

Realism and Resistance in South Asian Literature  
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In 1936 at the All-India Progressive Writers' Conference in Lucknow, Urdu-Hindi writer Premchand argued for a turn to realism. "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*]." Here, Premchand connects realism with political resistance: with anti-colonial nationalism and the continuing fight for social justice.

But what does it really mean for literature to be "a mirror on life's truths"? What assumptions about realism are embedded in that phrase? Is realism merely mimesis – or accurate representation of reality? Or might there be something more?

This paper argues that understanding the role of literature in political resistance movements requires a complex theory of what literary realism is and how it works. Even Premchand, who talked about the importance of including marginalized characters in his novels and short stories (Dalits, prostitutes, etc.), was acutely aware of how his realism was conditioned by the limitations his poor and subaltern characters had to full subjecthood. Thus his 1936 novel *Godaan* is split into two parts which never quite reconcile: one for the impoverished rural characters, whose lives get worse and worse, and one for the urban characters involved in their own petty conflicts. I argue that a novel with such a split structure asks us to consider realism anew – to complicate our idea of realism as straightforward, unvarnished representation. This is pushed even further by the short stories of Manto, which question the ethics of sympathy apparent in Premchand. And lastly, this paper considers Mohammad Hanif's recent novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* in relation to these questions. While Hanif does not exhibit the sense of injustice that underlies Premchand's literary project, his work nevertheless seeks to expose the underbellies of everyday violence in contemporary Pakistan. However it is, at the same time, a novel that is strikingly absurd in its characters, its plot and its language. How might Hanif's satire serve as a continuing engagement with the possibilities and limitations of realism? How do Premchand, Manto and Hanif together tell the story of a South Asian literature of resistance, literature that is a political democratic project to represent the lives of the poor and disenfranchised – yet one that is also powerfully aware of the fragility and even futility of the written word?