Novelists and critics have crucially employed ‘realism’ to define, re-define, classify as well as periodize the novel. So much so that, literary critics have rarely theorized the novel without in some way dealing with realism, and those working on realism have seldom managed to develop comprehensive theories by sidestepping the novel. When early writers of the English novel like Aphra Behn, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson or Henry Fielding began writing something ‘new’, they did so by making claims to copying ‘Nature’, presenting a picture of real life or of writing ‘histories’. These claims were often coupled with a stated opposition to either the prevalent romances or the epics, or, to both. Indeed, one of the most remarkable and notable aspects of the early novel was, that, unlike ever before it dealt at length with ordinary individuals, common circumstances and contemporary times as opposed to the outstanding past deeds of heroes, saints or gods.

This emergence of the novel and/or realism in literature has been attributed to the rising middle classes, development of the printing press, individualism etc., which were analogous to the development of the culture of Enlightenment, wherein ideas of reason, secularization, and freedom and equality for all made unprecedented breakthroughs in
eighteenth century European society and polity. The novel in its early experimental phase emerged by borrowing extensively from various forms of writings like travelogues, letters, picaresque, newspapers, chronicles, satires, pamphlets, essays, characters, sermons, chapbooks, diary entries, journals, pastoral and even drama, epics and romances. Over time, it has charted out a complex history for itself, incorporating techniques not only from other literary genres, but also from painting, photography, film, radio, television and the Internet within its narrative fold. The peak of the realist novel, however, was reached with the nineteenth century, as subsequent stages of the novel are characterized more by anti-realist proclamations and assertions. Contemporary writers have departed significantly from earlier realist conventions in order to create anti-novels, metafiction, surfiction, and realism has become a pejorative term in most critical and literary circles. Yet, realism in some form or the other still looms large on the novel, with the novel reinventing itself through radically different and innovative realisms like 'magic-realism' or 'hyperrealism'. In spite of nearly a hundred years of attacks and controversies realism still forms one of the nodal points of all theorizations of the novel. Opinions are divided between those who favour realism to those who treat it with contempt; those who find all novels realist to those who find no narrative realist. Many recent critics have also started emphasizing that all realist narratives are fictive by nature, and that all fictive representations are inevitably real. In the course of this chapter, therefore, we shall deal at length with the realism debate in order to interrogate the relevance and usefulness of 'realism' in understanding the novel.

Before getting into the thick of the debate, however, it is useful to start by making some broad observations about the different ways in which the term realism has been employed in literary studies about the novel. In the most general sense, realism has been used to denote ways of presenting or capturing the lives of people in fiction which is so evocative that it seems quite lifelike. In a more specific sense, realism has been used as a period concept to denote particularly those fictive techniques which were used by nineteenth century novelists to consciously depict the lives of ordinary, common, poor or socially marginalized people in their novels. In the former sense, realism is applicable to literatures of almost all types and times, reminiscent of the age-old 'mimesis' debates; while in the latter sense, it is largely applicable to nineteenth century writers and novelists like Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy etc. Novelists have more frequently put the former sense of verisimilitude into use; while critics have usually employed realism in the latter sense, especially while classifying the novel. The most
common outcome of its use by critics has been the classification/periodization of the novel into the early/proto-realist, realist, modern and postmodern novels.

It is obvious that this type of classification does not cover the entire diversity or range of works produced or consumed in the name of novels. Its validity can be put to test through alternative categories of classification like: realist and experimental novels, women’s and men’s novels, national and/or postcolonial novels, high or mass and fine or popular novels etc. Yet, these classificatory departures do not manage to entirely do away with ‘realism’ in theorizing the novel. For instance, realism has been crucially employed to contrast the anti-realist experimental techniques of ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ novels with the conventional realist techniques of ‘popular’ or ‘mass’ fiction. Postcolonial critics have also used realism to explain the development of the novel. Kwame Anthony Appiah in his essay ‘Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?’ states that the conventional chronology of the first-world novel is “traditional-modern-postmodern”, while that of the third-world novel is “traditional-colonial-postcolonial”. The postcolonial African novel, he argues, can be sub-divided into the ‘realist-nationalist’ and ‘postrealist-postnationalist’ phase. Feminist critics have also found realism useful for theorizing women’s writings. For instance, Elaine Showalter in A Literature of Their Own argues that there are three distinct phases in the development of women’s writings: the feminine phase from 1840 to 1880, the feminist phase from 1880 to 1920, and the female phase from 1920 to the present. The first phase is a “prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition...” in which women writers from Jane Austen to George Eliot develop “an all-inclusive female realism, a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and values of women within the family and the community.”

Thus, the concept of realism occupies an important place in different understandings and classifications about the novel. All basic ‘definitions’ of the novel also enlist realism as an important ingredient of the genre. Our main effort, in this chapter, therefore, would be to find out whether realism (in all its different avatars)

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3 Showalter, 29 (emphasis added).
actually constitutes an integral generic component of the novel, or is it expendable when it comes to understanding the genre? To find an answer to this question, we shall examine both novel critics as well as specialist critics of realism. Before doing that, however, let us also examine the opinions of a few novelists on this matter.

NOVELISTS ON REALISM

It is significant to note that almost all major novelists across different periods have commented upon realism in the novel. For instance, Aphra Behn, an early innovator of the novel, demarcates her novel from the romances in the ‘Epistle Dedicatory’ to *Oroonoko* to say that:

This is a true story....If there be anything that seems romantick I beseech your Lordship to consider these countries do, in all things, so far differ from ours that they produce unconceivable wonders, at least, so they appear to us, because new and strange. What I have mentioned I have taken care shou’d be truth, let the critical reader judge as he pleases.4

Behn gives her tale a ring of truth through the devise of the persona of the dramatized narrator who is the confidant of Oroonoko, and hence, supposedly provides an authentic account of his travails and sufferings. Daniel Defoe in the ‘Preface by Editor’ and the ‘End Account’ of *Robinson Crusoe* takes great pains to dispel doubts about the plausibility of Crusoe’s experiences.5 He uses various journalistic and historiographical narrative techniques to provide intricate details of Crusoe’s activities over a period of twenty-four years. Samuel Richardson also makes his preference for authenticity as opposed to artifice in literature very clear. The full title of his novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded: A narrative which has its foundations in Truth and Nature*...6, itself makes this evident for the reader. Similarly, Henry Fielding in his famous ‘Preface’ to *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams*, distinguishes his novel “from the productions of romance writers on the one hand, and burlesque writers on the other.”7 He explains his “comic epic poem in prose” by contrasting it with the romances which offer “very little instruction or

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entertainment" and deal only with the highest of characters instead of containing the possibility of "introducing persons of inferior rank, and consequently of inferior manners." Lawrence Sterne in *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), also professes to go with his reader "as close to life as we can."9

Walter Scott, in a review written in 1815, appreciates and values the quality of verisimilitude in the writings of Jane Austen to say "...the art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, ... a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him"10 is an advisable literary goal. Charles Dickens goes a step further to argue that there is an inherent merit in representing the lives of people who come from the seamier side of life. Defending the characters of his novel, *Oliver Twist*, who are often thieves, pickpockets or prostitutes he says, "It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really do exist...to show them as they really are...would be a service to society."11

Louis-Edmond Duranty wrote the *Realist Manifesto* in 1856 to advocate realism in all arts. Defining realism he says, "Realism...means the frank and complete expression of individuality; what it attacks is precisely convention, imitation, all types of school."12 He also argues that a writer must focus on the present rather than on representing a mystical past. Emile Zola gives a new twist to this debate by pioneering the new scientific technique of Naturalism, i.e., a "...return to nature and to man, direct observation, exact anatomy.... No more abstract characters in books, no more lying inventions, no more of the absolute; but real characters, the true history of each one, the story of daily life."13 For Zola, a return to nature did not just mean reporting facts as a novelist observes them, but that a novelist like a scientist or an experimentalist introduces an experiment in which he/she "sets his characters going in a certain story as to show that the succession

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10 Walter Scott, 'The art of copying from nature,' 1815, *European Literature From Romanticism to Postmodernism: A Reader in Aesthetic Practice*, ed., Martin Travers (London and New York: Continuum, 2001) 85. It is significant to note that Scott wrote historical novels in the image of medieval romances.
11 Charles Dickens, 'These melancholy shades of life,' 1841, Travers ed., 95.
13 Zola, 'Naturalism on the stage' 169-174.
of facts will be such as the requirements of the determinism of the phenomena under examination call for.\textsuperscript{14}

After Zola, the tide in novel writing starts visibly turning against realism. In 1884, Joris-Karl Huysmans, a follower of Zola writes his novel \textit{Against Nature}, literally breaking away from the naturalist school. Thomas Hardy also calls naturalism an error and argues against the very possibility of having any 'Science of Fiction'. He says:

\begin{quote}
To advance realism as complete copyism, to call the idle trade of storytelling a science, is the hyperbolic flight of an admirable enthusiasm, the exaggerated cry of an honest reaction from the false, in which the truth has been impetuously approached and overleapt in fault of lighted on....perhaps, true novelists, like poets, are born, not made.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Henry James in his 1894 essay, 'The Art of Fiction' argues that the "sense of reality" is absolutely essential for good novels but, "Humanity is immense, and reality has myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it, and others have not."\textsuperscript{16} E. M. Forster, in \textit{Aspects of the Novel}, redefines the meaning of realism to say, "[A] novel is a work of art, with its own laws, which are not those of daily life, and that a character in a novel is real when it lives in accordance with such laws,"\textsuperscript{17} not as in daily life. Emphasizing the same provisional or relative nature of the 'real' in fiction, D. H. Lawrence says, "Everything is true in its own time, place, circumstance, and untrue outside of its own time place circumstance. If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail."\textsuperscript{18}

By the time of Samuel Beckett, the scepticism about capturing reality in fiction grows till reality becomes impossible to grasp. Beckett says in his 1929 essay 'Dante...Bruno...Vico...Joyce' — "We only wish everyone was as sure of anything in this watery world as we are of everything in the newlywet fellow that's bound to follow..."\textsuperscript{19} or, "Reality, whether approached imaginatively or empirically, remains a

\textsuperscript{15} Thomas Hardy, 'The Science of Fiction,' 1891, in Kolocotroni, Goldman and Taxidou eds., 120-123.
\textsuperscript{16} James, 'The Art of Fiction' 147-150.
\textsuperscript{17} E. M. Forster, \textit{Aspects of the Novel} (Penguin Books, 1964) 69.
\textsuperscript{18} D. H. Lawrence, 'Morality and the Novel' quoted by Sharma, 22.
\textsuperscript{19} Samuel Becket, 'Dante...Bruno...Vico...Joyce,' 1929, Kolocotroni, Goldman and Taxidou eds., 450.
surface, hermetic.” Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) takes this logic further to argue that the world lacks immanent meaning yet humans always need to make sense of things or have some purpose in life. He calls this disjunction between reality and desire the ‘Absurd’. John Fowles, through an interjection by the dramatized narrator/author of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) says, “We are all in flight from the real reality. That is a basic definition of *Homo sapiens*.” Umberto Eco in *Reflections on The Name of The Rose* (1985) says, “…The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism…” Elsewhere, while discussing the impossibility of locating ‘meaning’, he argues - “Let us be realistic: there is nothing more meaningful than a text which asserts that there is no meaning.”

