RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERROGATING THE IDEA OF "REAL" OR "REALITY": FROM PLATO TO LYOTARD

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to understand the notion of reality and its representation in the early periods of literature and how changes took place in its representation in the postmodern writings. Spanning from the 3rd century B.C where reality was represented as an imitation by Plato till the postmodern times where the idea of reality is dealt with by Baudrillard, Lyotard, a vast change can be seen in the notion of real, reality or the act of realization. The paper shall basically focus on the different strands of reality in which we dwell. In simple terms reality is an immediate experience which we gather in everyday life. If we look at it from a deeper level, then reality takes a different shape. In the everyday experiences we come across multiple realities. The argument of this paper centers on this idea of reality which is filtered or mediated. The real which we experience passes through a series of mediums. In American literature, the insights of realism, its subject, attitudes and technique made a mark in the writing tradition. Ralph Waldo Emerson says "What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street…"[1] Thus from this we understand that there is a complex working in understanding the meaning. The meaning is layered which in turn distorts the idea of reality.

Keywords: Real, reality, postmodern, changes, distortion, layered.

INTRODUCTION

Realism is a literary movement which started in France in the 1830s and gathered momentum in the 1850s. This movement brought a change in the mode of writing and we get representations of human life and experience. The realist thought is concerned with the everyday activities. The common man becomes the concern in the traits of the movement. Recording of events as it is represents the traits of realism. It is a movement which goes against the traits of Romanticism. J.A Cuddon defines realism as "An exceptionally elastic critical term, often ambivalent and equivocal, which has acquired far too many qualifying (but seldom clarifying) adjectives, and is a term which many now feel we could do without"[2] (728) This definition gives an ambiguous meaning of realism and it is a malleable concept when he suggests about its elasticity.

The exact documentation of the events is important for the realist novelists. This fashion can be traced in the works of Honore de Balzac. He is regarded as one of the founders of realism in European literature. Balzac has a keen observation of the representation of the society. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is another example of the greatest work of realism at that time. Realism flourished outside France which we can see in the works of Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol, and Maxim Gorki and in Turgenev. In America realistic works can be seen in George Gissing and William Dean Howells. Realism has various trajectories like realism in arts movement, realism in theatre, literary realism, philosophical realism, moral realism, scientific realism, magical realism, sociological realism and psychological realism. The socialist realism is essentially a Russian phenomenon. The concern of realism is to interpret the Classics in contemporary terms so that they become relevant for the common people. Works are written on the lives of ordinary people. Psychological realism denotes a faithful representation of truth or "fidelity"[3](J.A Cuddon) to the truth. It deals with the mind and analyses the thought and feeling of a character. The stream of consciousness technique is used to understand psychological realism.

We have come closer to the understanding of realism and its characteristics which was widespread in the late 19th century. This will help us to understand the notion of reality. The relationship between realism and reality is that, realism is an attempt to capture reality. Realism is a reflection of reality. It is a response to the activities of reality. Realism propounds the idea of what life should be and what life is. There is a constant interaction between realism and reality. The ideal of the true is actualized in accordance with the needs of the real. The experiences of the ordinary people caught the attention of realism and portraying their lives becomes a response to the reality. To understand the notion of reality we can go back to Plato who contends that everything in the world is a reflection or imitation of the ideal world.[4]The physical objects are an imitation of the ideal. The world as we know derives its significance from the ideal world of which it is a reflection. Plato uses the dominant metaphor of mirror. The notion of reality can be understood in its attempt to know the knowledge behind what is true or real, the epistemology. Plato offers a model of knowledge which privileges rational knowledge over empirical knowledge. He argues that the senses only deliver knowledge about physical world, and not the ultimate reality. We infer from this that senses are the basis and it most often misleads impressions. We gain pseudo knowledge about the physical objects through our senses and this knowledge is nothing but an image of the object; the shadows or reflections and representations. The senses do not provide the truth about the ultimate nature of reality. What Plato calls episteme or knowledge about the truth is the highest level of understanding reality. The Greek word for this is noesis[5]. Noesis is the faculty that allows one to attain true knowledge of the nature of reality by grasping the ideal forms. Here we can give the example of Plato's famous 'Allegory of the Cave' that is designed to demonstrate the knowledge of true reality[6]. The prisoners are residing in an enclosed cave and they accept the dim light in which vague impressions of objects reach their eyes. The physical world of the cave is apprehended by the mere impressions of the objects. Thus sense perceptions do not reflect the true nature of reality.

