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POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY THEORY AND THE SPECTRE OF REALISM:
AN EVALUATION OF THE CURRENT POSITION OF THE REALIST NOVEL
IN POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND CRITICISM,
WITH A CASE STUDY OF ROHINTON MISTRY'S FICTION

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chapter one

scope and outline of this study

In the last half century, literary theory has radically overhauled our perception of the novelistic genre of realism. The genre that mainly held sway in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe has been undone of its claim to present reality in a transparent, objective and true manner. As a result, realist fiction now stands revealed as only fiction, and its truth-premises have been undermined so that realist fiction contains as many distortions of the real as anti-realist literary strands. However, what distinguishes realist from anti-realist fiction – and this is what the poststructuralist revision of the genre amounts to – is the realist denial of falsifying the real. Realist discourse, according to theory, masks the inherent contradictions between language and reality. It purports to overcome the insurmountable difference that arises when the world is represented by means of the linguistic system. The so-called naïve denial of this difference is what has turned realism into one of the *bêtes noires* of academic discourse.

The charge against realism reverberates loudly in the dark hallways of postcolonial literary theory. Here, the difference that accompanies the restructuring of reality in discourse is complicated by the cultural difference that informs the postcolonial experience. The postcolonial subject cannot profess to represent the Other in transparent or objective terms because there is an irreconcilable cultural difference in the approach of the Other. Realist discourse, in postcolonial theory, is thus flawed because of its denial of discursive failure and its insistence on the faithful, universal representation of the Other by means of a linguistic system that invariably reflects ideological presuppositions that belong to one specific society rather than to a universal world.

I do not wish to state that postcolonial theory overtly criticises the realist novelistic genre; there is no well-documented and coherent postcolonial theoretical charge against realism. However, I do believe that there is a covert but misplaced distrust of the realist premises. Theory is subliminally but frantically obsessed with the 'problem' of realism in that it does not turn it into a decent topic, but cannot leave it alone either. In other words, the spectre of realism haunts the fringes of postcolonial literary theory. The goal of this study is to uncover the marginal but disturbing presence of realism in postcolonial studies and to locate a more positive place for realism in the vast body of postcolonial theory.

The fiction of Rohinton Mistry seems particularly apt to serve as a case study to corroborate my theoretical argument. Despite the wide critical acclaim of his novels and short stories, including his hat-trick on the Booker Prize shortlists – *Such A Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002) were all shortlisted for what may perhaps be called today's most prestigious prize for English fiction – academic criticism is ambivalent about his achievements. While reviewers often praise Mistry for his nineteenth-century Dickensian or even French realism in the vein of Balzac, several academic critics are either uneasy with or not sure what to think of his 'realism' in a postcolonial context. Postcolonial theory and criticism often celebrate the use of anti-realist, 'postmodern' techniques and themes, which consequently leaves writers such as Mistry, "writing as if modernism had never happened" (Baena 2000:191), out of the picture. Either way, Mistry's use of the typically European genre of realism – especially concerning its ideological presuppositions – in order to portray the postcolonial experience does and must not go unnoticed.

In this study, I hypothesize that realism is sufficiently resilient a literary genre to stand the postcolonial test of

accommodating the difference inherent in the (post)colonial encounter. To substantiate my argument, I will first provide a short outline of the construction and deconstruction of the realist premises in contemporary theory. As I do not wish to indulge in another – by now already tedious – recapitulation of poststructuralism's charges against realism, I will devote special attention to the postcolonial repercussions for the genre. In the second half of this study, I will examine Mistry's critical use of the realist genre to narrate the postcolonial condition. In this tripartite chapter, I will first look at the history of the realist Indo-Anglian novel before turning to Mistry's work. As of yet, no critical attention has been devoted to the anti-realist tendencies in Mistry's *Family Matters*, so my corpus will be limited to this novel, preceded by a short outline of the reception of his prior work.

chapter two

the spectre of realism in postcolonial theory

THE PREMISES OF HISTORICAL REALISM

With the term 'historical realism', I do not refer to historical fiction – although the latter, as we will see, has much in common with realism – but rather to the origins of realism as a well-defined genre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The basic premise of any strain of realism is that there is some original reality on which language relies. Thus, realism primarily posits the existence of a reality separate from thought and language: "objects exist independently of what we think about them" (Lamarque 1990:135). Moreover, it stipulates that truth is to be found in this primordial reality, from which the meaning of linguistic marks derives. Elizabeth Ermarth phrases realism's love for the world out there most succinctly: "Any figure is a sign that points beyond itself; it is not apprehensible in itself, but only as a symbol of a reality hidden in the series of apparent forms and coordinating them invisibly" (1998:23). From this point of view, meaning is not solely created in language, but it is innate in extratextual reality. The linguistic construct thus tails along after external reality, and needs real-life experience as a touchstone for its own significance: the real world as we know it dictates narrative. Literature's harking back to reality is most succinctly displayed in the (realist) novel, "since in the novel, more than in any other genre, general truths only exist *post res*" (Watt 1963:12).

In addition to the basic realist precondition that language needs extratextual truth, historical realism presents a strong belief in the reason of the individual that has the ability to indiscriminately uncover this truth. As Ian Watt phrases it in

his classic study *The Rise of the Novel*: “modern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses” (1963:12). Even if Watt’s study of the novel has by now been discredited on the ground of empirical bias – he scotomizes without scruples the Gothic novel and the strong presence of female writers in the novelistic tradition (Azim 1993:26, Morris 2003:78) – his thesis on realism is still informative. It conveys a very confident belief on the part of realism in the power of the individual to eventually grasp real truth through his empirical faculty. Realism thus goes hand in hand with the upsurge of scientific understanding and the Kantian kind of Enlightenment that inspires the individual to think for himself. In the visual arts this amounts to a rationalization of sight, while literary realism’s goal is the “rationalization of consciousness” (Ermarth 1998:4). Importantly, Watt adds that this catchphrase alone does not distinguish the novel realism of the eighteenth century from its precursors. The novelty of philosophical realism in the vein of Descartes and Locke consists in its clean break with the burden of past ideology. The new realism does away with received truths and celebrates the victory of individual reason over collective doctrine. It comprises of

the study of the particulars of experience by the individual investigator, who, ideally at least, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs; and it has given a peculiar importance to semantics, to *the problem of the nature of the correspondence between words and reality.*

(Watt 1963:12, emphasis added)

Philosophical realism was scarcely out of the egg, or it already recognized that the very thing that it had in mind – the disinterested scrutiny of life in all its aspects – was a problematic venture. In all its various guises, realism eventually faces the realization of the chasm between word and world. Yet, philosophical realism emphasizes the transcendence

of this problem and the annihilation of gaps: through the faculty of reason, the problematic liaison of word and world can be overcome. The spirit of the Enlightenment aims at the profane transcendence of all problems, including the one philosophical realism puts centre-stage. Even if the British classical realist tradition is more ambivalent or indeterminate towards the language-reality interface than the French, it still "implies an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some non-verbal truth out there", as George Levine remarks (quoted in Morris 2003:80-81). This literary stance traces back to the foundations of philosophical realism in the eighteenth century.

