

## Review Article

# A Literary Review of Neorealism in British and American Literature

Wang Cong

Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

### Email address:

wangcong201612@163.com

### To cite this article:

Wang Cong. A Literary Review of Neorealism in British and American Literature. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*.

Vol. 10, No. 3, 2022, pp. 166-174. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20221003.13

**Received:** April 11, 2022; **Accepted:** April 25, 2022; **Published:** May 12, 2022

---

**Abstract:** In the wake of postmodernism, writers sit at an anxious crossroads where the language representation of postmodernism meets the lyrical realism of Balzac and Flaubert, and a few critics have attempted to anchor a realist grounding for the new directions of novels. In this sense, the appeal of the return of realism is recognized as congenial to experimental realism—neorealism, embodying experiments in forms, styles, and modes of valuing, with mimesis dominant. Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, neorealism has won certain celebrations from some Chinese scholars, but its descriptions, designations, and practices in British and American literature display some confusion and ambiguity that revolve around the present studies of neorealism in China. This paper, thus, aims to solve these questions by exploring its cause and effect, and pointing out the research gap between foreign scholars and Chinese, likewise with an attempt to provide an individual but academic description of this new form. It concludes that neorealism is a new form of realism in the postmodern context, integrating the self-consciousness of modernism and language dominant of postmodernism, with an attempt to articulate and evaluate the relationships between the individual self and “signified” social reality in the textualized world. In the postmodern context, multiple worlds are textualized in fiction and the reality is not absolute but the “signified” one understood by the majority. The major concerns of British neorealism fiction reside more in “self” due to its British tradition of (liberal) humanity, different from American neorealism with politics dominant.

**Keywords:** Neorealism, Neorealism in Britain and America, Neorealism in China

---

## 1. Introduction

The new direction of Britain and American literature encounters crossroads since the wane of postmodernism. In the wake of a series of appeals “the death of literature”, “the death of novels”, and “the demise of realism”, the perception of uncertainty, nonsense, and fictionality partly take a dominant place in Britain and the American academic scene. The questionable issues of “truth/fiction” and “language/world” haunt writers’ minds, critics’ criticisms, as well as readers’ expectations. However, based on the doctrine of art—all artworks are sure to reality and the continuous conflicts in the international arena, the literary compass points to realism again. In the world literary scope, the vicissitudes of realism elaborately affect the development of literature and the literary scene, because it by and large dominates an essential part in the field of Britain and American literature. In

doing so, realism matches itself with contemporary Zeitgeist and turns into a new form. As a result, the common recognition—the return of realism comes into being and gradually draws due attention of some well-regarded writers and critics. For example, Raymond Tallis holds a belief that realist literature is always aware of a world beyond the text and seeks to connect with it [1]. Furst absolutely defends the essential position of realism, “No longer is realism regarded as a sort of kindergarten mode of writing, essentially simple, transparent, and naïve” [2].

This insightful observation has been explicitly and implicitly illustrated by a few scholars, although there is rarely any authentic designation referred to the new direction of realism in the wake of postmodernism. Undoubtedly, it is the lack of unity in the designations that just right clarifies its complicated content, broad aesthetics as well as genre integration from another angle, which to the new form can be

accounted as a welcome celebration. In effect, there exist some designations to define this mode, such as neorealism, postmodern realism, postmodernist realism, post-postmodernism, and so on, among which the most widely recognized and frequently used ones are neorealism and postmodern realism. Both are alternative descriptions certainly entertained in the British and American academic fields. According to Wang Shouren's notes, the commonalities — “synchronicity, cultural homology” are shared by British and American literature at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century [3]. In doing so, both can be applied directly in literary practices and interpretations. Nevertheless, this paper tends to cherry-pick neorealism instead of postmodern realism. As far as the latter is concerned, this designation literally lures readers to the preoccupation that it accommodates simultaneously postmodern elements and realist characteristics. In doing so, readers' ears possibly turn blind to the influences of modernism on the new form in the postmodern context. As it were, there are prominent elements of realism, modernism, and postmodernism in postmodern realist works at the same time. Thus, the selection of neorealism in part avoids stepping into ambiguity at least in wording.

## 2. The Descriptions of Neorealism in Britain and America

Besides various designations of neorealism, its distinct definitions reside in a series of multiple descriptions and individual emphasis and there is hardly a perfect concept of this new genre. In the literary academic field, a few critics have attempted to define this genre from varying aspects, which the comparatively authentic ones count Raymond William, Tom Wolfe, Jonathan Franzen, T. V. Reed, Jose David Saldivar, Amy J. Elias, Winfried Fluck, Albert Borgmann, Deborah Bowen, Brain Richardson, Madhu Dubey, and Robert L. McLaughlin.

