of early years of Free India and it covers a period of eighteen months. It unfolds the life history of four-linked families in the province of Purva Pradesh and its capital Brahmpur, a fictional city and the other cities such as Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow traveled by heroine’s mother in her search for “a suitable boy” for getting her daughter married. But the praise worthy quality of the novel is truthfulness, which owes equally to research as well as to imagination, and an instinctive knowledge of the human heart with all its qualities of vices and virtues. In 1400 pages, the novel covers India on a miniature scale like a sun warming entire country in its historical rays.
His third novel *An Equal Music* (1999), is a tale of 38 years old, emotionally volatile musician and his gradual recovery of self. It is a tragic love story of a musician for a woman, whom he lost and then found her after ten-years but in the end lost her again forever. A chance of sighting on a London bus, a letter that should never have been read, a pianist with a secret that touches the heart of her music; from the multiplicity of details, the novelist creates a living, breathing social, private and enclosed world of musicians.

His latest book entitled *Two Lives* is published in 2005. It is about his great uncle Shanti and German Jew, Henny, whom he met in Germany and married in Britain. It is a biography and memoirs written in the background of 20th Century European history. It was the darkest period, when Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Army was massacring Jews and his sinister plan was to annihilate Jews from all European countries.

He lived in India for all but a year and half of his first seven years and set his foot in the United States of America, when he was 23. His command over English is now strongest. Today, he is one of the promising novelists of Indian English. A profile in a newspaper quoted his following poem.

**Dubious**

Some men like Jack And some like Jill
I’m glad I like them both
But still, I wonder if this free wheeling is
An Enlightened thing
Or is its greater Scope a Sign of
deviance from some party line?
In the strict ranks of Gay and Straight
What is my status:
Stray ? or Great ?
Vikram Seth is 54 years old but still he is unmarried. All his novels have the theme of selection of life-partner, love and marriage. Even his latest book, a biography of his uncle and aunty depicts love and marriage in the backdrop of Second World War. He is aware of need of companionship in human life but he maintains “It’s been a lonely journey. There are moments of loneliness”. Vikram Seth says, “Though I feel the idea is not to get into marriage too quickly, that’s not a good idea. You should take your own time to make up your mind.”

There is strong influence of his mother on his life. His mother, Leila Seth admits in her autobiography, On Balance, how she found it hard to come to terms with Vikram Seth’s bisexuality. Defending Vikram Seth’s bisexuality, the mother, Leila Seth writes, “Later, I realised that creative persons share this propensity and that it gives them a special nurturing and emotional dimension.”. But Vikram Seth says, “It is a part of life. Why make a big deal about it?” His literary corpus is not much but he is one of the leading writers of not only Indian-English literature but also of the world literature. Before critical analysis of the novels of Vikram Seth, it is essential to define explicitly the terms such as modernism, postmodernism, realism, socialist realism and social realism.

**Modernism**

The term modernism is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts and styles of literature and other arts in the early decades of 20th Century, but especially after World War-I (1914-18). The specific features signified by modernism/modernist vary with the
user but many critics agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only in Western arts, but Western culture in general. Important intellectual precursors of modernism, in this sense, are thinkers, who had questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality, and also traditional ways of conceiving. The human Self-thinkers such as Fredric Nietzsche (1844-1900), Karl Marx, (1818-83) , Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and James G. Frazer whose **The Golden Bough** (1890-1915) stressed the correspondence between central Christian tenets and pagan, often barbaric, myths and rituals.

The modernist revolt began in 1890 but the rapidity of change came in 1922 with the publication of monuments of modernist innovations as James Joyce’s **Ulysses**, T.S. Eliot’s **The Waste Land** and Virginia Woolf’s **Jacob’s Room**. The catastrophe of the First World War (1914-18) had shaken faith in the moral basis, coherence and Western civilization and adequacy of traditionally literary modes to represent the harsh post-War world realities. Ezra Pond in his **Cantos** and Eliot experimented with new forms and new style. Joyce’s radical novel **Finnegans Wake** subverts the basic conventions of earlier prose fiction by using new way of narration, character portrayal and language by use of stream of consciousness and other innovative modes of narration. Gertrude Stein experimented with automatic writing i.e. that has been freed from control by the conscious, purposive mind. The new forms of literary construction and new literary movements of expressionism, impressionism and surrealism changed the representational conventions.
A prominent feature of modernism is the phenomenon called the avant-garde (a military phrase, which means an Advance Guard), that the artists deliberately undertake to “make it new” by violating the accepted conventions and proprieties of art and established social order and tried to create new artistic forms and style. They also introduced neglected order and tried to create new artistic forms and style. They also introduced neglected forbidden subject matter and revolted against the established order, norms and pieties of dominant bourgeois culture.

