CHAPTER II

REALISM AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS
The simple and general meaning of realism is "interest in or concern for the actual or real, as distinguished from the abstract, speculative etc.". But in literature the term, realism is used in a technical sense. In literature it is "a manner of treating subject matter that presents a careful description of everyday life, usually of lower and middle classes". Further realism is "a theory of writing in which the ordinary, familiar or mundane aspects of life are represented in a straight-forward or matter-of-fact manner that is presumed to reflect life as it actually is".

Realism in literature is beset by semantic confusion, because there is no general agreement about the nature of "reality"—the qualities of "nature" and "real life". Though such questions on reality are metaphysical and philosophical,

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
at times these questions creep into literature and make realism difficult for our understanding.

The customary definition of realism is one that is based on the effect of a work of literature on the reader. Whenever a work is true to the external truth of existence with vivid and powerful descriptions, it has been described realistic. This emphasis on the appeal of a work is one that does not make a distinction between successful and realistic literature. Therefore, M.H. Abrams’ study of realism seems to be a good starting point for the present discussion. He gives a functionary definition of literary realism: “Realism is used in two ways, (1) to denote a literary movement of the nineteenth century, especially in prose fiction (Beginning with Balzac in France, George Eliot in England and William Dean Howells in America), and (2) to designate a recurrent way of life in literature which was typified by the writers of this historical movement.” 4 Further commenting on realism he adds:

"Realistic fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction: romance is said to represent life as we would have it be, more picturesque, more adventurous, more heroic than the actual; realism is to present an accurate imitation of life as it is. This distinction is not valid, but it is inadequate. Casanova, T.E. Lawrence, Winston Churchill were people in real life, but their histories, as related by themselves or others, demonstrate

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that truth is stranger than realism. The realists set out to
write a fiction, which will give the illusion that it reflects
life as it seems to the common reader...5

As such, it has been unanimously accepted that realism
originated in France having a pseudo-name "neologism" in 1850.6
Realism as a term in the literary sense, probably first
appeared in Westminster Review article on Balzac in 1853.7
Although the phrase "Realist school" had been used in Fraser's
Magazine before it had not been defined as to what it meant.
In 1856 Edmund Duranty began a short lived review called
"Realisme". In the following years the term was used by the
French painter Courbet and his supporter Champfleury, an
enthusiastic supporter of new literature as "Du Realisme" and
"Le Realisme" respectively. Thus, the term was launched into
the literary firmament of France.

Flaubert's Madam Bovary (1856) was the sign-post of
realism in literature. Inspite of its short-comings in becoming
a true realistic novel, it broke new ground for realistic
fiction on the basis of observation and objectivity. In the
following years there came the Goncourt brothers and Emile
Zola. Though Flaubert and Goncourt brothers were the first

6. George J. Becker, "Introduction", Documents of Modern
Literary Realism (Princeton, New Jersey :
7. Along with G.J. Becker, Eugene Current-Garcia and Walton
R. Patrick held the same opinion in tracing the origin of
Realism. Further discussion follows according to them.
See, "Introduction", Realism and Romanticism in
practitioners of realism, they did not affect the traditional tastes. It was Emile Zola with his journalistic talent who championed the realistic movement. Gradually, this movement was accelerated by Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevski, and Gogol in Russia; Galdo's Balacio Valde's and Parдо-Bazan in Spain; Bjorson, Ibsen and Brandes in Scandinavia; Hauptmann in Germany; Verga in Italy; George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Bennet in England. To America, Realism came later than these countries. Thus, realism was a world-wide movement in the nineteenth century and often it is known as "Critical realism".

The rise of realism in literature has a long history. "Realism" says Robert E. Spiller, "is as old as fiction itself". Again emphasizing the development of realism, he says that realism, "though often considered the antithesis of romance, it was actually developed by the romancers to make their creation plausible. ---it was contrasted not with romanticism, but with classicism, which tended toward the imitation of art rather than nature. Both romanticist and realist tried to give detailed transcripts of the world about them. The romanticist wanted a background picturesque, yet real enough to be plausible, against which to display the subjective passions that were his main interest, while the realist's aim was an accurate, objective reproduction of scene and character for its own sake. The difference lay less in their choice of material than in their intention."8 Thus, Spiller's authentic history of realism has

widened the scope of realism itself by its minute analysis. Realism has no longer been exclusively the property of realists, romanticists have also contributed to the development of realism in literature.

