

Social Realism in English Literature

By

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Literature has thousands of threads which can weave the beautiful piece of art. Each thread has its own importance in the creative work. In the same way, there are different narrative techniques for the narration of literature. Among the narrative techniques, Realism, in literature, is an approach that attempts to describe life without idealization or romantic subjectivity. Although realism is not limited to any one century or group of writers, it is most often associated with the literary movement in 19th-century France, specifically with the French novelists Flaubert and Balzac. George Eliot introduced realism into England, and William Dean Howells introduced it into the United States. Realism has been chiefly concerned with the commonplaces of everyday life among the middle and lower classes, where character is a product of social factors and environment is the integral element in the dramatic complications in literature, an approach that proceeds from an analysis of reality in terms of natural forces.

Realism, a style of writing that gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life. The term refers, sometimes confusingly, both to a literary method based on detailed accuracy of description and to a more general attitude that rejects idealization, escapism, and other extravagant qualities of romance in favor of recognizing soberly the actual problems of life. Modern criticism frequently insists that realism is not a direct or simple reproduction of reality (a 'slice of life') but a system of conventions producing a lifelike illusion of some 'real' world outside the text, by processes of selection, exclusion, description, and manners of addressing the reader. In its methods and attitudes, realism may be found as an element in many kinds of writing prior to the century ago.

It was also found in theater. Realism established itself as an important tradition in the theatre in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the work of Henrik Ibsen, Bernard Shaw, and others; and it remains a standard convention of film and television drama. In the drama, realism is most closely associated with Ibsen's social plays. Later writers felt that realism laid too much emphasis on external reality. Many, notably Henry James, turned to a psychological realism that closely examined the complex workings of the mind. Despite the radical attempts of modernism to displace the realist emphasis on external reality, realism survived as a major current within 20th century fiction, sometimes under the label of neo realism.

Realism in literature is the theory or practice of fidelity to nature or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization of everyday life. The 18th-century works of Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett are among the earliest

examples of realism in English literature. It was consciously adopted as an aesthetic program in France in the mid-19th century, when interest arose in recording previously ignored aspects of contemporary life and society. The realist emphasis on detachment and objectivity, along with lucid but restrained social criticism, became integral to the novel in the late 19th century. The word has also been used critically to denote excessive minuteness of detail or preoccupation with trivial, sordid, or squalid subjects.

The twentieth century, prevailing models of literary criticism drew a line between realist and anti-realist literature, placing realist works on one side of the line and fantastic works on the opposite side. Despite this inherent questioning of the boundaries and construction of reality, the international literary scene has been largely uniform in its placement of magical realism in the anti-realist category, thereby opposing it to realist fiction. Furthermore, the current critical climate furthers the division between realism and magical realism in the premium that it places on magical realism at the expense of the earlier social realist tradition, which is defamed for producing artistically stunted narratives without any enduring aesthetic value.

This hierarchical and oppositional division of social and magical realism into the categories of “real” and “anti-real” literature, respectively, is too simple and that this attitude of dismissal of social realist fiction must be understood within the context of the historical trends of literary criticism, as it goes hand-in-hand with the languishing of Marxist criticism. The term “social realism” is a term that derives from Russian-inspired beliefs about the function of literature in a revolutionary socialist society. The international production of social realist fiction is characterized by a belief (now regarded as naïve) in the power of the word and in the writer’s ability to portray in a satisfying documentary fashion the structure of social reality. Social realism is inspired in various ways by the Russian revolution, Soviet communism, international Marxism, and the need to respond critically and in a denunciatory fashion to the various mechanisms of repression and the frustration of personal and collective aspirations.

The term ‘Realism’ is widely accepted according to need and time. Realism in literature and the visual art used to describe a variety of approach in which accurate depiction of reality is the aim. Each of these uses involves a contrast between human thought or imagination and an external reality independent of mind. The notion that reality has a cognitive or normative authority over the mind is also generally present. Arnold Kettle remarks as Victorian novel is characterised by realism that the novel by its very definition “is a realistic prose fiction, complete in itself and of a certain length” wherein the word ‘realistic’ is meant to ‘indicate’ relevant to real life as opposed to... ‘Romantic’. There is difference between social realism and socialist realism. According to Galsworthy, “the word ‘realist’ characterizes that artist whose temperamental preoccupation is with revelation of the actual spirit of life, character and thought with a view to enlighten him and others”. The main difference between social realism and socialist realism is between ‘is’ and ‘should be’. Social realism means the depiction in

literature of social reality as it is; there should be a point one to one correspondence between the society depicted in literature and the real actual society.

Socialist realism means the depiction of the social reality not as it is but as it should be: idealized. The second kind of approach is typical Marxist approach to literature. The theory of Socialist Realism was adopted by the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. Approved by Joseph Stalin, Nickolai Bukharin, Maxim Gorky and Andrey Zhdanov, Socialist Realism demanded that all art must depict some aspect of man's struggle toward socialist progress for a better life. It stressed the need for the creative artist to serve the proletariat by being realistic, optimistic and heroic. The doctrine considered all forms of experimentalism as degenerate and pessimistic.

Socialist realism had its roots in neoclassicism and the traditions of realism in Russian literature of the 19th century that described the life of simple people. It was exemplified by the aesthetic philosophy of Maxim Gorki. His novel *Mother* is usually considered to have been the first work of socialist realism. Gorky was also a major factor in the school's rapid rise, and his pamphlet, *On Socialist Realism*, essentially lays out the needs of Soviet art. Other important works of literature include Fyodor Gladkov's *Cement* (1925) and Mikhail Sholokhov's two volume epic, *And Quiet Flows the Don* and *Quiet Flows the Don Summary* (1934) and *The Don Flows Home to the Sea* (1940). It has been noted that the realism in Indian context or in context of post colonial would have been treating literature in better way at present scenario. Realism in art and literature is an endeavor to portray life as it is. It shows life with reality, omitting nothing that is ugly or painful, and idealizing nothing. To the realists, the writer's most important function is to describe as truthfully as possible what is observed through the senses. Realism began as a recognizable movement in art in the 18th century. By the mid 19th century, it was a principal art form. In past, realism has been an upheaval against classicism and romanticism – artistic movements characterized by works that idealize life. Classicism shows life as being more rational and orderly than it really is while Romanticism shows life as being more emotionally exciting and satisfying than it normally is. While it was an attempt through realism to present life as it is. This 'life as it is' is what realism is.

In this literary approach of literature, writer is keeping in mind the basic reality while narrating a piece of art. It is a unique literary observable fact which never allows believing anything by the force of formulas of art. However, in the process of selecting and presenting their material the realists cannot help being influenced by what they feel and think. Even the most through-going realism is the result of observation and personal judgment. Even there is no place for the writer's own belief and thought to present. It means writer without being prejudice of anything narrates what it is. It is surprising that realism became very popular recently. It has two major factors; the development of modern science with its emphasis on facts and figures and the other is an increasing desire of artists and readers for a realistic understanding of different social problems.

Even so realism is not an object, to be identified, pinned down, and appropriated. It is rather a way of describing certain methods and attitudes, and the descriptions, quite naturally, have varied in the ordinary exchange and development of experience.

Realism is the acknowledgment 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 the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type 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 possibilities latent in them, in extreme presentation of their extremes rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and age. True realism depicts man and society as complete entities instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. It is not just an echo but the real sound of an individual or society or jointly voice of their being.

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