CHAPTER 1

Realism in the Colony

> "I understand Indians have written very few novels," said Lawrence. . . . "Only fables with moral lessons."
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> "They are moralists and want a sense of harmony," Huxley explained. "They believe the world to be unreal."
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> – Mulk Raj Anand, *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (39–40)

In 1936, at the first meeting of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) in Lucknow, India, Hindi-Urdu author Premchand advocated for a turn to realism, which became one of the most significant pronouncements in Indian literary history. "In earlier times we might well have been impressed by fairy tales, ghost stories and accounts of star-crossed lovers, but those have little interest to us anymore," he declared. "In order to produce an impression in literature it is necessary for it to be a mirror on life's truths [*jeevan ki sachaiyon ka darpan*]" ("Sahitya" 75).[1] This statement and the meeting at which it was read represented a revolution for Indian letters. The desire to break away from elite aesthetic traditions was greeted with elation by writers; this marked the possibility for a new literature suited for the modern world, and for India's imminent independence from colonial rule. The claim, at one level, was quite simple: instead of adorning stories with erudite language, sentimentality, and fanciful elements, writers should seek truth and beauty in ordinary life (Premchand, "Sahitya" 86).[2]

The AIPWA's vision of realism as forging a new literary sensibility can be considered in relation to the mode's short but vibrant history in India beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, when it was instituted as an aesthetic ideal via colonial education. Along with reforms in political rationality and other domains, colonial officials sought, as part of their civilizational mission, to educate Indians in modern aesthetic modes. Educators held literary competitions that rewarded the most convincing realist novel.[3] Reverend James Long, who presided over the Vernacular

Literature Society – established in Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century to support Bengali translations of English literature – stated that "Bengal needs a Sir W. Scott who will make fiction the vehicle of historic and other instruction, thus gradually superseding the old love tales" (qtd. in Schwarz, "Aesthetic" 582). Long's "old love tales" was shorthand for a set of indigenous aesthetic styles that he envisioned gradually dying out: long, circuitous sentences; descriptive excesses; poetic flourishes; fantastical and formulaic subjects; flat, stock, or epic characters; an incomprehension of verisimilitude; a lack of historical consciousness; plotlessness and an unnerving variance of styles and modes within a single text.[4] Such concerted endeavors resulted in two related trajectories. On one side, Indian writers started to write realist prose in English. These works, such Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's English novel *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), and the village novels of Lal Behari Day (such as *Govinda Samanta*, 1874; eventually renamed *Bengal Peasant Life*), sought to replicate what they construed as English realism's mimetic impulses as closely as possible.[5] At the same time, other writers strove to transfer colonial aesthetic values to Indian languages, enacting far-reaching reforms of the vernaculars, and contributing to the rise of modern literary languages as a result.[6]

Premchand's investment in reviving literary realism gained energy from these past movements; however, what he advocated as the AIPWA's mission was not entirely a continuation of these stylistic reforms. Although still an advocate of trimming Indian literary traditions of their excesses and telling new kinds of stories, the AIPWA writers sought not merely to emulate colonial norms to prove how modern they were but to wrest back control over their own literatures in order to conceive of a positive vision for a socially just, national future.[7] They mobilized the energy of the historic transition "from colony to nations," which "constituted a 'conjunctural terrain' that engendered powerful political and cultural possibilities" (Gopal 11).[8] Reclaiming realism was in this context an act of self-determination – a refutation of the colonial project. Where colonial discourse had accused the Indian writer of distortion and dissimulation in her writing, in a classic gesture of nationalist consciousness, the Indian novelist of the 1930s wielded the powerful ideal of mimesis to suggest that she too was able to grasp the realities not only of her condition but also of colonial hypocrisy. The subtext of Premchand's speech is thus one of deploying colonial aesthetic norms to turn colonial logic on its head.[9]