**Postmodernism:**

“The change in modernism may be called postmodernism” says Hans Bertans. He further elaborates…”Hassan tells us here adding with a great show of conviction that without a doubt, the crucial text is James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. It is true that he modifies this again in the Revised Version of 1975 Query. It is postmodern, as it is modern? But still he gradually delimits his postmodernism to the post-War period. The periodization that was derived from the new internationalism of American criticism is now dropped and replaced by periodization that is internal to literary history itself. One result is that Hassan’s postmodernism becomes much more American. The older European Literature of Silence is now seen in terms of “antecedents” and Postmodernism is now a firmly contemporary phenomenon with only two or three exceptions. The works of Borges, Becket and perhaps *Finnegans Wake* and it now tends exclusively towards decreation that is towards anti-representation and anarchy since Hassan has also decided to drop the Heideggerian, sacramental, strain that in earlier publications had belonged to the Literature of Silence”. 3
Professor of Literature, Ihab Hassan (b.1925) was one of the earliest advocates of Postmodernism. In his essay **POSTmodernISM: A Practical Bibliography** (1971), he presents a list of the elements and influences that suggest a turn from modernism to postmodernism. There are cultural elements along with graphic textual anomalies and intentional playfulness in postmodernism. Postmodernism is positive and ecstatic for him. He says postmodernism is an attempt to write the unwritable. “Truly” he remarks, “We dwell happily in the Unimaginable.”

It is essential to differentiate between Modernism and postmodernism. Linonel Trilling says: “I can identify it the detachment of our culture with itself...the bitter line of hostility to civilization that runs through it (modern literature)...I venture to say that the idea of losing oneself up to the point of self-destruction of surrendering oneself to experience without regard to self-interest or conventional, morality of escape in a wholly from the societal bonds, is an element somewhere in the mind of every modern”.

Countering this view, Henry Levin, argues that: “In so far as we are still moderns, I would argue, we are the children of Humanism and the Enlightenment. To identify and isolate the force of unreason, it has in certain sense, has been a triumph for the intellect. In another sense, it has reinforced that anti-intellectual undercurrent which, as it comes to the surface. I would prefer to call postmodern.”

Prof. Ihab Hassan then discusses various qualities of Modernism such as Urbanism, Technologism, Dehumanization__which really means Elitism,
Irony and Abstraction, Style, Primitivism, the Archetypes behind Abstractions, Eroticism, sadomasochism, solipsism, nihilism, anomie, Antinomianism, Experimentalism, Innovation, dissociation, the brilliance of change in all its aesthetic shapes. New languages are new concepts of order.

Poem, novel or play henceforth can never really bear the same name. These certain elements of Modernism are crucial. Prof. Ihab Hassan remarks: "Postmodernism may be a response, direct or oblique, to the Unimaginable. That Modernism glimpsed only in its most prophetic moments. Certainly it is not the Dehumanization of the Arts that concerns us now; it is rather the Denaturalization of the Planet and the End of Man. We are, I believe, inhabitants of another Time and another Space, and we no longer know what response is adequate to our reality."

In respect of the Anarchy or Pop of Postmodernism or its Fantasy, Prof. Ihab Hassan further elaborates that:

"...True, there is enhancement of life in certain anarchies of spirit, in humour and play, in love released and freedom of imagination to overreach itself, in a cosmic consciousness of variousness as of unity. I recognize these as values intended by Postmodern art, and see the latter as closer, not only in time, but even more in tenor, to the transformation of hope itself. Still I wonder, if any art can help to engender the motives we must now acquire; or if we can long continue to value an art that fails us in such endeavour."

Postmodernism with its self-contradictory implications its self-conscious deployment trickery playfulness and unexplained supernaturalism
and its penchant for apocalyptic contents and subversive strategies too heady to a brew for readers to enjoy.