Thus, this preliminary appraisal of a few views on realism expressed by a few novelists shows the divided house over realism. It also shows that realism forms an important concern in the philosophy of writing novels for different novelists. Let us now move back to our initial task of examining significant critical views about realism and the novel.

**‘CRITICAL REALISM’**

Let us begin by examining the ideas of Georg Lukács who left an unmistakable impact upon almost all subsequent critics of the novel. As we know, the important works of Lukács on the novel are: *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), *Studies in European Realism* (1930) and *The Historical Novel* (1937). Among these, his book *Studies in European Realism* contains the most detailed discussions about realism and the novel. Lukács not merely discusses the uses of realism by great novelists of nineteenth century Europe, but also develops a realist ‘aesthetic’ for assessing good and bad literature. Being acutely critical of his contemporary modernist novelists, he argues - “Never in all history did mankind so urgently require a realist literature as it does to-day.” For Lukács, a truly great, profound and all-embracing realism has the capacity to educate the people and transform public opinion. He calls this type of realism ‘critical realism’ and defends it in
opposition to subsequent trends of naturalism and modernism, as well as the Soviet
prescriptions for ‘socialist realism’.

The central category and criterion of realist literature for Lukács is “the ‘type’, a
peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in
characters and situations.”26 A type is a three-dimensional or all-rounded way of
presenting a complete human personality, both through depiction of a psychological
inner life as well as the representation of its organic link to social and historical factors.
Lukács argues that such a representation is possible only if a writer manages to capture
the key contradictions of an epoch or age within the scope of his work. This work may
be a historical novel, as in the case of Walter Scott, who depicts the unfolding reality of
medieval England accurately in his novels, or, it may be a novel about contemporary
times, as in the case of the greatest realists of all—Balzac. Writers who are unable to
understand the social problems or human conflicts of their times, end up either leaving
out the most decisive social elements from their plots, or situate their imperfectly crafted
characters against “merely ‘sociologically’ or impressionistically-psychologically
conceived milieu.”27 Lukács argues that the type does not represent merely a social
average or a profoundly conceived individual. Rather, types are “figures of exceptional
qualities, who mirror all essential aspects of some definite stage of development,
evolutionary tendency or social group.”28 That is why the characters created by great
realist novelists like Balzac or Stendhal, have an independent life of their own. They are
governed by an “inner dialectic of their social and individual existence”29, rather than by
the will of the author. Lukács argues that a “ruthlessness towards their own subjective
world-picture is the hallmark of all great realists”30.

Lukács expresses his appreciation for the works of ‘true’ realists like Balzac,
Goethe, Tolstoy, Scott, Gorky and Thomas Mann. He describes Balzac’s admirable
understanding of the specific conditions governing French capitalist development.
Unlike in England, where the social compromise struck between aristocratic landowners
and bourgeois capitalists became the basis of social evolution, in France, the landed

26 Lukács, European Realism 6. Lukács borrows the idea of the type from Friedrich Engles, who in a
letter wrote, “Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of
typical characters under typical circumstances.” ‘Letter to Margaret Harkness,’ 1888, Travers ed.,
123.
27 Lukács, European Realism 176.
28 Lukács, European Realism 71.
29 Lukács, European Realism 6.
30 Lukács, European Realism 11.
aristocracy was doomed and was standing on the brink of an economic ruin. In his novel, *The Peasants*, Balzac depicts this historical evolution of French society from the French Revolution of 1789 to 1848, that is, the year of great revolutions all over Europe. Balzac’s own sympathies lie with the moribund French aristocracy and Roman Catholicism. However, Balzac doesn’t let that come in the way of accurately describing the break up of the feudal estate, set against the backdrop of capitalist transformation and growing secularization of France. Although Balzac is deeply tormented by the transition to capitalism, he presents it as a social and historical inevitability, and doesn’t tamper with the story to create some desired picture. Neither does he decide to just ignore and escape this immense social upheaval. According to Lukács, he manages to sophisticatedly represent both the morally debased as well as the socially progressive character of this paradoxical transition. His skill of narration lies in the fact, that though he manages to represent all the significant aspects involved in the decline of feudalism and the advent of capitalism in France, the action of his novel never moves out of a particular fictional estate and its neighbouring small town.

Elaborating upon the development of the narrative styles of the novel, Lukács states that after the ‘realism’ of Balzac, Stendhal, and Hugo in France comes the ‘naturalism’ of Emile Zola. He attacks the “exclusive extraversion” or “pseudo-objectivism” of naturalism for its treatment of the socio-historical as mere background. Lukács argues that the “trivial photographic naturalism” of Zola distorts reality and presents it as just a lifeless average. Severely criticizing naturalism, he states:

Zola’s method, which hampered not only Zola himself but his whole generation, because it was a result of the writer’s position as solitary observer, prevents any profoundly realistic representation of life. Zola’s ‘scientific’ method always seeks the average, and this grey statistical mean, the point at which all internal contradictions are blunted, where the great and the petty, the noble and the base, the beautiful and the ugly are all mediocre ‘products’ together, spells the doom of great literature.31

Looking into the reasons for the development of naturalism, Lukács argues that after the unsuccessful revolutions of 1848 throughout Europe, the hitherto seemingly progressive bourgeoisie abandons its conflict with the nobility for a struggle against the proletariat. This causes widespread pessimism among radicals and intellectuals. Instead

31 Lukács, *European Realism* 91.
of seeking to capture this 'totality' in their novels, novelists start resorting to looking at just aspects or facets of the real. He categorically states that in spite of the fact that Zola was a left-wing progressive, and authors like Goethe, Walter Scott, Tolstoy and Thomas Mann were on the wrong side of history because they sided with the nobility, the landlords or the bourgeoisie; the latter were the truly great realist writers because they captured the key contradictions of their times more accurately and profoundly in their works.

Tracing out the further progress of the novel, Lukács argues that naturalism gives way to another kind of 'distortion' of reality, i.e. the 'mirage-subjectivism' or 'exclusive introspection' of the psychologist or abstractly formalist 'modernism'. The depiction of reality gets mutilated into an individual principle, which dissolves itself into nothingness. The false extremes of representing conversations without beginnings or ends, chance fragments, or incoherent slices of life, portray not a new kind of near-realism or realism, but false subjectivism or an impoverishment of reality. Lukács argues that such a fragmentary representation develops in the twentieth century due to an apparently fragmented or disrupted nature of capitalism, but beneath its surface of autonomies, separations and disunity, exists an 'essential' unity. True realism or critical realism requires that an author not only portray segments or aspects of reality that are immediately obvious, but also those that are permanent and objectively more significant. For Lukács, modernism like naturalism, is a reflection of alienation under capitalism, when the writer increasingly gets reduced to a mere spectator rather than a participant in the workings of society and the making of history.

Thus, Lukács differentiates between realism and anti-realist modernism in his work. His main emphasis remains upon delineating the merits of good realism and the demerits of anti-realism. Good realism or critical realism, according to him, has the potential to educate people about their own societies and histories. In Lukács' view, realism in the novel is integrally linked to the consciousness of the middle classes across modern European history. As long as the middle classes play a progressive social role in the contradiction between feudalism and capitalism, realist preoccupations remain their priority. However, as soon as capitalism becomes a triumphant force by the mid nineteenth century, the middle classes become preoccupied with the workings of the 'mind' rather than the workings of 'society' and become anti-realist. For Lukács, questions pertaining to the form of the novel are never as important as those relating to the content of the novel. Any technique which reflects reality accurately is good,
however, no technique that seeks to escape material reality merits much attention. A good novel is like a good book of sociology or history or philosophy, which educates people about their societies. Good novels can contribute to building a more progressive and just social order. On the whole, Lukács argues for imbibing realism and its virtues in literature and appreciates great realist writers like Balzac and Tolstoy. He does not generically associate realism with the novel, that is, he does not consider realism to be an integral part of the genre of the novel. He just finds realism to be the dominant preoccupation of early novels, and anti-realism to be the dominant preoccupation of modern novels.

Lukács’ celebration of realism, and disapproval of modernism is attacked by Bertold Brecht, giving rise to the famous Brecht – Lukács debate. Brecht questions the veracity of the argument that nineteenth century bourgeois artists could provide a right model for the new modern age. Reality changes, therefore, the modes of representation must also change. Although, Brecht does not deal directly with the novel, he develops his “epic” or “dialectical” theatre against naturalist drama. Brecht views naturalism as a continuation of realism. He argues that naturalism persuades audiences to identify so fully with characters and situations that they unquestionably accept what they perceive. Brecht does not want his audiences to suspend all disbelief; rather to recognize the constructedness of representation and to realize that things could have been otherwise. By making everything seem strange, he seeks to expose everything as artificial and ideological. He is critical of Lukács’ exclusive interest in the novel, which he calls “narrowly prescriptive”. He also condemns Lukács for his “empty formalism” and eulogization of the old. Thus, for Brecht, nineteenth century realism is a historically dated concept which cannot and must not be resurrected in modern times.