The subtlety of this inversion has, however, been lost to many critics. In part because of the immense success of recent works of Indian fiction – by Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and others – that have powerfully

refused realism's putative transparency and legibility, scholars treat any claim of realism's oppositionality with overwhelming skepticism. This is underlined by a theoretical suspicion of any mode of representation that claims to be mimetic or to represent reality accurately – a suspicion that can be traced to high modernism in Europe (Woolf 147–9) and that has been successively reinforced by structuralist and poststructuralist literary theory. For writers and theorists in these schools, realism is never really a mirror on life's truths, but anything from a misguided materialism to a more dangerous, hidden ideological project.[10] Eli Park Sorensen locates the influence of these theoretical positions in what he calls postcolonial literary critics' "*fetishisation* of characteristically modernist literary techniques (such as linguistic self-consciousness and formal disruption), as these are seen as the equivalents to specific political values of postcolonial imperatives *as such*" (8, emphasis in original). Susan Andrade agrees that in African literary criticism, "anti-mimeticism is valued more than mimeticism; it is understood to be sophisticated and complex" (183). It is not that modernism and anti-mimeticism have not contributed to postcolonial literature. However, the power of what Sorensen terms this "modernist ethos" has resulted in the systematic overlooking of other styles and modes that are equally important to the richness of literary production in the colonial and postcolonial worlds. As Chelva Kanaganayakam writes, realism can never be experimental because it "implies transparency; it claims implicitly that the world of fiction reflects the 'real' world outside (despite the obvious problems of that assertion)." In contrast, "experiment acknowledges its artifice and its hybridity and works on the assumption that there is a hiatus between the real world and the fictive universe" (14–15). Pascale Casanova repeats this privileging of linguistic experiment in her book on world literature.[11] Even Simon Gikandi, who has written extensively on African realism,[12] seems to replicate this slippage when he argues that "it was primarily – I am tempted to say solely – in the language and structure of modernism that a postcolonial experience came to be articulated and imagined in literary form" ("Preface" 420). Again, although Gikandi is certainly correct in showing how important modernist poetry was in the formation of an African literary canon, the faltering in his sentence is notable nonetheless: what is primarily true becomes solely true.

Views such as these make Premchand's pronouncement in favor of literature that is a "mirror on life's truths" sound strikingly naïve. How do we begin to analyze the myriad works and literary movements that thrived under colonialism but did not make use of recognizably

modernist aesthetics? How might focusing on realism as a complex and self-conscious literary mode lead us to reconsider the Indian novel, and postcolonial studies more broadly?

I suggest that at the heart of this problem is an inadequate critical sense within postcolonial criticism of what realism is and does. Whereas studies of the European and American novel have made significant strides in conceiving of realism beyond the naïve, mimetic representation of an inert and legible world, postcolonial criticism continues to regard the term with embarrassment – as what Michael Denning calls "simple representationalism" (118) – celebrating the magical, the parodic, and other forms of "post"-realisms with significantly more enthusiasm. A critic interested in taking seriously the body of realist literature associated with Premchand and his contemporaries must carefully navigate the question of realist aesthetics and emphasize, for instance, realism's political purpose in the pre-Independence decades rather than its literary contributions. Priyamvada Gopal writes, for instance, that "realism, within this framework [of AIPWA], is *less a specific aesthetic technique* than a philosophy that brings together an affective sense of justice, fairness and harmony with an understanding of all that violates that sense" (27, emphasis mine). Yet as I show in the succeeding pages, once realism in the colony is seen precisely as a set of aesthetic techniques that enabled a highly plastic and innovative level of engagement with some of the crucial crises of modernity, its political vision can no longer be cordoned off. The very meanings of ideas such as "justice, fairness and harmony" were developed, contested, and reclaimed within aesthetic and formal elements such as characterization, plot, and narrative time. Thus whereas Gopal describes progressive writing as representing "a range of experiments in literary radicalism" (10), I emphasize how the group's political innovations were made possible by experiments in *radical literarism*. In this way, I move away from understanding AIPWA as a political movement that marshaled a particular aesthetics in its service, to seeing its politics emerge precisely from its literary innovations.[13]

To this end, I use the phrase "realism in the colony" to designate a metafictional mode by which authors not only represented the world around them but also considered the stakes of representation itself. This mode was constituted by its difference from the classic realism of nineteenth-century Europe, and inflected by the historical experience of colonial rule. These produced a realism characterized by self-consciousness and an awareness of its own secondary status within colonial discourse. I argue, however, that Indian realism does not suffer for this trait but is instead

enriched by it, marked by an intensifying of what Bakhtin describes as the novel's interest in "parod[ying] other genres," in the process of which it "exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, re-formulating and re-accentuating them" (*Dialogic* 5). Thus against common perceptions, realism in the colony is highly metatextual, founded on variegated textual fields and constituted not by ideological certainties but by contradictions, conflicts, and profound ambivalence as to the nature of the "real" world being represented, and the novel's ability to represent it. "Realism" is both deployed and kept at arm's length; it is both used and thematized, and in this way it is both the mode of representation and, in particularly illuminating moments, the question at stake in representation itself.

