(essay date 2000) In the following essay, Moss explores Mistry's realistic style, comparing it with the magic realism increasingly evident in South American novels.

On the back cover of the American paperback edition of Rohinton Mistry's recent novel A Fine Balance, there is an excerpt from the New York Times: "Those who continue to harp on the decline of the novel ought to ... consider Rohinton Mistry. He needs no infusion of magic realism to vivify the real. The real, through his eyes, is magical." The celebration of Mistry's choice of "a compassionate" realism (and the implicit denigration of magic realism) is but one critic's perception of Mistry's prose, yet it is also a comment on contemporary attitudes to the form of realism. The back cover, written to appeal to an "average" American consumer, depoliticizes Mistry's novel as it is placed in the company of "masters from Balzac to Dickens." In this light it can appear as if Mistry's use of the form rescues the (European) novel from the uncomfortable possibility of being overtaken—threatened, even—by magic realism, a form that has been most often associated with Latin American writing and therefore recognized as fundamentally non-European. Furthermore, the use of realism by a writer of what has recently been called the "far rim" (whether that be India or Canada) is taken to resuscitate the humanist traditions of the realist novel. Mistry's novel is accepted as having a sweeping appeal by the back-cover critic precisely because it does not resemble what has come to be viewed as a postcolonial novel of resistance—whether that be to caste in India or racism in Canada. The reason for this is simple: Mistry's novel is unequivocally realist and the prevalent view—both popular and academic—is that, for whatever reason, realism and resistance do not converge.

While Mistry's novel resists on every page, his resistance comes in the form of realism and is therefore often ignored as a focus of the text. The problematic nature of critical assumptions about postcolonial examples of realism stems, at least partially, from the privileging of the notion of resistance in postcolonial discourse. The concept of "resistance" has been fetishized to the point where it is even often presented without an object. At the same time, there has been a critical elevation of writing perceived to be experimental or writing that plays with non-realistic form. Within postcolonial criticism, these simultaneous developments have converged in the production of a profusion of studies linking, and sometimes suggesting the interdependence of, political or social resistance and non-realist fiction. If a text does not fit the profile of postcolonial resistance, as realist texts seldom do, it is generally considered incapable of subversion.

David Carter, in his article "Tasteless Subjects," notes that postcolonial critics tend to present realism as a monolithic whole that is "complicit with the process of imperialism" and therefore with "universalism, essentialism, positivism, individualism, modernity, historicism, and so on" (1992:296). In spite of many examples of recent politically charged realist texts, the critical expectations about the form often hold that it is a reinforcement of conservative, specifically imperialist, ideology. On one hand, this assumption has led to the co-option of literary
realism by conservative critics. On the other, it has led to the virtual dismissal of the realist novel by those critics looking for an apparently radical form to hold disruptive content. As part of the larger body of critics in the Academy, postcolonial critics are prominent in establishing such expectations. Non-realistic writing is frequently privileged by the critics because of the assumption that its various forms are inherently conducive to political subversion because of their capacity for presenting multiplicity. I challenge the idea, as it has been developed or assumed by many postcolonial critics, that realism is almost necessarily conservative, and non-realistic forms are inherently somehow more postcolonial—and therefore subversive. What is at issue in this paper, then, is the limited function of criticism when critics place too tight an ideological hold on realism and are not inclined to recognize the varieties of its possibilities or its capacity for multiplicity. I challenge this critical hegemony, arguing that realism is a viable, perhaps even indispensable, form for political and social engagement in postcolonial contexts. As such, the study is a reaction to the positioning of realism as a foil for other more "accepted" forms of insurance regardless of whether such positioning is driven from the left or the right.

Realism, for example, is repeatedly set in opposition to magic realism. Because of its Latin American literary origins, magic realism has become privileged as a suitable form for the inclusion of politicized commentary in what Jeanne Delbaere has called the "energy of the margins" and Stephen Slemon has now notoriously labeled "postcolonial discourse." Wendy Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora argue that in magic realist texts "ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions" (1995:3). In this formulation, realism has "accepted conventions" to which the politically active magic realist text can react. Magic realism opens up a space for the political to enter the text precisely because it is not realism here, while realism without magic is taken to be less capable of opposition. While I quarrel with the New York Times reviewer's depiction of magic realism as infused with a dose of magical rhetoric by an invisible but lurking trickster of the "far rim," it does seem that the increasingly popular form has either been characterized as a catch-all of political action or is emptied of its politics.

Realism has a history of political activity in India, but it does not have the international recognition that magic realism has as a form capable of carrying resistance. Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance traces the day-to-day lives of fictional characters through non-fictional incidents in the 1975 State-of-Emergency. The primary function of the "ordinary" characters in A Fine Balance is not to be synecdochic of the "Indian citizen" in the Emergency but rather to represent possible examples of what might happen in such a state. Mistry's characters populate a novel that is critical of the resilience of the caste system, the pervasive nature of corruption, the hiring of political crowds, forced labour camps, sexism, "Family Planning" and Indira Gandhi herself.