The well-regarded literary critic Raymond William in his *The Long Revolution* (1961) devotes one chapter to dealing with the crisis of contemporary novels and explains his attitudes toward new realism. “Yet, since it is discovery, and not recovery, since nostalgia and imitation are not only irrelevant but hindering, any new realism will be different from the tradition and will comprehend the discoveries in personal realism which are the main twentieth-century achievement” [4]. Obviously, Williams gives his emphasis on the legacy of 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernism to which the new realism will trace back, which further bespeaks the possible genealogical relationship among traditional realism, modernism, and new realism. As the forebear presaging the new realism, William's focus on the balance of individual and society calls to question the relationship of both sides.

In the late 1980s, some declared the death of postmodernism. Some pointed out that this manifesto called into question the binary thinking of experiment and tradition, realism and postmodernism, which is mainly represented by

Raymond Carver, Tom Wolfe, and Jonathan Franzen who acted as pioneers in this realistic turn. Thanks to Carver's focus on lower-class individuals, his minimalist novels are also accounted as a kind of realism or a fictional synthesis of neorealism-between-postmodern experimentalism. Tom Wolfe in his 1989 article “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” called for a strong emphasis on realism in fiction to replace postmodernism. He seriously launches a counterattack against “unrealistic” literature, calling for new social novels and a return to realism [5]. Wolfe expresses his disappointment over the imperceptible metropolis and rich slices of contemporary life that both are compared to “the billion-footed beast”. He insists the new social novel should be particularly journalistic or reported, which implies that writers should play the role of recorders of social life. His claim of the social novel was in fact an initiative for the writing of fictional realism. As a result, Wolfe arguably had a significant influence on the fiction of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially on the trend of realism. Coincidentally, seven years later, Jonathan Franzen published an essay, “Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels,” also in *Harper's*, about the state of American fiction, which is also regarded by many as a literary “manifesto” [6]. Like Wolfe, Franzen expresses his strong disappointment with the current state of American literature and jointly launched a crusade against contemporary American literature. Both hold the belief that writers should reflect on social issues rather than adopt a nihilistic attitude. It is true to say that they presage the forthcoming of realistic mode in the next few decades, although they do not directly put forward with the designation of neorealism.

Based on the characteristics of realism and aesthetics of the new mode, T. V. Reed puts forward the concept of “postmodernist realism” in a 1988 article on James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in which he defines this form as “a self-conscious, ironic, politically engaged mode of writing that takes reality more seriously than did the realists and aesthetic form more seriously than did the modernists” [7]. In Reed's opinion, this term denotes the convergence of objectiveness of reality and modernist and postmodernist techniques. It is concluded that this academic position sheds light on the possibility of the return of realism for representing the world, while Reed puts a poetic spin on the term “postmodernist realism” more than political.

Postmodern Realism is a literary term primarily in 1991 coined by Jose David Saldivar in his article entitled “Postmodern Realism” collected in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*. Saldivar, the expert in Chicano literature and culture, explores postmodern realism as “a space of affinities and alliances among diverse history”, which involves a few Pan-American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Arturo Islas, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carole Oates and E. L. Doctorow [8]. To conclude on a personal note, Saldivar's description undoubtedly is a dangerously oversimple generalization and puts rather a heavy burden on a novel that makes no such claim. Besides this, he forces the question of the believability and truth of postmodern realism whose origin

lies in magical realism.

Amy J. Elias who is an expert in postmodern fiction, published an essay entitled "Meta-mimesis? The Problem of British Postmodern Realism". She turns due attention to this new approach and portrays it as "mimesis with an ontological dominant" and she defines it as followed:

In postmodern Realism (capital in origin), the world has become textualized. Postmodern Realism records the multiple worlds/texts within contemporary culture and recognizes the inability to evaluate society's conflicting values; it mimics the multiple selves of characters (or more accurately the self as subject within a textualized culture) and recognizes the problem articulating an essential Self in this social context. Both of these goals and limitations are realistic; postmodern Realism is true to the new definition of self and society in a postmodern culture [9].

Elias lays emphasis on the variability, flexibility, and creativity of the textualized world and the multiplicity, authenticity, and intelligibility of self and world in a social context. In other words, the process to decode the textual codes of self and society encounters many rules and difficulties, while postmodern Realism is available to render concrete the multiple textual codes and, in this sense, it is close to the truth of the world. However, what should be noticed is Elias' clever designation "postmodern realism" elides the period of modernism that locates between traditional realism and postmodernism, which is a common limitation of the present research on the modes after postmodernism.

The return of realism as well draws due attention of the critic Winfried Fluck in the 1990s targeted postmodernist writings that are well presented by Barthes and Donald Barthelme, and he confirms the existence of new Realism in America.

It is a realism that does not claim to know the real but wants to come to terms with the fact that reality is nevertheless out there in an amorphous, ever changing shape.... this realism refers us to a cultural situation whose complexity and variety can no longer be represented by any single text or mode of writing, only by a set of relations within a growing plurality of cultural styles and modes of writing. This new cultural space still must be mapped out, and in this sense a discussion of the new realism is meant to contribute to an understanding of the plurality of choices in which we currently live. The new realism,... it is one with its own flexibility and aesthetic potential to respond to changing times [10].