Language, in eighteenth-century linguistic speculation, was seen as a perfect system of representation, issuing from the coherent and unified subject, which this system presupposed ... The 'emergence', 'appearance' or 'rise' of the novel took place within an area of speculation and debate about language and subjectivity. Gaps in the word/object formula tended to be overlooked in this scheme.

(Azim 1993:17-20)

Realism's worship of reason becomes evident in its staging of the phenomenal categories of time and space. In a liberal turn away from the so-called organic hierarchy that was implicit in the pre-modern feudal system, philosophical realism propounds the neutrality of time and space to democratically homogenize experience and to establish a world-view common to all. The realist convention neutralizes and naturalizes time and space so that they can provide the basis for a common understanding of reality. The continuity of time and space permit reality to be measured in terms of sameness.

As continuous, homogeneous, neutral media, space and time are populated by objects that exhibit certain consistencies of behavior, regardless of changes in position, which enable us to recognize them as the same. Neither people nor objects are any longer merely collections of attributes, each with independent status; instead, they reveal uniformities that constitute

identity. Both the identities of things and the conditions in which they appear have a consistency and a constancy that permit them to be measured and reproduced.

(Ermarth 1998:18)

As a result, realism's concept of history, which is firmly grounded in the humanist tradition, tries to establish unity through the reconciliation of differences. In contrast with medieval historiography, where history is thought of as discontinuous, the humanists look for continuities between historical instances. This radically new, unitary sense of history – which is central to liberal traditions – finds its apex in the age of realism, where history gains scientific status. Through a meticulous study of historical particulars, the enlightened axiom that past and present are mutually informative results in the homogenization of history. This humanist conception of history does not only take hold of the literary and scientific-historical field, but also and especially of the English social and political system (Ermarth 1998:29-30). History thus unites the literary and scholarly, as well as the English socio-political world.

Next to the objectivity and ubiquity of the temporal medium, realists also proclaim the neutrality of space. Reason permits them to accurately measure the distance between two different objects in space. In literary realism, this not only boils down to a scrutiny of setting, but also to the creation of a neutral narrative point of view. The narrator's position is fixed and overtly arbitrary. The distance of the realist narrative perspective maintains the empirical rules underlying the events and settings he depicts: the narrator's position "could be moved without altering the essential [spatial and temporal] relations in the scene pictured—relations that are independent of apparent ones" (Ermarth 1998:20). No matter where the realist narrating subject is standing, as long as the founding principle of distance is observed, he speaks the truth.

Again, faith in mankind's secular transcendence of all particularities and problems through the empirical categories of time and space is part of the realist novel's striving for unity. The lost vertical unity with God is replaced by a belief to reinstall unity, but now along the horizontal axis. Modern (realist) art presents a reality that is *being given* totality but which is always questioned, in contrast with the religious *given* totality of pre-modern art (Lukács 1973:33). Still, the self-questioning aspect of the realist novel is always recuperative: no matter how insurmountable the problems that realism portrays – these problems are situated *in* as well as *about* representation – “the basic grid is agreed upon, and so a whole world can be projected in which there will be no absolute discontinuities, no disturbing anomalies that cannot, at this general level, be rationalized” (Ermarth 1998:22). To the realist's mind, the difficulty of the individuation or liberation of the subject, the troubles concerning the gradual Hegelian progress of humanity, as well as the issues pertaining to the representation of reality through language are all challenges that will eventually point to their rational resolution. There may be cracks in the realist code, but never sweeping fissures. “Differences in realism are always concordable, never irreducible; they invite us to reach for the inner dimension where differences are reconciled” (Ermarth 1998:47).

In historical realism, this positive and positivist understanding of reality tends to be easily naturalized (Bell 1990:188-193). Whether this is a mere forgetting of the convention, or a sly attempt – as deconstructionists would want to make us believe – to consolidate the ever problematic affair between language and so-called reality, “realism compounds its [conventional] abstraction [from reality] by masking it” (Ermarth 1997:75). Wayne Booth was clearly onto something when he put forward that for the true realist author “selectivity must be eliminated—or is it simply that all recognizable signs

of selection must be eliminated?" (1961:52). Even if all literature, including realism, is subject to artificiality, some forms of realism try to ignore it by naturalizing their conventions, which is potential danger of mimesis: "la mimèsis fait passer la convention pour la nature" (Compagnon 1998:112). These forms of realism no longer self-consciously put forward the problematic relationship between reality and language that realism holds dear. Stripped of the awareness of its own making, these realist variants indeed put forward a belief in an original reality that is "*hidden* in the series of apparent forms and coordinating them *invisibly*" (Ermarth 1998:23, emphasis added). Even if the artificiality and conventionality of realism has always been pointed out by novel criticism, which is also the pet subject of the poststructuralist turn, the slipperiness of realism's claim to common and neutral understanding is prone to elicit negative and even hostile responses. As Ian Watt phrased it back in 1957:

Formal realism is, of course, like the rules of evidence, only a convention; and there is no reason why the report on human life which is presented by it should be in fact any truer than those presented through the very different conventions of other literary genres. The novel's total air of authenticity, indeed, does tend to authorise confusion on this point: and the tendency of some Realists and Naturalists to forget that the accurate transcription of actuality does not necessarily produce a work of any real truth or enduring literary value is no doubt partly responsible for the rather widespread distaste for Realism and all its works which is current today.

(1963:32)

I will consequently present literary theory's pressing scepticism of realism that flourished in the second half of the twentieth century before considering the place of realism in postcolonial literary theory.

THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST CHARGE AGAINST REALISM

Twentieth-century thought radically takes down all that realism presupposes. In the wake of structuralist linguistics, poststructuralism puts forward the idea that the origins of meaning are not to be found in extratextual reality, but in language itself. It takes up de Saussure's convincing contention that significance is shaped by the binary oppositions inherent in language, and that no non-textual reality need be consulted in order to check the truth-value of texts. From this point of view, language constructs meaning, and the basic realist premise that there is some non-verbal truth out there that contains the key to textual significance is subverted. Narrative, as the intense exploitation of the meaningfulness of language, constructs meaning while "in life, elements and events do not have this intrinsic meaningfulness" (Bell 1990:174).

Consequently, the realist constellation collapses like a house of cards. Realism's axiom that 'truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses', as Watt formulates it, is rephrased as 'truth is created by the community through language'. In the doctrine of poststructuralism, the individual loses his or her power to discover the significance of the world, not only because the world as a sensible entity no longer exists, but also because language always predates the individual. Human subjects are born into a community; the words that we use are always contaminated by previous uses in other contexts. Etymologically, the text is a tissue of quotations, as Roland Barthes tells us. Consequently, we can never use words innocently or truthfully, because they are inextricably tied to the collective social construct and are thus subject to some form of ideology and thus to falsity. As René Wellek cunningly states it: "In theory, completely truthful representation of reality would exclude any kind of social purpose or propaganda. Obviously the theoretical difficulty of realism, its contradictoriness, lies in this very point" (1961:13). Moreover,

the stain of ideology is not *present* to us, as deconstruction would have it. Language is characterized by a disturbing absence of the human subject, so that the idea of a free-willed rational individual expressing himself is forever relegated to the dungeons of nineteenth-century thought. Or, more radically put, we do not speak language, but language speaks *through* us. What is more, the realist bridge between thought and language, where language functions as a perfect rational system in the fashion of John Locke, is also blown up: "the project of absolute knowledge [is] deluded at source by its forgetfulness of how *language* creates and capriciously misleads the processes of thought" (Norris 2002:76). As a result, together with the notion of an extra-textual reality, the liberal ideas of individual reason and consciousness fall in a poststructuralist faint, and give way to a catatonic view of human beings caught in the web of collective ideology.