The four main characters converge in Dina's apartment. As refugees from constricting caste, gender or social roles, they each inhabit a marginal position in the context of India: Dina as a woman and a Parsi; Maneck as a rural Parsi; and Ishvar and Omprakash as leather workers transgressively transformed into tailors. The apartment is a setting at the interstices of culture, or "the overlap and displacement of difference," to use Homi Bhabha's phrase (1997:3). The four characters resist the social positions to which they are relegated by the community and try to foreground their own individuality. If the apartment is viewed as the secular site of convergence of individuals in a disruptive society, then the collapse of the community in the apartment is inevitable in the Emergency—a fact which the more conservative critics tend to ignore. The point is crucial: the individual can not be extricated from the community in this narrative. Bhabha writes that "political empowerment comes from posing questions of solidarity from the interstitial perspective" (1997:3). However, Mistry disempowers his characters after placing them in the putatively interstitial space of Dina's apartment.

The focus on the individual within the community evokes Bhabha's idea of the proximate, the "minority position," the moderate subject, or the "first-in-third" (Bhabha 1997:434). For Bhabha, this position depends on the interstitial space of identification, on the ambivalent position of being at once one in a community (third person) and an individual in society (first person). The moderate subject is articulated in a movement between third and
first persons. It is constituted "as an effect of the ambivalent condition of their borderline proximity--the first-in-the-third/one-in-the-other" (Bhabha 1997:434). However, in the Emergency context of A Fine Balance, there is no movement allowed between the first and the third. In this realist example the moderate position cannot exist. Conversely, magic realism relies on the possibility of the moderate position: the in-betweenness or the "all-at-onceness" which "encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural substructures" (Parkinson Zamora and Faris 1995:3). In Mistry's novel the point of resistance lies precisely in its representation of the impossibility of the moderate position. Mistry's realist novel concludes with the collapse of the apartment community which, in turn, leads to Dina's loss of independence, Ishvar's loss of his legs, Om's loss of his "manhood" and Maneck's loss of life.

Some critics have argued about the applicability of the term realism to Mistry's mode of representation. The argument runs like this: it is degrading to see Mistry's writing as derivative of a European form, where the Indian writer has now "caught up," in the literary evolutionary scheme of things, to the point where British writers were in the nineteenth century. While such criticism can fairly be aimed at those critics who call Mistry "worthy of the nineteenth-century masters," such a view is not necessarily the impetus for all those who label the text realist. A focus on the limitations of social structures is by no means exclusively a feature of Victorian realism, although such fiction was an integral part of the education system in India. A concentration on the undistinguished lives of the lower classes clearly does not suggest that the text's precursor is necessarily Victorian realism. One only has to turn to such disparate classics of "social realism" in India in English as Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable, Raja Rao's Kanthapura or Bhabhani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers to think of critical depictions of a diversity of castes. Still, I agree with John Bal's comment that the realist novel is a precursor to Mistry's text, but I add that works of Indian social realism are also likely to be prominent precursors (1996:87).

As with the social realists, at points Mistry can be accused of being overly romantic in his portrait of poverty. The following tableau of workers trying to unblock an overflowing drain illustrates Mistry's propensity to present a lyrical view of poverty:

then a boy emerged out of the earth, clinging to the end of a rope. He was covered in the slippery sewer sludge, and when he stood up, his shone and shimmered in the sun with a terrible beauty. His hair, stiffened by muck, flared from his head like a crown of black flames. Behind him, the slum smoke curried towards the sky, and the hellishness of the place was complete. (1997:87)

The "interminable serpents of smoke" of Dickens's description of Coketown in Hard Times surface here in the slimy serpentine "s's" where the slippery sewer sludge stood up, shone and shimmered in the sun near the slum where fires smouldered, with smoke smudging the air (1990:28). Such alliteration adds to the self-consciously lyrical and somewhat melodramatic qualities of this depiction of the "underworld" (Mistry's word); yet, sewers do have black sewer sludge spilling from drains in a state of civic unrest and governmental corruption. This is a romanticized portrait of poverty and filth, but even such a portrait carries pointed commentary within it. It is important to note that Dina views this scene because her train is blocked by "demonstrations against the government" (1996:67). So the sewer scene for Dina--on the top level of a double-decker bus--is juxtaposed with a view of "banners and slogans [that] accused the Prime Minister of misrule and corruption, calling on her to resign in keeping with the court judgments finding her guilty of election malpractice" (1997:87). Mistry's explication of the Emergency context is not simply to provide a setting for a lyrical alliterative passage. There is an irrefutable link between slime and corruption.