In fact the term postmodern is vogue. How can something contemporary and hence modern postdate the modern, being chronologically modern but critically postmodern? The postmodernist writer deliberately goes about violating all expectations as well as confounding this commonsense scepticism. There are some quintessential elements of postmodern literature. These elements are playfulness, sheer, audacious, unabashed trickery and as such as reader is unable to understand. Postmodern literature is quintessentially personal, idiosynocratic, even weird vision of life, provoking, teasing, confusion, amusing or bewildering reader in a playful, informal, knowing manner.

Postmodernism as a literary phenomenon owes its existence to the cumulative impact of a number of pursuits and disciplines; anthropology, philosophy, linguistic philosophy, literary theory, with ideological colouring even in the matter of inquiry, postmodern writers have emerged after World War-II. Brain McHale points out the difference between “modernist” and “postmodernist” fiction:

“Postmodernist fiction differ from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues”.9

Postmodernism faces the challenge through its inculcation of conscious subversiveness. Obviously postmodernism chooses consciously to dabble in experiences and deviate in ways from the mainstream, are
marginalized placed on the culture, social and moral periphery irrespective of moral judgement. The post structural theory question the unchallenged and universally acknowledged priorities—that of sanity over madness, of culture over nature, of work over play has affected postmodernism significantly. The basic difference between modernism and postmodernism is that cultivated austerity; Postmodernism is interested in pleasure. Modernism arises to capture reality through individual consciousness, which is equivalent of life itself.

In brief, there are different versions of postmodernism. It is an organized system of poetics and aesthetic. It is a specific movement in culture and criticism. Toynbee first used the term but the word was originally used in architecture. Later on the word was used for an aesthetic style, a culture situation, a critical practice and an economic situation. In fact, the word postmodernism means different things to different academicians and critics. For John Barth “Postmodernism” is a Literature of replenishment. For Charles Newmen, it is a Literature of an inflammatory economy, for Jean Francois Lyolard, it is general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; for Ihab Hassan it is a stage in the road to spiritual unification of human kind.

Terry Eagleton, Douwe Fokkema, Fredric Jameson, Henry Levin, Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe and many others defined and used the term “Postmodernism” in their own ways. There is diversity in the definition and use of postmodernism. However, one can identify a singular feature...the hallmark of postmodernism i.e. Unity in diversity and bring not only different versions of postmodernism but also postmodernism and
poststructuralism into a harmonious whole or as manifestations of the same basic principle.

The term postmodernism is often applied to the literature and art after World-War-II (1939-45). There was great impact on the Western morale of the First World War were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment and the ominous fact of over-population. Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to extreme, of the counter traditional experiments of modernism. It also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had inevitably, became in turn conventional as well as overthrow the elitism of modernist “high-art” by recourse to the models of “mass culture” in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music. Many of the works of postmodern literature by Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Ronald Barthes and many others...so blend literary genres, culture and stylistic level, the serious the playful, that they resist classification according to traditional literary lubrics. Phenomenon of John Cage and the films of Jean-Luc Godard and other directors parallel all these literary anomalies on other arts.

An undertaking in some postmodernist writings prominently in Samuel Beckett and other authors of literature of absurd. These writers subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the meaninglessness of existence and the underlying “abyss” or “void” or “nothingness” on which any supposed security is conceived to be precariously suspended. Postmodernism in literature and the arts has
parallels with the movement know as post-structuralism in linguistic and literary theory. Post-structuralists undertake to subvert the foundations of language. They try to show that its seeming meaningfulness dissipate, for a rigorous inquirer into a play of conflicting interminacies, or else to show that all forms of cultural discourse are manifestations of the ideology, or of the relations and constructions of power in contemporary society.

To understand the term Social Realism, firstly it is essential to define the literary term Realism.

**Realism:**

Realism is a term applied by literary critics in two different ways: i.e. firstly to identify a movement in the writing of novels during the nineteenth century that included Honore de Balazac in France, George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America. Secondly, the term is applied to designate a recurrent mode, in various eras and literary forms of representing human life and experience in literature.

