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**A Play Of Signifieds:
Realism, Literature, and the Politics of Meaning**

Abstract. While it goes without saying that creative literature inscribes human experience through the manipulations of verbal and rhetorical resources, it also stands to reason that literary deployments are epistemic and discursive, thus necessarily *biased*. To locate realism as a signifier of an irrefutable truth, as suggested by certain schools of thought, becomes highly problematic in literature since it is a linguistic system whose possibilities of meaning are ‘always in a process’ and therefore ‘never concluded’.

This paper examines the claims of realism in literature, exploring its history and metamorphosis in time and space, and advancing that its foregrounding by a number of ideo-aesthetic interests as constituting the core of their discourses is, at best, an exercise in ‘idealism.’ This argument subtly branches into a recognition of how postcolonial literatures have inscribed their difference from the Western Master Text within the realistic discourse. It proffers a poststructuralist resolution of identifying a multiplicity of identities in any project exploring the realistic in imaginative literature.

Key words: Realism, Literature, Poststructuralism, Relativity, Postcolonial Literatures.

Any enterprise towards locating what is 'realistic' or what constitutes 'realism' sets in motion a machinery of enquiry which seeks to discover an identifiable site of knowledge or perception shared (or which could be shared) as authentic within a complex geography of human experience. Thus, Gideon Rosen opines that 'we may epitomize the realist's stance by saying that to be a realist about a region of discourse is to regard it as describing a genuine domain of objective fact' (891). But what, we may ask, really defines this elusive phenomenon called 'objective fact'? Is it temporal, geo-spatial, racial, cultural, classic(ist) or gendered? Is it rather political, religious or individual? Whither way the politics of identification extends, any question regarding realism or the realistic immediately evokes an atmosphere carrying with it a 'righteous' air, challenging the uncritical, complacent and the taken-for-granted, and in other elaborate contexts, foregrounding the subversive. Realism thus becomes a problematic semiotic which may as well convey the 'irreal', claiming a place in the realm of (notional) reality.

This paper engages the problematic assignment involved in the signification of realism in literature. While allowing that realism, when deployed, necessarily inscribes a persuasion to human experience, it however argues that it (realism) participates in a series of epistemic networks which tend to deconstruct it. Thus, in the poststructuralist procedure embraced here, realism is seen as a concept whose constituency belongs to a region of multiple identities, in a field not involving the mere exchange between a signifier and a signified (where meaning is *truth*) but a 'playful' relation between the signifier and signifieds (where meaning is a version within a negotiable field of *truth*). It goes on to recognize the politics of realism in the articulations of a number of discourses and asserts that the value of realism is not in the 'truth' it propagates, but in the complementary alternatives it offers in the representations of difference.

The development of realism in the annals of creative literature in early eighteenth century

Europe could be persuasively described as ‘writing committed to changing man’s consciousness’ (Wellek,17), and a literary development having an indelible impact on literary history. The endurance of this art, through the nineteenth to the twenty first century, has helped to argue the fact that literature thrives in the reflection of very delicate human issues in any age, and is able to affect positive development in the resolution of telling human conflicts.

Realism, as nurtured in early eighteenth century European literature, developed the peculiar technical form of a rendering in art in which description depicted ‘the precision and vividness... of some observed detail’ (Williams, 581). Thus, in his object of portraying a persuasive likeness of the observed world around him, a painstaking effort was demonstrated by the artist in deviating from ornateness, intensity of style, illumination of characters, which, according to Erich Auerbach, ‘were all elements of a doctrinal attitude of representation dating back to the conception of art by the ancient Greeks and which had been the literary vehicle of every later classicistic movement’ (554).

The realist’s authority in narrativity was in employing the simple technique of telling a story, using everyday or ordinary language. His characters (including the protagonist(s)) were selected from non-aristocratic classes. They possessed the ordinary experiences of childhood, adolescence, marriage, family, love, hate, health, and death and thus negated the culture of choosing characters of noble extractions or privileged qualities with faint relevance to popular life as the heroes, as depicted by an intimidating percentage of classical or renaissance writing.

Auerbach, along this line, submits that

When Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke with the classical rule of distinct levels of style, for according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate

kind of style, that is to say, as the grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and elegant entertainment (554).