The new realism can be regarded as a variant of realism in a postmodern context, with continuous development and changes. In this way, this mode comes to convergence with British realist novels in turns of the new century. In fact, in Fluck's point of view, the new realism can be read as an aesthetic experiment representing and describing the multiple reality, which response to the possibility and potential of realism's resurrection.

The essential role of postmodern Realism gains the

authoritative recognition of Albert Borgmann who in *Crossing Postmodern Divide* asserts that it is the final choice in US beyond couple mainstream cultural atmospheres—hyperactivity and sullenness—in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century [11]. His sociological ideas mainly focus on the two dominated elements—postmodernism and realism—can come to a compromise, even complete, and finally lead to "a recovery of the world of eloquent things, a recovery that accepts the postmodern critique and realizes postmodern aspirations" [9]. Obviously, Borgmann contends that postmodern realism puts a utopian plan into practice or turns promises into reality. In short, this genre in Borgmann's eyes is an elaborate genre allying postmodernism with realism and a qualified approach to make the modern promise come true in the new age. However, this bold assertion has a trend of dangerous positivism in the functions of postmodern realism because he neglects the objectivity of social "disease" that is much more difficult to be cured by novels or art. His conception is framed under the influence of postmodernism as "a long detour around the postmodern discourse", which implies the limitation and fault of Borgmann's observation [12].

In the subsequent year, William H. Thornton and Songok Han Thornton, in "Toward a Cultural Prosaics: Postmodern Realism in the New Literary Historiography" published in 1993, seem to attempt to define postmodern realism as "a more capacious and socially accountable postmodernism" [12]. The Thorntons together confirm the obsolescence of the traditional literary realism due to the calls for a "postdisciplinary fusion of objectives" [12]. Obviously, such assertion makes it reasonable that a viable realism refers to a cogent convergence of postmodern in form and postdisciplinary in scope, namely, "de-bounding of literature and history" or concretely "cultural prosaics" [12]. In doing so, it bespeaks that postmodern realism plays the role as a mediation between "the conflicting demands of esthetic and historiography" and between "fact and fiction" [12].

Following Albert Borgmann's advocacy of "postmodern realism", which will involve "a recovery of the world of eloquent things" and will be characterized by "focal realism, patient vigor, and communal celebration", Deborah Bowen, in 1995's essay "Preserving Appearances: Photography and the Postmodern Realism of Anita Brookner" applied this term to describe the characteristics of Anita Brookner's novels, namely, ethics and realism [11]. He wittily points out that Brookner's realism is "a reconstituted realism as a mode of moral inquiry" by expounding her use of photography in novels that possesses the (unacknowledged) nature of politics and constructing in Hutcheon's celebration of the politics of postmodernism [13, 14]. In short, Brookner's postmodern worldview is not at odds with a realist ethic, but a revised realism involving ethics.

In his essay "Remapping the Present: The Master Narrative of Modern Literary History and the Lost Forms of Twentieth-Century Fiction", Brian Richardson in 1997 focused on the history of British fiction in the twentieth century and set forth the revisionary map of modern literature-realism, postmodernism, expressionism, high

modernism, and romance, namely five principal competing narrative poetics. In this rhizomatic model, he asserts that these five narrative poetics exist in the movement of fluctuation, conflict, combination, and interlamination. Poetics itself is not in stasis but continues to move forward or backward in modern literary history by combination, transition, and fusion [15]. In doing so, a ready example is the so-called “postmodern realism” that has attempted to “conjoin the otherwise opposed poetics of realism and postmodernism” [15]. Obviously, realism and postmodernism in Brain’s position fail to act as two poles opposite to each other, but both can converge in one mediated form—postmodern realism.

The referentiality of language and real-world acts as an indispensable topic in the debates of postmodernism and postmodern literature. This topic in effect still takes an important part in much scholars’ research, such as Madhu Dubey and Robert L. McLaughlin, which also becomes a contentious and continuous focus in the discussion of postmodern realism.

Madhu Dubey in her paper “post-postmodernism realism?” deliberately take social conditions of global capitalism and politics into consideration. Dubey’s research interests include African American literature, cultural studies, and postmodern theory and she has published a few academic articles concerning postmodernism in African American novels, among which “Contemporary African American Fiction and the Politics of Postmodernism” (2002) is a typical example. In this paper she asserts that Toni Cade Bambara’s *These Bones Are Not My Child*, as a neo-realism, associates with the real world and raises questions about the organization and legitimacy of both historical and novelistic texts. Its metafictional element of this genre is congruent with realism, and “referentiality remains a powerful preoccupation in many strands of postmodern fiction” [16]. After an almost decade, Dubey (2011) furthers her research on “post-postmodernism realism” in her paper “Post-Postmodernism Realism?” that is greatly inspired by the new genre- “post-postmodernism” that is coined by McLaughlin in his article “Post-Postmodernism Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World”. Overtly, Dubey adds the word “realism” after “post-postmodernism” literally, which on the one hand implies her research weight the importance of realism and its inheritance of traditional realism, and on the other hand, her emphasis on the basic grounding of post-postmodernism lies in the “material conditions” [16]. McLaughlin holds that post-postmodernists are more interested in “representing the world we all more or less share” than in “self-consciousness wordplay and the violation of narrative conventions” [17]. However, what should be noticed is the cores or emphasis respectively explored in these two articles. If we say that the former genre post-postmodernism confirms the functions and potential of representation and referentiality of language or word, it also makes sense to say that the post-postmodernism realism in Dubey’s designation, does not abandon the referentiality of language and layers of representation but engages the language-based nature of literary operations. In doing so, it is not difficult for readers to fathom the reality