As such, Indian realism is marked by two competing trends. On one hand, like so many postcolonial forms, it is constituted by a lack, a mark of its historical belatedness. Realism in the colony, in this sense, is never *quite* realism in the metropoles. Like Partha Chatterjee's in a slightly different context, however, my approach "shuns … the preformed judgement – that is to say, the prejudice – that … difference is always the sign of philosophical immaturity and cultural backwardness" (*Lineages* xii).[14] Coming at the same question from the other side, I argue that realism is simultaneously less and more capacious under colonialism; as a mode receptive to the complexities of contemporary experience, realism itself expands to account for this putative insufficiency. Realism is thus, to adapt Homi Bhabha's terms, "less than one and double" (119). For Bhabha, this phrase refers to an epistemological phenomenon under colonialism whereby some of the authority of colonial knowledge is preserved – here, for instance, realism as a normative aesthetic – and then that partial authority "gets caught up in an alienating strategy of doubling or repetition" in which it is "articulat[ed] … syntagmatically with a range of differential knowledges and positionalities that both estrange its 'identity' and produce new forms of knowledge, new modes of differentiation, new sites of power" (119–20). Where I differ from Bhabha is that rather than seeing this doubling as an infinitely proliferating process by which meaning is continually made and remade, I see it instead giving rise to a realm of deliberate metafictionality, in which realism represents both the world and the limits of its own referentiality. Unlike Bhabha's ever-proliferating signifier, realism's metafictionality does not refuse the totality of the sign altogether but allows realism to contest the self-evident meaning of a set of identifiable modern values such as humanity and

humanism, progress, history, and the future – even while it mobilizes these values in its service.

In this way, and despite its innovative forms, its occasionally radical aesthetics, its thematization of indeterminacy and its contemporaneity with high modernism in Anglo-America, I continue to use the term "realism" to define the mode I explicate here. For one, this is because the works I engage with refuse, to various degrees, the aesthetics of high modernism – not only as practiced in the West but in India as well. Ahmed Ali, for instance, whose *Twilight in Delhi* I discuss in Chapter 4, employed modernist techniques in some of his earlier works and yet returned to realism by the end of the 1930s. His stream-of-consciousness story, "Baadal Nahin Aate [The Clouds Aren't Coming]," was written almost a decade before his realist *Twilight in Delhi*.[15] Another progressive writer, Mulk Raj Anand, spent many years in London socializing and exchanging ideas with members of the Bloomsbury Group, but when he returned to India he deliberately chose to write realist prose – realizing, at that point, that he "was inclined more and more towards concrete realities" (*Conversations* 133). Both writers were clearly acquainted with the techniques and aesthetics of high modernism, yet chose to use them selectively. I argue that it is precisely because of realism's colonial implication on one hand and what is seen today as its outdatedness on the other that it is such an interesting mode to consider – but *as realism*, not as some other mode altogether. Using the term "realism" forces us to consider the relationship of new forms to the past – even when that past is one of messy implications in colonial rule – and to engage with political and aesthetic positions we might not find appealing, such as the admittedly unfashionable desire to represent "the actualities of life" (Ali, Afterword 168). In this way, my use of the term "realism" does not merely describe a definable body of texts but also constitutes an epistemic challenge to our accepted literary histories.

REALISM IN THEORY

Considering realism as simultaneously an effect of colonial difference and a means of representing that difference offers a new approach to the mode's general disfavor in postcolonial theory. Overwhelmingly in postcolonial criticism, realism's colonial origins and its mimetic premise provide uncontested justification for its repudiation. Edward Said calls Orientalism, for example, a form of "radical realism," such that "anyone employing Orientalism … will designate, name, point to,

fix what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality" (*Orientalism* 72). The assumption here, inspired largely by Foucault, is that Orientalism gains its power precisely from its realism, its ability to render fully legible its object of study.[16] As Said underlines in *Culture and Imperialism*, in nineteenth-century Europe realism was "ideological and repressive: it effectively silences the Other, it reconstitutes difference as identity" (166; see also Azim). Thus, for instance, the unnamed, omniscient narrator of a realist novel is an expression of the singular and panoptic authority of British imperial rule (Henry 10), and realism's putative openness to the representation of all sorts of Otherness is in fact a means of "expand[ing] limited notions of Englishness" (Henry 7). Such critiques of literary realism have been reinforced in other fields as well. As Mary Louise Pratt writes in her discussion of nineteenth-century colonial travel writing, the most insidious forms of travelogue are those that offer "panoramic views" (143) and a narratorial perspective that is "unheroic, unparticularized, without ego, interest, or desire of its own" (143) – in short, the realist ones.