It stands to reason, therefore, that eighteenth century European literary realism, in embracing what Lewis Nkosi would describe as ‘artlessness in art’ (156), represented a major hallmark in creative expression.

Eighteenth century European literary realism may also be described as a temperamentally subversive practice as regards perspective. First, it informed the occasion of the departure of committed literary art from artistic expressions hinged on purely impressionistic considerations for fulfillment to a celebration of an art which primarily sought the vehicle of objectivity (which encompassed an adherence to ‘detachment’, ‘neutrality’, ‘impersonality’ and ‘impartiality’) for its ratification in relation to social and vocational commitments. Thus, realism represented an iconoclastic order in art, in exposing, interpreting and attacking the despicable institutions of society in a direct way, in order to correct them.

The realist artist, in faithfulness to his ideological purpose, selected certain types of subject–matter and themes which thus validated his material as being realistic. He chose items that represented the ‘everyday’, ‘popular’ ‘contemporary’ and ‘ordinary’ in contrast to those which would be identified as ‘unrealistic’, such as traditional heroic, romantic and epic episodes in literature. This inscription of the realistic was to expose the vulgar, the despicable, the unjust and the unacceptable in the society. Georg Lukacs, the Hungarian Marxist critic, in this regard, intones, ‘the eighteenth century great realistic social novels portray contemporary morals and psychology and thus accomplished a revolutionary breakthrough to reality for world literature’ (18). Honore de Balzac, the figure around whom the realistic art is adjudged to have significantly flourished in nineteenth century France, is noted for his unswerving zeal in attacking the bigotry and pretensions of the nobility, depicting the realities of ‘ordinary’ life with breathtaking narrative realism. Rene

Wellek comments on Balzac's art in his *Lost Illusions* that 'Balzac at the beginning of *Lost Illusions* gives a lengthy account of the equipment, the staff, the techniques, and the vicissitudes of a print-shop under the Revolution and Napoleon...' (23), a metaphor of the fall of the feudal class in France and the flowering of the bourgeoisie. The literary realism of this period is therefore generally referred to as 'domestic' or 'bourgeois' because it mainly depicted the occasion of conflict between the predominant bourgeois predilection and the feudal (noble) class.

The realistic representations of this period witnessed a further development with regard to the fairly established bourgeois class. The new realism that came about attacked the depiction of life by the pioneer bourgeois realists through a more precise and conscious selection of material, which included the preference for the 'sordid', 'startling', 'commonplace', 'unpleasant' and the 'unexposed'. The French novelist, Flaubert, belonged to a revered section of this new persuasion, and according to Lukacs, 'In his contemporary novels Flaubert concentrates his ironic attack on the betrayal of everyday bourgeois life and average bourgeois man' (231). Indeed, Lukacs opines that Flaubert 'modernized and exoticized history' (232).

The history of realism is paralleled with that of 'naturalism', which came a little bit after it, with a similar adherence to 'observed detail', the 'everyday' and the 'ordinary', but with a doctrine of 'determinism' which situates an inter-play between human existence and the dynamics of man's environment and genetics. Under Emile Zola, the celebrated founder of this school, it became a movement of immense artistic influence, championing the signification of what the English *Daily News* in 1881 referred to as 'that unnecessarily faithful portrayal of offensive incidents' (cited in Williams, 582).

In the nineteenth century, however, there developed the processes that informed the definitions of realism and naturalism on separate grounds. The Marxist critic, Raymond Williams,

asserts that the most instructive dimension came from Strindberg's definition of naturalism as 'the exclusion of God'. Thus, it opposed any appeal to the supernatural in its doctrinal framework.

Before the end of the century, realism and naturalism had been separated. Naturalism came to refer to the simple technicality of the artist's attitude to the whole concept of nature as it interacted with human existence, while realism, although evincing elements of this, was used 'to describe subjects and attitudes to subjects' (Williams, 582).

