Social Realism in Three Novels -
*The God of Small Things*,
*A River Sutra*, and
*The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Under the supervision of
Sanjoy Saksena
Professor of English

Submitted by
Snigdha Mishra
Enrol no: I0121801

Department of English & Modern European Languages
University of Allahabad, Allahabad-211002, India

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Abstract

The present thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, viz. “Realism: Concept and Dimensions” discusses various issues regarding Realism and derives the parameters to judge the three novels, viz. *The God of Small Things*, *A River Sutra*, and *The Thousand Faces of Night*. On going through the debate of several writers and critics on the issue, it is apparent that it is rather hard to reach on any concrete definition of the term “Realism”. However, critics hold it as the theory or practice in art and literature of fidelity to nature or to real life. It thrusts on accurate representation of the most typical views, details, and surroundings of a subject. Realism, particularly in literature, is based upon an implicit or explicit assumption that it is possible to communicate about a reality beyond the writing.

Initially, the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of Realism as a trend in paintings and art. Historians agree that the movement started with the painter Gustave Courbet who made famous the term “Realism” as a slogan. In 1855, Courbet displayed his paintings in an exhibition. For the first time in his paintings, he used the method of exact representation of things and named it as “Realism”. After some time in 1856 Flaubert’s novel *Madame Bovary* was
published and was hailed as the vindication and triumph of “Realism”.

Following these developments, in France, realist novel genre was most consciously pursued throughout the nineteenth century.

Critics also hold that the development of the realist novel coincided with the development of democracy, and as a literary form it insists that art cannot turn away from the more sordid and harsh aspects of human existence. Instead, it participates in the democratic impulse of modernity. Unlike an idealist, a realist believes only the truth as universal creed. This notion leads him to take into concern things, which he can see and know in detail. Thus, one can say that the term indicates a movement, which gives preference to tangible objects and refuses to believe insubstantial insights. In fact, Realism revolts against the Classicism and Romanticism. While Classicism is based on rules which make it confined and restrain from providing any pleasure, Romanticism presents beautiful image of things / society which is hard to believe that such things exist or ever existed. So, naturally both doctrines are unable to present life in its true sense. Classicism tends to portray life more rational than it really is while romanticism presents life more emotional than it really is.
Georg Lukacs, an authority on Realism, considers it as an artistic consciousness that makes, instead of mere reflecting, a creative intervention of into the world. Lukacs, in *Studies in European Realism*, declares that the object of proletarian humanism is to reconstruct the complete human personality and free it from the distortion and dismemberment to which it has been subjected in class society. Thus, the realistic novel, as M H Abrams says, is characterized as the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism, by representing complex characters with mixed motives that are rooted in social class, operate in a developed social structure, interact with many other characters, and undergo plausible, everyday modes of experience.

According to the critics there is not one unified form of Realism. Instead, there are many, and all developed somewhat differently under the impact of diverse national cultures and social forces. However, Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert and Zola are considered as the main exponents of this movement in nineteenth century France. After France, this movement reached in England. In England, Literary Realism fully came into sight with the publications of Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*, Harriet
Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and George Eliot’s novels. These novels show the suffering and hardships of the working people.

With the passage of time, Realism has evolved various ways of representing reality. It has shown both similarity and dissimilarity with other methods of conveying the truth. It as a trend in literary writing has survived the test of time and been kept in vogue. In addition, with the passage of time it has flourished to its fullest and new techniques have been evolved to present reality. Now it has many branches, such as Critical Realism, Social Realism, Naturalism, Neo-Realism, National Realism, Magic Realism, Universal Realism, Pictorial Realism, Aesthetic Realism, and Spatial Realism, Realism in Painting, Realism in Theatre, Realism in Motion Pictures, and Realism in Philosophy. All these kinds of realism are associated with the fidelity of representation in almost every sphere of life.