‘MIMESIS’

A scholar who shares Lukács’ distaste for modernism and preference for French Realism is Eric Auerbach. His exhaustive study – Mimesis: The Representations of Reality in Western Literature (1946) is an outstanding book which demolishes all monolithic conceptions about realism. Auerbach does not focus his study solely upon the novel form. Instead, he examines different types of writings in history for their uses of realism

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and mimetic techniques. He begins his study with Homer's *Odyssey* and *The Bible* (Old Testament) and goes on to eventually examine the novels of Virginia Woolf. Homer's *Odyssey*, he argues, has significant sections that are very evocative and picturesque, where the descriptions are such that everything seems visible. This 'mimesis', however, is characterized by an *action* that is limited only to the lives of the ruling classes, *emotions* that alter and change but cause no psychological development in the characters, treatment of *time* that is legendry, and *descriptions* that are detailed but fully externalized. Similar, yet, different is the mimesis or realism of the *Old Testament* which explores various levels of conflicting consciousnesses simultaneously existing within the human soul. The *Old Testament* treats time historically, deals with nomadic or half-nomadic tribal leaders, and represents action that is largely confined to the domestic realism of daily life. It invokes a multiplicity of meanings and a need for constant interpretation and re-interpretation. Auerbach treats the *Odyssey* and the *Old Testament* as literary prototypes. He goes on to demonstrate the slow evolution of mimetic/realistic representations in subsequent literary works such as Greco-roman writings of Petronius and Tacitus, historical accounts of fourth century A.D., *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, poems like *Chanson de Roland* or *Chanson d'Alexis*, twelfth century courtly romances like Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain* or plays like *Mystère d'Adam*, Dante's *Inferno*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, fifteenth century novellas, Rabelais's adventure tales, Montaigne's *Essais*, Shakespeare's plays, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, La Bruyère's *Caractères*, early eighteenth century novels, Schiller's *Luise Millerin*, Stendhal's novels, works by Flaubert, Balzac, and Zola, plays by Ibsen etc., right up to Woolf and Joyce. Auerbach compellingly drives home the point that very complex and intricate uses of realism have existed in literature since time immemorial, in prose, poetry as well as drama. He also argues that these different mimetic techniques become more refined and developed with time, and that in different successive ages they reflect the changing preoccupations of their own times.

The crucial categories for Auerbach, however, in examining the development of realism are two ancient styles of representing reality: the "separation of styles" and the "mixture of styles". The separation of styles is characterized by the belief that everyday reality can find description in literature only in the comic, low or intermediary genres. Whereas, the mixture of styles does not necessarily restrict realistic descriptions to low genres but seeks to altogether do away with the rigid hierarchies, rules or codes of high and low forms. Auerbach argues that classical theorists of literature like Plato etc.
advocate a rigid separation of styles and view mixture as sacrilege. Plato in book 10 of *The Republic* argues that mimesis ranks third after truth. Auerbach argues that throughout literary history a conflict can be discerned between these two styles of representation. But sometime after the Renaissance, the “mixture of styles” starts turning the tables on the “separation of styles”. The decisive moment comes with the rule of Louis XIV in France when the French nobility and the elite start considering their culture at par with the ancients, a belief that betrays their anxiety about changing status quo, at a time when their supremacy is being challenged by many. In doing so, they also revert back to a strict imposition of the separation of styles method through the copy of the ancients. This neo-classicism causes subsequent writers to rebel against its artificiality; also because the profile of society itself starts undergoing a dramatic change after the French revolution, though, it is yet some time before “tragic seriousness and everyday reality could again meet.”

For Auerbach, writers like Stendhal and Balzac are characteristic for breaking away completely from the classical rules of distinct level of styles. They complete “a development which had long been in preparation” by becoming the creators of modern realism. Auerbach argues that throughout the nineteenth century, France plays a far more important role than England or Germany, in the rise and development of modern realism. In his opinion, writers like Dickens or Thackeray, who were the best of the English realists, were deficient because their novels did not manage to capture the fluidity of their political or historical background within their work. Auerbach describes the modern realism of the French realists as follows:

The serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation, on the one hand: on the other, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background – these, we believe, are the foundations of modern realism, and it is natural that the broad and elastic form of the novel should increasingly impose itself for a rendering comprising so many elements.

According to Auerbach, subsequent writers like Flaubert and Zola continued this holistic realism, but their works suffered from “a certain dryness, excessive clarity,
almost inhumanity in it. This is because by the decades of the 1850s, while the economy continued to grow at a rapid pace; in France, the ideas of the Enlightenment and the Revolution become merely passé; two tendencies which, until now, had gone hand in hand. Unlike Hugo and Balzac, who had tried to intervene in the events of their times by trying to influence the moral, political and practical lives of their urban middle class readership, Flaubert and Zola were more preoccupied with the questions of style. Auerbach emphasizes that the impulse behind their 'mixed-style-realism' became aesthetic rather than social. By the last decade of Zola’s life, “...the last of the great French realists“, the anti-naturalist movement had become quite strong, and gave way soon after to modernism. Being critical of modern novelists and differentiating them from their predecessors, Auerbach says, “It is all, then, a matter of the author’s attitude toward the reality of the world he represents.” Unlike the objective assurance found in Goethe, Keller, Dickens, Meredith, Balzac or Zola; the modern writers seemed to have abdicated their position and authority as the bearers of objective truth. They “hesitate to impose upon life...an order which it does not possess in itself“ and emphasize its arbitrary nature. But, argues Auerbach, through our acts of story telling we “are constantly endeavouring to give meaning and order to our lives in the past, present, and the future, to our surroundings, the world in which we live...” The attempt by the moderns to merely grasp the random moment, therefore, poses “a challenge to the reader’s will to interpretive synthesis.”

According to Auerbach, writers like Virginia Woolf display the distinctive characteristics of the ‘realistic’ novels written between the two world wars – “multipersonal representation of consciousness, time strata, disintegration of the continuity of exterior events, shifting of the narrative viewpoint”. These characteristics indicate certain needs and tendencies of both the authors as well as the reading public of the twentieth century to try to come to terms with their changing realities. Auerbach argues that by the time of the First World War, society had become so complicated that a writer, engaged in representing reality, no longer has had the older reliable criteria of a

35 Auerbach, 510.
36 Auerbach, 515.
37 Auerbach, 535.
38 Auerbach, 548.
39 Auerbach, 549.
40 Auerbach, 549.
41 Auerbach, 546.
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"clearly formulable and recognized community of thought and feeling." With the rapid, but unevenly distributed, advances made in the areas of science, technology and economics, the world became a smaller place in which the differences between different people or different strata of the same people were more acutely visible. Auerbach argues that during the early twentieth century all sources of authority, be it religion, philosophy, ethics, economics, or the ideas of the Enlightenment, democracy, liberalism, and even socialism had taken a severe drubbing in a violent and disaster prone world; caught in midst of heterogeneous ways of life overflowing with unsettled ideologies. This led to the development of the literary method of dissolving "reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness...But [this] method is not only a symptom of the confusion and helplessness, not only a mirror of the decline of our world..." but a great deal more. It carried with it an atmosphere of universal doom, blatant and painful cynicism, uninterpretable symbolism, vague indefinability of meaning, confusion, hopelessness, and hostility to the very reality it represented. This seemingly unprejudiced and exploratory type of representation, with its emphasis on random occurrence, however, does not make obvious to the reader the other side of the coin. Auerbach compellingly argues:

Beneath the conflicts, and also through them, an economic and cultural levelling process is taking place. It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible....So the complicated process of dissolution which led to fragmentation of the exterior action, to reflection of consciousness, and to stratification of time seems to be....the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification.

Therefore, according to Auerbach, merely representing fragmentation and not representing the ongoing simultaneous process of unification is an incomplete representation of reality. On the whole, he argues that similar kinds of realisms occur across genres in particular ages. He values 'mixture of styles' as the most important breakthrough in the literary history of realism. He doesn't view modernism as completely unrealistic, but, as a modified or degraded form of realism in which the author is no longer able to represent the complete entirety or totality of the world within the framework of his work. He does see, however, a basic conflict between 'realism' and

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42 Auerbach, 550.
43 Auerbach, 551.
44 Auerbach, 552-553.
'modernism' and views the latter as a departure from the former. He does not view the novel form as being too crucial for the development of 'mixed-style-realism'; nor does he see 'mixed-style-realism' as being too important for the novel form. Auerbach just finds the two mutually compatible.

**FORMAL REALISM**

Creators of modern realism and whose philosophical ideas had a profound influence upon the development of different features of the novel. Watt sums up their ideas as follows:

The general temper of philosophical realism has been critical, anti-traditional, and innovating; its method has been the study of the particulars of experience by the individual investigator, who, ideally at least, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs; and it has given a peculiar importance to semantics, to the problem of the nature of the correspondence between words and reality.45

Watt states that this formal realism of the novel mainly involves a narrative method that embodies a circumstantial view of life. It is 'formal' because it has nothing to do with "any special literary doctrine or purpose, but only ... [with] a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself."46 In the novels of Defoe or Fielding this formal realism comes into effect through the simultaneous use of the following techniques – authentic reporting of human experience, detailing of the story, individuality of actors, particularity of time and space, and referentiality of language. He argues that literary forms other than the novel also imitate reality, but the specialty of the formal realism of the novel is that it allows "... a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its temporal and spatial environment..."47 and involves a distinctive break with tradition and convention both in the choice of story and plot, as well as in the ways to narrate it. It is deeply linked both to the development of individualism and the rise of the middle classes.

Nineteenth century French Realists are obviously not particular favourites of Ian Watt, but neither is his position an anti-realist one. He views realism — an anti-

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45 Watt, 12-13.
46 Watt, 32-33.
47 Watt, 33.
traditional, innovating realism — as the chief characteristic of the novel. Apart from tracing the origin of the novel to the materialist writings of Locke and Descartes which consequently lead to the development of secular individualism, displaying a preference for a circumstantial and experiential view of life and its meaning, Watt also links the origin of the novel to a new sense of understanding history, i.e., a sense wherein the present is viewed not merely as part of a a-historical continuum but as a progress over the past. Watt also argues that it is not the case that realism did not exist in the middle ages, only that the realists of the middle ages believed in representing reality in their stories through ‘universal abstractions’, as opposed to particular, objective, sense-perception based realities of the modern realists. Although the focus of Watt’s study is upon Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, as the first three genius innovators of the novel, he also notes the obvious “technical weaknesses” of their works in comparison to the works of subsequent novelists like Balzac or Jane Austen, who were able to evolve the novelistic techniques much further.48 Remarking on the pre-eminence and the generally acknowledged supremacy of the early English novel, Watt simultaneously notes that the eighteenth century French novelists like Stendhal and Balzac stood unchallenged by their English contemporaries. This, he argues, was because the early French novelists enjoyed three additional advantages over their English counterparts: one, they did not have to invent the novel but inherited novelistic techniques from their English predecessors; two, the force of the French Revolution of 1789, which brought the middle classes into social and literary power, was far more immediate and dramatic for the French than the hundred-year-old Glorious Revolution of 1688 was for the English novelists; and three, the critical culture of Romanticism prevalent in France at the time of the origin of the French novel was far more favourable for the development of ‘formal realism’, than the neo-classicism prevalent in England just before the development of the English novel.49 On the whole, Ian Watt argues that realism is crucial for the form of the novel, but he also emphasizes the differences between general realism, the realism of the genre of the novel and the specific realism of late nineteenth century French novelists.