already made and other realities are possible. It concludes that Madhu Dubey we might say, paraphrasing Robert L. McLaughlin, writes post-postmodernism realism.

The above mentioned has portrayed a profile of the present definitions and descriptions of neorealism and postmodern realism abroad. It is not difficult to find that these critics place emphasis on the return of realism from different aspects and focus on different key points. Nevertheless, what should be noticed is their concurrence in the alliance between postmodernism and realism, and their confirmation of the fact that neorealism acts as the advanced stage of postmodernism. In this sense, neorealism to a large degree eschews the confusing aspects of experimental referentiality and has an attempt to set its foot in the ground of reality.

At the same time, more micro but important discoveries of their commonalities should be further illustrated. First, these comments mentioned above are mainly put up forward in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century crossing the postmodern divide. In this situation, these critics in effect provide the possibility for the emergence of new cultural movements and genres in the new millennium. In doing so, neorealism predominately emerges in the exploration of the new directions at the end of postmodernism and spreads its light into 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature. Therefore, this new genre sets a possible and potential scene for the development of literary works with no exception of Zadie Smith. Second, nevertheless, different dimensions are taken by different critics, it seems straightforward in discussing its concern on history, aesthetics, and referentiality based on their different focal subjects—pan-American literature, postmodernist writing, modernity, the new literary historiography. It can be concluded that scholars who are experts in different fields have a shared commonality that neorealism responds to the call for the return of realism and meets the requirements of representing reality. Third, except Raymond William’s observation, the present descriptions together express an oblique reference to the convergence of realism and postmodernism, but much rare attention is paid to the influences of modernism on neorealism. For example, Elias’ commentary on “postmodern realism” also elides the period of modernism because she seemingly only compares the distinctive characteristics of traditional realism and postmodernism, which partly bespeaks the collective limitations of the present descriptions of the new mode.

### 3. The Present Study of Neorealism in China

In the scope of world literature, it is well known that realism undoubtedly plays an essential role in the historical stream of literature, while its consequent genre—modernism should not be neglected, which acts as a transition between traditional realism and experimental postmodernism. Modernity’s self-questioning calls into question the position of self and social values that respectively correspond to the internal/mental world and external/objective world. This dissertation holds the belief that modernists purportedly

anchor their profound meditation of reality in their deliberated portrayal of inner psychological activities rather than blindingly leaving behind reflecting reality. In this sense, the conflicts between the individual and society would be vividly presented in the fictional world, as well as personal struggles with social suppression. The relationship between self and society thus would close the distance between readers' objective world and textual world. The modern technique of self-consciousness in large measure is well embodied by the stream of consciousness. The social concerns and techniques that are in part inherited in postmodern realism, implicit and explicit, cannot be ignored and belittled. Fortunately, some domestic studies have noticed this research gap in the Western research of postmodern realism.

By and large, foreign theoretical construction of neorealism/postmodern realism in the British and American scene, on the one hand, beyond doubt serves as a beacon for domestic literary researches and sheds light on the domestic intellectuals. On the other hand, since any literary theory and genre is an academic mode in flux, changing over time, it is thus reasonable to argue that its designations and constructions embrace different voices and welcome new sources. Such a challenging academic situation leaves a large room for forthcoming researches. In fact, many domestic scholars dedicate themselves to this issue and contribute their wisdom to the introduction and application to this new subgenre of realism, like Hou Weirui, Guo Jide, Zhong Ming, Yu Jianhua, and Wang Shouren—and the list goes on. If we draw some lines in the whole development of neorealism in China, up to now it clearly presents three stages—introduction, exploration, development, respectively corresponding to the 1980s, 1990s, and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The middle 1980s goes through the wake-up stage of neorealism's development, during which Hou Weirui primarily announced the possibility of new realism at the end of the 1970s. It is supposed that professor Hou's bold assertion in large measure is inspired by British literary critic and novelist David Lodge who believes that British novels in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century swing like a pendulum. That is to say, the mode of novels or other literary genres go back between two poles—modernism and realism. In other words, both are mainly alternative tendencies in this century's literary works. At the beginning of this century, in the 1930s and 1950s, realism dominates these three periods, while in the 1920s, 1940s, 1960s, and the early 1970s, the British literary field is dominated by modernism. Following Lodge's convincing observation, Chinese scholar Hou Weirui in 1985 demonstrated his argument about the intermingled relationship between modernism and realism in his celebrated monograph *A Survey of Modern British Fiction*:

Modernism and realism had experienced three times of inter-crosses and fusions in the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature. As a result, both had fused each other's strengths and adapted to the epoch's vicissitudes to enrich and develop themselves. By the end of the 1970s realism in British novels much differed from critical realism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century [18]...