The assumptions of realism in the twentieth century took a radical turn, which in effect threatened any settled meaning of 'objective fact'. Reality, to a great extent, became a relative term, and realism began to explore the representation of features and questions which could be rashly described as 'hidden' or 'abstract'. Christine Brooke – Rose asserts the tendencies in the twentieth century to view reality from fragmented perspectives when she traces this attitude to Plato who regarded the idea of 'our familiar reality' as 'mere shadows of perfect ideas (truer, so more 'real')' (3). She ingeniously links this with the views of contemporary poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida 'for whom truth is forever postponed' (4). And with the disenchantment of the modernist movement in the early twentieth century with a complacent view of reality as a largely linear and patterned progression of society and human experience, as projected by the Victorians in England, realism began to experiment with 'uncertainty', 'the sudden', 'the strange' and 'the slippery' as valid aspects akin to reality in Western literature. This particularly fits notions of the incomprehensibility of human nature after the colossal tragedies, wastes and horrors witnessed during the first world war.

In the West, therefore, twentieth century realism assumed a special bias to a fidelity to psychological reality, a realism of the life within the man, with a position that the essential realism of states of the mind could be persuasively rendered in art. By implication, concerns about 'the

common', 'the everyday' or 'the popular' were exchanged for a cross-class artistic and thematic orientation in the spirit of 'impartiality', thus problematizing realism as an arguable elite construct. It became a humanist art allowing the expression of all 'hidden' interests.

The twentieth century bent of realism in the Soviet Union informed a novel dimension with the birth of what critics would refer to as 'socialist realism', since it championed the course of socialism in literary expression. The four major elements of socialist realism as developed in the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century included the *narodnost*, the *ideinost*, the *partiinnost* and the *tipichnost*.

The *narodnost* could be described as the technical aesthetic perspective through which socialist realism flowered. It was the overall element of its narrative articulation and the artist's main vehicle in externalizing the conflicting social questions of society and proposing a socialist angle to the resolution of these conflicts. Thus, the *narodnost* embraced the popular simplicity and traditional clarity found within the aesthetic experimentations of the eighteenth and nineteenth century realists of the West.

The *ideinost* and *partiinnost* were the ideological and partisan platforms on which socialist realism rested in the artist's attempt to delineate the absurdities of the economic, and thus, socio-politically separate development of the working and ruling classes. They were seen as ideological interrogations of western literatures, which were viewed as basically bourgeois in Soviet literary circles. Wellek, in opining Lukacs as the main exponent of this taste, asserts the latter's bias for it, based on

his firm commitment to a concept of literature as a reflection of social reality and a conviction that modern art, in rejecting realism, reflects only the decadence of the West (59).

The fourth element of socialist realism, the *tipichnost*, extends another unorthodox strain in

the question of realism in literature, and explains why its proposition has been doctrinally espoused by Marxist creative writers. The *tipichnost* has been acknowledged as a major artistic development based on Engel's definition of realism as 'typical characters in typical situations' (Williams, 583), partially debunking the 'popular' and 'everyday' criteria for aesthetic expression as celebrated by *narodnost*, thus charting a new art popularly referred to as 'Marxist realism'. The *tipichnost* endures through a philosophy which maintains that the typical should not be confused with that which is frequently encountered, and is based on the school of thought which emphasizes the intellectual icon of 'comprehension of the laws and perspectives of social development' (583). There is, thus, an epistemic similarity between the *tipichnost* and twentieth century Western realism, which projects 'a fidelity to psychological reality' because of its leaning on 'comprehension' rather than 'observation'. The *tipichnost* however differs from it in its concentration on the collective society, rather than the individual.

Realism, as an art form, has had an immense impact in achieving a categorization of novels in how they represent space and individual experience. Williams identifies these as the 'social documentary', 'social formula', 'personal documentary', and 'personal formula' novels (586), though elements of one may be found within the more predominant environment of another.

The social documentary novel creates, in its objective, the usual way of life of a particular social or working community, so that if we want to know about life in this community (the people's culture(s), economic activities, educational orientations or political awareness), this novel gives an almost documentary reportage. Camara Laye's *L'enfant Noir (The African Child)* (1953) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) are representative examples of this sub-genre.

The social formula novel abstracts for us a sum total of social experience with an objective

of commenting on, analyzing and proffering (re)solutions to given social conflicts. Examples of this include R.K. Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi* (1961) and Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Weep Not Child* (1964).

The personal documentary novel describes the emotional types and responses of characters in a novel in order to appreciate their needs in a complex socio-political or cultural situation. Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976) falls within this category.

The personal formula novel depicts a particular pattern of human experience in which human beings, not societies, are developed. There is a special appeal of the artist in contriving the consciousness of a psychological reality which might have been unnoticed and unappraised. This type of novel finds tremendous expression in a number of Marxist or feminist products where the marginalized protagonist is pitted against an immense psychological wall that hardly gives way without a radical and violent confrontation. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977), Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song* (1981), and Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1993) are noteworthy examples.