**REALISM DEBATES: 1880S TO 1940S**

It is easy to see that Lukács, Auerbach and Watt defend and appreciate the merits of realist novels, especially those written during the early nineteenth century. Not all critics, however, hold similar opinions. If we examine the debates about realism

48 Watt, 314.
49 Watt, 312-313.
chronologically, we find that by the late nineteenth century realism begins to get explicitly contentious. Simultaneously, the novel also starts becoming more problematic. As Henry James says in his 1884 essay called ‘The Art of Fiction’:

During the period I have alluded to there was a comfortable, good-humoured feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it. But within a year or two, for some reason or other, there have been signs of returning to animation - the era of discussion would appear to have been to a certain extent opened.50

In the same essay, James also says, “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.”51 However, in another important essay, ‘The New Novel’, written in 1914, James distances himself from this earlier opinion and attacks the common literary level of contemporary English novels which pretend to be in the “state of knowing all about whatever it may be.”52 Criticizing the cheap gift of the democratic model he says, “…prose fiction now occupies itself as never before with the ‘condition of the people’.”53 The realist novelists of the nineteenth century wrote what was suitable and innovative for their own times, but for modern novelists to continue practicing the same technique is not at all appropriate. He attacks the very claim of capturing reality by asking, “How can a slice of life be anything but illustrational of the loaf, and how can illustration not immediately bristle with every sign of the extracted and related state?”54 There is no universal reference or illustration, and even the most closely or vividly covered canvas, with its “exhibition of innumerable small facts and aspects” is relational and depends entirely upon recognition by the reader. All representation depends upon ‘selection’; therefore, the reader must not assist the author in comfortably creating an illusion of truth. James argues against all prescriptions and recommendations made by other authors about realism. He takes an ideological position wherein he draws an association between the ‘derogatory’ form of realism and growing democracy in society.

50 James, ‘The Art of Fiction’ 147.
51 James, ‘The Art of Fiction’ 147.
53 James, ‘The New Novel’ 60.
54 James, ‘The New Novel’ 74.
Unlike James, who argues for creating new styles for the new novels of a new age, the modern movement of surrealism, symptomatic of its extreme positions, calls not only for a change in the form of the novel, but for the abolition of the very form of the novel. André Breton in the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* written in 1924 sharply attacks "the realist attitude" contained in the form of the novel to say, "I have a disdainful prejudice against the novel". He calls the novel an inferior genre because it flatters public opinion in its lowest taste through the style of pure information. Criticizing the classic realist novel he argues, "The intractable mania that consists in reducing the unknown to the known, to the classifiable, lulls minds." That is why realist novels leave him with "no other discretionary power than to close the book, which I do not neglect to do somewhere about the first page." André Breton argues for the liberation of the mind from the domination of logic, rationalism, as well as notions of civilization and progress. He asserts that "our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer" is far more important than the material world. Through the surrealist movement, Breton seeks to reclaim "imagination" to its rightful place by arguing that "the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful." He classifies surrealism as a kind of absolute reality, or a resolution of the two states of dream and reality. He defines surrealism in more precise terms to say, "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by a reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern." Thus, the Surrealists redefine realism to mean exactly the opposite of what it had signified so far. From an emphasis on the description of the material world based upon assumptions of rationality, the logic of cause-and-effect, and the progress of history through a clear distinction between the past, the present, and the future; they now change its meaning to signify the arbitrary expression of a fragile reality of life and an equally fragile working of the mental world though imagination, unrestricted language, nonconformism and fancy.

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56 Breton, *Surrealism* 1.
57 Breton, *Surrealism* 4.
58 Breton, *Surrealism* 3.
59 André Breton, ‘The First Manifesto of Surrealism,’ 1924, in Kolocotroni, Goldman, and Taxidou eds., 308.
60 Breton, ‘Manifesto’ 309.
61 Breton, ‘Manifesto’ 309.
The same year as André Breton's scathing attack on the novel, Virginia Woolf writes her famous essay — 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown'. Through this essay she counters social and historical writers like Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells, i.e., the Edwardians. Woolf argues that these writers write incomplete books, which require "that the reader should finish them, actively and practically, for himself." She says, "In order to complete them it seems necessary to do something — to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque. That done, the restlessness is laid, the book finished; it can be put upon the shelf, and need never be read again." Criticizing Arnold Bennett for arguing that Georgian writers were unable to create 'real characters' she says — "But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality? A character may be real to Mr. Bennett and quite unreal to me." Therefore, like Henry James, she, too, insists upon the relative or provisional nature of truth/reality. She condemns writers who imagine or present a complete or deliberately reasoned picture of life, who pretend to authoritatively narrate truths in their works. Woolf accuses them of denying relativity, deluding and misleading the readers, and pretending to be more authoritative sources of knowledge than they actually are. She advocates, "that writers shall come down off their plinths and pedestals." Describing the shortcomings of the reading public, she says, "In England it is a very suggestible and docile creature, which, once you get it to attend, will believe implicitly what it is told for a certain number of years." The readers must stop thinking that they know any less than the writers. Stressing upon the question of technique and style, Woolf adds that it is essential to bring about a change in the conventional "tools" of writing. New methods should report accurately and describe in detail the "impression" created by a character or scene, instead of trying to give it a larger meaning by "describing" in detail a background, a location, an occupation, a complete family history etc. While distancing herself from the Edwardians, Woolf also distances herself from modernist innovators like James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. She calls their methods "indecent" and "obscure", respectively. She argues that though Joyce and Eliot are innovators who break away from past inadequacies, their experiments represent nothing but "failures and fragments". After all,
"where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition."\(^{67}\)

Expressing similar views in another essay, ‘Modern Fiction’, written a few years earlier in 1919, she says, “[I]t is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old.”\(^{68}\) In truth, art is all about “a circular tendency”, where no one writes better, they just move on. Woolf attacks her immediate predecessors for completely disappointing her generation of writers by trying to label certain methods as superior. On the contrary, according to her, the main merit of the English tradition lies in the fact that, “no ‘method’ no experiment, even of the wildest – is forbidden.”\(^{69}\) Arguing against the tendency to represent the seamier side of life in fiction she asserts, “‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction.”\(^{70}\) She calls writers like Bennett and Galsworthy materialists who take upon themselves the work that ought to be discharged by government officials. Criticizing them she asserts:

Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and the external as possible?\(^{71}\)

Woolf argues that writers must have the courage to acknowledge their true point of interest, rather than meekly following conventions. Going a step further she says that the main point of interest for the moderns very likely lies in the “dark places of psychology”. It is the inner life, which according to Woolf is as important or perhaps more than the outer life. She argues for the amalgamation of outer and inner realities within the scope of the novel. She argues that spiritualists like Lawrence Sterne, James Joyce or Marcel Proust are far more superior to materialists like H. G. Wells or John Galsworthy. Elaborating upon the nature of reality in her novel *A Room Of One’s Own*, she says, “[Reality] would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable – now

\(^{67}\) Woolf, ‘Mr. Bennet’ 38.


\(^{69}\) Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’ 115.

\(^{70}\) Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’ 115.

\(^{71}\) Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’ 113.
to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun.”

It is not simple or systematic; rather it is fluid and bafflingly complex. Although she argues that it is the business of a writer to find reality, collect it and communicate it to the rest of humankind, reality is something that resides under the skin or surface of life, it is a pure truth, a great abstraction and closely related to ideas and feelings within the intense life of the mind. Thus, Virginia Woolf as a writer does not differentiate between realism and anti-realist modernism, she just redefines realism to mean the representation of what she calls the more enduring aspect of reality, that is, the interiority of the mind, instead of just an outer reality.

In the backdrop of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the debate over realism became more and more ideologically pitched. Taking their respective sides in this debate, critics argue for either the primacy of representing socio-historical reality in literature, or the realities of the functioning of the mind. Elizabeth Drew, in her book, The Modern Novel (1926), intervenes in the ongoing debate between the Edwardians and the Georgians, or the realists/pragmatists and the moderns. She severely indicts the “egotistical” moderns who are “a good deal more interested in their own psychology and environment than in general human life.” Elaborating upon this view she says, “There is no reason why subconscious life should be any more ‘true’ or ‘essential’ than conscious life, the ingredients of a pudding are no more ‘true’ or ‘essential’ than the pudding itself when it is cooked.” Also, the entire purpose of art is “to bring order out of chaos, to impose form on being.” Therefore, to criticize art for making life more intelligible is completely erroneous on part of the moderns.

Jose Ortega y Gasset, a major early twentieth century novel critic and Spanish essayist and philosopher, shares the contempt of James and Woolf for the representation of the bleak side of life in fiction. In his book The Revolt of the Masses published in 1929, he laments the new social changes taking place in the modern life of the West, in which the masses or the “average man” appear in the highest seats of power – political, economic, moral, intellectual, religious and cultural power. He divides the dynamic unity of society into two main factors – the minorities and the masses. The minorities represent “especially qualified individuals and groups” and the masses represent the “multitude”,

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72 Virginia Woolf, A Room Of One's Own, qtd. in K.K. Sharma, 7.
73 Qtd. in Robert Morss Lovett’s 'The Novel To-Day,' which is a review of Elizabeth Drew's The Modern Novel, in Middleton ed., Vol. I, 227-228.
74 Lovett, 227.
75 Lovett, 228.
the “social animal” or the “average” type who are not particularly qualified. Ortega expresses his disapproval for the fact that this “depressingly ordinary” or ungifted mass-man has now become the “qualitative determinant”. Earlier, the minorities practiced democracy through the liberal principle and judicial norm. Now, the masses have caused a lawless “triumph of hyperdemocracy”. He launches a scathing attack upon the historical changes taking place in modern times:

The characteristic note of our time is the dire truth that the mediocre soul, the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be mediocre, has the gall to assert its right to mediocrity, and goes on to impose itself wherever it can .... The mass crushes everything different, everything outstanding, excellent, individual, select, and choice. Everybody who is not like everybody else, who does not think like everybody else, runs the risk of being eliminated.76

In his other work, Mediations on Quixote (1914), Ortega argues that the difficult task of transforming illusion into reality is what characterizes Don Quixote, a novel which evolves many techniques of the modern novel. In his famous essay, Dehumanisation of Art and Ideas About The Novel (1925), Ortega predates Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes in arguing that the novel has exhausted itself. Like many other modernists he places greater emphasis upon form rather than content. He argues that modern realism is all about relating things from a certain distance. Ortega makes an important paradoxical remark to argue, “Precisely because it is a preeminently realistic genre [the novel] is incompatible with outer reality.”77 He says that no writer can be called a novelist unless he possesses the gift of forgetting, and thereby making us forget the reality beyond the walls of his novel. Consequently, in order to establish its own inner world the novel necessarily must dislodge and abolish the surrounding one. Ortega argues that “description interests us in the novel precisely because we are not actually interested in what is described. We disregard the objects which are placed before us in order to pay attention to the manner in which they are presented.”78 Things seem realistic to us because “we do not consider real what actually happens but a certain manner of happening that is familiar to us.”79 It is the content, not the form or structure of the novel

77 Jose Ortega y Gasset, extracts from Mediations on Quixote (1914) and ‘Notes on the Novel’ (1925) in McKeon, Theory, 269.
78 Gasset, Theory 265.
79 Gasset, Theory 265.
which stands considerably depleted today. The cause of this depletion is the novel’s attempt to meet its reader’s expectations of being realistic in content. The novel, Ortega asserts, has become a victim of its own success.