Admittedly, Mr. Hou's interpretation of realism breaks with commonplaces of traditional scholarship. He maintains that realism is always in process with modernism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a return of realism comes into being in the 1970s. At that time, he failed to coin a specific terminology to delineate this tendency at home, and yet there was no doubt that Professor Hou presaged the resonance of realism and modernism in Britain's 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature. This excerpt above possibly can be registered as the very beginning of the research on neorealism at home due to its primary confirmation in the convergence of modernism and realism, as well as its sure presage in the forthcoming new form in the 1970s. Consequently, a return to realism occurring in the 1970s was advocated and was put into literary theories and practices by men of letter.

After Hou's insightful prediction in the 1980s, the next decade has witnessed the hot-debated and exploration period. In China, many scholars have focused on neorealism as early as the 1990s. Cheng Xilin in his 1992's essay points out that new realism in post-war American novels combines "fact and fiction, history and imagination", and it aims at reflecting the contemporary world and American society. Besides exploring the characters of this new realism, Cheng likewise confirms its everlasting energy—"continuing development and profound progression" [19]. Guo Jide in a 1997's article upholds the assertion that American writers turn to rewrite realism in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As he notes, this neorealism "inherits the old tradition of realism and continuously draws new nourishment from the creative techniques of modernism and postmodernism has formed a new way of creation" [20]. Three years later when Professor Guo portrays the characteristics of American postwar literature, he again emphasizes the revival of realism [21]. Yin Qingping in his 1997's article primarily introduces Raymond William's novel notion and puts his positive spin on William's insight of the novel's deadlock and his emphasis on the relationship between individual and society in the new realism [22]. Similar to Elias' observation that "postmodern realism might be understood as mimesis with an ontological domain", Zhong Ming believes that this mode contains postmodern techniques being as important as realism. At the same time, he highlights the important distinctions between British postmodern realism and American: "it is not as radical and avant-garde as the postmodern novels of the United States or other countries in Europe. It has always been influenced by the traditional bloodline of realism" [23]. He further delicately analyzes the works of writers such as Graham Swift, Martin Amis, and discusses the transformation of traditional realism in conception and art in postmodern realist novels in the UK. To sum up, in the 1990s, domestic scholars' interpretations of postmodern realism do not break with the tradition of realism.

When it comes to the new millennium, neorealism has gradually become a well-recognized genre in the literary field and welcomes its profound development in descriptions and applications. Professor Yu comes up with the assertion that the revival of American realism emerges at the end of the 1980s different from Hou Weirui's opinion. Nevertheless, both put a

positive spin on the social concerns and on the representation of reality, which in large measure responds to the demise of novels.

Since the end of the 1980s, we have found that there have been clear signs of a realistic resurgence in novels and literary studies in Europe, America, and even Asia and Africa. Writers and critics show great interest in the reappearance of realistic writing in literature. They begin to place more attention on the historical, cultural, and racial conflicts in their works, the “marginalized others”, and the multiculturalism in the post-colonial period. Some people call this tendency in literature “neo-realism” [24].

This excerpt explicitly highlights Yu’s focus on the writers’ realistic concerns with multiple social problems and marginalized individuals and groups portrayed in novels and the content of novels draws his eyes. Weight on the content serves as very different angles from other critics’ views.

In 2007, Wang Shouren and Tong Qingsheng boldly put up forward their insightful description of postmodern realistic fiction.

The postmodern realistic fictions that appeared after the postmodernist experimentation fever are, in a sense, a new development of contemporary literature in the postmodern context. In other words, postmodern realistic fictions not only maintain the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, but also combines the common self-consciousness in modernist fiction and the characteristics of avant-garde fictions that reflect on the fiction itself [25].

These lines clearly express pinpoint descriptions of postmodern realism. First, Wang and Tong affirm the genealogical relations among 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist fictions, and postmodern realism. Second, critical self-judgment or self-evaluation is embedded into the new genre’s text and lines, which reflects its strong lively nature and the lasting energy of 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism. What is worth noticing is the vital theoretical construction of postmodern realism attributed to Wang Shouren and Yang Jinca’s co-edited collections—*The Research on the Process of the Post-War World and the Foreign Literature* published in 2019. In the fourth volume, entitled *The Research on the Development Trend of Foreign Literature in the New Century*, editors use one chapter to explore this new genre and provide some elaborate exemplars. This chapter can be accounted as one of the most authoritative and comprehensive construction at present.

