Chapter – I

Realism: Concept and Dimensions

The literary theorists and critics have defined the term “Realism” variously. If one looks the definitions given by them, he may get an impression, as Toni Davies writes, that its “possible meanings run from the pedantically exact to the cosmically vague” (02). J A Cuddon also holds it as an exceptionally elastic term, often ambivalent and equivocal, which has acquired far too many qualifying (but seldom clarifying) adjectives (728). Pam Morris holds that a water-tight definition of Realism is impossible. According to him it is a notorious tricky term to define. He suggests three causes responsible for its slippery nature:

First, the terms realism and realist inhabit both the realm of everyday usage and the more specialist aesthetic realm of literary and artistic usage.

Second, the entanglement of realist and realism with a series of other words, such as factuality, truth, reality, realistic and real, is equally resistant to clear-cut definition.

Third, the term realism almost always involves both claims about the nature of reality and an evaluative attitude towards it.

(01-10)
However, writers and critics have endeavoured to give some tentative definitions to the term. While, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “a style in art or literature that shows things and people as they are in real life” (1055); M H Abrams’ *Glossary of Literary Terms* gives that it designates a recurrent mode, in various eras and literary forms, of representing human life and expression in literature (260). If Pam Morris suggests that Literary Realism is any writing that is based upon an implicit or explicit assumption that it is possible to communicate about a reality beyond the writing (06), Martin Coyle also considers it as the theory or practice in art and literature of fidelity to nature or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization of the most typical views, details, and surroundings of the subject (933).

Initially, the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of Realism as a trend in paintings and art. Though historians find it difficult to give a definite date for the movement, yet they agree that the movement started not with the novelist but 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. Morris believes that, by and large, the development of the realist novel coincided with and aligned itself to the modern secular materialist understanding of reality. Realist plots and characters are constructed in accordance with secular empirical rules. Events and people in the story are explicable in terms of natural causation without resort to the supernatural and divine intervention. Whereas idealism is grounded upon a view of Truth as universal and timeless, empiricism finds its truths in the particular and specific. He further tells that Realism as a literary form 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. As a genre, it has reached out to a much wider social range, in terms both of readership and characters represented, than earlier more elite forms of literature (03).

Looking the practice of realist writing it is easy to differentiate that, unlike an idealist who reprimands the materiality of the social world and does not seem to believe and accept less than the high morals of life; a realist
believes only the truth as universal creed. It is hard for him to consider abstract things. In other words, he is near to material and far away from theoretical phenomenon. 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. As Vidyanath Singh writes, Realism means a reaction against a number of things that were thought in the mid-nineteenth century to be ‘unreal’ – Gothic romances, picaresque adventure, allegorical fantasy, classic composure, conservative morality etc (02). 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.

Differentiating Realism with Classicism Pam Morris writes that whereas realism derives from an acceptance that the objects of the world that one knows by means of his sensory experience have an independent existence
regardless of whether or not they are perceived or thought about, idealism gives primacy to the consciousness, or mind or spirit that apprehends. According to him, this privileging of the non-corporeal as the ultimate source of reality begins in the classical world with the teaching of Plato and Aristotle which together constitute a pervasive and powerful tradition within Western notions of knowledge and aesthetics. He explains that at the centre of Plato’s philosophy is his concept of the Forms or Ideas. Plato considers them as eternal, transcendent realities that can only be directly comprehended by thought; and human beings as mediator between the two realms of the Ideal and the sensible. However, Aristotle seems to reject the mysticism of Platonic Forms; but, he is also more favourably inclined towards artistic representations, seeing imitation as central to the human capacity to learn. Moreover, he suggests that it is the poet’s responsibility to represent the universal not the particular (49-51). Contrary to this belief, as J A Cuddon writes, Realism is the portrayal of life with fidelity. It does not try to render things in accordance with supranormal or transcendental. Instead, Realism is conceived in terms of the everyday, the normal, the pragmatic. Realism, as a literary term, is about as clear and bendable a term as, say, Romanticism and, as it happens, they are the -isms of two very different camps – if not campuses.
According to Cuddon, the term suggests that a work of literature has
verisimilitude or in some way possesses that kind of authenticity (729-30).