In 1934, Andrey Alexandrovich Zhdanov, the spokesman for the Union of Soviet Writers, addresses the debate over realism in the first meeting of the union. He takes an emphatic position against bourgeois realism. He argues for embracing ‘socialist realism’ as the new mantra of writing fiction. Demarcating the tasks of this new literary aesthetic he says:

[Socialist realist literature must organize] the toilers and oppressed for the struggle to abolish once and for all every kind of exploitation and the yoke of wage slavery.... [base] the subject matter of its works on the life of the working class and peasantry and their fight for socialism.... [defend and uphold] the principle of equal rights for the toilers of all nations, the principle of equal rights for women.... [smash] every kind of obscurantism, every kind of mysticism, priesthood and superstition... 80

He argues that socialist realism must become the main method of both literature as well as literary criticism. 81

Philip Henderson in his essay, ‘The Functions of The Novel’ (1936), criticizes the inverted or interiorized preoccupation of modern writers and critics. Giving vent to his disappointment he laments, “[C]riticism has retired from the world at large to the ‘inner world’ of the psychiatrist’s consulting-room and the novel itself has come to be regarded as primarily the tool of self-analysis.” 82 Modern writers “dare not look too closely at social reality lest it lead them to unwelcome conclusions. Their art being based ... upon compromise and evasion, however brilliantly they may juggle with their unresolved perplexities, can never achieve greatness ... because it has lost touch with the basic realities of the world which sustains [them].” 83 Henderson also disapproves of the hugely popular novels of writers like Galsworthy and Wells which confirm “familiar feelings” and keep life on a “safe dead level”. Asserting that all works are political and biased even if the authors deny so, Henderson advocates that there is nothing wrong in

81 Socialist realism became a major conceptual force in many colonized nations where its development coincided with developing national liberation movements which found the notion of commitment embedded deeply in the concept of socialist realism very attractive.
83 Henderson, 7-8.
politics for “everyone must believe in something, otherwise there would be no point in living at all.”84 It is this belief or world-view that a writer must bring to bear upon the specific fragment which forms his immediate theme. He labels novels which do so as “vital novels”, which always serve the purpose of changing society. It is this noble function that is the duty of all sensitive writers who must honestly try to explore and explain the painful issues of life.

While Henry James, Virginia Woolf or Ortega oppose mass culture from conservative positions, a major modern thinker, Theodore Adorno, of the Frankfurt school, criticizes the ‘mass culture’ of modern times for entirely different reasons. He argues that mass art represents a degraded culture, not because it represents the low tastes of the masses or the multitude, but because it represents the deliberately produced rubbish of the bourgeois order. He argues that mass art is completely controlled by the *culture industry*. In a landmark work, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), written jointly with Horkheimer, Adorno argues that modern society is dominated by monopoly capitalism. Under monopoly capitalism, not only goods but also culture is turned completely into a commodity. Culture now caters to the manufactured needs of the modern society. Commodified artworks are manufactured and distributed by big culture monopolies. Serious art or fine art have to counter and resist the power of the culture industry because the people at the top of the culture industry seek to mould the spontaneity of the public into conformity and passivity. Reiterating his views in a subsequent article, ‘Culture Industry Reconsidered’ (1975), he says, “The customer is not king, as the culture industry would like us to believe, not its subject but its object. ....The masses are not the measure but the ideology of the culture industry.”85 Through mass reproductions and formula, the culture industry deliberately standardizes all art, it produces conformism, it disseminates norms, promotes status quo and, generates dependence and servitude among all in their opinions about culture. Modern society, which is dominated by monopoly capitalism, is a society in which consciousness gets completely reified or commodified. In such a context, Adorno privileges non-realist art. He defends modernism by arguing that modernist forms are non-representational in nature. Rather than communicating an unambiguous content, they foreground the ‘process’ of literary production. He argues that content and subject matter are not as

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84 Henderson, 8.
See also Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, 1944).
important as they are made out to be, because art is never a reproduction of the real, but an aesthetic representation or an image of it.\(^6\) It is precisely the distance or gap between artwork and reality that permits art to contradict and even critique the real. Art, Adorno famously says, is the negative knowledge of the world. That is why Adorno keeps his primary consideration upon elements of form, style and technique. For Adorno, however, the key distinction is not between realism and modernism but between fine art and mass art. He defends fine art because it resists appropriation by the market. He argues that it is vital to do so in order to prevent the masses from joining ‘the progress of barbaric meaninglessness’.

**REALISM DEBATES: 1950S TO CONTEMPORARY TIMES**

Novelists and thinkers oppose the realist novel for various different reasons and argue for innumerable experiments with the genre of the novel. The most notable features of the realist novel like — the omniscient narrator, the attempt to capture something like a totality within its content, the emphasis on plot with a beginning, middle and end, development of character, the description of the socio-historical, etc. — are all replaced by new features of the turn of the century modern novel. The modern novel favours impressionism, symbolism, subjectivity, interiority, point-of-view, stream-of-consciousness, non-chronological and discontinuous narratives, fragmented forms, and self-reflexivity. It is surprising therefore, that during the fifties and sixties when French authors like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Claude Ollier, Nathalie Sarraute, Robert Pinget, Claude Simon and Marguerite Duras announce the *Nouveau Roman* or the new novel, they do so not in opposition to its immediate predecessor — the modern novel — but again against the realist writings of Balzac, who wrote over a hundred years earlier. In an important collection of essays on the new novel entitled *For A New Novel* (1963), Alain Robbe-Grillet argues that his novels like *The Erasures* (1953), *The Voyeur* (1955) and *Jealousy* (1957) are meant against omniscient narration, rounded characterisation, all embracing totality and linearity of closed narratives of nineteenth century novels, particularly those written by Balzac. Explaining his new philosophy of writing novels, he says:

\(^{6}\) Haslett, 99-108.  
Today we are, in fact, witnesses of a new development that separates us radically from Balzac...it is the abandonment of the old myth of 'depth'.

We know that the entire literature of the novel was based on such myths, and on them alone. The role of the author traditionally consisted in mining the depths of Nature, descending as far as possible, in order to reach increasingly deeper layers, and then finally bringing to light some fragment of a disturbing secret....And the sacred vertigo the reader suffered on these occasions, far from causing anguish or nausea, would, on the contrary, reassure him of his power to dominate the world....but we no longer even believe in its depth.87

He argues that the novel must immediately innovate and rejuvenate; otherwise it will die of stagnation. The new novel, he asserts, must lack any 'analysis' by the author, and must involve the reader into thinking about fresh ways of reading and viewing the world around him. In another significant essay from the same school of writers, 'What I am seeking to do' (1971), Nathalie Sarraute argues that imagination can give rise to an infinite mass of possible situations, none of which can claim to be greater, more real or superior to the other. An author must not try to intervene and establish an artificial order upon the universe. The construction of characters in novels should be such that they remain fluid instead of getting enclosed or contained in some fixed mould. The narrative must be formless, shaking and trembling; that is the only way to write novels in present times.

While the innovators of the nouveau roman make anti-realist proclamations, in his essay, 'The Nouveau Roman and Reality', the French Marxist thinker, Lucien Goldmann, analyses their writings in another light to say:

... while many critics and a large section of the public see in the nouveau roman a set of purely formal experiments and generally speaking, an attempt to evade social reality, two of the principal representatives of this school [Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet tell] ...that their work was born out of an effort, as rigorous and as radical as possible, to grasp, in its most essential way, the reality of our time.88

88 Goldmann, Sociology 132.
Goldmann asserts that the essence of human reality changes through history, therefore, it is no longer possible to write like Balzac, Flaubert or Stendhal. The *nouveau roman* is an outcome not merely of a wish to create something new in opposition to the old, but actually of the very nature of a different reality we live in. Describing this new reality with the help of the concept of commodity fetish or reification, Goldmann argues that in the era of market economies, autonomous objects, “are the sole concrete reality and outside which human realities and feelings can have no autonomous existence.”

Robbe-Grillet, in his novels, manages to capture precisely this process of reification, which he makes the center of his artistic creation. But, argues Goldmann, Robbe-Grillet is also conscious of differentiating himself from obvious similarities with the Marxists in their opposition to such dehumanization. Goldman cites him – “Marxists...are people who take up a position, I am a realist, objective writer; I create an imaginary world that I do not judge, that I neither approve nor condemn, but whose existence I record as an essential reality.”

In another essay, ‘Interdependences Between Industrial Society And New Forms of Literary Creation’, written in 1965, Goldmann argues that the New Novel presents a picture of a “universe where man is entirely subordinate to things and whose structure and mechanisms ... [the New Novel analyses] realistically and pitilessly, but almost without anguish.” It is this lack of anguish and the presence of ‘hope’ that distinguishes Robbe-Grillet from his predecessors and makes the *nouveau roman* remarkable. Talking about the role of literary creations in social life he says that literary works must not merely record reality or reflect collective consciousness. Rather literature has and must continue to fulfil two basic functions of social life: on the one hand make people aware of “their own affective, intellectual, and practical aspirations” and, on the other hand, simultaneously give individuals as group members “a satisfaction on the imaginary plane which can and must compensate for ... multiple frustrations ... which reality imposes.”

Goldmann, therefore, defends the function of literature of providing imaginary relief to its readers and does not view it as a vice as long as the other function of making the reader aware is also fulfilled. He views Robbe-Grillet as an important writer because in a

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90 Goldmann, *Sociology* 47.
92 Goldmann, *Cultural 77*.
society with inauthentic human existence, Robbe-Grillet brings to anxiety-prone novels, an element of hope.\(^93\)

Sharing Goldmann’s basic view that reality changes and therefore its modes of representation must also change, Raymond Williams in his short essay ‘Realism and the Contemporary Novel’ (1961) argues that realism is not an “object” but a “method”, which denotes different things. In its simplest usage it is a term that invokes descriptive precision or vividness of some observed detail in fiction. Right from the beginning its most ordinary definition has been “of an ordinary, contemporary, everyday reality, as opposed to traditional heroic, romantic, or legendary subjects.” \(^94\) He argues that since the Renaissance it has been associated with the rising middle classes or the bourgeoisie. From an initial “domestic” content, however, it changes to depicting the “startling”, i.e. showing the unpleasant, the poor, and the sordid. Starting by being a bourgeois form it develops into an anti-bourgeois form that focuses on making a “further selection of ordinary material.” With the advent of naturalism it moves on to Zola’s “unnecessarily faithful portrayal of offensive incidents.” Strindberg further refines it’s meaning to mean natural as oppose to the “supernatural”. In the twentieth century its implication changes yet again to mean “fidelity to psychological reality.” The advent of Soviet socialism gives rise to the differentiation between “socialist realism” and “bourgeois realism”.