If realism were not so denigrated in studies of colonialism already, its association with the homogenizing forces of Indian nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s has further reinforced what are perceived as its compromised politics. Whereas earlier postcolonial theorists were concerned with exposing colonial rule's reliance on dominating discursive practices, more recently critics have transferred this methodology to the nation-state, which is seen to be the inheritor of colonial discourse. This transference was enabled in part by the popularization of the early work of the Subaltern Studies Collective (SSC). The SSC introduced a third agent, the subaltern, onto a historical landscape that had been occupied by only two, colonialism and nationalism, thus revealing how nationalism – led by the heretofore sacrosanct Indian National Congress – was also a project of knowledge production, structurally analogous to colonialism (Guha, ed., vols. 1–4; Hardiman [*Coming*]; Amin [*Event*]; Guha [*Elementary*]). The idea of the nation-state as an institution of power/knowledge quickly rose to dominance in studies of the postcolonial world. In literature, scholars began to identify the generic and aesthetic accompaniments to nationalism that was equivalent to nineteenth-century realism's role in colonial rule. The progressive writers were an obvious target, as they actively defended realism as a means of representing the marginalized and the downtrodden; moreover, most came from elite backgrounds and were active in the nationalist movement. Their

statements and most of their literary works could thus easily be read as claiming not only to represent but also to speak for the subaltern in fiction, much as Nehru and Gandhi did in political discourse. In this way, scholarship on the progressive writers that takes a postcolonial theoretical perspective is almost universally critical of their use of realism. As I elaborate in Chapter 3, for example, Gauri Viswanathan argues that Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel *Untouchable* discursively reenacts Gandhi's betrayal of the Dalits through an appropriative realism that lets Anand, a non-Dalit, speak on behalf of his untouchable protagonist (*Outside* 222). Aamir Mufti similarly maintains that realism's tie to a secular, universalizing Nehruvian politics forecloses the possibility for minority or otherwise located subjects to exist within the novel or the nation (*Enlightenment* 183). The implication in all such readings is that realism is complicit in the hegemony of the nation-state.

Although these works make crucial interventions in showing how the putatively universal nation is in fact a site of exclusion, they rely on the assumption that realism reflects external realities with little mediation, and thus can do little else but replicate the exclusions of the nation. I offer a contrasting view, based on the idea that realism is a project of "continuing experiments with forms, styles, modes of valuing" (Levine 628). Although a realist novel may seem to support colonial or nationalist hegemony, its instability allows it to elude any rigid ideology. As I discuss in Chapter 2, a realist representation of the rural poor is not solely a means of incorporating that population into the universal fold of the nation, but can simultaneously show the *inability* of realism to capture the reality of social inequality. In this case and in so many others, realism is sometimes complicit with dominant ideology, sometimes resistant, but mostly neither – or somewhere in between. This ambivalence is not always aesthetically pleasing but sometimes clumsy, reading at times more like inconsistency or hesitation. Clearly a new methodology is required to interpret ambivalence outside of the critical assumptions that render all realist texts necessarily effects of power. Doing so is not only in service of a fuller aesthetic history of the Indian novel but also aids us in understanding the multilayered literary responses to the experience of colonial modernity.

"THE CONCAVE MIRROR"

In this task of rethinking the broader work of literary realism, it is helpful to turn to Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács. Although Lukács has

been criticized in postcolonial studies for his prescriptive aesthetic criteria and what can seem like rigid parameters for thinking about literary form, he is in fact one of the most productive thinkers of the plasticity of realism. Despite his Eurocentric beliefs and the fact that imperialism was one of his "blind spots," on the basis of what Jed Esty identifies as his "Hegelian-Weberian assumption of Europe as the space of modernity's real time of emergence" ("Global" 367–8), Lukács's writings surprisingly enable a rethinking of realism outside of Europe.