In denying the primacy of individual reason, the poststructuralist/postmodernist heritage pricks the balloon that promises the eventual resolution of all problems, including that of translucent representation. The spirit of postmodernism does not envisage transcendental closure, but, as Linda Hutcheon remarks, "exploits and yet simultaneously calls into question notions of closure, totalization, and universality that are part of those challenged grand narratives". She adds that "maybe we need to stop trying to find totalizing narratives which dissolve difference and contradiction (into, for instance, either *humanist eternal* [and ubiquitous] *Truth* or Marxist dialectic" (Hutcheon 2002:67, emphasis added). Poststructuralism debunks the enterprise of liberal humanism, which pulverizes reality into a temporal and spatial oneness that transcends the horrific irreconcilability of particulars.

Postmodernism also does away with empirical interpretations of time and space, the watchdogs of liberated reason.

Where the older conventions of space and time—and they are conventions essential not only to novels but to cultural narratives of all kinds, as well as to empirical science and technology—provided common ground in the media of time and space, postmodern narrative looks elsewhere for its common ground.

(Ermarth 1992:22).

Realist conventions about time and space are never naturally, but culturally determined; they carry the weight of social ideology and doctrine. Temporal consciousness in postmodern narrative is not passive, but active: the idea of time is always moulded by individual and, primarily, collective sense. Along with the ubiquitous neutrality of time and space, the inclusiveness of history disappears. History no longer unites mankind, but is specific and ideologically determined. In classical realism, historical time tends to depreciate questions of value and purports to carry objectivity, neutrality and quantitative measurement. History, however, is not natural and thus universal but “the great creator of disciplines and the great segregator of culture” (Ermarth 1992:37). Poststructuralist theories shed light on the degradation of the liberal conception of time, space and history into a discriminatory, all-encompassing world-view.

Poststructuralism’s most informative insight is that, rather than attaining the liberal bliss of organic unity, realism can only proffer a nasty sense of wholeness by violently conflating incommensurable differences. According to poststructuralist philosophy, realism replaces the pre-modern organic oneness with God by a credence to the resolution of particulars that is blind to their inherent contradictions. In realist discourse, difference tends to be dialectically synthesized onto a higher level – as Hegel taught us – which cancels out the irony that is inherent in human experience. Even though irony is masked by the realist novel, it subliminally shapes the realist form. Georg Lukács uncovers irony or dissonance as one of the main characteristics of the realist novel. Realism may aspire to

unity, but this is always an ironical unity, as it is never complete (Lukács 1973:88).

Still, even Lukács cannot skirt the realist trap. Paul de Man argues that Lukács is "indeed freeing himself from preconceived notions about the [realist] novel as an imitation of reality" in identifying irony as the main organizing principle of the realist novel, because "irony steadily undermines this claim at imitation and substitutes for it a conscious, interpreted awareness of the distance that separates an actual experience from the understanding of this experience" (1983:56). However, he concludes his discussion in disappointment by pointing to Lukács's further rejoicing in the triumph of the positive principle of time. Also Lukács cannot offer a completely ironical view of the realist novel, purportedly because the latter slurs its inescapable irony and because it inclines towards naturalizing its conventions. "It seems that the organicism which Lukács had eliminated from the [realist] novel when he made irony its guiding structural principle, has reentered the picture in the guise of time" (de Man 1983:58).

The charge of poststructuralism thus does not specifically consider realism's transparency, as both theory and the realist novel itself exclude a one-to-one correspondence between the word and the world, but the positivist denial of its ambivalence. Under the burden of its concurring ideology, realist art turns a blind eye to, or at least minimizes its underlying conventions and ironies. Postmodern art, in contrast, holds them up for scrutiny and flaunts convention and difference, and in doing so is artificial, but morally so, as Brian McHale once remarked. From a poststructuralist point of view – and specifically in its deconstructionist version – the whole natural world tends to be turned into culture, including those concepts which seem so empirical and natural to us, namely time and space. "As postmodern narrative breaks down the convention of historical time, it reveals the arbitrariness of its historical 'neutrality', and this opening forces us to focus

on precisely those questions of value and proportion that historical thinking defers" (Ermarth 1992:41). The poststructuralist revolution enables discourse analysts to look at how all literature, including realist currents, more or less self-consciously skirts the boundaries of its artifice. An investigation of realist literature in contexts that cannot sidestep the problem of difference and contradiction thus demands a heightened alertness to issues of troublesome representation, implicit or self-proclaimed irony and obvious conventionality. This is exactly the context of postcolonialism.

THE POSTCOLONIAL CHARGE AGAINST REALISM

As a subset of poststructuralist theory, postcolonialism fits into the discussion of realism as it has been hitherto outlined. Major critics point at the collusion of poststructuralism and postcolonial theory. The crisis of thought which the Enlightenment turns a blind eye to and which provides poststructuralism with its most illuminative insights is consequently seen as a specifically Western phenomenon. The poststructuralist/postmodern emphasis on decentralization, the ideological nature of the word, and the disappearance of the true knowing subject does not operate in a cultural vacuum, but ties in with the loss of Europe's hold over the world. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that the "accelerated qualification of monocultural thinking [i.e. the awareness that the discourse of Western Enlightenment was not universal, but specific] has been closely associated with so-called postmodern writing and poststructuralist literary theories, that is, with the 'crisis of authority' in European forms" (Ashcroft et al 1989:162). Homi Bhabha even goes so far as to declare that colonial (literary) practice foreshadows today's theory.

My growing conviction has been that the encounters and negotiations of differential meanings and values within 'colonial' textuality, its governmental discourses and

cultural practices, have anticipated, *avant la lettre*, many of the problematics of signification and judgement that have become current in contemporary theory – aporia, ambivalence, indeterminacy, the question of discursive closure, the threat to agency, the status of intentionality, the challenge to ‘totalizing’ concepts, to name but a few.

(Bhabha 2004:248)

Postcolonial theory shares many poststructuralist convictions about language and reality. It too is informed by a view of language constructing rather than reflecting reality. Again, there is no pre-given real that serves as the grain of mustard for the linguistic construct. Postcolonial theory radically abnegates a view of language that locates meaning in the material, non-verbal world. Consequently, it does away with representationalism, i.e. the conviction that language is built on the vestiges of a knowable and informative reality, and that its veracity has to be (empirically) tested with respect to this ‘original’, meaningful reality that lies outside of it. Postcolonial theory, according to Bhabha, raises

the issue of the representation of the colonial subject which questions the collusion between historicism and realism. It proposes that the category of literature, as of its history, is necessary and thoroughly mediated: that its reality is not given but produced ... This other view demands quite another notion of the historical inscription of literature and entails a critique of representation as simply given.