Williams argues that though it is usually argued that the psychological novel of the twentieth century is opposed to the realist novel, it can also be argued that in spite of different techniques of narration the intentions of writers still remain wholly realistic.

Describing the development of the modern novel Williams argues that it can be classified into: the ‘social’ novel and the ‘personal’ novel; which can be further subdivided into the social documentary and the social formula, and the personal descriptive and the personal formula novels – “In the social novel there may be accurate observation and description of the general life, the aggregation; in the personal novel there may be accurate observation and description of persons, the units.” \(^95\) The social documentary novel focuses upon the general way of life of a community, while the social formula novel instead of having a descriptive tenor, prioritizes an abstracted pattern from the sum total of social experience. The personal descriptive novel deliberately dwells upon the personal experience, with society being usually outside the people, while the personal

\(^93\) It is to be noted that Goldmann is writing in times that have just seen the pits of the hopelessness of the Absurd movement and the existentialist crisis.

\(^94\) Williams, *Long Revolution* 274.

\(^95\) Williams, *Long Revolution* 280.
formula novel deals with the abstracted pattern of the sum total of individual experience rather than that of societies. Williams proposes this four-fold classification for the novel and argues that these forms have replaced the older realist novel and reflect the “crisis of our society”, which is searching for “relationships, of a whole kind”. Like Lukács, Williams too develops a realist aesthetic, although a slightly different one. Elaborating upon ideal realism, Williams explains:

...a valuing of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, and at the same time valuing creations of human beings who, while belonging to and affected by and helping to define this way of life, are also, in their own terms ends in themselves. Neither element, neither the society nor the individual, is there as priority.

.... In the highest realism, society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms.96

Williams argues that distortions in realism amount to the privileging of one aspect versus the other. The modern novel can possibly be divided into the polarizations of ‘object-realist and subject-impressionist’ novels. The older form of realism, he states, is dead and impossible to recreate now. We can no longer go back to the simple idea of the old observer who is blissfully unaware of the problems of perception and communication. The absence of balance between the individual and the social in the contemporary novel, however, reiterates the need for achieving a new creative realism. The shortcomings of the contemporary novel are both a warning as well as a challenge for the contemporary writer.

In the late 1960s, another kind of realism, i.e., ‘magic realism’, starts making its presence felt in the world of fiction. During the 1960s, writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar and Carlos Fuentes bring it to the centre stage of literary discussions through their hugely successful novels. Their novels effortlessly combine the representation of everyday mundane reality with elements of fantasy, folktale, myth and magic. The content of their novels completely upsets the familiar rationalist logic of cause and effect. Yet, the author/narrator narrates his/her story without any awkwardness about unusual events. Magic realist writers assert that in their societies magic: is very much a part of the everyday real life and consciousness of the people. That is why they see no reason to emulate the scepticism of the Europeans towards magic or myth; and

96 Williams, Long Revolution 278-287.
that by making the supernatural an integral part of their stories they are only making their narratives more natural and real. Subsequently, magic realism comes to be associated with many non-Latin-American writers like Günter Grass, Italo Calvino, and Salman Rushdie. Although the practitioners of magic-realism write no manifesto about their style of writing, the sheer success of their novels keeps magic realism in the hub of debates about realism, especially in theories about postcolonial literature.\footnote{Debates over what kind of reality magic realist novels represent, however, are far from being resolved, with critics arriving at contesting and often irreconcilable views. As Franco Moretti says in Modern Epic: The World-System From Goethe to García Márquez:}

\textit{Lo real maravilloso. Not magical realism, as it has unfortunately been translated... but marvelous reality. Not a poetics – a state of affairs...} It is an everyday, collective fact, which restores reality to modernist techniques: which takes the avant garde, and sets it feet back on the ground... And after half a century of enigmas, there is always a great need for explanations... [a need to s]et modernism’s feet back on the ground.\footnote{Moretti, 241.}

The magic realist novel, Moretti argues, has reality seeping out from every aspect, the reality of wars, revolutions, trade, invention, religion, gypsies, military revolts, etc, things which the West has been escaping from looking straight in the eye. In its content “if there is any nostalgia, it is \textit{nostalgia for disorder. The world was beautiful when ... it was formless, composite, unstable}”\footnote{Initially the term was used during the 1920’s for denoting a dream-like quality in painting. In 1943, Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier applied it to Latin-American fiction for the first time in the Prologue to his novel \textit{The Kingdom of This World}. Since then magic-realism has been seen as a fictional assertion made by the erstwhile colonies over the literature of the West. See also, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin eds., \textit{The Post-Colonial Studies Reader} (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).}, implying, thereby, that the contemporary world is highly ordered and regimented. In order to seek disorder, magic realism takes recourse to the past. However, unable to resolve the true meaning of magic realism for the people of the third world, Moretti says –

\begin{quotation}
A backward-looking myth, or one hope of freedom. For now, let us leave the matter in suspense. What is certain is that myth... is the sign and instrument of a \textit{symbolic resistance} to Western penetration....For rewriting an event in mythical form is tantamount to making it \textit{meaningful}: freeing it from the
\end{quotation}
Theories of the Novel

profane world of cause and effect, and projecting into it the symbolic richness of the archetype. 100

Being relatively clearer about the significance of magic realism for the West, he says that magic realism fulfils "the desire for 'meaning', imagination, re-enchantment." 101 It reaches Europe during the decade of the sixties when the long phase of colonial conquest comes to an end and the colonial powers withdraw from Africa.

Marthe Robert in Origins of The Novel (1972) argues that there exists a generic commonality between realist and non-realist narrative techniques in the novel right from the days of its inception. She argues, "Whether the subject is based on reality or is purely fictional is not what makes a novel." 102 Realism in the novel is not a period concept at all, as is commonly perceived. She argues that the novel manages to appropriate every traditional form and all modes of expression within its boundaries — "Fantastic or realistic, utopian or naturalistic, 'fictitious' or true, whatever relation it may claim to have with reality, a novel's subject matter can thus never provide a reliable criterion for defining the genre". 103 It is not the case that every writer prefers to create an illusion or an effect of reality; rather, there are many novelists who emphasize the fictive nature of their novels. Describing the simultaneous interplay between reality and fiction in the narrative techniques of the novel, Robert states:

[T] he genre's originality and paradox consist in ... 'trying to make us believe'; in the willful delusion always created in the name of truth but for the sole purpose of deceiving.... the novel is neither true nor untrue but merely creates the illusion of being one or the other. In other words it can only choose between two ways of deceiving, between two kinds of deceit which exploit the readers gullibility in unequal proportions.... The novel's truth is never more than its greater ability to delude. Doubtless according to popular opinion the novel is no better nor worse than reality. But neither is it a pointless imitation of reality. 104

Robert argues that the novel has this twin ability of representation, and all novelists are always torn between these two tendencies. Novelists like Balzac, Hugo, Tolstoy,
Dostoevsky, Proust, Faulkner and Dickens try to be true to life by being engaged writers. While, Cervantes, Hoffman, Jean-Paul, Novalis, Kafka or Melville fly in the face of reality and ignore history. According to Robert, these two trends constitute the ways in which novels negotiates reality.

Roland Barthes in his famous work *S/Z* written in 1973, takes the critique of realism a step further by criticizing what he calls the “reality effect” created by readerly texts, i.e., most realist or “classic” texts which ascribe to the reader the role of a passive consumer who is constantly reassured by familiar and predictable representation of character and plot. Barthes advocates the creation of writerly texts, i.e., texts that shake the assumed stability of meaning and involve the reader as a collaborator in breaking racial and gender stereotypes created by classic realist texts in the guise of objectivity. Doing a detailed structural study of Balzac, he argues that two types of empirical codes participate closely in creating the reality effect: the code of actions, and the cultural or referential code. The former operates by creating a structure of intelligibility through an “empirical sequence of events such as ‘answering a knock at the door’”\(^{105}\), while the latter operates through “multiple explicit and implicit references in a text: familiar cultural knowledge, proverbial wisdom, commonsensical assumptions, school texts, stereotypical thinking.”\(^{106}\) Barthes says, “This way a text seems to share the semantic fullness of a known social reality.”\(^{107}\) He argues that it is important to write writerly texts, but he also proposes that it is possible to find writerly qualities in readerly texts if the reader so applies herself. He, therefore, reads Balzac’s short story *Sarraisine*, a readerly text as a writerly one. Barthes also proposes that the task of a critic is not merely to discern the common elements or codes of literature, but also to appreciate their differences.

In his essay, ‘Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism’ (1975), and his book *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Fredric Jameson argues that realism is inseparable from the development of capitalism. He argues that the rising bourgeoisie and its ideologues create the movement of Enlightenment in which they set out to completely destroy religion and superstition. In this phase, the novel performs an extremely important historical task in the bourgeois cultural revolution by systematically


\(^{106}\) Barthes, 105.

\(^{107}\) Barthes, 106.
undermining and demystifying pre-existing inherited traditions. It helps in the “immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by other, now archaic, modes of production are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in a new world of market capitalism.”

It does so by creating a “referent” i.e. a newly quantifiable space of extension and market equivalence; a “disenchanted” object of the secular world of commodity system, along with a “centred subject”, “closure”, and “description”:

And when in our own time the bourgeoisie begins to decay as a class, in a world of social anomie and fragmentation, then that active and conquering mode of representation of reality which is realism is no longer appropriate; indeed, in this new social world which is ours today, we can go as far as to say that the very object of realism itself — secular reality, objective reality — no longer exists either.

Jameson argues that modernism is that stage in the development of bourgeois ideology, which comes after the stage of realism. The middle classes now seek to repress reality not so much out of false consciousness or a distortion of reality stemming from outright cynicism or lies, but as a part of a careful preparation to prevent certain questions from being asked. Modernism, thus, is an entirely ideological practice that seeks to make people look away, forget, ignore or lose interest in the strategic realities of their lives.

Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) argues that realism creates mass conformism. Reality for the style of ‘realism’ is just equal to unity, simplicity, and communicability. Realism seeks to represent an uncritical and oversimplified picture of the world. Lyotard argues that the present society is a post-industrial, knowledge based, computerized society in which knowledge is power. This knowledge is conveyed through narrative and language. He attacks the very veracity of narrative knowledge because narratives always illustrate how they are to be applied — “They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do.” He says that all knowledge in society is quintessentially some

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110 Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘Narrative, Knowledge and Representation,’ Nicol ed., 80.
or the other form of narrative knowledge. But narrative knowledge causes legitimation especially because it is based upon claims to representing reasonable reality. He argues that instrumental conceptions of reason and belief in totalities, and systematic metaphysical systems produce totalitarianism and reigns of terror. Lyotard welcomes the collapse of grand theory and metanarratives in the postmodern society. He argues that modernism cannot exist without the shattering of belief and without the discovery of the lack of reality of reality, together with the invention of other realities. Modernity places an emphasis on the powerlessness of the faculty of representation, on the nostalgia for the presence felt by the human subject. The postmodern, he says, is part of this modern:

The postmodern would be that which, in the moderns puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.... Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.  

Unlike in the early twentieth century, when people develop nostalgia for lost narratives, in postmodernism people lose the nostalgia for lost narration. They become aware of the fact that legitimation can occur only through their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction, but that there is nothing much that they can do about it. This, he argues is "the harsh austerity of realism". The validity of narrative knowledge can no longer be judged since, "All we can do is to gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive speeches."

Linda Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) defines metafiction as a new kind of contemporary "fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity." It involves the reader as a collaborator instead of a consumer. Metafiction challenges its own textual autonomy by constantly pointing out that it is only a construct in which the artist is not a God-like creator but a maker of a social product. She argues that a greater degree of self-

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112 Lyotard, 'Answering the Question' 87.
113 Lyotard, 'Answering the Question' 83.
114 Hutcheon, *Narrative I*. 
awareness in literature is akin to the Brechtian techniques of defamiliarization. Tracing out the genealogy of the novel she says:

[W]e could say that the poetics of Romanticism involved a concentration on the author and his biography, that realism then brought social and historical reference to the fore, that modernism proceeded to orient critics and readers formally and formalistically toward the closed text and its difficulties, then it would seem that the poetics of postmodernism has been responsible for continuing the work....

Hutcheon argues that narcissist metafiction is different from modernist fiction in that it "tends more to play with the possibilities of meaning ...and form." A different kind of mimesis takes place in the contemporary novel in which the "product mimesis" of nineteenth century is replaced by the "process mimesis" of the late twentieth century. It is the act of reading itself, which is now imitated by the novel. The novel today is "...selfreferring and autorepresentational: it provides within itself, a commentary on its own status as fiction and language, and also on its processes of production and reception." The referents of the novel no longer refer to the real world, but to a fictive verbal universe.

Countering the critique of nineteenth century realists, George Levine in *The Realist Imagination* (1981) argues that this entire attack is unfounded. He argues that nineteenth century writers were never so naive about the problems of representation as they are made out to be. Studying writers like Brontës, Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy; Levine argues that their perception of reality is filtered through the ideas of Romanticism, along with those of the Enlightenment, in which a 'sympathetic imagination' is often regarded as a more reliable means to understand and represent elements of reality than 'rational objectivity'. Their multiple sense of reality is also informed by popular literary traditions of fairy tales, melodrama, religious and radical discourse etc. which strengthen the impulse to question dominant perspectives. Levine proposes that the English realists are alert to "the possibilities of indeterminate meaning' and 'the arbitrariness of the reconstructed order to which they point.' He particularly gives the example of *Wuthering Heights* to argue that the great novelists of

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115 Hutcheon, *Narrative* xiii.
115 Hutcheon, *Narrative* xiii.
117 Hutcheon, *Narrative* xii.
the nineteenth century are never simply “deluded into believing that they were in fact offering an unmediated reality” and that they try to transcend the limitations of language.

Another contemporary critic who makes important contributions to the realism debate is Jean Baudrillard. In his influential book, *Simulations* (1983), he argues that the defining feature of our age is “simulacrum” or the fact that everything is simulated. In an age of frantic reproduction and reduplication of art works “…the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*. The hyperreal.” In this culture of hyperreality: models replace the real and determine the real. Reality utterly disappears. Baudrillard argues that hyperrealism is the end of the real as well as the end of art because now representation itself is part of the real. He states that in postmodern times we live in an “esthetic” hallucination of reality where guilt, anguish, death can be replaced by the signs of guilt, anguish despair – “Reality no longer has the time to take on the appearance of reality...the principle of simulations wins over the reality principle.”

We experience fake things as real and reality as fake, for instance we watch the reality television show *Big Brother* as if it were real and watch the bombing of WTC towers as though it were a Hollywood film. Baudrillard says, “[A]rt is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality.” Bran Nicol echoes Baudrillard to argue, “Reality is no longer something we can take for granted, but is something that we suspect is continually organized and constructed for us by the twin apparatuses of the mass media and the global capitalist economy.” He further emphasizes, “In postmodernity we are no longer able to appreciate the particularity of our historical location. We can no longer create original works of art, we live and work in ‘virtual’ space rather than reality.”

Raymond Federman, a novelist and critic, who famously coined the term “surfiction” for contemporary novels, writes in his book *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays* (1993) that fiction today has become a pursuit of non-knowledge:

> Much of contemporary fiction does not relate the reader directly to the external world (reality), nor does it provide the reader with a sense of lived experience (truth), instead contemporary fiction dwells on the circumstances

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120 Baudrillard, 339-340.
121 Baudrillard, 340.
122 Nicol, 5.
of its own possibilities, on the conventions of narrative, and on the openness of language to multiple meanings, contradictions, paradoxes, and irony.\textsuperscript{123}

Federman argues that to write simply to reveal the difficulty or impossibility of writing is hardly a worthwhile enterprise. The more we read postmodern novels the less we seem to know. Instead of proposing the “limitations of the possible”, writers dwell more upon the lack of “limits for the impossible”. It is due to these reasons that contemporary novelists are socially or politically not engaged. The act of creating fiction today is an act of transforming reality; it is also simultaneously an act of abolishing reality and the notion of its truth. He argues that contemporary fiction proposes that it must not be judged; rather it should be allowed to just simply ‘BE’. That is why contemporary fiction by any name, be it New Fiction, Antifiction, Metafiction, Postmodern fiction or Surfiction, is absurd and must be “questioned, challenged, undermined, and even rejected.”\textsuperscript{124}

CONCLUSION

It is evident from this entire appraisal that realism in the novel has continued to inspire a lot of strong opinions both among novelists as well as critics. The realism debate is very high pitched, with critics and novelists not merely defining their own versions of realism, but also ridiculing and attacking others for being pro or anti-realist, as well as claiming to be more real than the others. Those who favour ‘realism’, argue that it offers a better understanding and comprehension about the world, especially with its emphasis on the socio-historical. Those who attack ‘realism’, argue that it offers the false comfort of understanding and comprehension, while in fact the world is too complicated to comprehend. They argue that the realists do not take into account the fact that there are no absolute truths in this world, and that everything is relative; that what is true for one may not be so for the other. They argue that it is impossible to find objectivity in any account. Narrative cannot but be subjective, because the process of narration necessarily involves a process of selection and extraction from specific points of view. Realist narratives, according to them, impose an artificial sense of order, logic, rationality, familiarity and symmetry upon the world. This, in turn, blunts critical thinking in the readership because it reassures the mind into passive acceptance. The complexities of interiority are completely ignored by the realists. Additionally, the realists are accused of

\textsuperscript{123} Federman, 2.
\textsuperscript{124} Federman, 3.
being blissfully unaware of the problems of representation, which among other things include the fact that even the language of narration is already historically and textually constituted. Therefore, according to the anti-realists, the claim of presenting a neutral, objective account through any kind of discursive practice is entirely erroneous. They argue that the problem and process of representation must itself be highlighted in the narrative of any novel. While the main emphasis of their attack remains on the question of form rather than content, some also attack the realists for their deliberate choice of low subjects, and attribute it to the distortions of democracy/hyperdemocracy.

While most realists and anti-realists attribute these respective literary trends to particular periods in history, there exist a few exceptions who do not do so. For instance, Marthe Robert is partially right in pointing out that some antirealist tendencies in the novel can be traced back to the days of the novel’s inception, to writers like Cervantes, Hoffman and Sterne, and that there is no monolithic period of realism in the novel. However, we do not think that this offers a very valid explanation for concluding the debate on realism in the novel. Let us explain this with the help of a concept proposed by Fredric Jameson in his book, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Jameson argues that in order to understand any cultural or literary phenomenon we must first identify the ‘cultural dominant’ of an age. This concept, he argues, “…allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features”^125, but it explains why certain artistic-intellectual-ideological practices come to occupy the dominant space of culture and its critical debates in certain times and ages. The cultural dominant is not merely reflective of an autonomous artistic/literary development, but is always constituted in a complete historical totality. By this logic, it can be argued that the anti-realist techniques practiced by some novelists during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not the cultural dominants of their age. At best, novelists like Sterne, who are today being celebrated as the precursors to postmodern fiction, represent an occasional, marginal and exceptional tendency of the literature of their times. Using this conceptual category, we can say that the cultural dominant of the novel can be divided into two distinct phases – the realist and the anti-realist. The former being the cultural dominant of the novel during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the latter being the cultural dominant of the novel during the twentieth and twenty first centuries. This does not mean that other trends in novel writing did not exist in that time; only that, whatever they were, they were not the dominant trends of their times. Of course, it is also

^125 Jameson, Postmodernism 4.
significant to keep in mind that the ‘cultural dominant’ is not some steady marker of a long phase of the novel. As Raymond Williams says, it follows the trajectory of being the emergent, the dominant and the residual trend at different points of time in the development of the novel.

In the realist phase, the novel largely engages the reader in a process of discerning a logic of cause and effect behind the movement of plot, behaviour of characters, etc. The subsequent anti-realist phase is characterized by the absence of such invocation. For instance, Jane Austen’s novels involve the reader in a process of trying to understand why certain characters behave the way they do, why certain characters fall in love, how family equations operate etc. However, similar questions are not invoked about characters and action in the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Salman Rushdie. In the anti-realist phase, things are just given, and even if readers are involved in an elaborate process of unravelling motivations, as in Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* or E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, it is a foregone conclusion that they would never be able to do so.