Realistic fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction. The romance is said to present life, as we would have it to be more picturesque, fantastic, adventurous, or heroic than actuality. In Realism, on the other hand, it represents life, as it really is more useful to identify realism in terms of the effect on the reader. In realistic fiction the writer represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist and that such things might well happen.
novelist prefer the common place and everyday in minute detail over rarer aspects of life but they must render their materials in ways that make them seem to their readers the very stuff or ordinary experience. For example, Daniel Defoe in the early eighteenth century deals with the extraordinary adventures of a shipwrecked mariner named Robinson Crusoe. In the another novel Moll Flanders, he presents the extraordinary adventures and misadventures of a woman named Moll Flanders. He uses reportorial method of rendering all events, whether ordinary or extraordinary and uses the mode of realism. Both the fiction of Farz Kafka and modern novels of Magic Realism, achieve their effects in large part by exploiting a realistic manner in rendering events that are themselves fantastic, absurd or flatly impossible.

Russian formalists followed more systematically the structuralists’ critics, who proposed that both selection of subject matter and the technique of rendering are a realistic. Novel depends on literary conventions and codes, which the reader has learned to interprete or naturalize in a way that makes the text, seem a reflection of everyday reality.

Some theorists draw the conclusion that since all literary representations are constituted by arbitrary conventions, there is no ground for holding any one kind of diction to more realistic than any other. It is a matter of common experience, however that some novels indeed produce on the reader the effect of representing the ordinary course of events is not. Scepticism about the possibility of fictional realism is not an empirical doctrine which is based on the widespread experience of readers of literature
but a metaphysical doctrine that denies the existence of any objective reality that is independent of altering human conventions and cultural formations.

It is essential to differentiate between the two terms i.e. Socialist Realism and Social Realism, frequently used in literature and literary criticism.

“Social Realism is a distinct term used loosely to describe a realistic objective yet socially aware and detailed method of artistic presentation.” In the element of “social awareness” lies the distinctive nature that distinguishes itself from other shades of Realism.

In the opinion of Frederik Engles realism implies “truth of typical characters under typical circumstances.” The Literary History of Realism is usually associated with the efforts of novelists in the 19th century, particularly in France, of established novel as a literary genre. “The realism of Balzac and the Goncourt brothers was essentially an assertion that far from being escapist and unreal, the novel was uniquely capable of revealing the truth of contemporary life in society.”

**SOCIALIST REALISM**

George J. Becker differentiates between the two types of realism as the critical realism and socialist realism: “A distinction must be made between critical realism and socialist realism, that is between the traditional nineteenth century variety and that which is officially practised in Russia today [1963]. Critical realism is to be found in Balzac, in Flaubert, in
Turgenev and in Tolstoy, in fact everywhere that there has been an effort to depict the workings of bourgeois society and to show its ugly and repressive aspects. Socialist realism, on the other hand, seeks the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. It is not enough to represent life, as it is, it is necessary to show where it is going, and that is towards the inevitable future of the communist society. In short what is introduced here is quasi-philosophical, quasi-religious theological doctrine.”

Though the Russian critic advocated socialist realism, the basic tenets of objectivity, truthful reproduction of reality and the presentation of the author’s views in a concealed manner were observed. Frederik Engels points out that Realism means to present truth in detail. There is truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances. Regarding direct preaching, he suggests that the more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art. The Realism may crop out even in spite of the author’s opinion.

Frederik Engels says Balzac is a greater realist than all the Zolas, present, past and future. He points out his depiction of reality to the minutest details with utmost accuracy. He further remarks, and around this central picture he groups a complete history of French society from which, even in economic details for instance the redistribution of real and private property after the French Revolution. He says that he had learned more than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians of the period together.
Maxim Gorky defines “Social Realism” as revolutionary Romanticism—which is essentially a pseudonym for socialist realism. The purpose of socialist realism is not only to depict the past critically, but also chiefly to promote the consolidation of revolutionary achievement in the present and a clearer view of the lofty objectives of the socialist future. In the opinion of C. H. Lewis art originates from reality. He further elaborates that “Art is a representation of Reality...Art always aims at the representation of Reality, i.e. of truth, and no departure from truth is permissible...Realism is thus the basis of all Art, its antithesis is not Idealism, but Falsism.”