But, simultaneously, the critics forbid to confuse the term with everyday
reality. Pam Morris specifies that there is one distinction between realist
writing and actual everyday reality beyond the text that must be quite
categorically insisted upon: realist novels never give us life or a slice of life or
not do they reflect reality. Because, Literary Realism is a representational form
and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents.
Moreover, words function completely differently from mirrors. No matter how
convincing the prose is in its rendering of social reality, even the most realist of
texts deploys writerly convention that has no equivalent in experiential reality
(04). Terry Eagleton also believes that the idea that literature ‘reflects’ reality is
clearly inadequate. Criticizing Bertolt Brecht’s comment in A Short Organum
for the Theatre (1948) – ‘If art reflects life, it does so with special mirrors’ –
Eagleton believes that the metaphor of a ‘selective’ mirror with certain blind-
spots and refractions serves only limited purpose. According to him, literature
does not stand in some reflective, symmetrical, one-to-one relation with its
object. Instead, the object is deformed, refracted, dissolved (46-48). Both
Georg Lukacs and Leon Trotsky too endorse the belief. While Lukacs sees, in realistic representations, an artistic consciousness that makes, instead of mere reflecting, a creative intervention of into the world; Trotsky claims that artistic creation is ‘a deflection, a changing and a transformation of reality, in accordance with the peculiar laws of art’ (qtd. in Eagleton 47-48).

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. He considers it as the central aesthetic problem to present the complete human personality adequately. According to him, true great Realism depicts man and society as complete entities; and any live portrayal of the complete human personality is possible only if the writer attempts to create types that show an organic, indissoluble connection between man as a private individual and man as a social being, as a member of community. Therefore, Realism, for him, is the recognition of the fact that a work of literature can rest neither on a lifeless average, as the naturalists suppose, nor on an individual principle which dissolves its own self into nothingness. The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which
organically binds together the general and particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type is not its average quality, not its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in extreme presentation of their extremes, rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and epochs (05-08).

Thus, the realistic novel 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 (Abrams 192). Shifting the thrust from the process of writing to the process of reading M H Abrams adds a new dimension in the discussion when he writes:

[It is] more useful to identify realism in terms of the effect on the reader: realistic fiction is written to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen. To achieve such effects, the novelists we identify as realists may or may not be selective
in subject matter – although most of them prefer the commonplace and the everyday, represented in minute detail, over rarer aspects of life – but they must render their materials in ways that make them seem to their readers the very stuff of ordinary experience. (260-61)

Realism insists on the presentation of life like characters in probable situations with authenticity. The Realist novel, Steven Earnshaw writes, presents stories, characters and settings that are similar to those commonly found in the contemporary everyday world. This requires events to take place in the present or recent past, and the events themselves are usually organized in a linear, chronological sequence, and located in places familiar to author and audience either through direct observation or report. The characters and storylines need to be plausible, and in this they give the impression of commonplace (Earnshaw 14).