Albeit in domestic, there are few scholars delineate their personal descriptions of neorealism, except Yu, Wang, and Tong mentioned above, and a few ones dedicate their papers and dissertations to dealing with neorealist fictions. In these circumstances, this new genre can be conceived as coming into its development and theoretical practice. Jiang Tao asserts that “neorealist novels are the organic integration of the creative principles of realism and the methods of modernism and postmodernism” [26]. Tong Xueming in 2009 delicately explored American postmodern realism and he boldly asserts that “postmodern realism is the convergence of postmodernism and realism” [27]. He defines the

characteristics of this genre: “paying attention to social moral orientation, focusing on narrative, plain style, with profound educational connotation. Among them, realism and postmodernism are relatively prominent, which is the resultful unity of two poles” [27]. She Jun and Zhu Xinfu (2013) explore characters and characterizations in American neorealism fiction, and they find that neorealist writers tend to adopt blended techniques to portray fictional characters [28]. In doing so, it is available for them to construct more lively and vivid characters simultaneously in internal and external dimensions. This article sheds light on the key roles of characterizations and the characteristics of personality.

Coming into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Zeng Yanbing portrays the profile of 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature, and he summarizes four remarkable characteristics involving “the return of realism”, “the return of moral concern”, “pluralism”, and “the turn to photography” [29].

#### 4. Literary Practice of Neorealism in China

In the past few years, many academic monographs on the systematic study of American neorealistic novels have been published in China, such as Gao Ting *Transcending Jewishness: A Study on Philip Roth’s Latter Novels from A Neo-realistic Perspective* (2011), Luo Xiaoyun’s *Beyond Postmodernism: A Study of Neorealism in America* (2012) and *A Study on the Art of Philip Roth’s Neorealistic Novels* (2019), Luo Hong’s *Neo-realism in Contemporary Afro-American Novel* (2014), Fan Xiangyun’s *A Research on American Neorealist Novels in the Post-Classical Narrative Context* (2015), and She Jun’s *The Third Path Between Tradition and Experiment: A Study of American Neorealistic Fiction* (2016). What is worth noting is that there are some books that dedicate one chapter to exploring the neorealistic characteristics of one specific writer or this genre, like Li Jinyun’s *A study of Paul Auster’s Novels* (2016), and Dun Junxia and Zhang Yue’e, etc. co-authored *A Study of British Fiction Genres in the 20th Century* (2013). Among these authors mentioned above, the most influential ones cover Luo Xiaoyun and She Jun, so it is necessary to shed light on their individual opinions on this form as much as possible.

What should be paid more attention to is Luo Xiaoyun’s indispensable contribution to this new realism because he not only professionally explores the artistic features of American neorealism in 2012, as a new genre, covering four themes—novels about social issues, political issues, race issues, and war, but also he provides an academic case study of Phillips Roth’s neorealistic art. In his opinion, neorealism, different from traditional realism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, actually combines many artistic features of realism, modernism, and postmodernism. The new realist writers do turn their due attention to real social issues and paradoxical foci, by various methods and techniques, instead of to mimics of the real world [30]. Seven years later, he from a macro-dimension, defines neorealism from the authors’ social

concerns and genealogical connections among realism, modernism, and postmodernism.

Neorealism mainly refers to the return of realism in literature and art, with special emphasis on focusing on the living conditions of ordinary people in contemporary social conflicts and political turmoil at home and abroad. Various artistic techniques from modernism to postmodernism reflect the views flowing from writers' careful considerations.... The rise of new realism has two main characteristics: the first is the development of traditional realism. The second is the return from modernism and postmodernism to realism [31].

Apparently, as far as Luo is concerned, it is credible to say that neorealism sets its feet on the ground of social problems and conflicts clearly expressed in his two researches, and it is not difficult to find that in his second book he lays his emphasis on the individual that is absent in his former study. Thus, individual and society become one keyword in American neorealism in Luo's recent study. In fact, concern for society likewise wins much celebration from She Jun, which is well evidenced in his creative definition of neorealism.

American neorealist novel is an important contemporary American novel genre that began to appear in the 1970s. In the late 1960s, the trend of postmodern fiction experimentation in the United States turned sharply, and writers came the crossroads between continuing experimentation and returning to tradition, where contemporary American novelists have re-focused on social reality, drawing on the realist creation model and connecting with postmodernist creative skills, but separating from complete copy. A group of young novelists are also actively adopting this creative mode. As a result, in the new stage of postmodernism, a novel form of realism that is similar to the traditional realism style but has the characteristics of postmodernism is formed—neorealism novel, which is also called the postmodern realism novel. After more than 40 years of development, neorealist novels have become the main genre of contemporary American novels [32].