(1984:96)

The European truth about the Other is not simply given, in order to be correctly traced over in language, rather, it is produced by the metropolitan linguistic system that cannot step out of its European framework. Colonial epistemology presents the colonized as simply there, and as entirely and objectively representable on the basis of this uncontested givenness. In postcolonial studies, representationalism gives way to a concept of *discourse*, which shows that words produce rather than reflect the world. From this point of view, the Other is not just there,

but projected as being there on the basis of the Self's epistemological frame. Such presuppositions about language are radically different from those which colonialism, and, significantly, historical realism provide.

Moreover, the notion of discourse implies that language is socially motivated and construed through the apparatus of ideology. As de Saussure taught us, words acquire meaning through the internal linguistic binary oppositions and not by means of their reference to material objects in the world. Language is thus relational, but also arbitrary and conventional, as the various signifiers and signifieds need to be agreed upon and respected by a community of speakers. Language is not universal and objective, but specific and ideological. It shapes the community and is shaped by it at the same time. The disturbing and radical result of this train of thought is that "no human utterance [can] be seen as innocent. Any set of words [can] be analysed to reveal not just an individual but a historical consciousness at work. Words and images thus become fundamental for an analysis of historical processes such as colonialism" (Loomba 1998:37). To translate Ian Watt's thesis about European realism into a (post)colonial catchphrase: 'truth about the Other is created by the European community through ideological language'. Postcolonial theory, akin to poststructuralism, thus also supports a view of language as subjected to communal ideology rather than to individual reason.

In accordance with poststructuralism's wholesale rejection of the pure and self-present reason of the Enlightenment, postcolonial theory casts doubt on the European ideal of self-conscious liberal ratio. In the wake of Foucault, scholars as famous as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak have developed the idea that Western knowledge dovetails with fierce issues of power, discrimination and scientific racism. "The central figure of Western humanist and Enlightenment discourses, the humane, knowing subject, now stands revealed as a white male

colonialist" (Lomba 1998:66). Postcolonial thought does not only reject the liberal project of the Enlightenment because it fondles with the concept of a reason that claims to solve all problems, but also and especially because it inspires universalism and crudely ignores the fundamental differences between cultures. Also here, colonialism and realism convene, as both aspire after the rational transcendence of difference into unity.

Postcolonial theory equally disputes rational understandings of time and space. In contrast with realist and colonialist discourse, space and time are not considered universal, but specific. The colonial West conceives differently of the temporal and spatial categories than its colonial servants do. For the colonizer, they unite the world, whereas for the colonized they figure in terms of a differential problematic. Elizabeth Ermarth defends realist time and space by pointing to their objective make-up: they depend "not upon qualitative distinctions between 'better' and 'worse' points of view, but rather upon quantitative distinctions" (1998:21). But what if the purported neutrality of quantitative measurement has ideological bearings? What if the instruments of measurement are only available to a small portion of the world's population? In this case, the neutrality of the universal conceptual framework melts into thin air.

However, the postcolonial critique goes further. Realist time and space do not only unite the European conceptual framework, but also become conquistadors of the colonial undertaking. They are not merely part of a Western way of thinking about the world, negating the possibility of an Other historical and spatial consciousness, but also act in the colonial project and support modern colonial warfare by taking over the Other world, including the world-view of the colonized. Ermarth's vocabulary – whether she intends this or not – clearly bears the imprint of the violent nature of 'neutral' time and space: "The act of historical awareness ran through the era from Piero della

Francesca to Erasmus like a bolt of energy and opened the horizon, both in space and time, to *exploration and conquest*" (1992:27, emphasis added).

Historical time, in its realist guise, is an invention of the West: it is specific, local and conventional even if its truth-claims are universal (Ermarth 1997:71). In the vicious context of colonialism, realist historical time incarcerates Other histories. The destruction and rewriting of indigenous historical sources testify to the fact that European historiography jettisons its ground-breaking principle of liberal unity and shared perspective – which is also that of realism – when it is confronted with an Other which it cannot depict rationally, that is, in terms of universal constancy, consistency and sameness. And yet, this coercive rewriting of colonized historical consciousness will never completely consist of the colonizer's words: the Other refuses to be repressed. The ambivalence of realist time, the fact that it is inhabited by uncompromising differences – the colonizer's word against that of the colonized – reveals its specificity and undermines its universal validity. According to Bhabha, the world-views of both the colonizer and the colonized are affected in the hybrid meeting place of colonialism, so that both views of time are ambivalent. The crucial difference, however, is that the colonized subject "will not ... celebrate the monumentality of historicist memory, the sociological totality of society, or the homogeneity of cultural experience. The discourse of the minority reveals the insurmountable ambivalence that structures the *equivocal* movement of historical time" (Bhabha 2004:225-226). Minority speech exposes the arbitrariness of all speech, and thus corrodes the 'natural' power of the colonizer's words.

The same holds true for the empirical concept of space. Bhabha contends that the politics of space of the Enlightenment, which finds its apex in the modernity of European nationalism, does not meet its universalist aim, because it needs to define the nation's exteriority – the nation's Other that must be

different – to install itself and is thus specific (2004:203). In the hybrid postcolonial perspective, the national Self is always founded on the frightening presence of the Other and thus undermines its own authority. The colonial model lays bare that “exteriority names precisely those ambiguous places in which what is strange and seemingly outside is at the same time inside by the sheer fact of being named” (Mignolo 2002:156). The hybrid site of colonialism exposes the universal validity of European nationalism as specific, and yet at the same time contaminated by the gaze of the colonized. The incommensurable spatial differences that inhere in the colonial venture thus question the universalism of the nationalist model, which is itself a continuation of the colonial system, as Linda Hutcheon observes (Mignolo 2002:160).

Homi Bhabha’s indictment of the ‘neutral’ concepts of time and space is one of the most developed in postcolonial theory, and irrevocably shows that realist and colonialist narrative converge on this subject. In the key essay ‘Dissemination: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation’, he theorizes that realism depends on the structural concepts of time and space to take hold of the Other, but that even then, this realism can never really affirm itself. For Bhabha, realism always displays a “narrative struggle”: it is ambivalent, because it depends as much on its Other as it tries to deflect it. In his paraphrase of Bakhtin’s discussion of the chronotope in Goethe’s realist texts, he asks whether “this national time-space [can] be as fixed or as immediately visible as Bakhtin claims” (Bhabha 2004:206). Realist time for Bhabha is always Janus-faced, unstable and ironic; it is never fixed, immediately visible or complete. It is invariably inhabited by an Other historical consciousness, even if it claims to overcome the latter. The difference between the West’s conception of the temporal and spatial labels is that the West believes in their power to unify the world and to measure it in terms of sameness,

while for the colonized subject, space and time are never unifying and the same but inherently split.