Being part of Realism, Social Realism carries all the merits of it but along with it, gets specific with the word ‘social’. Specifically, it is Realism of society, and is considered as an outcome of the Industrial Revolution. When urban centres grew, slums proliferated on a new scale contrasting with the display of wealth of the upper classes. With a new sense of social
consciousness, the Social Realists pleaded to “fight the beautiful art”, any style which appealed to the eye or emotions. Instead, they focused on the ugly realities of contemporary life and sympathized with working-class people, particularly the poor. Thus, Social Realism in art describes both a stylistic approach and an overall attitude toward the subject. Social Realism aims toward the not so lovely part of life. Its goal is not to amuse, but to show the observer the evils of poverty, immorality and war. It focuses on the social norms and conventions which regulate the society.

Along with countries like France, Russia, Britain, and America, Realism got impetus in India also. In nineteenth and twentieth century, Indian society was facing many social, political vicissitudes and at the same time was struggling for independence from the British rule. All these social happenings greatly affected the Indian sensibility, and played a crucial role in the production of “Indian English Literature”, a literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality. If one surveys the writings by the earliest Indian novelists, viz. Bankim Chandra Chattterjee and Rabindranath Tagor, he may easily find that both have dealt with the current issues of the time. Tagore’s *Binodini* and Bankim’s *A Poison Tree* and
Krishnakanta’s Will are the examples of novel, which have discussed the contemporary burning issues like miserable condition of women in the society. Later on, this practice was joined by the trio, viz. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R K Narayan. Their Novels, like Untouchable, Kanthapura, and The Guide, also depict the social realities of the contemporary time.

Together with male novelists, women novelists also have made a significant contribution in “Indian English Literature.” Likewise, they also have given voice to suppressed, down-trodden, and marginalised people. Among the galaxy of female Indian English novelists, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, and Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Gita Mehta, Kiran Desai, Githa Hariharan etc. are bright stars that have increased the radiance of the galaxy with their lustre. They have articulated the miserable social realities of the contemporary India. But, as men and women are biologically different, so are their feeling and thought. However, it does not mean that they are opposite to each other, and both are likely to have singular approach towards things and way to describe it. But, while they share most of the common sensibilities with their male counterparts; their writings also show some typicality that differs them from male novelists.
If one surveys the novels produced by women novelists, it becomes obvious that their subject matters essentially round about women and their external as well as internal life. It includes their childhood, married life, professional life, if it is, and its aftermath on her psychological condition.

Through the analysis of the three novels in the subsequent three chapters, it is apparent that they are deeply embedded into Indian social life and culture. Each of the three novels successfully captures and renders various social realities of contemporary India. The first novel, *The God of Small Things*, presents a number of burning issues of local as well as universal relevance. It depicts a big panorama of social life, exploitation of poor and weaker section in the society, and social apathy towards marginalized ones. It carefully displays the social evils that have been having deep roots in the Indian society for millenniums. The second novel, *A River Sutra*, raises a number of indigenous social issues. But, side by side, it also presents the vibrancy of Indian culture. The novel seems to synthesize tradition and modernity. In symbolical manner it presents that Indian tradition is immortal. Though, it is endangered by human greed, because of which the contemporary India is suffering under the perils of harsh social realities; but, ultimately it will
be able to overcome them. The third novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, exclusively deals with women question in Indian social life. It shows that an all pervasive chauvinism has been controlling Indian social life from time immemorial. It re-tells Indian myths from feminist point of view and draws an analogy between contemporary and mythical figures. By presenting the plight of three subsequent generations of women, the novel presents that despite all high claims of modernity and women empowerment, women are still leading miserable life. The novel shows that all women, whether they are queens, princesses, middle class woman, or a home caretaker, have similar fate. They are victim of patriarchy.

Besides, these novels fulfil the other criteria suggested by practitioners and critics on Realism, and substantiate their position in the main-stream of Realist fiction, and their writers’ to be true inheritor of tradition of Realist fiction writing. After investigating the novels it is perceptible that the novels have been written with great care, deep knowledge and understanding of Indian scenario and beliefs. The novelists have proved their commitment to Realist novel. The issues taken in the novels are very close to social reality. It may be possible that in order to emphasize any theme, the novelists would have
accentuated some particular scenes or conditions, but they largely stick to the promise of true representation. Since, owing to the last few decades of feminist movement, women have become more assertive and vocal regarding their feelings and experiences, and have acquired wider vision; they, instead of dealing with romantic subject, are tackling an array of serious themes and are presenting them with conviction.