In her review of Mistry's first novel Such a Long Journey, Arun Mukherjee argues with the comparison to a Victorian realist novel because such a comparison does not consider how the characters' lives are "negotiated in the context of a social environment" (1992:83). Mistry's narrative form, according to Mukherjee, is not realism but rather a representation of the real, as it "attempts to make sense of actual historical events by narrativising them" (1992:83). The necessity for cultural and historical specificity in realist novels is not fully taken into account.
in this comment. In Mukherjee's configuration of realism, the form simply provides a background for the action of the novel. The use of realism as background is sharply criticized by Chinua Achebe in his essay on Joseph Conrad's use of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*:

> Africa as setting and backdrop ... eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? (1988:257)

While I agree with Achebe's analysis of *Heart of Darkness*, I do not think that such a criticism should be launched against all examples of realism, as Mukherjee seems to. Mistry's realist novel is a case in point. Like Achebe, Mistry works against the notion of using context as a background for development of the individual in the novel. Mistry's recent novel relies closely and clearly on an understanding of its Indian context set in a specific time and place. *A Fine Balance* is emphatically not a World text in Franco Moretti's terms, where the "geographical frame of reference is no longer the nation-state, but a broader entity--a continent, or the world-system as a whole" (1996:50); nor is it a postnational text with sites as interchangeable as postcards, to use Frank Davey's formulation of postnational settings, nor are the political issues constructed in purely globalized terms. In *A Fine Balance*, although we follow the quotidian lives of fictional characters through non-fictional incidents in Indian history, "History is emphatically not the backdrop. Indeed, Dina is proven wrong when she dismisses the Emergency as background. Early in the narrative she explains the Emergency as "Government problems--games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us" (Mistry 1997:75). However, the remainder of the novel slowly details just how it does affect the "ordinary" character in the destruction of the apartment community.

This is clearly a tragic novel; yet many reviewers seem to rely heavily on the assumed conservative nature of its realist form and focus on the universally applicable elements of the apartment community (the optimism evoked in such a communal gathering), rather than the clear disruption of those elements in the conclusion (the pessimism that leads to the inevitable disruption of the community). This is particularly well illustrated in the comments that adorn the novel paratextually: "A Fine Balance creates an enduring panorama of the human spirit in an inhuman state"; and "The four strangers start sharing their stories, then meals, then living space, until over the divides of caste, class, and religion, the ties of human kinship prevail"; and even "in this one shabby little apartment, at least, the human family becomes more than a phrase, more than a metaphor, a piety" (Mohani 1996:29). Such responses to the novel are undeniably humanist. My response is repeatedly: yes, but--yes, but the fundamental point of Mistry's text is that the "ties of human kinship" do not prevail in his 1970s India. Things have fallen apart; the universalist paradigm can not hold.

Perhaps the finest example of a conservative--even neoimperialist--co-option of Mistry's realism is presented on the flyleaf of the novel. From the *Literary Review of London*, it reads: "A Work of genius ... A Fine Balance is the India novel, the novel readers have been waiting for since E. M. Forster." This comment not only exposes the vision of realism as an orientalist technique; it addresses itself specifically to the readers who would consider realism as such. The thinking behind this comment seems to be that, because *A Fine Balance* is not written in the quick syntax of Raja Rao, or the innovative styles of G. V. Desani, Amitav Ghosh or Salman Rushdie, it must be exemplary of the English tradition and therefore more valuable, more marketable, and ultimately more easily canonized in the Great Tradition. To equate Mistry's novel with *A Passage to India* (and to ignore the products of the intervening seventy-one years) thoroughly negates the context of both novels. I can only think that this is done because the reviewer, like many other critics, blindly accepts the notion of an ideologically conservative realism which is by definition an imperial product. The publicists of the American edition of *A Fine Balance* foreground the universal humanist elements of the novel in the comments found on the physical body of the text in order to decontextualize, dehistoricize and ultimately depoliticize the realism in the novel and thus ostensibly make it more palatable for a general American public. Although I do not particularly believe that the novel needed rescuing, I do
think that realism does.

Notes

1. This quotation is taken from A. G. Mojtabai (1996:29).

2. See Rushdie (1996:49) for an explication of the term "far rim."

3. Bhabha claims that through his theorizing of "proximity": "we are in a better position to grasp what [Gilles] Deleuze and [Félix] Guattari cryptically describe in *A Thousand Plateaus* as 'becoming minoritarian': a movement within the 'in-between ... constituting a zone of proximity ... sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other'" (1997:439). He also works through Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of Kafka's "minor literature" (1997:440). However, Bhabha only seems to use their term loosely as a launching point for his own criticism of the "minority" writer.

4. See, for example, Arun Mukherjee (1992).


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