Plato's philosophy in general is partly what M.H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* would term "mimetic"[7] which mean the meaning of the literary is derived from what it imitates or reflects or represents. Plato's conception of the nature of reality essentially corresponds to the idea of mimesis or imitation. Everything is a reflection of the ideal. Plato's philosophy of language is also mimetic. He argues words too function like mirrors. Words are mere reflections of reality and thus it is twice removed from reality. The concept of imitation or mimesis is explicit in Dante too. He explains in *Inferno* that art imitates nature which imitates God. The essence of reality is captured in his works. He tries to arrive at the comprehension of reality. His *Paradiso* is infused with a meditation on reality. In this he based his realism with a social intercourse in respect to the reality of paradise. His questions of reality lead inevitably to the question of creation. He is realistic in the treatment of the conception of Hell.

We have come to a much more closer understanding that reality is thus the state in which things exist as they are. It includes everything that is observable and comprehensible. It is contrasted with what is imaginary, delusional, and fictional or what is abstract. In American literature realism gathered force from the

1830s. It began as a reaction to Romanticism. The industrial revolution changed the economic, political and social scenario. It has attempted to represent the actualities of any event. At that time it became an attempt to record life as it is lived. William Dean Howells defined realism as realism "is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material."[8] This definition doesn't answer regarding the actual treatment of truth. Other writers like Christopher Donovan in his book *Postmodern Counter narrative* writes that in American literature, the term "realism" has been

> associated with a particular movement of writers in the so called Gilded Age, William Dean Howells and his often more talented cohorts, a loosely cohering school who in their rejection of commercially dominant novels of sentimentalism and romance and their avowed adherence to mundane truths of day to day life often served to expose social injustices sorely in need of remedy. (9)

It is difficult for the realists to represent the truth as it is. They felt a need to shape the narrative. On practicing this, writers faced difficulty in representing facts. There is a crisis of representation which means difference between representation and the thing represented. Two prominent writers of the age in American literature named Henry James and Mark Twain have understood that language is an interpretation of the real rather than the real itself. The parade of characters represented people from ordinary walks of life. The simple language used in Twain's novels marked the beginning of representation of reality in American literature. The representation of reality shows how each author actually realizes and brings character to life and clarifies his own world according to Erich Auerbach[9]. This harsh reality is represented through language. The narrative unfolds the different layers of reality.

Thus the act of realization and the process of realizing is an important aspect of reality. In the representations of the character and the plot of the novel, we can interpret the actions, situations with objective assurance. The writers have represented what exact knowledge they have about their characters and what they felt about the characters. They also thought how the character's needs to be interpreted. At the same time they didn't take the authority to govern the truth. In James Joyce's *Ulysses* there is a reflection of the consciousness which projects multiple variations of reality. The writings proceed from perceptions to expressions. The stress is given in the way reality is seen. There are other attempts as how reality is seen for example Marcel Proust who took extracted realities by recovering it from the remembrances. He fathoms the art of recovering things from memory.

William Dean Howells has exposed the capitalistic formation of society which is constructing our reality. He has practiced realism in his novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) which came out to be quintessentially realistic in its treatment. It creates an illusion of the everyday life. Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis have talked about the turns of economic reality, mass media, and booming of the multinational corporations. The subject of their fiction deals with too much despair. Jacques Derrida too deconstructed reality in the postmodern novel. He writes "what is happening today in what they call society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality and so on and so forth."[10] An important understanding and the growth of the genre is the difference between realism and fantasy. Here we can mention DeLillo who has correspondences with Lewis Caroll's *Alice in Wonderland* in his treatment of fantasy in *Ratner's Star*. Tim O'Brien also recognizes this concept and in his book *Going after Cacciatio* blurs the difference between the reality and the fantasy. Tom Wolfe in his *Bonfire* represents the life of New York and the people of urban America and its multicultural society. William Gaddis again represents the reality as a communicative channel of television, radio, advertising, music. In contrast Richard Rorty, another postmodern writer didn't conform to the realistic representations rather he represented the creative. He failed to project the world beyond. Donald Pizer writes: "Metaphysical and epistemological inquiries as to what is real, or the ethical implications of what is natural, can be used to undermine almost any act of literary historiography or criticism" (*Realism and Naturalism: The Problem of Definition*, 100) There is an instability in the meaning of the real which we can infer from the above definition. According to him reality is the "concrete immediacies of experience" and it is "unmediated by the intellect." (Pizer, 3) This discussion got priority during the late nineteenth century as debates were going on between the "ideal" and the "commonplace experience."(Pizer, 4).Pizer has found

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difficulty in defining the term realism as it is interpreted in different layers. It is a movement and at the same time a concept which Pizer couldn't define while struggling between the ideal and the ordinary definition. He further added that critics of realists are essentially middle class. It has "to make us known to each other in our common political and social progress (and also, in Howells's later modification of his views, our defects). It was to serve social ends as these ends were defined by the socially responsible"(Pizer, 7). Thus disparities between the idea of the ideal and the commonplace shall remain. This gulf between the ideal and the ordinary which we perceived in Plato can be traced in the postmodern world. The objects or images become the actual rendition of reality and reality takes the form of tiny images and human beings interact with the images only.