Realism and colonialism alike thus try to install unity by ignoring the incommensurable differences that enrich human experience. Bhabha clearly puts colonial discourse on a structural par with realist narrative:

colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet *entirely knowable and visible*. It resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and *recognizable totality*. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism.

(2004:101, emphasis added)

Instead of unity, postcolonial theory cherishes and openly points attention towards differences, without wanting to annihilate them into identical and identifiable oneness. The vantage point of postcolonialism consists in its ability to think beyond identity, sameness and transparent representation, which are precisely the concepts that realism puts forward. Contemporary postcolonial theory, then, pits realism and the postcolonial condition against each other.

Apt to engender "confusion of linguistic with natural reality," mimesis in the realist genre can be a risky trope for the postcolonial writer because it is associated with such terms as "copy," "reproduction," and "imitation," and so in danger of contributing to rather than challenging the problems of fixed identity that postcolonial discourse has consistently struggled against.

(Bahri 2003:123)

In the postcolonial experience, as in realism, the reconciliation of opposites is never complete, but the difference is that postcolonialism warns us that the difference should never be forgotten. Homi Bhabha's catchword for this constant awareness of the differential nature of being is mimicry: the "difference that is almost the same but not quite"

(2004:122). Colonial mimicry is the summit of ambivalence, indeterminacy or doubleness. Bhabha maintains that it differs from mimesis in that it "repeats rather than re-presents" (2004:125); its imitation is never complete but partial. Mimicry implies the conspicuous presence of fissures and splits, in contrast with mimeticism, which overcomes its splits by ignoring them. Therefore, mimicry is a weapon of (political) resistance which threatens the issue of authority: "The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Bhabha 2004:126). What is more, mimicry is not only a means by which the colonized subject may question the authority of the colonizer, but also the very trap by which the colonizer endangers his own authority. *All* colonial discourse, both that of the colonizer and that of the colonized, is characterized by mimicry. Therefore, mimicry ultimately disavows the notion of origin, or the pre-givenness of representation.

As far as anti-colonial narrative is concerned, this position boils down to a continuous vigilance over the artificiality of the word. As Bhabha would have it, the 'narrative struggle' should always be foregrounded in order not to disregard the fact that the differences are still there. Whereas the Western colonizer – who employs the tropes and conventions of realist representation – pretends the *natural givenness* of the truth about the colonized so as to mask the ideological and therefore discriminatory nature of his representation of the colonized, the colonial subjugated and the postcolonial point of view openly draw attention to the *cultural production* of truth. Mimicry may be considered as the blanket term for all literary tropes, modes, genres and other theoretical coinages which postcolonial literary theory and criticism tamper with: irony, metaphor, parody, allegory, rewriting or writing back, magic realism, historiographic metafiction, multiplicity, the carnivalesque, etc. All these terms imply both continuity and distance, sameness and difference – almost the same but not

quite – and most crucially, they bring their artifice to the fore through a permanent self-consciousness of the act of writing. Postcolonial theory thinks of literary realism as a mode of writing which, in contrast with ‘postcolonial’ discourse, masks its conventionality, arbitrariness and specificity.

What we are made aware of immediately, is that the values of historicism and realism, the ‘unmediated’ and sequential progression to truth, the originality of vision – what Leavis would call the wholeness of their resolution – are historical and ideological productions without any of the inevitability that they claim. They are necessary fictions that believe too little in their own fictionality. They are historical in the sense that Giddens locates such practices of writing – such concepts of consciousness and truth – in the post-feudal West, associating them with development of the ideas of tradition, hermeneutics, historiography, and dissociating them from ascriptive, traditionalist cultures where writing may be mythological, and time-consciousness is cyclical. They are ideological in the sense in which the discourses of historicism and realism manifestly deny their own material and historical construction. Their practices can be seen as unmediated and universal because the unity of tradition lies in an absolute presence – a moment of transcendent originality.

(Bhabha 1984:97)

Bhabha’s critique of the naiveté of realism is obviously very harsh. He rather easily aligns colonialist with realist discourse on the basis of their denial of their fictionality. In this respect, Bhabha does not walk alone in postcolonial theory. Roland Barthes – even though not a postcolonial thinker – once suggested that “realist novels were complicit in fostering the confidence with which European nations imposed their understanding of moral identity and values upon colonised peoples, claiming, and often believing, they were upholding abiding human laws and promoting enlightenment and progress” (Morris 2003:33). Also Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Edouard Glissant and Bill Ashcroft – besides Bhabha four other pre-eminent postcolonial theorists – succumb to a reading of realist

texts in terms of their colonial innuendo. Spivak maintains that realism cannot be read without reference to British imperialism (Azim 1993:30). Other critics even go so far as to say that "the novel [the realist novel is implied] is an imperial genre, not in theme merely, not only by virtue of the historical moment of its birth, but in its formal structure – in the construction of that narrative voice which holds the narrative structure together" (Azim 1993:30). Edouard Glissant proposes for postcolonialism a departure from literary mimesis, which he considers to be a colonial mode of narrative representation (Puri 1993:96). Thus, a resuscitation of literary realism in a postcolonial context should first of all include the way in which realist narrative brings into question this formal structure and looks at narrative as *not* given, where unity is *not* naturalized and difference is *not* completely transubstantiated into wholeness.

AN ATTEMPT TO RECUPERATE REALISM IN POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND CRITICISM

Until now, postcolonial theory and criticism have been mainly concerned with literary techniques which typify "the move away from realist representation" (Tiffin 1988:172). Critics celebrate literary devices that operate in the vein of mimicry, because these deviate from complete identification, wholeness, or translucent representation and therefore construct the ideal vantage point for writing back to the centre, or – to put it in less oppositional terms – at least for offering some form of literary and political resistance. As Laura Moss phrases it: "non-realist 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" (2000:158). Moss rightly locates the postcolonial theoretical bias in the nexus of the fetishism of the notion of resistance and the critical investigation of

experimental form, so that non-experimental writing – of which realism professedly is the apex – is deprived of its capacity for subversion. The various ‘anti-realist’ discursive forms that nurture postcolonial resistance include irony (Hutcheon 1991), parody (Dentith 2000:175-183, and Hutcheon’s work on parody in general), allegory (Slemon 1988), or magic realism (Slemon 1995, Delbaere 1992). Significantly, critics and theorists alike mainly associate these so-called postcolonial rhetorical mechanisms with postmodernist writing, which equally implicates a move away from the transparency and the ‘natural’ conventions of realism. As an unfortunate result, postcolonialism has been too conveniently consumed by the apparatus of postmodern and predominantly Western epistemology and aesthetics.

It thus seems that in its current stage, postcolonial theory displays a bias towards realist discourse. Some critics even detect at the centre of post-colonial and Commonwealth literary criticism a “desire to bracket out certain forms of discourse” (Quayson 1994:122). This may be due to an exaggerated obeisance to the tenet which the writers of *The Empire Writes Back* locate at the heart of postcolonial discourse, namely that “theories of style and genre, assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems are all radically questioned by the practices of postcolonial writing” (Ashcroft et al 1989:11). I do not wish to deny the value of this founding principle, but if postcolonial theory blindly lives up to this battle cry, does it then not make realist narrative its Other? Does it not disregard the ghostly presence of a significant deal of realist postcolonial writing?