Though the history of realism is long and varied, this discussion on realism is confined to American literature and attention is focused on the rise of realism in fiction only.

The social conditions that prevailed during the birth of American realism have been detailed in the earlier Chapter. Further this background is emphasised in the words of Warner Berthoff —

"...the rise of the industrial city and the mass society; the accelerating material complication and the impersonality of civil life, the cycles of financial and agricultural depression and of labor (sic) unrest, coinciding with what was understood by contemporaries as the closing of the frontier and the filling out of the national domain; the continual displacement of population from country to city and suburb, and from region to region, East to West or South to North; the steady flooding in of immigrants without experience of the older Anglo-American Traditions of culture and polity, their own traditions being wrenched and eroded in the process; the prolonged national advance in wealth and population, the corresponding redistribution of political power and authority, and above all the ruthlessly disruptive incursions of capitalist enterprise, competitive and unrestricted, upon the organism of society and upon the
continuities (such as they have ever been in America) of social behaviour and expectation."9 These changes in social life affected human intelligence and stirred their imagination profoundly for a change of spirit — a realistic approach to life. Apart from this, the influence of Darwinism and foreign literature stimulated the minds of the anxious creative writers for a realistic representation of contemporary life in literature.

While Warner Berthoff links realism with the change in thought and new ideas flowing from abroad, Alfred Kazin is of the opinion that realism in America was an independent movement. Alfred Kazin says, "Realism came to America from everywhere and nowhere ("no one invented it", said Howells "it came"), and it had no centre, no unifying principle, no philosophy, no joy in its coming, no climate of experiment. There was something dim, groping, unrealized in American realism... Like so many of the innovations and literary revolutions that were to compose the subsequent history of modern American literature..."10 Thus, in any event Realism as a literary movement dominated American literature from 1860 to 1900, passing through different phases in its development.

American literature during the 1860's was in transition from romanticism to realism. There was persistence of romanticism and growth of conflict in the works of Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Sidney Lanier, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, John

Woolman and Abraham Lincoln. The general tone of the work of these writers was romantic but the growth of the democratic spirit made it easier for writers to accept the 'Low' and 'Common' as suitable literary material for their writings. The power of the evil war had destroyed their romantic misconceptions about life, yet a strain of transcendentalism and traditional sentimentalism were found in their works. They were striving hard to keep up "tradition" and "new convention" in their works and formed a distinctive group of writers known as "Genteel Tradition". Though many of these writers had real ability to be a realists, their love for "gentility" and aspiration for "refined" writing did not make the different from the writers of "Genteel Tradition".

Another point of interest in the course of American literature during this period was the rise of folk literature, frontier humour, development of science. These factors may be called the "four corner stones in the foundation of American realism". 11

Folk literature was renovated during the sixties and American letters took an active interest in collecting folk songs, ballads and tales. Most notable among these collections were, B.A. Botkin's A Treasury of American Folklore, Carl Sandburg's The American Songbag, and Paul Bunyan's tales like "Casey Jones" and "Frankie and Johnny". These folk songs and

tales dealt with the lives and experiences of cowboys, homesteaders, Lumberjacks, Mountaineers, railroad men, slum dwellers and workers of all classes and races. The narrative technique of these songs and tales was simple with colloquialism of language. Simplicity and commonness were the chief characteristics of folk literature. Thus, American realism owed full debt to folk literature for its vivid expression of common life with all its peculiarities in literature.