In the postmodern world reality is essentially mediated. Language is also a mediating system through which we comprehend reality. The mediated reality has various approaches like using a real object for interaction with virtual content. It leads to an enhancement of the object and provides an amplified reality. It changes our vision of reality and through images we can interact with the real world thus leading to mediated reality. The contemporary reality is an imitation or a replacement of reality. This concept can be understood by the theory of "simulacrum"[11] proposed and problematized by Jean Baudrillard as the truth and the facts behave as figures or images and it becomes diluted in the process of realization. Reality is an array of simulations and Baudrillard suggests a hypothetical model of reality. He has adopted a radical perspective which has a resemblance to the phenomenological methods. His hypothesis functions on the possibility of the social realm which has disappeared. The understanding of reality is not linear, it is layered. The diversity of perspectives opened up number of strategic options for explaining the modes of disappearance of reality. The concept of reality has never been more than a simulation, a delusion. The society became a pure simulacrum and it claims to represent what Baudrillard calls "hyper reality"[12] of the social. Baudrillard writes:

> Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper real.*(Simulations*, 2)

He further adds "It is a hyper real, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (*Simulations*, 3)

There are debates centering on the concept of reality. The social is simulated and the reality principle is placed in a doubt. As we have arrived at the concept of simulacrum we should describe its meaning. There are two distinct phases of simulation according to Baudrillard. These two types correspond to the specific historical phases, which mark a difference in logic and function of images. For Baudrillard it is the third phase which states the space of simulation proper.

> "the successive phase of the image"
> __ it is the reflection of a basic reality
> __ it masks and perverts a basic reality
> __it masks the absence of basic realty
> __it bears relation to any reality whatever: it is known pure simulacrum. (Baudrillard ,1983. 11)

A new phase of understanding reality has been created by Baudrillard and has characterized the world into a symbolic structure. The system of codes actually produces reality and we experience the world through sign systems. The code represents a replica of the original and the difference between the original and the copy of the original is eliminated. This is true for the contemporary American culture which dwells in a process of reproduction. Even the wars of the twentieth century were replaced by their representations. On this Baudrillard argues regarding the Vietnam War and says 'the war became film, the film becomes war, the two are joined by their common hemorrhage into technology' (Baudrillard, 1994, 59).

In the postindustrial society the everyday activities are governed by the media and it has become a communicational society. The postmodern writings open up this subject matter as postmodernism is a radical break from the earlier thoughts and it came up with a different socio economic organization. This new social and economic environment has variously been called as the media society. Guy Debord has called it as the 'society of the spectacle'[13]. A spectacle engulfs the masses which acts as real. This society is controlled by consumption and the commodities become an element of that spectacle. To further the idea we can say that

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consumption plays a significant role in modern societies in understanding signs and their systematic articulations. The consumption is not only of material elements but of the ideal elements too. The modern consumer doesn't consume objects only; he or she rather takes control of them. Advertising also suggests that individuals do not need objects and they only act as a technician. Technology is producing a mimesis of the natural world. Reality is effaced as simulacrum and it is so well simulated that men here became only a mere object of representation. The force of signs created a signifying order.

Everything becomes concealed and there is a new order in the modern society. Everything is operating in a system of signs which eventually is consumed. Lefebvre was of the opinion that technology is necessary as it serves the people. He writes:

> It is a fact that in our society technology has become a determining factor, not only by revolutionizing productive conditions and involving science directly in its technical achievements. Indeed theory and appreciation go much further, and it is, unfortunately, only too true that technology - unmediated by a controlling mind or a significant culture - gives rise to a particular form of social and industrial conscience. Technology is reflected in the social and individual conscience by means of images and objects and their related words.[14]

Technology is invading social experiences. The camera is the object which is capturing every moment of reality and we rely only on the lenses. But at the same time we can refute by saying that technology became an instrument of mastery and it is enforcing power. In the act of consumption we undergo the machinations employed by technology. It is also in a way structured by the social, cultural and political forces.