In recent years, however, several theorists have questioned the conflation of postcolonial and postmodern writing and theory (for a detailed theoretical coverage see Loomba 1998:245-254). I think that, in addition to the problematic theoretical consequences, the consideration of postcolonial theory and literature as a continuation of postmodernist thought passes over the presence of a vast body of postcolonial writing which

is not served by postmodernist ideology and aesthetics. Without wanting to deny that there is indeed a large corpus of postcolonial literature which employs rhetorical strategies similar to those of postmodernism, and without wishing to imply that the study of the interesting similarities between both should be dropped from the postcolonial theoretical agenda, I think that sufficient attention should be given to writers that continue the more traditional narrative mode of realism. As Jean-Pierre Durix observes: "Though post-modernism has naturally affected most English-speaking regions of the world, post-colonial writers have also shown a renewed interest in the potential of the realistic mode" (Durix 1998:42-43). The novels and realist tendencies in the novels of world-renowned authors such as Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, V. S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Bharati Mukherjee and Rohinton Mistry testify to the persistence of and need for realist storytelling in a postcolonial world.

If critics and theorists locate mimicry and ambivalence at the heart of the postcolonial as well as of the postmodern condition, this does not imply that these features have not formed part – be it in a more covert way – of the realist novel. The mimetic mode of realism is not deprived of the faculty of displaying ambivalence or performing mimicry. Since its very Aristotelian beginnings, the theoretical concept of mimesis has never assumed to proffer the perfect single mirror of reality. Aristotle defines mimesis as the active transmutation of reality, rather than as its passive copy. Mimesis, then, designates the cognitive act by which man constructs his world:

La *mimèsis* est donc connaissance, et ni copie ni réplique à l'identique: elle désigne une connaissance propre à l'homme, la manière dont il construit, habite le monde. Réévaluer la *mimèsis* malgré l'opprobre que la théorie littéraire a jeté sur elle, cela revient d'abord à souligner son lien à la connaissance, et par là au monde et à la réalité.

(Compagnon 1998:134)

By its very cognitive nature, mimesis differs from nature and reality. A re-evaluation of 'naïve' mimesis should thus cover an investigation of the cognitive processes by which the cultural word is dissociated from the 'natural' world. Mimesis is as much *about* these rational mechanisms as *in* them; it calls attention to language's rational disconnection from the world as well as it offers to restore the interface between the linguistic and the real.

In his postmodern critique of the Enlightenment, Theodor Adorno pursues the Aristotelian concept of mimesis. He dismisses the interpretation of mimesis as straightforward imitation, and points to its self-containedness and arbitrariness. Thus, he disjoins art from the instrumental rationality of modernity – the many charges against realism envisage precisely these rational bearings – and claims that “the mimesis of artworks is their resemblance to themselves” rather than their rational copy of the world (quoted in Bahri 2003:124). In the dissociation from life lies the arbitrariness of art as well as its autonomy. The autonomous status of art, finally, paves the way for utopian thought and political revision: “for Adorno, mimesis affords an alternative form of knowledge, representing an attempt to approximate nature and that which is not there—a notion intimately tied to the prospect of utopian thinking” (Bahri 2003:128).

Elizabeth Ermarth, who is abreast of the poststructuralist/postmodern allegations against realism, equally endorses this understanding of mimesis in pointing at the active process of signification in realism rather than at its passive mirroring. She puts forward that the realist novel is not primarily obsessed with the close mirroring of reality, but with the act of rationalization of reality. As a consequence, realism is not naïve, but questions its mode through self-reflexiveness. “This realist consensus is in some ways a profoundly self-reflexive device, because it calls attention to the act of rationalization

itself rather than to the objects used to specify that act" (Ermarth 1998:21).

If there is one thing that poststructuralism and the postmodernist turn have taught us, it is that art is not transparent, free of values, or realistic. Art is always mediate rather than immediate. But if poststructuralist theory has deconstructed the immediacy of art, including the so-called transparent truth-premises of realism, and reinstalled irony or ambivalence as one of its shaping principles – as Paul de Man's argument on Lukács proves – then why should there still be a clear-cut distinction between realist narrative and other sub-genres of the novel? Why should realism be deprived of its awareness of the separation between word and world? Michael Bell heeds both the easygoing elision of the difference between art and life – purportedly the tenet of realism – and the all-too-easy proclamation of dualism – supposedly the main criterion of deconstructive anti-realist narrative.

This dependence on an umbilical continuity still underlying the act of separation largely resists analytic treatment; and realistic narrative, of course, sets out to be peculiarly compelling in this respect. But that does not excuse a literalistic elision of the difference between art and life. It seems that the terms of the discussion need to be reconsidered if we are to avoid the twin errors of elision and dualism with respect to the meaning of narrative.

(Bell 1990:177)

Even if realists try to close the gap between the word and the world, they are still aware of the fact that the gap *is* there. Even nineteenth-century realist writers, whose organicist ideology "allows for a profound homology between fiction and life ... affirm the continuity between their narrative and the world of the reader and yet at the same time they represent a constant subliminal assertion of the narrative frame" (Bell 1990:192).

In postcolonial realism, the "understanding of the interrelations of narrative and life [that] is to be found in this self-questioning aspect of the [realist] novel form" (Bell 1990:179) is complicated by the interrelations of different cultures. The poststructuralist warning that realist narrative should be wary of its claim to immediately represent reality extends to its portrayal of the Other in a postcolonial context. The incommensurability of postcolonial circumstance thus inspires the realist novel to vigilantly heed the trap of immediate and totalizing representation of the Other, which is by definition not completely representable. An investigation of how the realist postcolonial author self-consciously skirts the separation of art and reality should thus be accompanied by a study of how he or she uncompromisingly traces the differences in cultures, even if the realist agenda intends to transcend these differences. I strongly believe that, since poststructuralist readings of many realist novels have uncovered their mediate and distancing rendering of reality rather than their uncontested direct link to the real, the realist genre should prove resilient enough to present the difference that informs the postcolonial experience. I am convinced that a meticulous undoing of the incarceration of realism in the dungeons of postcolonial theory will not unleash Pandora's box in the contemporary debate, but will on the contrary harvest fertile insights for the future of critical realism in postcolonial theory.

chapter three

a case study of Rohinton Mistry's critical realism

THE REALIST NOVEL IN (POST)COLONIAL INDIA

Issues concerning language have always triggered fierce debates in postcolonial literature and theory. Poststructuralism and common sense tell us that the wholesale adoption of a language which is not one's own amounts to endangering one's sense of authentic identity. Because words are the markers of culture and social ideology in addition to meaning and communication, the continuous use of an alien language results in ideological treason. Postcolonial writers and theorists have always been aware of this problem, and either reject or subvert the dominant language to retain a measure of distance. Ngugi wa Thiong'o radically opts in favour of rejection because next to the bullet, which subjugated the Third World physically to the West, "language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (1995:287). The same attitude is present in a considerable part of postcolonial Indian writing, which testifies to a self-protective choice for indigenous languages against English linguistic imperialism. However, a large part of Indian literature is written in English by authors who claim to authentically portray the Indian experience (MacDermott 1993, Dharwadker and Dharwadker 1996).