Like folk literature, the frontier humour contributed and shaped the foundation of American realism to a great extent. Humour is born of incongruities. The frontier humour was based upon the hard and barren frontier life and became one of the most forceful weapons for social criticism in an age when many things needed the lash. The chief characteristics of this humour were gross exaggeration, sharp commonsense and the element of surprise. What the realists of successive generations shared with these humourists was the social concern and at times criticism of the follies and foibles of human life and society. As Oscar Cargil has pointed out: "the frequently unrecognized cynicism of the frontier humourists deepens more and more into the pessimism of the realists". 12

The works of the local colourists during the sixties and seventies served as a bridge between the decadent romanticism of the "Genteel Tradition" and the virile realism of the next age. Sometimes the "local color" works were a combination of

folk material and frontier humour. This combination is not found out always because the main interest of the local colourists was to portray society and man of a particular region "as it is". Therefore, the distinction between "Local color" and realism is not always easy to make. But, generally, 'Local color' is the result of attention to the physical surroundings in which characters are placed in typical scenery, their external appearances are marked by typical costumes and their manner of expression is in typical dialects. When the interest of the writer passes from these mere externals to a portrayal of character, whether typical or individual, the "Local Color" takes on the hue of realism. In general it is true, as most critics on "Local color" have insisted that its tone is romantic, yet there are many writers whose work is called "local color" by some and realism by others. Writers like Eggleston, Cable, Hart and Twain are local colourists and in whom "Local Color" is a transition from romance to realism. Much of the works of "Local color" may be condemned for its sentimentality and mechanical emphasis, yet its very focussing attention on definite parts of the country and on specific types of character, specific dialects, specific dress, made for that careful scrutiny of the realities of life which the true realists demand. Thus, the local colourists secured in many cases by their manner of writing a realistic effect and anticipated realists to succeed them.

The advancement in the field of science encouraged expository forms of prose which were conducive to the progress
of realism. The writer who had influenced and propagated his true scientific attitude upon realism in the creative writings of America was John Fiske. His voluminous and compendious book "Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy" did battle for Darwinian theory in America. As Marle Curti has observed, "The chief credit for reconciling theism and evolution and for popularizing the results belongs to John Fiske."\textsuperscript{13} Along with Fiske, the scientific treatise of Lewis Henry Morgan, Lester Frank Ward's The Dynamic Sociology, William Jame's The Principles of Psychology, Henry Adams' The Education of Henry Adams and Josiah Royee's The Religious Aspect of Philosophy laid emphasis on science as the only reality solving all earthly problems and hastened the movement of new realism.

Thus, along with these four indigenous forces of American literature, the influence of foreign literature and changed frontier culture, turned American literature from romanticism to realism. American realism as Professor Pattee has well said "was simply the new, young, vigorous tide which had set in against the decadent, dreamy softness that had ruled the mid-year of the century."\textsuperscript{14}

Realism is always a relative term, varying with the author's view of reality. To Howells it meant "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful presentation of material."\textsuperscript{15}


Mark Twain said in his "Preface" to *The Innocents Abroad* what might be said of all his works - "I am sure I have written at least honestly, whether wisely or not".  

16 And Henry James defined realism in his essay "The art of Fiction". He says "Do not think too much about optimism and pessimism; try and catch the color(sic) of life itself".  

17 Thus, truthful presentation, honest writing, catching the colour of life itself; though varied in emphasis on the same matter, were blended harmoniously to represent and report life aright. These principal American realists were concerned with a new vision. Their aforesaid statements pointed toward a literature which rests upon a particular theory of vision — a trend of writing concerned with grasping truth that underlies facts. In this context what E.H. Cady says may be relevant. Defining American realism he says "realism is a theory of common vision".  

18 Similarly, commenting on American realism Warner Berthoff says: "In so far as it (realism) constituted a movement at all, American literary realism was concerned less with problems of artistic definition, and discovery than with clearing the way to more profitable exercise of individual ambition".  

19 In fact, American realists were ambitious to

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create a "standard" work of art. Therefore, realism was often
considered as a "dominant standard value". This realism was
reasoned and progressive, and its aim was for "a systematic
searching out of fundamental issues of expression and form". 20

Thus, American realism as a "movement", or a "theory"
or a "dominant standard value" appeared to exhibit the following
salient characteristic features:

Literary realism in general and American realism in
particular began with features of literary revolt having a new
notion of reality. History repeats itself and it is evident
from the history of literature that from the beginning the
current of literature has flown on the lap of time making
ripples of revolts. The romanticists revolted against the
classicists and the realists in their turn revolted against
the romanticists and the classicists. The pattern of revolt
in literature is an unending process. It is not an end in
itself, rather a means to an end. If at all, American realism
emerged out of revolt, it was due to realists yearning for
newness. The brilliant generation of Americans who became
more or less thirty years old in 1870, felt "ennui" with the
worn-out flamboyant conventions of romantic idealism. 21
Romanticism was already diseased with romantic fancy and
extravaganza. Glorification of nature and natural phenomena
lost their charm on these young writers. They expended their

magnificent resources of wit and creative energy to create a new kind of literature which can give expression to their youthful spirit and set them free from out-worn tradition. To feed their artistic hunger new subjects were readily available in the form of Darwin's theory of evolution, Thomas Huxley's agnosticism and the socialism of Marx and Engel. They were more reasoned and less speculative in their writings. Romantic abstraction was replaced by scientific truth. Literary artists took the position of scientists and there happened a happy marriage of science and literature. Writers like Henry James, Howells and Twain by their satirical reduction of romanticism invented new techniques to treat contemporary life as the new subject matter of their fictions to make realism a literary success. Here-in lies the basic difference between realism as a "movement" and realism as a simple "evaluating term". When realism is used as a simple "evaluating term", it takes the name "realistic". A certain work of art may be realistic but it is not "realistic" in the sense works of Howells, James and Twain are concerned. Realistic refers to one part of a work of literature and realism refers to the effect of the whole. To make this point clear Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels can be taken into discussion. In the opening pages of the same novel, there is a wonderful detailed account of the ordinary career of a wilful boy who became a common-place ship's surgeon. We are led simply into an apparently normal memoir of travel and adventure by sea. And at once we find ourselves in Lilliput. Here the tactic is
that the moments of strategic attention to homely detail in the book leads us to call it "realistic". But, in its total effect it is a fantastic allegorical satire but not realism in the Howellsian or Jamesian sense. Realism is applied here only to evaluate one aspect of the work but not the whole. Hence, the characteristic of a true realistic work is to give total realistic effect both thematically and technically.

Humanism is one among the many characteristics of this critical realism. The realists inherited "humanism" as a quality of their works from the romanticists and this humanism became the realist's new notion of reality. One can distinguish the realist from the romanticist on the one side and the naturalist on the other, precisely by this distinction. The romanticist in the long run, is concerned with the ideal, the transcendent, the superman. The naturalist is concerned with the vast forces heredity and environment, a world or brute chance, with what we share of animality and they ultimately reduce human to subhuman. Whereas the realist is certainly reductive when compared with the romantic, the realist is concerned neither with superman nor with the subhuman but with the human. There is significance in the fact that the fathers of James and Howells were followers of "New catholicism". From early childhood, both the sons had been taught to believe in "New catholicism" which states that above every physical existence there hovered a spiritual significance, an angel, an essence, an eternal destiny. But

as young realistic writers, both the men wanted to blot out transcendence and God from their writings. Their vision fell from the height of transcendence and God to the level plane where it focused upon man and his life in this world. Such interest in humanity led them to sympathise with human beings. Talking about their sympathy W. Besant says "sympathy includes not only the power to pity the sufferings of others, but also that of understanding their very souls; it is the reverence for man, the respect of personality, and the enormous value of one man, the perception of one man's relation to another, his duties and responsibilities. Through strength of this newly born faculty, and aided by the guidance of a great artist, we are enabled to discern the real indestructible man beneath the rags and filth of a common castaway, and the possibilities of the meanest gutter-child that steals the streets for its daily bread". 23 Thus, humanism was at the core of their work.

Such humanism leads us to another characteristic feature of realism, that is selection of effective subject matter. Therefore, the first condition was that the material used by the realists must be the product of unbiased observation. From a strictly realist point of view an invented proletarian or an invented fairy princess would be unnecessary for a realistic work. This implies an inescapable limitation on the range of the individual realist, since he can not have access to an infinite range of material. With humanistic concern for persons, American realists sympathised with democracy.

as democracy became a significant feature of the literary movement. Moreover, most of these realists have had a middle-class background; therefore, it has been natural for them to exploit material from "low" and middleclass families. They took their stand with the Wordsworthian principle that common men and women are capable of conveying their emotions and feelings in a pure state; they are nearer to nature, hence they are simple and uncomplicated. This idea suited the realists best for the glorification of the common men who were yet neglected. They also supported the assumption that the life lived by the greatest number is somehow most real.