A technical culture has been installed in our minds through the rapid development after the post industrial society. Baudrillard's depiction of America is that of a radical modernity which he calls as a genealogy of simulation. The real becomes blurred. The solidity of reality doesn't remain for longer as it passes from one medium to another. It leads to the hyper real and the hallucinatory and this in turn changes the relationship of the world with the objects and the objectivity is disengaged from the object. The "gaze" over sways the actual object. The hyper real form is the simulation form which dominates the workings of the society. Even language fails to express feelings in this world of simulation. There are men without qualities, body without organs, and mind without feeling. The simulations are dull and repetitive.

The postmodern theorists reflect different versions of lived realities. On the one hand, Derrida's and Lyotard's ideas of postmodernism promises justice and harmony by supposedly unveiling and correcting (Enlightenment) modernist mistakes, those particularly attributed to modernist epistemology that privileges identity over difference. Deconstructing modernist logocentrism[15], God, teleology[16] in general represents a different ground of reality and counteracting modernist reductive and hegemonic tendencies. Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition describes* this media tradition as 'Doing science'[17] which involves a particular kind of legitimating. Lyotard's subject matter is science and technology and he writes:

> The status of science and technology, of technocracy and the control of knowledge and information today – is perhaps the most familiar material for the American reader, yet it opens immediately and instructively onto all the other themes I have just enumerated. (Lyotard, 6)

There is an increase in monopolization of information and a radical social change and transformation. In Marxian social analysis, the mode of production is the fundamental one which bears some questions regarding the contemporary society. The new society is marked by the machine – made raw materials and foodstuff. This is the period of late capitalism and Lyotard writes again:

> Late capitalism, far from representing a 'post-industrial society,' thus appears as the period in which all branches of the economy are fully industrialized for the first time; to which one could further add the increasing mechanization of the sphere of circulation (with the exception of pure repair services) and the increasing mechanization of the superstructure. (Lyotard, 12)

The changing nature of science and knowledge gave a different view in understanding the mode of production. Society is dominated by technology, cybernetics, informatics, computer and its language. It had a considerable impact on knowledge as we know. Lyotard is of the opinion that it has two principal functions- "research and

the transmission of acquired learning" (4) These elements are creating its impact on the present times and also will affect the future. The theoretical dimensions can be owed to the cybernetics. The information processing machines is continuing to have its effect on acquiring learning and its advancements are paving path for sounds and visual images. In this era learning is getting transformed into bodies of information. Everything is translated into the language of machines. There is hegemony of computers and a set of accepted knowledge. The present scenario is akin to "computerization of society"[18](Lyotard, 7)It is now a part of the observable reality. The economic growth and the paradigms of socio political power are in a progress due to computerization of the society. The functioning of the society can be explained by the lines

> The true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like a computer, is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output – in other words performativity. Even when its rules are in the process of changing and innovations are occurring even when it dysfunctions inspire hope and lead to belief in an alternative, even then what is actually taking place is only an internal readjustment and its result can be no more than an increase in the system's "viability." (Lyotard, 12)

A relationship has been created both locally and globally through the system and the society is performing according to the characteristics of the system. The system is developing and growing in favorable condition and the technology functioning as an important factor. In this system we are constantly adjusting ourselves in the various mediations of society. The system is making us bound to follow the traits of global culture. "The technocrats also subscribe to this idea. Whence its credibility: it has the means to become a reality, and that is all the proof it needs. This is what Horkheimer called the "paranoia" of reason." (Lyotard, 12) The society is a circle of facts and information. The reality is regulated by the information and the media and the people residing have to optimize their performance. We are unifying and totalizing the truth and there is an inherent homogeneity working in the society. Talking about knowledge we understand that there are two kinds of knowledge working; one is the acquired and the other is the functional knowledge. We can understand this through the following lines:

> It is tempting to avoid the decision altogether by distinguishing two kinds of knowledge. One, the positivist kind, would be directly applicable to technologies bearing on men and materials, and would lend itself to operating as an indispensable productive force within the system. The other- the critical, reflexive, or hermeneutic kind by reflecting directly or indirectly on values or aims, would resist any such "recuperation" (Lyotard, 14)

The above statement puts light on the ideas associated with knowledge regarding technology. We can understand technology through the immediate knowledge which we have and how it functions on men and on the other hand it is the interpretive characteristic of technology. This extracts some interpretations like what technology is and what it means to be or what it does. We are residing in a society which is reflecting knowledge of technology. It is regulating the economy as it is entrusted to machines. Knowledge here should be understood as knowhow. It is a question of competence that determines the truth. Access to data and information is becoming the order of the day. The individual is absorbed in this mass frenzy. There is a loss of the organic society. A self is engaged in a complex network of relations. People are located in nodal points for communication through which various messages pass. One's mobility is determined by such connections and solicited to regulatory mechanisms. The system has increased the performativity and it forever demands and consumes. In this society language is assuming much importance and it is becoming prominent both as a reality and as an issue. The recent technology boom has not only increased the opportunities to gather information, but also the speed. One of the important factors is the use of internet in everyday life. There is an overabundance of information that was simply not accessible in the pre-Internet 1990s.