The latter option does not seem totally unnatural, since English has harboured Indian culture for nearly two centuries now. English literature, moreover, was in the vanguard of India's Anglicization. The 1813 Charter Act introduced English literature into the Indian educational programme, the goals of which were to educate the native on the one hand, and stabilize the immoral behaviour of the British servants who were ruling in India on the other hand. The latter were thought to have been

corrupted by their experiences on the Indian continent and especially by their contact with natives. Even if this defensive movement – Britannia's protection of its own citizens – played a significant role in the Anglicization of India, the introduction of English literature in India was not free of aggression towards the native culture. Its main goals consisted in restoring the serenity of British servants and in ruling out the possibility of further corruption by subjecting the natives to the English ideological apparatus (Viswanathan 1989:23-31). The doctrine inherent in the then popular realist novel served the cause of ridding British and native servants alike from the threat of colonial corruption.

The 1835 English Education act reinforced the preliminary work of the 1813 Charter Act. As a result of Thomas B. Macaulay's infamous 'Minute on Indian Education', it liquidated the funds for teaching native languages and literatures. The British defended this by arguing that if native literatures became extinct, it was because of their lack of intrinsic worth. Macaulay had already foisted a want of literary and scientific value upon the native languages and their literatures in saying that "when we pass from works of the imagination to works in which facts are recorded, and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable" (Macaulay 1835). Macaulay thus opposes the scientific slant of the European literary tradition – significantly, the same scientific attitude was considered of paramount importance by the most ardent of realists – to the imaginative, poetic tradition of indigenous Indian culture.

As a consequence of the indoctrination of the native by English education and literature, the pioneering Indo-Anglian novel – the term designates novels written by Indians in English, in contrast with the Anglo-Indian corpus, which comprises of the Western orientalist/colonialist fiction about India such as the work of Forster and Kipling – fell into step with the realist English school. Meenakshi Mukherjee spots the

European realist novel as the primary template for the most significant strain of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indo-Anglian novel (1985:16, see also Kanaganayakam 2002:16-18). Frank Kermode writes that the allegiance of Indo-Anglian novelists is to

the English novel of the 19th-century tradition, and their work has little in common with deviant strains, whether of Modernism or Postmodern magic realism, or of such mid-20th-century experimental styles as the *nouveau roman*.

(Kermode 2002:11)

Indo-Anglian novelists thus share with the European realist project "the willed tendency of art to approximate reality" (Mukherjee 1985:16).

However, the two traditions do not convene unproblematically: "it is perhaps unfortunate that the nineteenth-century Indian novelist had as his model primarily the British Victorian novel; with hindsight after a century it seems the British model was perhaps the least suitable for the Indian mind in the nineteenth century" (Mukherjee 1985:17). In this historical period, British and Indian society rested upon totally different sociological conditions, the most significant of which was the different status of the individual. The emergence of the idea of individualism, modern capitalism and the rise of the middle class, which are for Ian Watt and Georg Lukács the central principles of the European realist novel and its concurrent society, are totally incompatible with the nineteenth-century Indian mind. Europe's liberal idea of the sovereign subject that can shed off its natural and cultural bonds clashed with the rigid hierarchy of India's social and familial classes.

As a result, the adaptation of the European realist genre in the Indian literary system succeeded only partially. Because of the different ideological and social contexts, the nineteenth-century Indo-Anglian realist novel in the European vein shows exactly those fissures in its formal and thematic structure which European realism eschews. Even if these Indo-Anglian

authors programmatically profess to portray reality in accordance with its true appearance, they fail to live up to their programme. Chelva Kanaganayakam remarks that Indo-Anglian realism, in contrast with realism in native Indian language novels, easily succumbs to stereotyping its characters, which incarnates the incompatibility of different worlds (2002:18) and, in my opinion, also betrays the realist artifice in a covert, non-self-conscious way. In a more positive tone, Meenakshi Mukherjee culls the body of nineteenth-century Indo-Anglian literature for a list of features which are not naturally ascribed to realism but to the indigenous Indian tradition, which shares more with magic realism than with realism: cyclical time, the presence of a vague past as in the predominantly epic tradition, flights into surreal situations, stylized characters, the inhibition of individual liberation resulting in loss or human decline, and the persistence of religion. She concludes by pointing at the hybrid nature of the realist Indo-Anglian novel in the nineteenth century: "It is a critical platitude to say that the Indian novel has a derivative form, imitated from the West. This is only superficially true. A form cannot be superimposed upon a culture which lacks the appropriate conditions to sustain its growth" (Mukherjee 1985:99). In a nutshell, the realist brainwash fails on the Indian waves because the differences between English and Indian society and their epistemological frames refuse to be unified.

In his detailed and convincing study of the counterrealist tradition in Indo-Anglian literature, Chelva Kanaganayakam puts forward a reading of realism as masking its contradictions and a view of its counterrealist counterpart as flaunting them:

realism implies transparency; it claims implicitly that the world of fiction reflects the "real" world outside (despite the obvious problems of that assertion). 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.

(2002:14-15)

As a result, realism in Indo-Anglian writing is less suited to offer political resistance because it endorses rather than abrogates issues of representation and complicity. Realist postcolonial authors "have to face the conundrum of replicating the 'real' while working with a readership that is alienated from what is being portrayed and a medium that is resistant to the material" (Kanaganayakam 2002:186). I believe, however, that even if certain strains of realism tend to slur their contradictions, realism is not an apolitical novelistic subgenre. In my opinion, realism can, like the counterrealist side of the literary coin, also question its own representation and proclaim its own status as literature. I am strongly convinced that critical theory's most illuminative insight that "at the heart of [the counterrealist] enterprise is a desire to question, to subvert and, in the end, to foreground ambivalence [as well as] the consciousness of artifice, and the conviction that literature is, in the end, about itself" (Kanaganayakam 2002:23) equally applies to the realist tradition, and, moreover, I believe that this body of writing pressingly formulates the need of critical but also joint political thinking. Postcolonial realism should, in other words, be concerned with the rethinking of history and representation in cooperative terms, but should never forget the critical attitude that points to the inherent presence of representational and political gaps.