Thus, the subject matter of a realistic work covered all human experiences from the drawing room to the stable. Looking back at the whole course of the realistic movement, it can be realised that new areas of subject matter were opened up in the political and socio-economic life of man, which were closed previously. Society and social situations were not merely shown as setting or background, rather there was an examination of these processes in the form of strikes and wage slavery. Usually great cities and urban slums were taken as setting for realistic works. Social themes like poverty, destitution, love, marriage were presented in an unconventional manner. The realist's objective observation and impersonal treatment had made these themes interesting for the readers. Nothing was left or considered unfit for the subject matter of the novel. As one eminent critic has pointed out "where life inhabits,
the realist must go if honest observation leads him there".²⁴
Thus, the realistic novelist experimented with subjects diverse
in range and intensive in magnitude. To define its veracity
once Henry James referring to Zola's novels said that: "realism
has proved to be a capacious vessel, capable of carrying a most
varied cargo and of being converted to more elegant uses".²⁵

The earnest and sweeping observation leads us to an
essential characteristic of "critical realism", the innovations
of new technique which are either part of the realistic doctrine
or are derived from it. It is obvious that the exploration of
new subject-matter demands also application of a new method,
otherwise the new materials will be anything other than realistic.
Therefore, the realists adopted "objectivity" as the basic tenet
of the method. It was believed that the facts in a realistic
work should speak for themselves, as they do in real life. It
should avoid authorial voice of commentary or exhortation.
"The artist ought to be in his works" says Flaubert "like God
in creation, invisible and omnipotent. He should be felt
everywhere but not be seen".²⁶ Essentially the artist should
be a dispassionate observer like a scientist, who manipulates
data to arrive at a conclusion as coldly impersonal as that
reached in the laboratory. Such impersonality curtailed fancy
and intuition from intellectual creations of the writer, and he
limited himself within the territory of observed facts and

²⁴ George J. Becker, op. cit., p. 25.
²⁵ Quoted in George J. Becker, op. cit., p. 4
²⁶ Gustave Flaubert, "On Realism"
Appears in G.J.Becker's DMLR, p. 94.
factual details.

Thus, such an important technique de-emphasized plot and stressed on characterization. A genuine realistic novel took up patches of mundane life without beginning and ending, and told the facts in "medias res". Characters appear and disappear without biographical sketch or obituary notice. Commenting on this aspect of the realistic novel Friedrich Engels says that "realism implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances". 27 Characters in a realistic novel, therefore, ought to be "types" rather than "individuals", but no realistic novelist has ventured to depict characters in this manner as there is risk of artificiality. The hero in a realistic novel came from the multitude of common men, whose character was not heightened or distorted to reap a rich realistic harvest. He was centre of good or evil forces demanding the reader's identification to an intense degree. Moreover, two different qualities of personality were never pitted against one another in order to avoid comparative commentary because commentary is anathema for the realists. Walter Besant's critical study of realistic fiction and its assumptions will make clear what the realists did in their works. Realistic fiction says Besant "whose sole end, aim and purpose is to portray humanity and human character, the design must be in accordance with the customs and general practice of living men and women under any

27. Friedrich Engels, "On Socialist Realism" Appears in DMLR, p. 484.
proposed set of circumstances and conditions. That is to say, the characters must be real, and such as might be met with in actual life, or at least, the mutual development of such people as any of us might meet; their actions must be natural and consistent; the conditions of place, of manners, and of thought must be drawn from personal observation. To take an extreme case: a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life". 28 With this technical characterization the realists tried for the perfection of their work of art.

As realism was a reaction against sentimentality and gigantism in character presentation, early realists held rigorously to an external view. When realism tended toward naturalism, the naturalists portrayed the character externally and internally stressing on heredity and environment. The realists as well as the naturalists followed the method of documentation and observation to provide physical data about the persons or characters they dealt with their novels. The realist believed that by using only actual attested events as materials, he can reduce the possibility of arriving at a false conclusion. Therefore, some realists had gone to the extent of using photography and literary texts together as means of getting closer to actuality. The realists disbelieved

their memory lest they would create something which would be fanciful or abstract.