Realism, from the foregoing, seems to be an ideology and practice synonymous with relativism, and indeed, many critical attitudes have launched attacks on its conceptual grounding. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon insist,

What we call social 'reality' is a human construct, the product of a cultural *mythology* or *value system* that intervenes between our minds and the world we experience. Such cultural myths reflect the values and ideological interests of their builders, not the law of nature or logic. (17)

To Michel Foucault,

it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of image, metaphor, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax (9).

Foucault's opinion above is reinforced by Gregory Rabassa, the translator of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's celebrated novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), for whom 'Words are treacherous things ... mere metaphors for things' (4).

Emphasizing the 'playful' tendency of 'the word' to continually slip away from the domain of fixed meaning to a space of plural signification, Nadine Gordimer, the 1991 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, offers,

In the beginning was the word. The word was with God, signified God's word, the word that was creation. But over the centuries of human culture, the word has taken on other meanings, secular as well as religious. To have the word has come to be synonymous with ultimate authority, with prestige, with awesome, sometimes dangerous persuasion, to have Prime Time, a T.V. talk show, to have the gift of the gab as well as that of speaking in tongues (38).

And Susan Sontag observes that

Reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images; and philosophers since Plato have tried to loosen our dependence on images by evoking the standard of an image-free way of apprehending the real. But when, in the mid-nineteenth century, the standard finally seemed attainable, the retreat of old religious and political illusions before the advance of humanistic and scientific thinking did not - as anticipated - create mass defections to the real. On the contrary, the new age of unbelief strengthened the allegiance to images. The credence that could no longer be given to realities understood in the form of images was now being given to realities understood to be images, illusions(80).

Sontag's isolation of 'realities understood to be images' is Jean Baudrillard's burden in his identification of 'hyperreality' in the present postmodern age. This is a type of reality produced through the representational manipulations of information and media technologies and which is consumed as real. Hyperreality thrives through what Baudrillard identifies as models of simulacra, which are images/ semblances/ likenesses. 'Simulacra', intones Catherine Chaput, 'challenges

objectivity, truth, and reality by feigning its existence' (183). It becomes so contagious in the schematics of hyperreality that 'the reality' reproduced within the hyperreal appears 'more real than reality itself' (Chaput, 183). Most written literatures of the postmodern hue borrow so much from cinematic devices of foregrounding particular moods, events and individuals, and playing on the reader's psyche through sudden shifts of events in order to weld the plot with the constructed logic of hyper(realism) pursued within the text's subject-matter. This development also subtly challenges the traditional monopoly of the narrative or the prosaic in the orthodox contemplation of realism in literature by infusing the dramatic, even in prosaic texts.

Perhaps one may say that the problem of imagining or conceptualizing the real as a determinable or explicit phenomenon, as advanced by the slippery Eurocentric modes of realism examined so far, might have been solved by the recognition of a realism of the 'uncanny' espoused in the cosmic and artistic consciousnesses of a number of postcolonial cultures, referred to as marvelous realism. This realism articulates the worlds of the rational and the inexplicit within a flow of comprehensibility which acknowledges the interactions of normal day-to-day human existence with forces and experiences beyond human control. It dissolves the tension involved with rationalizing within the ocean of magic, which, in turn, validates the functionality of the mythic, the legendary and the animistic in the lived consciousnesses of reality among the cultures and peoples involved. The existence of the magical, thus translates experience into a wide zone of possibilities which escape the realism of mere empirical determination. Ideologically, within postcolonial literatures, the marvelous is deployed as a statement of cosmic and civilizational difference from Western modes of perception. Some texts that have noteworthy profited from the utilization of marvelous realism include Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1954), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days*

(1982) and Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995).

It stands to reason that realism is, to borrow a phrase from Niyi Osundare, 'a mask dancing'. It demonstrates, in the manner of poststructuralist textual explication, a tendency to differ from itself, constituting a deterministic way of viewing the world which, in achieving the ideological ends of its practitioners, is an exercise in idealism. Realism cannot but be an unfinished concept and process within the forever reworked anatomy of literature, which only foregrounds the dynamism of man and art.

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