This is most evident in Lukács's studies of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy and German writer E. T. A. Hoffman, both of which demonstrate an expansive idea of realism's possibilities. Lukács can assimilate neither writer into the universalized, bourgeois realism that he valorizes in authors such as Balzac: Tolstoy because he is clouded by an occasionally aristocratic worldview, and Hoffman because he is overtly fantastical. Yet it is precisely these elements that compel Lukács to make what might be taken as his most nuanced pronouncements on realism – for instance, that "the fantastic tales of Hoffmann … [are] among the highest achievements of realistic literature, since these essential elements are exposed through the very fantasy" (Lukács, "Marx" 79). In this way, Hoffmann "represents some deeper reality in fantastic garb" (qtd. in Wellek 238). Here Lukács presents realism as a mode that goes significantly beyond "a photographic reproduction of the immediately perceptible superfice of the external world" ("Marx" 75). Rather, it is a means of grasping the social totality through "the adequate presentation of the complete human personality" (*Studies* 7), regardless of whether it is faithful to reality per se. In his study of Tolstoy, Lukács pushes this even further, arguing that although Tolstoy was an aristocrat and often "[held] views containing reactionary elements" (*Studies* 138), he was nevertheless able to represent the totality of Russian society and thus transcend the superficial world to become a great realist writer. In this argument, Lukács opposes some of the dominant voices in Marxist criticism of the time, who claimed that Tolstoy's obsession with the peasant – a survival from the "semi-feudal despotism of the Tsar" (138) – marred his works with an anti-progressivist viewpoint. Likewise, these critics maintained, Tolstoy's uneven aesthetics, so different from those of classic realism, amounted to crucial literary failings. For Lukács, however, these elements were not detractions from Tolstoy's realism, but essential to it. What might seem to be sympathetic characterizations of aristocrats such as *Anna Karenina*'s Levin in fact reflect the reality of landowners' constant equivocations between embodying the perspective of their class

and transcending it. Non-realistic representation in this way marks "the socially inevitable zig-zag path men like Levin must necessarily follow" (186). In this case, it is Tolstoy's refusal of mimesis that, ironically, makes his representation of a transitional period in Russian history all the more realist, even if *less realistic*.

This gap between the realist and the realistic lies at the heart of the difficulty surrounding realism as a concept. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* has been a hugely influential book on the relationship between literature and the real, but despite its title it is not in fact about *imitation*, which is the etymological origin of the English term (Greek *mimeisthai*, to imitate). Yet the specter of imitation continues to haunt discussions on realism. Lukács seems to redress directly this mimetic fallacy in his essay on Tolstoy. He begins the essay by invoking Lenin's words that Tolstoy is "the mirror of the Russian Revolution," and then asks rhetorically: "How can something be called a mirror which gives so obviously incorrect a reflection of events?" (*Studies* 126). From the very beginning, then, Lukács opens up a space where the mirror, despite its obvious denotation of mimesis, is able to accommodate some form of mediation, whether it is "incorrectness" or, as in other parts of the essay, social upheaval, which might preclude a complete identity between representation and referent. Lukács pushes this formulation further in the contrast he subsequently draws between petty naturalism – in which "the reality which they [post-1848 realists] mirrored drove them into … narrow triviality" (135) – and a richer realism in which Tolstoy "became the poetic mirror of certain aspects of the revolutionary development in Russia" (137). This final, paradoxical term, "poetic mirror," seems to encompass the contradiction that Lukács struggles to resolve: between faithful representation and meaningful artistic distortion.

Ambivalence regarding the ontology of this mediatory "mirror" between text and world underlies the writings of many Indian progressive writers as well, and inflects even the putatively un-self-conscious premise of undistorted representation invoked by Premchand's words – *jeevan ki sachaiyon ka darpan*, or a "mirror on life's truths" – with a more nuanced subtext. The image appears again in the words of another founding member of the AIPWA, Mulk Raj Anand, for whom, "to be sure, creative arts reflect life in a mirror. But the concave mirror is also a mirror" ("Sources" 28). Here the work of art offers a perspective of its own, but precisely in the service of faithful representation.[17]

This nuance is significant for theorizing realism in colonial and postcolonial contexts. By introducing the impurity in the mirror-image