According to 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. Their works have played a very important role in epitomizing the essential traits of the genre. Most historians find Count Frederic De
Stendhal (1783-1842) the first writer who consistently understands and represents characters as the shifting location. His stylistic innovation gives more importance to particularity in contrast with idealistic claims – the slogan of realism. The second writer Honore De Balzac (1799-1850) represents his characters as types rather than as averages. He himself describes his method as “individualizing the types and typifying the individual.” He further associates the role of the writer with that of the rational scientific observer. His ‘Preface’ to The Human Comedy has been held as the manifesto of realism. The third, Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) brings two new qualities to realist writing: his passionate commitment to artistic objectivity and his almost mystical sense of artistic dedication. In addition, he declares, “It is one of my principles that you must not write yourself. The artist ought to be like God in creation, invisible and omnipotent. He should be felt everywhere but not seen’ (qtd in Morris 65). And the fourth, Emile Zola holds that like scientists novelist too could be experimental with the facts associated with human existence. With the help of such beliefs, they can come to the new knowledge regarding human life. Zola pays more attention towards the sordid and bestial aspects of human beings and rejects idealism. He does not find any nobility, dignity, beauty, morality in not knowing. For him true works are only those are great and moral works (Morris
According to Pam Morris, Realism in France was very radical in nature and denied all traditional conventions of representing the human existence. He suggests the four defining features of this body of writing:

1. It emphasises on the particular at the expense of universal truth; and focuses upon individual characters perceived as the location of the multiple social forces and contradictions of their era;
2. It makes formal experimentation, especially in terms of narrative perspective and linguistic innovation;
3. It holds that the novel form is a participant in the movement towards greater democracy and social justice;
4. It seems to be affected by the commercial demands of a mass market. (55)

After France, this movement reached in England. In nineteenth century, the English novel was recognized as a serious literary form. The main reasons behind its increasing popularity were the socio-political circumstances. Right to vote and spread of education enabled people to ask things of their choice. They were not content with whatever they got in life. Instead, they wished to see and read new things. This change in attitude also led to this movement and strengthened it also. Moreover, the contemporary world was full of industrial developments that helped in the emergence of new class in the society i.e. middle class which was educated, intelligent, and prosperous. Due to spread of
education, the movement got momentum. They preferred realistic literary works, which dealt with the stories of common people. They discarded romances and tales of knight, prince, and princesses. The other reason was being prosperous they had all the comforts of life. Men usually worked outdoor and in leisure time women read novels. For these reasons there was huge demand of stories, and that too of people like them. 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. They show the suffering and hardships of the working people. These realist novels point out to the most important element in the novel – character. Through the characters, the writers intend to show the duplicity of the social organizations. While these organizations work with mutual understanding, any kind of unconventionality shown by the people results in torture and punishment. Pam Morris holds that British Realism has added certain new dimensions in this school. The first and foremost is the development of writerly techniques of indirection and suggestion. The second is the introduction of democratic impulse. The third is the extension of subject matter by introduction of an entirely new type of characters – female characters – by women novelist (Morris 76-94).
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. Realism shows some affinity with the tradition of the Enlightenment. The tradition came into existence in the eighteenth century with the belief that art should be a source of knowledge. However, there are also doctrines which reject this approach towards the social condition and its presentation in the literary texts. Instead, they advocated ‘Art for Art’s Sake’. They hold that “art is self-sufficient and need serve no moral or political purpose” (Drabble 43). But, Realism 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. Wikipedia describes:

an artistic movement, expressed in the visual and other arts, which depicts social and racial injustice, economic hardship, through unvarnished pictures of life’s struggles; often depicting working class activities as heroic. The movement is a style of painting in which the scenes depicted typically convey a message of social or political protests edged with satire.

It further gives that Social Realism is 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. They recorded what they saw (“as it existed”) in a dispassionate manner.

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. Anita Singh writes:

Social Realism is concerned with dynamic interpretations of life with the purpose of changing the existing reality . . . . The concept of “Social Realism” in the strictly scientific and philosophical sense has come to us with the philosophy of Marxism. (76)

Initially, Social Realism was introduced in Russia, as the form of Socialist Realism. It was invented by Anatoli Lunacharsky and was intended for classics to be interpreted in contemporary terms. It held the opinion that by interpreting classics it would become relevant to the people. Socialist Realism was used as a tool for implementing socialism of Marxist doctrine, and was associated with the literary works which were being translated in order to uplift the condition of working-class people. In addition, social novels have played a great role in bringing and keeping into vogue the trend of Social Realism. In the nineteenth century France and Britain many novels were written that portrayed the contemporary social realities. Some of them are: Turgenv’s Sportsman’s Sketches (1882), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), Benjamin Disraeli’s Sybil or The Two Nations (1885), Mrs. Gaskell’s North and South (1855), Charles Dickens’ Bleak House, and Charles Kingsley’s Alton
Locke (1850). They all highlight the evils of factories, law courts, problem of emancipation of women, and the inhumanity of war.