Let us now get back to the original question of this chapter—does realism constitute an integral generic component of the novel, or is it expendable when it comes to understanding the genre? Some would definitely answer this question in the affirmative. They would argue that almost all novelists at least claim to represent reality. Besides, if we were to take a closer look at the world around us we would find that it does not have a semblance of any kind of order. Therefore, to give it a chronological, well ordered, unproblematic structure within a narrative is in fact far less realistic than representing its randomness and arbitrariness through non-chronological, illogical, diverse points-of-views. To make the world of the novel seem reasonable is to impose artificiality upon it. They would argue that in the real world, life does not have a distinct beginning, middle and end. There is no plot, no fathomable characters. In real life even the closest people we know are never as familiar or logical in their actions and behaviour, as characters in a novel. Therefore, the sophisticated techniques evolved by modern and postmodern novelists to represent narratives without plot, character, chronology, action, and even authorial privilege, tend more towards the real than the so called realists. That is, according to them, the anti-realists are as real as anybody else, if not more. Though this argument merits serious consideration and cannot be simplistically dismissed, we would like to argue to the contrary.
As many have argued before us, we would also argue that creating any form of art is basically an effort to extract some kind of meaning from the world and communicate it to others. To assume that there is no logic to social organization and that the world is completely random and its workings are entirely accidental is a deeply ideological position that seeks to deny human beings any agency in creating or changing the world around them. The anti-realists today, at the most, seek to grasp fleeting moments of truth residing in mere fragments of social reality. They no longer wish to look at the total picture and nor do they wish to decode it and convey it to the reader. Whatever they do convey, they themselves undermine it by simultaneously arguing that their understanding is only as good or bad as anyone else’s. However, even if we cast a cursory glance at the development of the novel in Europe and subsequently in the colonies, we find a particular pattern to exactly when ‘realism’ becomes an important preoccupation for novelists, and exactly when doubts regarding the reality of realist representations start getting expressed.

As we have argued in the previous chapter, the rise of the novel in Europe started in England and was particularly tied to the development of capitalism. Historically, the peak of realism in the European novel occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, doubts regarding the shortcomings of ‘realism’ started coming to the fore. As far as the development of the novel in the colonies is concerned, the novel witnessed the peak of realism during national liberation movements, and almost without fail, started suffering from a crisis of realism in post-independence days when the era of disillusionment with the objectives of the national liberation movements started setting in. The common element in both these developments is that the novel is realist when the middle classes are involved in the forward march of progressive social movements, and the novel becomes anti-realist when the middle classes start suffering from disillusionment and adjust to the injustices of the world.

Lukács, Jameson and others have powerfully argued the middle class thesis in their theories about the novel. Our main proposition in this chapter also is that the novel is basically a genre of the middle classes, and reflects closely, integrally and accurately the dominant cultural and intellectual mood of this class. Instead of seeing ‘realism’ as a crucial feature of the genre of the novel, it makes more sense to use it as a concept for

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126 We largely mean Asia and Africa, not Latin America, because there, the sales of novels were and still are often banned under several kinds of regimes for various reasons. As a result the novel has had an entirely different kind of development in that continent.
classifying stages in the development of the genre. Let us examine this point in greater detail. As is common knowledge, right from the days of its inception, the novel derived its readership from the middle classes. The main reason for this was the integral dependence of the novel on the ability to read for its consumption. The ability to read, in turn was a crucial middle class characteristic. As Eric Hobsbawm says, "...the chief indicator of social membership [of the middle classes] increasingly became, and has remained, formal education."\(^{127}\) Even though the novel has expanded its scope and circulation since the days of its inception, it has not transcended the middle classes as readership. Neither is the novel elite enough to belong only to the rich class or the big bourgeoisie, nor is it popular enough to go beyond the scope of the middle classes to become a genre of the workers or peasants, unlike cinema, which actually always had a more cross-class character. Though its circulation is nowhere close to that of newer forms like television or film, the novel has not seen any decline in its own sales. The spread of the novel has almost paralleled the spread of the middle classes, who came into existence with the advent of capitalism, and by now have become a huge and enormous global class.

To make our point, let us digress a bit to understand the development of this class. As we have argued in the previous chapter, the middle classes, with all their moral and ethical preoccupations, came into existence with the advent of capitalism. In the initial stages, they were most interested in putting an end to the old feudal system, and establishing capitalism as a dominant economic and political system. In Europe, the bulk of this process was accomplished by the mid-nineteenth century, mostly though popular rebellions and revolutions. A large section of the masses participated in these movements motivated by the ideas of equality, democracy, secularism, progress, etc. However, once this task was accomplished, and capitalism did in fact emerge as a dominant system, the bourgeoisie was no longer interested in carrying forward these ideological positions any further. In fact, after the mid-nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie "had no great difficulty in organizing itself as an elite, ...[using] methods very similar to those used by aristocracies, or even — as in Great Britain — the actual mechanisms of aristocracy."\(^{128}\) New notions of exclusivity started developing. The bourgeoisie became more interested in demarcating itself from its erstwhile allies — the poor and the working classes. A new contradiction began to occupy the political centre stage, that between the bourgeoisie and


\(^{128}\) Hobsbawm, *Empire* 176.
the yet aspiring working classes. The bourgeoisie now made all efforts to ensure that the poor and the oppressed carried the ideas of freedom and equality no further. This was a great moment of crisis for the middle classes. As Eric Hobsbawm says:

[By the turn of the century]...the middle classes of Europe were uneasy...They had lost their historic mission. The most heartfelt and unqualified praise of the benefits of reason, science, education, enlightenment, freedom, democracy and progress of humanity which the bourgeoisie had once been proud to exemplify, now came ...from those whose intellectual formation belonged to an earlier era and had not kept up with the times. It was the working classes and not the bourgeoisie...  

This crisis was reflected in the worlds of art and literature as well. While the new elites looked for more exclusive cultural status symbols, the middle classes were torn between carrying forward their earlier mission and abandoning it all together. The arts of the early twentieth century displayed both these trends. On the one hand were those who still argued for adherence to realism with its focus on representing the lives of the common folk and making sense of this world. On the other were those who took a strong position against realism and argued that the world was not intelligible. Therefore, to make distinctions between ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ or ‘good’ and ‘bad’ was completely meaningless. We shall not enumerate the specific instances of this debate again. We shall only point out the fact that at the turn of the last century this battle of ideas was almost evenly divided. However, after the Second World War, the arts came to be completely dominated by the latter trend. This is evident from the fact that the innovators of the new novel during the mid-twentieth century did not hold a debate with their ‘non-existent’ realist contemporaries, but went considerably back in time to attack the nostalgia of the realism of Balzac. To quote Hobsbawm again—“All ‘postmodernisms’ had in common an essential scepticism about the existence of an objective reality, and/or the possibility of arriving at an agreed understanding of it by rational means. All tended to a radical relativism.”

However, this shift in ideological position was not a very comfortable one. The entire intellectual and artistic movement had to confront their own guilty conscience. The loss of meaning in the world was accompanied by a very strong sense of anguish. The

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129 Hobsbawm, Empire 190-191.
more the world became unintelligible, the greater was there a sense of nihilism and torment. This tendency intensified and led to the depths of despair visible in the existentialist crisis of mid-twentieth century Europe, beyond which an ironical playfulness came to become the dominant aesthetic of this anti-realist trend. This playful attitude was related, among many other things, to the post-war economic boom of 1950–1973 in the developed world, in which the middle classes benefited enormously. To use a phrase popularly used in those times, the middle classes ‘never had it as good’. This newfound economic and material prosperity of the middle classes was unlikely to go hand in hand with extreme social depression; perhaps that is why the middle classes just started looking up. As Hobsbawm says, “The old moral vocabulary of rights and duties, mutual obligation, sin and virtue, sacrifice, conscience, rewards and penalties, could no longer be translated into the new language of desired gratification.”

If we view the trajectory of the development of realism in the novels of the colonies, there exists a striking resemblance to its European counterpart. The middle classes in the colonies emerged with the development of capitalism, which, on the one hand was an outcome of colonialism; on the other hand, it also had its own independent and domestic character. The middle classes initially championed all the values that the middle classes of Europe had stood for at an earlier historical juncture, although to varying degrees; i.e., the values of equality, liberty, women’s emancipation, democracy, secularism, reason and rationality. Once the middle classes became involved in their respective national liberation movements, the novel witnessed the peak of the use of realist techniques. However, the post-liberation disillusionment brought the same questions regarding the intelligibility of the world to the fore and the realist novel ran into crisis, leading to the evolution of techniques of writing similar to those of Western modernism and postmodernism, and in that specific chronological order.

To return to our original point of inquiry, we can say that ‘realism’ is both an aesthetic as well as an ethic. It is a particular kind of representation that places an emphasis, both on an engagement with the common people as well as upon comprehending society as a whole. At least the realist aesthetic believes that the ‘whole’ can be understood. It places a special emphasis on understanding individual life as part

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131 Hobsbawm, *Extremes* 338.

132 See any introduction to the development of the novel in different countries, continents or linguistic cultures. The same holds true for the Russian novel as well, which was realist during the phase when its middle classes were committed to building a better social order, starting from anti-serfdom struggles till the Russian Revolution. Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, all wrote during this stretch of history.
of socio-historical realities. We would, therefore, disagree with critics who say that the novel is always realist, as well as with those who say that the novel is never so. We would also not associate this concept integrally with the intention of the genre of the novel, because if realism were indeed to be associated intrinsically with the genre of the novel, then most anti-realist fiction written over the last hundred years or so would merit a name other than that of the novel. Therefore, we would strongly argue that, keeping realism at the diagnostic core of understanding the genre of the novel is incorrect. On the contrary, the best insights into the genre of the novel can be gained by viewing the novel essentially as a genre that exhibits the consciousness of the middle classes. It is the middle classes that the novel has remained true to, across its multifarious development and spread. The novel is the only major literary genre whose emergence is integrally tied up to the emergence of the middle classes. Different dominant and marginal concerns of the middle classes have all found reflection in the form and content of the novel.

However, if realism in the novel is indeed associated with progressive concerns of the middle classes, then how do we explain the absence of ‘great’ realist novels during the tremendous progressive upsurges in the middle classes of Europe immediately after the Russian Revolution or during anti-fascist struggles? After all, in these times, large parts of the middle classes aligned themselves with progressive causes, movements and ideologies. In response, it is possible to argue that the loss of ‘totality’ among novelists during the twentieth century was largely an ideological position entrenched in conservatism. One could also argue that the inability to capture ‘totality’ also arose from certain conditions produced under capitalism, which effectively resulted in the failure of the novelists to grasp or comprehend the complete reality and led them to view the world in increasingly fragmented ways. We shall discuss this aspect of the development of the novel in greater detail in the next chapter. Let us therefore, conclude by saying that we firmly believe that realism is not a generic feature of the novel, but a stage in its development. It is a very important stage, important enough to remain the intellectual point of departure for defining all subsequent stages, but its relevance for the novel can only be understood if the middle classes and their histories are kept in mind.