Abiding by such strict principles in method of preparation, the realists faced many perils in the maintenance of objectivity. Very often, the realists used images and symbols and myth as superstructure in their novels. Since the chief aim of realism is to present objects truthfully "as it is", such use of symbols, images and myth is a violation of its objectivity as they do not permit the reader to see or judge the "things" or "persons" of the novel in any but one dimension. Despite this objection, the works of American realists and naturalists abound in images and symbols.

There is also a serious psychological barrier to the maintenance of objectivity. A strict realist should restrict his emotions, passions and sympathy within such a limit that, it should not affect the readers while going through their works. As it is incalculable and too delicate to measure the degree of emotion, sympathy and passion, the American realists went on sympathising with the characters in their novels pouring much of their emotions and passions into them.

The next characteristic of American realism is its moral vision. As a revolt against romanticism, it discarded traditional morality. In league with the movement "Art for Arts sake" the realists put emphasis on art. They held the opinion that art has nothing to do with morality.
Another aspect of their moral vision was an active disbelief in romantic individualism and Dionysian self-assertion. Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* sang the chorus of human solidarity. Their affinity for democracy and contemporaneity brought them toward effective insight into the human problems. These novelists sympathetically studied common characters like Silas and Huck. Sympathy became their moral vision. Their insight into human problems stimulated them with growing sentiment for reform. Therefore, they concentrated on the preservation of and extension of democracy, populism, progressivism, nationalism, unions and labour movement, and socialism. As the realistic movement matured, the realists inquired into the American business mind.

The American realists lost the war of realism against romanticism, as they failed to capture the American taste. The later realists moved deep toward an increasingly psychological and scientific realism, propelled by two major forces. One of these was the displacement of positivism (factual details) from its dominant position during the late nineteenth century and the other force was the practice of realistic fiction itself. The more one confronted the mystery of persons living out their fates and struggling toward death, the more one's scrutiny turned from the outward sign to the inward process. The realistic novels became intricate in depicting inner psyche of characters and complex ideas derived from science. With such complexity, novel reading became a burden for Americans instead
of giving pleasure. Therefore, realism lost the battle in dominating American taste.

Though the battle was lost, American realism prepared the way for its succession. The movement contributed to the development of new theories of novel writing and the realists became models for the future generation of novelists. For example - Mark Twain's novels of "Local Color" made way for the present day "regionalism" in the novels of Willa Cather and John Steinbeck, Henry James' psychological realism in The Portrait of a Lady and Howells' The Shadow of a Dream were followed by modern "Stream of Consciousness" novels. Thus, dynamism or progressivism is one among the characteristics of American realism.

Finally, coming to the philosophical aspect of realism we lose heart as there has been no specific philosophic position maintained by the realists. It seems to rest on contradiction. Since the basic ideal of the realistic movement was rigorous objectivity and dispassionate observation, it was almost impossible for the realists to make any firm statement about man and his fate. The realists were sceptical of traditional theistic belief such as soul, the power of divine grace and the whole world of miracle in which man is put. Since the whole climate of thought in which realism flourished was one of scientism, the determinism of the realists was a direct reflection in literature of the prevalent mechanistic science of the age. It usually happened with these writers to declare
that life had no meaning. Man was a creature barely risen from the level of animal behaviour and driven by forces over which he had little or no control. And he could discern no goodness or purpose in life.

American realists were determinists but their determinism was not consistent as they waver between cosmic determinism to mechanistic determinism. When realism verged on naturalism, some realists seem to occupy a solid philosophical position. Naturalism is termed as "Stark realism" which gives an account of unpleasant, sordid details and is dubious about man's higher nature. In essence and in origin naturalism is no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some realists, showing man caught in a net from which there can be no escape. Man's position is degenerating from bad to worse under the effect of circumstances. Thus, the realists turned into naturalists, and provided a strong materialistic determinism in postulating the philosophy of life.

If at all realists differ from the naturalists, it is only on the ground of philosophy. When the realists falter philosophically, the naturalists, at least, to a certain extent tried to propound a naive philosophy of life.