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 (Naik 02). Observing the influence of Social Realism on this body of literature Meenakshi Mukherjee writes:

Realism is not a value in literature, but one of the many modes that narrative fiction can adopt. When the novel was emerging as a distinct genre in India, Social Realism had for some time been the dominant mode in the European novel, and the early Indian novelists joined in ‘that effort, that willed tendency of art to approximate reality.’ This effort consisted, among other things, in the creation of characters in situations permitting individual choice as well as their mimetic representation in a manner which did not distort contemporary Indian reality. (98)
She further states that it focuses on the complex relationships between individuals and their society, and this relationship can be studied in sharper focus when the individual’s life is restricted within a narrow sphere where she or he is permitted very few options, and when the odds are against her or him (99). So, it is relation between individual and his society with conformity of everyday life with its odds and evens.

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 discuss 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 Narayanan. Their Novels, like *Untouchable, Kanthapura,* and *The Guide*, also depict the social realities of the contemporary time. As far as the subject matters of pre-independence Indian English novels are concerned, they are social, historical, East-West encounter, tension between tradition and modernity, influence of Gandhian thought, communal problem and untouchable as well as economical exploitation of landless poor people etc.
However, Bijay Kumar Das observes a shift in emphasis in post-independence Indian English Novels:

[W]e have moved away from the Gandhian era of village centrism of the Post-Emergency era. The ‘locale’ has shifted from the village to the metropolis of our country and then abroad. East-West encounter which is explained in terms of hybridity in relationship by post-colonial critics, takes ‘a space’ in Postmodern Indian English fiction. When the world has become ‘a global village,’ no culture, or society is pure or insular today. That is why Indian English fiction now takes characters, situations both from inside the country and abroad into its orbit and develops them. (56)

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. Regarding the selection of the subject matter of the contemporary women novel writing Nirmala Prakash observes:

[B]roadly speaking, feminism is a dominant issue in the contemporary women’s thought. [The women] writers seem to challenge male-devised orthodoxies about women’s nature, capacities and roles. Their books are abuzz with discussions about freedom and individuality. They seem to address an audience, which is receptive to such ideas and applies them to its own situation.  (203)

After analysing the body of texts produced by several Indian women novelists Anita Singh suggests the following specific features in contemporary women writing:

1. They celebrate their defiance of norms and boundaries and expose its constructed nature.
2. They vocalize their experiences and thereby delegitimize the cultural of science.
3. They question deep structures of sexual politics.
4. They aim to create a resistance discourse.
5. They deconstruct myths that demonize women.
6. Their writings flaunt a valorization of their bodies. This ‘womanspeak’ inserts the hidden narrative of women’s sexuality into the typology of culture.
7. Their recognition of the radical interconnectedness of beings. They are alert to an ecological consciousness which underlines their writings.
8. These writings are questioning every aspect of social order – the pillars of community – marriage, motherhood, control of sexuality and moribund traditions.
9. They distrust history and point out the exclusion of women from it. They call for a revisionist history – a history from below – where their voice is not under erasure.
10. As women in Diaspora they express their pangs of uprootedness. Intersections of gender / race / class / dislocation inform their writing.
11. Their works register important shifts in the ways of seeing, showing, saying and even not saying. Their writing seems to draw on Indian women as representation of independent thought and action – the stultifying cultural mores notwithstanding. (14-15)
Works Cited


Singh, Vaidyanath. “Social Realism: Indo-English and Victorian Approaches.”


*Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.* Web.