Globalization has changed the very face of consumerism. At the click of a button, one can buy almost anything. We are able to maximize the dissemination of information. We experience a mediated reality in everyday life where we incorporate various layers. Eleanor Heartney indicates, "…characterized by its removal from a reality whose absence is not even felt. Thus, each supports the [post] postmodern tenet that our understanding of the world is based, first and foremost, on mediated images. Each affirms the notion that we

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live within the sway of a mythology conjured for us by the mass media, movies, advertisements."(*Postmodernism,*30). Mediated reality thus describes the concept of filtering of our vision of the real world with and by virtual information realized with a linear or non-linear filter. For example computer graphics can provide rapidly evolving representations of an object –with low cost in terms of energy, time, and resources compared to the creation or modification of a real object – and can produce nonrealistic effects (by animation or rendering). The real world allows intuitive manipulation of elements. The mediated reality has various approaches like using a real object for interaction with virtual content. It changes our vision of reality and through images we can interact with the real world thus leading to mediated reality.

To conclude we can point out that after reading the representation of reality in the earlier depictions and later we can trace a connection that we see a replacement of reality. There are multivalent simulations in understanding reality. This pattern gives a certain amount of possibility in understanding reality as it is filtered. We inhabit a virtual realm and every day we participate in a series of sign system. It is a gradual propagation of thoughts and ideas which are placed in a network of media. It is a need to portray reality as it actually appears. The media forms and practices, satellites, TV, digital video recorders, computers and mass market technologies are invading our mind and body. This can be called as new media colonization.

End Notes

1. These lines are told by Emerson in his paper The American Scholar, in the year 1837. p-478.
2. J.A. Cuddon defines the idea of realism in his book *Literary Terms and Literary Theory.* p-728.
3. J.A Cuddon discusses the concept of reality in terms of fidelity or rather the true representation of reality in his book *Literary Terms and Literary Theory.*p-729.
4. Plato's conception of ideal world which played a significant role in understanding reality. It has been expressed in his *The Republic*.
5. This has been taken from Plato's "Analogy of the Divided Line," Book 6 of *The Republic* p- 510d-511e
6. The essay "Allegory of the Cave" is included in included in *The Republic*, Book 7,8, 514-520)
7. The term is used by M.H Abrams in his book *The Mirror and the Lamp*. He has described art essentially as mimetic or is an imitation which has been used by Plato earlier. (Abrams. M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition.* Google Books. London: Oxford University Press, 1953) p-8
8. This definition of realism has been taken from Howells's *Criticism and Fiction*. It is a collection of essays. William Dean Howells can be called the founder of realism in America and he has contributed a lot on this issue.(Howells. William Dean. *Criticism and Fiction*. New York, Harper and Brothers, 1891) p-77.
9. Erich Auerbach conceives the notion of reality in such a way in his book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.*
10. Derrida used this idea to understand reality in his essay "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, and Other Small Seismisms". (p-368–378)
11. Baudrillard used this term in his book *Simulacra and Simulations.* (p-3)
12. Hyper reality is a term used by Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulations.* (p-2)
13. The phrase society of spectacle is used by the theorist Guy Debord in his book *The society of Spectacle* (p-7)
14. Henri Lefevbre described the use of technology in the modern world and its role in the everyday life in his book *Everyday Life in Modern World*. (Lefevbre. Henri. *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. Trans, Sacha Rabinovitch. United States of America. The Penguin Press, 1971) p-48
15. The term logocentrism is used by Jacques Derrida to explain the presence of God in the universe and the truth revolves around this concept of a centre. He used it in his book *Of Grammatology* (p-17)
16. Ibid…17
17. This phrase is used by Lyotard for explaining the idea of technology in the postmodern condition in his book *The Postmodern Condition*. (p25)
18. Ibid..25.

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A brief bio note of the Corresponding author:

Prithwa Deb has completed her M.Phil from Gauhati University and is pursuing Ph.D from the same on Graphic novels. Her interest has always been on the questions of reality, knowledge; how we perceive reality in this information driven world where reality is nothing but a simulacra. At present she is working as an Assistant Professor at Biswanath College, Department of English, Assam.