Compared with Luo Xiaoyun's description, She Jun discloses the worse necessary to choose one creative direction when the literary creation encounters the crossroad between continuing experiment and returning to traditions. Similarly, both describe neorealism through the lens of genealogical relations of realism, modernism, and postmodernism, which directly points out that neorealism does not come out not out of the air but as an alternative to genre development.

Based on the descriptions and designations mentioned above, some commonalities are shared by these domestic critics and scholars, which can be summarized in the following double aspects. First, in terms of content, neorealist novels return to the tradition of reflecting reality; second, in terms of artistic techniques, they adhere to the basic creative principles of realism and absorb the creative ideas and creative methods of modernist novels and postmodernist novels. Neorealist fiction does not eliminate the traces of

modernism, which in effect is left behind by foreign studies but draws due attention of domestic scholars including a constellation of Hou Weirui, Wang Shouren, Tong Qingsheng, Luo Xiaoyun. Besides, it is not difficult to find that most part of the research is contributed to American neorealist novels both in macro and micro dimensions, while there are few scholars exploring Britain neorealist novels, except for insightful theoretical construction in Lin Yi's doctoral dissertation "Heiresses of the 'Great Tradition' Britain's Liberal Humanist Women Writers in the Post-WWI Debates on Humanism". It is clearly shown by its title that humanism is its core topic, and the new novelistic form—postmodern realism, as an elaborated form, that is embedded in Zadie Smith's liberal humanistic thoughts. However, what should be noticed is that she only provides theoretical commons and diverges from close reading. In this sense, her theoretical observation makes it available to interpret Smith's novels from the perspective of neorealism.

## 5. Conclusion

After reviewing the great research gap left behind between American neorealism and Britain's neorealism, more regard should be paid to the latter, especially in the following three respects—the overall theoretical construction of Britain's neorealism, the profile of neorealist novels, as well as the case study of the writer's novelistic style.

This paper argues that any literary work is fundamentally realistic. What changes reside in the form the writer takes, and what remains unchanged is the writer's essential reflection of social reality through artificial techniques. As scholar Ruan Wei notes,

Realism is the distinguishing feature of literary generic novels and is the most crucial quality for being novels. If a novel does not express the reality or "the signified" in the minds of the ordinary, it will not be a successful novel or at least lacks vitality. Of course, it goes without saying that the art form is also crucial. If the art form is eliminated, the novel may be reduced to a general written report or an archive [33].

Realism has infinite vitality and it goes through vicissitudes of its various forms in different periods: objective realism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its representation of the social environment, the attention to human psychology in the stream of consciousness of modernism, and the deconstruction of the signified in postmodernism. These are all writers' artificial expressions of their continuous social concerns.

Based on the aforementioned situation, this paper will put forward the definition of British neorealism: British neorealism is an important creation type of contemporary British novel that has been continued since the 1980s. It is a new form of realist literature in the postmodern context, integrating the self-consciousness of modernism and language dominant of postmodernism, with an attempt to articulate and evaluate the relationships between the individual self and "signified" social reality in the textualized world. In the postmodern context, multiple worlds are textualized in fiction

that can be multi-interpreted by various readers. The origins of reality cannot be found, and it depends on readers' understanding. The major concern of British neorealism fiction resides more in "self", but it does not aberrate from the British tradition of (liberal) humanity.

Compared with traditional realism, modernism, and postmodernism, neorealism shares one commonality with the previous three genres and likewise, it accommodates many unique characteristics in the postmodern context. Regarding commonalities, the most compelling feature depends on the nature of realism—the typical. As the well-regarded British novelist and cultural critic Raymond Williams notes in *The Long Revolution* (1961),

we can see that the concept of *tipichnost* (italic in origin, typicality in Russian) alters 'realism' from its sense of the direct reproduction of observed reality: 'realism' becomes, instead, a principled and organized selection. If 'typical' is understood as the most deeply characteristic human experience, in an individual or in society (and clearly Marxists think of it as this, in relation to their own deepest beliefs), then it is clearly not far from the developed sense of the 'convincingly real' criterion, now commonplace in the West in relation to works of many kinds, both realist and non-realist in technique. And it is not our business to pick from this complex story the one use that we favour, the one true 'realism'. Rather, we must receive the actual meanings, distinguish and clarify them, and see which, if any, may be useful in describing our actual response to literature [4].

Certainly, realism in Williams's view refers to telling what is true to describe the most typical in an individual or society. Typicality takes a dominant place in realism, which is "the truly typical is based on 'comprehension of the laws and perspectives of future social development'" [4]. In this sense, it is reasonable to say that the most typical characteristics embodied in different periods depending on the novelists' favorable techniques, styles, and forms, which relate to the differences in realism, modernism, and postmodernism.

As far as neorealism and its literary scope are concerned, it is certainly credible to say that these scholars do not retreat from the questions of "truth/fiction", namely the paradox of realism, and "language/world", also the indispensable topic related to postmodernism. In other words, the first question focuses on the relationship between the social world and the textual world, and the second concerns the referential relationship of language and the material world, which both matter in the vicissitudes of realism. Both respond to the criticisms of "the death of literature" and "the demise of realism" due to the uncertainty, nonsense, and fictionality of the literary texts in the postmodern context. Thus, it can be concluded that neorealism is a sub-genre of realism combining the concerns of realism with technical experiments of modernism and postmodernism, by accommodating the strengths of that genres and eschewing their limitations.