Another critic, Leon Trotsky visualizes total victory of the new principle of socialism not in a complete solution of basic human problems of food, clothing, and shelter. He says that the development of art is the test of vitality and significance of each epoch. He further states that revolution cannot survive together with age-old mysticism or romanticism. A new kind of realism, in the sense of a philosophy of life, not realism in the sense of the traditional arsenal of literary schools is the need of the time. He further expounds that “What are we to understand under the term realism? At various periods, and by various methods, realism gave expression to the feelings and needs of different social groups. Each of these realistic schools is subject to a separate and social literary definition, and a separate formal and literary estimation. What have they in common? a definite and important feeling for the world. It consists in as telling for life as it is, in an artistic acceptance of reality, and not in a shrinking from it, in an active interest in the concrete stability and mobility of life. It is a striving either to picture life
as it is or to idealise it, either to justify or to condemn it, either to photograph it or generalise and symbolise it but it is always a preoccupation with our life of three dimensions as a sufficient and invaluable theme for art. In this large philosophic sense, and not in the narrow sense of a literary school, one may say with certainty that new art will be realistic.” 15

Since Russian society under communist’s rule was undergoing a radical change and the future of the society was the most urgent concern for almost all the critics and writers, they laid greater emphasis on literature also playing a positive and partisan role to promote their cause. The Marxist philosophy of life had moulded the entire vision and way of life. These had honoured in literature too. Boris Suchkov gives a detailed explanation of “Socialist Realism” on the basis of the above argument that “In socialist realism, which investigates and presents the real contradictions of society and man’s inner world, criticism is inseparable from the affirmation of the positive social ideal introduced by the socialist revolution, the tasks of building socialist and communist social relations. Social realism subjects to uncompromising, comprehensive and substantiated criticism of the social relations based on private ownership and the consciousness they gave rise to and also everything that impedes the advance of the free socialist world towards communism. Socialist realism is partisan for the simple reason that it forthrightly rejects capitalism and the phenomena of mankind’s societal and spiritual life engendered by capitalism. Social realism forthrightly defends and expresses the ideas of communism and therefore criticises those forces and phenomena that hinder the process of socialist construction and interfere with the strengthening and improvement of the socialist system.” 16
Raymond William says that there are four components of Socialist Realism as was popularly known in the erstwhile Soviet Union. He explains these elements. He describes the concept of typicality introduced but left unexplained by Frederick Engles. He says:

“In the Soviet Union...the earlier definitions of realism have been maintained and extended, and the elements of ‘Socialist Realism,’ as defined, may enable us to see the tradition more clearly. There are four of these elements:

Nardnost, tipichnost, ideinost and partiinost. Nardnost is in effect technical, though also an expression of spirit; the requirement of popular simplicity and traditional clarity, as opposed to the difficulties of ‘formalism’. Ideinost and Partiinost refer to the ideological content and partisan affiliations of such realism, and just as nardnost is a restatement of and ordinary technical meaning of realism, so idenost and partiinost are developments of the ideological and revolutionary attitudes.”

Raymond William comments on this “element of typicality” explained as Tipichnost is of crucial importance. He says that “Engles defined ‘realism’ as typical characters in typical situations,” which would pass in a quite ordinary sense, but which in this case has behind it the body of Marxist thinking. Tipichnost is a development of this definition, which radically affects the whole question. For the ‘typical’, Soviet theorists tell us, must not be confused with that which is frequently encountered”, the truly typical is based on ‘comprehension of the laws and perspectives of future social development’...the concept of tipichnost alters ‘realism’ from its sense of
the direct reproduction of observed reality. ‘Realism’ becomes, instead, a principled and organised selection.\textsuperscript{18}

The old concept of ‘Socialist Realism’ no more influences modern Russian literature. Elena Y. Kelinnikova, a Russian critic comments that: “No, the concept of Socialist Realism is not a guiding principle in modern Russian literature and in the whole Soviet literature. … The quotations you give from Engles and especially the definitions of socialist realism given by Zhdanov and Malenkov, Stalin etc. in 1934, 1947 are absolute now not up to date. They are wrong moreover, I would say harmful.”\textsuperscript{19}