## Acknowledgements

The paper is supported by the funding project "Guangdong University of Foreign Studies on Sponsoring Postgraduate Study and Exchange Abroad in 2021".

## References

- [1] Tallis, Ramond. In Defense of Realism. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.
- [2] Furst, Lilian R. "Realism and Its 'Code of Accreditation'." *Comparative Literary Studies*. 2. 2 (1988): 101-26.
- [3] Yang Jincai, Wang Shouren. Research on the Postwar World Process and the Process of Foreign Literature Volume 4, Research on the Development Trend of Foreign Literature in the New Century. Yi Lin Press, 2019.
- [4] Williams, Raymond. *The Long Revolution*. Columbia University Press, 1961.
- [5] Wolfe, Tom. "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Manifesto for the New Social Novel." *Harper's Magazine* (1985): 45-56.
- [6] Franzen, Jonathan. "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels." *Harper's Magazine* (1996): 35-53.
- [7] Reed, T. V. "Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodernist Realism in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." *Representations*, no. 24 (1988), 156-176.
- [8] Emory Elliott. *The Columbia History of the American Novel*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005.
- [9] Elias, Amy J. "Meta-mimesis? The problem of British Postmodern Realism." *British. Postmodern Fiction* (1993): 9-31.
- [10] Fluck, Winfried. *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. Kristaan Versluys. Rodopi, 1992, 65-85.
- [11] Borgmann, Albert. *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- [12] Thornton, William H., and Songok Han Thornton. "Toward a Cultural Prosaics: Postmodern. Realism in the New Literary Historiography." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 26.4 (1993): 119-142.
- [13] Bowen, Deborah. "Preserving Appearances: Photography and the Postmodern Realism of Anita Brookner." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* (1995): 123-148.
- [14] Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 1898.
- [15] Richardson, Brian. "Remapping the Present: The Master Narrative of Modern Literary History and the Lost Forms of Twentieth-century Fiction." *Twentieth Century Literature* 43.3 (1997): 291-309.
- [16] Dubey, Madhu. "Post-postmodern Realism?." *Twentieth Century Literature* 57.3/4 (2011): 364-371.
- [17] McLaughlin, Robert L. "Post-postmodern discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social. World." *Symploke* 12.1/2 (2004): 53-68.



- [18] Hou Weirui. *The History of Modern British Fiction*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1985.
- [19] Cheng Xilin. "Fiction and Fact: Contemporary and Neorealism in Post-War American Fiction." *Foreign Literature Studies* 3 (1992): 32-38.
- [20] Guo Jide. "The Neorealist Tendency in Contemporary American Literature." *Contemporary Foreign Literature* 4 (1997): 147-150.
- [21] Guo, Jide. "A Review of Post-War American Literature." *Contemporary Foreign Literature* 3 (2000): 134-140.
- [22] Yin Qiping. "Calling Neorealism: A Review of Williams' View of Novels." *Foreign Literature* 5 (1997): 64-72.
- [23] Zhong Ming. "An Analysis of British Postmodern Realism Fiction." *Foreign Literature Studies* 1 (1999): 38-43.
- [24] Yu Jianhua. "Death and Birth: Sinclair Lewis Research and the Trend of Contemporary Literature." *Foreign Literature* 4 (2004): 77-82.
- [25] Wang Shouren, and Tong Qingsheng. "Recalling and Understanding Imaginary Knowledge: On American Postmodern Realist Novels." *Foreign Literature Review* 1 (2007): 48-59.
- [26] Jiang Tao. "The New Realism Horizon of Contemporary American Fiction." *Contemporary Foreign Literature* 4 (2007): 115-121.
- [27] Teng Xueming. "An Analysis of American Postmodern Realism Novels." *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University* 2 (2009): 66-69.
- [28] She Jun, and Zhu Xinfu. "Characters and Characterization in American Neorealist Fiction." *Contemporary Foreign Literature* 2 (2013): 127-135.
- [29] Zeng Yanbing. "The Trend and Characteristics of Western Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." *Guangdong Social Sciences* 1 (2011): 179-184.
- [30] Luo Xiaoyun. *Beyond Postmodernism: A Study of Neorealism in America*. Peking University Press, 2012.
- [31] Luo Xiaoyun. *A Study on the Art of Philip Roth's Neorealistic Novels*. China Social Sciences Press, 2014.
- [32] She Jun. *The Third Path Between Tradition and Experiment: A Study of American Neorealistic Fiction*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2016.
- [33] Ruan Wei. *Texts in Social Context: A Study of British Fiction after World War II*. Social Sciences Literature Publishing House, 1998.