**Social Realism**

Social Realism means portrayal of realities of life with sociological insight. Social Realism is basically opposed to the ruling class and its more, predominantly presents the subject matter the negative aspects of life under capitalism: Labour conflicts, the greediness of capitalists, the poverty of working class and the nobility of suffering Labour community. The writers employing social realism used art to protest and dramatise injustice done to the working class and their exploitation by capitalist class. Hence the literature of the time. “In narrative canteen this was an art bodily and often fiercely anti-establishment”\textsuperscript{20} in a broad sense, the writers of the school of Social Realism present revolting voices of all the oppressed classes of society emphasising the social aspect of reality.
A writer, who professes Social Realism, transcribes life and society very sensitively and presents his reactions to the social, cultural, political and religious conditions of the time. His work is an expression of this interaction and reaction. A writer picks up some significant moments and snatches some dramatic moments in the life of people. The writer focuses on these moments of indignity, pathetic condition, and miserable condition in that they work and live. Not only authentic and realistic picture of life and society is presented but also there is explicit criticism of the contemporary social system.

Social realists believe that the work of Art stemming from the attitude characterised as ‘art for art’s sake” are in fact natural product of the prevailing condition of life and art in modern industrial society. They take these artists away from reality, which is the essence of their art, and their artists are forcefully shunned off. In addition, they condition these artists and they are transformed.

Socialism transforms art as well as life of an artist. A Social Realist seeks common cause with the workers and labour class. The role of the artist is to portray the life of working class and inspire them and praise their actions. An artist must direct his work towards the mass of people. Social Realists believes that self-expression and anarchistic individuality is the result of isolation and alienation of the artist in capitalist society.

Art has become a commodity like any other commodity in the market and the artist has sold himself as well as his art. Instead of expressing and
portrayal his sense of loneliness, neglect and alienation, a artist must present the values held by people in their everyday lives.

A social-realist-writer that is not to practise the self-indulgent, self-expression encouraged by a decadent capitalism for its own jaded amusement; instead he has liberty to use his freedom to interprete the aspirations of a free people. The new culture of the people dominates with the artist’s visual voice and artists becoming their prophets. The literary artist must become the “conscious” point of the contemporary life’s drama and portray it to the people so that they understand the potentialities of the time better. A new higher prophetic function is assigned to social realism. The critique of realism, therefore, includes not only a social historical reality but also a steady approach to a mystical reality. In this process the artist has to confront with the problem of commitments. And artist is not expected to propagate his personal views under the garb of reality but no great artist can afford to remain uncommitted. Great writers like Balzac and Tolstoy successfully deal with this apparent duality. Balzac has soft corner for aristocracy but he lashes out at aristocrats mercilessly. Tolstoy, though an aristocrat, openly expresses his sympathy for the poor people. Both see in the decadence and old social order, the seeds of resurgence of the dignity of Man, the seeds of progressive evolution of Man. Humanism and Realism, thus become inseparable parts of each other in the socialistic ideology and aesthetic. “If there is such mature piece of art, then naturally it has deep influence on the minds of readers. James Berkley had rightly compared it to an intelligent person’s “Listening to a symphony of Beethoven, or sitting quietly in a great Cathedral or conversing earnestly with a friend on an issue of real interest to them both-----.” 21
A realistic novel is a source of great pleasure to readers because it is a product of enhanced and deep understanding of life and its problems. Such a novel is a source of inner illumination.

To understand fully the concept of "Social Realism", it is essential to give in brief some basic questions regarding art and life and literature. Literature's relation with life and functions of literature and the writer's role, his view of art and literature as weapon and propaganda etc. should be given. "Literature is writing which expresses and communicates thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards life." Says R. J. Rees. There is close relationship between life and literature.

Literature is born out of life and fed by life. Literature is in fact reflection of life. Life provides raw material to literature. No man is an island, he is invariably bound up with his family community and society. Hence, there is very intimate relation with society. All critics are of the view that literature is essentially social and its content causes and effects are social. The whole range of social forces and trends, which are operative, find reflection in literature. Mathew Arnold says "Literature holds mirror unto Nature." Taine regards literature as a social mirror. Naturalists regard literature as a social criticism. Marxist critics treat literature as an ideological instrument. Literature not only reflects and reproduces life but it also influences readers. The pattern of literary development is interwoven with the very fabric a sense of social awareness to portray the real and authentic picture of society.
Christopher Caudwell lays emphasis on the social aspect of any literary creation. In fact language is a social product and instrument whereby men communicate and persuade readers; thus literature cannot be separated from life and society. He further says:

But the arts work lives in a world of society. Art works are always composed of objects that have a social reference. Not mere noises but words from vocabulary, not chance sounds but notes from a socially recognised scale, not mere blobs but forms with a meaning, are what constitute the material of art. All these things have emotional associations, which are social.\textsuperscript{22}

A great work of art transcends the boundaries of time and space but its conception is essentially temporal and spatial. “It is the work of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important, because articulate part.” \textsuperscript{23}

Many eminent critics such as Rene Wellek and Austin Warren profess the sociological approach to literature. He remarks:

Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation. Such traditional literary devices as symbolism and metre are social in their nature... Literature ‘represents’ ‘life’, and ‘life’ is, in large measure, a social reality...The poet himself is a member of society, possessed of a social status”...\textsuperscript{24}

It is essential to discuss Social Realism in detail. This term has not been used much popularly in the west. And wherever it has been used, it appears as a synonym of socialist realism. The term has been used in Indian
English writing. It is a term somewhere between critical realism and socialist realism. It advocates the depiction of life in an entirely honest manner without prejudice and glamour, and at the same time it is accepted as the offspring of Marxism. Unlike *stark realism* which suggests a purely scientific and impersonal depiction of objective reality, in social realism the author is involved. He says:

> "The difference between realism and social realism is that unlike the former, in the latter case the author is involved and feels - he expresses his rational anger and a sense of indignation and expresses his desire that the injustice be ended."  

The celebrated revolutionary writer and critic Ralph Fox, who sacrificed his life for the sake of his cause, and says that the definition given by him in *The Novel and the People* is the best definition of Social Realism:

> "The revolutionary task of literature today is...to bring the creative writer to face with his only important task; that of winning the knowledge of truth, of reality...[he] must always engage in a terrible and revolutionary battle with reality, revolutionary because he must seek to change reality. For him his life is always a battle of heaven and hell, a conflict of Gods dethroned and Gods ascendant, a fight for the soul of man."  

Any work conforming to the tenets of social realism should depict the social forces, their influence over the lives of individuals, and the process of change taking place in society. It should also portray the dynamic relationship between the individual and society.
“Social realism, then, is the acute awareness of the social forces that surround the individual, their power to influence the lives of man and woman—for better of for worse—and the overall interaction of the individual and society. This relationship is creative and dynamic, for in the process not only the individual’s character and destiny changes but the individual helps to change the social condition.”

The commitment of a writer in this case is to depict social change in whatever direction it is taking place. There are instances of writers betraying revolutionary romanticism but that does not constitute the central of social realism. Maxim Gorky associates realism with romanticism.

“I think that a mixture of realism and romanticism is necessary. Not a realist, not a romantic, but a realist and a romantic. They are like who facets of a single being.”

Social realism, is a portrayal of the common men, their problems and sufferings. They are porters [coolies], jokers, soldiers, untouchables, famine-struck farmers and landless labourers, extras in the film industry and the victims of Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Yet it is different from socialist realism in the sense that ideinost and partinost do not have as bending an influence as they have in socialist literature. The perspective here is:

Whether or not a writer is committed to depict the social changes that are taking place around him; and to what extent is the writer influenced by changes in society from time to time. There is always a feeling that too much absorption in the
social milieu and its employment in novels as themes often leads to propagating a particular-political or otherwise—ideology. And such attempts at social change, if made consciously, really serve no purpose.29

Thus, social realism is a tendency that reflects trends, which are somewhere between critical realism and socialist realism. The test one may apply to a writer whether there are elements of Postmodernism in his novels and he follows the mode of social realism in his fiction can be summarised in the form of following questions:

1] What elements of postmodernism are found in the novels?

2] Which elements of postmodernism are embedded in the novels?

3] Whether or not a novelist is committed to depict the social changes that are taking place around him?

4] To what extent is the novelist influenced by changes in society from time to time?

5] Is the novelist able to keep the delicate balance between social realism and demands of artistic creativity?

6] Does the novelist become an idealist in his portrayal of society?

With these questions in mind all the three novels of Vikram Seth will be scrutinised.
Chapter-II

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