ROHINTON MISTRY'S POSTCOLONIAL REALISM

The reception of *Tales From Firozsha Baaq* (1987), *Such A Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995)

If the long-standing colonial tradition of realism in Indo-Anglian writing poses an urgent issue for postcolonial revision, the more so does Rohinton Mistry's 'realism'. Mistry, who today lives and writes in Toronto, originates from the Parsi

population of Bombay, a slowly but surely dwindling religious minority that descends from the ancient Zarathustrian Persians and settled in Bombay after having been chased away by the Muslim invasion in Iran in the seventh century AD (Morey 2004:9). Because of their strong economic and political skills, the high-class Bombayite Parsis enjoyed special protection by the British in colonial India, and could thus be considered, to put it in Thomas B. Macaulay's colonial diction, "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay 1835). The mediating position held by the Parsis in the British colonial administration clearly demonstrates Macaulay's filtration theory: the Parsis ruled the indigenous mob while pledging allegiance to the British colonizer, and thus occupied a buffer zone between the lower-class Indian population and the British crown. As a result, Macaulay's filtration system freed the genuinely British functionaries of guilt in case of upheaval. Thus, in colonial India, even if they preserved contact with the native Indians, the Bombayite Parsis sided more with the British than with the indigenous population and functioned as "the conduit of Western thought and ideas" (Viswanathan 1989:34).

Rohinton Mistry's work, however, displays a more obvious and resistant in-betweenness than the position of the colonial Parsis. At the linguistic level, he subverts the hegemony of the British through the creolization of English with native Indian languages, together with a refusal to gloss. In *Family Matters*, Mistry even goes so far as to occasionally provide grammar lessons in native Indian languages (124). As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back!* claim, the writerly device of creolization "installs linguistic distance itself as a subject of the text" (Ashcroft et al 1989:58), which openly acknowledges the gaps between different cultures. However politically resistant this approach may be, I will not pursue this strain of criticism, since it does not investigate the specific literariness of discourse in the representation of difference and distance.

Considered from the latter perspective, i.e. the construction of narrative distance, Mistry's collection of short stories *Tales From Firozsha Baag* forms the most interesting share of his work. Obviously, this does not go unnoticed in critical practice: critics eagerly indicate that the short stories rely on formally innovative poetical techniques, such as metafiction (Albertazzi 1993), hybridity or irony (Davis 2000, Heble 1993), the carnivalesque (Eustace 2003), in short, "anti-realist modes of narration [that] not only challenge elitist Master Narratives but privilege the marginal and provide resistance to Western hegemony" (Bharucha 1995:59). As far as these formal techniques are concerned, Bharucha even puts Mistry on a par with Salman Rushdie. On the basis of these observations, critics thus see no problems in reconciling the poetical strategies in Mistry's short stories with postcolonial political resistance and in identifying him as a truly postcolonial writer.

The critical response to Mistry's novels is of a different make-up. While some critics have spotted in *Such A Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, as in his short stories, a break with classical realist conventions through metafiction (D'Souza 2002), postmodern convictions about historiography (Schneller 2001), the "multitude of narratives [which] disrupts the centralizing pull of conventional realism" (Gabriel 2003:88), and the undeniable presence of a tradition of oral storytelling (Malak 1993), others seem unable to think beyond the realist tendencies in Mistry's novels. Hilary Mantel writes of Mistry as carrying a Stendhal-like "mirror for us down the dusty highways of India, through the jostling Bombay streets" (2000:181), compares him with Dickens and faults him for the universality that inspires his characters. The latter point is of course one of the defining streaks of the realist novel in the tradition of humanism. David Williams corroborates this claim in writing that Mistry "seems to take the old humanist assumptions as a given" (1996:57, emphasis added). John Ball, like Hilary Mantel, cites Dickens as an intertextual influence, and thinks that "realism

is as good a label as any to describe his mode of representation" (1999:237).

In my opinion, the latter critics have been lured into the realist trap set up by the author in the epigraphs to his novels – Mistry cites Balzac in claiming that all of *A Fine Balance* is true – and which is also evident in some tendencies in his novels. At some points, he certainly tries to get across the realist illusion that his texts present reality as given, and ignores the constructedness of his words. Detailed interpretations of *Such A Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, however, lay bare Mistry's self-consciousness of the narrative struggle. Williams is aware of the realist trap and rightly qualifies Mistry's givenness of the world and of humanism as *seeming*, and further down his article observes that we might also see Mistry's texts as resisting a form of realism (1996:67). Eschewing labels and generalizations, I would not go so far as to state, as some of the quoted critics do, that Mistry's writing is postmodern or anti-realist, but I still endorse their reading of certain *tendencies* that are associated with postmodernism and anti-realism.

The critical realism of *Family Matters* (2002)

In *Family Matters*, Mistry is aware of the dangers and benefits of realism and thus avoids the naiveté of some kinds of realism. First of all, he posits the separate existence of the two entities of language and reality. As a typical representative of philosophical realism, he tends to close the gap between the word and the thing. His character Jehangir ponders over the power of words with youthful marvel:

The lavatory at school was disgusting, it stank like railway-station toilets. The boys called it the bog. The first time he heard it, he was puzzled by the word. He had looked it up in Daddy's dictionary, and found more than one meaning. Slang for lavatory, it said; also, wet spongy ground. He *imagined* wet spongy ground, *imagined* putting

his foot in it, and agreed "bog" was the perfect word.
(96-97, emphasis added)

Jehangir's concoctions clearly represent the process of realist identification: he assumes that there is a reality out there, which contains meaningful information that can finally be reflected in language. However, as is clear from the excerpt, the concord between the boggy reality of the toilet and the bogginess of the word is not natural or given, as it has to be *thought*. Mistry emphasizes through repetition that realism requires the active imagination of the linguistic subject in order to be effective, and thus, he presents the rationalization of consciousness, as Elizabeth Ermarth would have it. In other words, the mimesis that Mistry employs is active, like Aristotle's, and not passive, like the undistorted mirror which Stendhal holds before his reader.

Vilas Rane, the village scribe, is one of the most vehement proponents of the realist position in *Family Matters*. He makes a living by writing letters in the name of his illiterate customers. Even if he gets paid for his service, he never cuts short his letters if his clients run out of money, because "it's like death – one moment the words flowing, next moment silence, the thought unfinished, the love un conveyed, the anguish unexpressed" (140). Vilas, in other words, shuns fragmentary writing. However, his realism also operates in the mode of Aristotelian mimesis, providing through active representation information on the one hand and pleasure on the other hand, as one of the return letters testifies to:

Such a beautiful letter, they said, it is like being with you in the city, sharing your life, taking the train to your book shop, watching you work. And we hear your voice in every line, so wonderful is *the effect* of words. (141, emphasis added)

Even in the most realist mode, words *effect* the real. Through the very awareness of the fact that words create an effect,

Mistry questions their veracity, even if he tries to fill up the cracks in the realist code.

Next to the tendency to close the gap between word and world, Mistry's novel also bears testimony to a more overt difference between the linguistic artifact and the real world. At some point in the novel, the characters discuss the mind's capacity for conceiving things which are not there, as with the imagined "damned spot" on Lady Macbeth's hand. The object here is "more psychological than real" (109). Although the passage does not directly concern the status of language, it is symptomatic of certain tendencies in *Family Matters* that insist on the capacity of language to create rather than reflect the real. Even the radical realist Vilas knows that language creates truth, and that truth is an ideological construct which is informed by social conventions. As such, truth is not given, but 'created by the community through language', as in the doctrine of poststructuralism.

Myths create the reality. Point is, there was a time when living according to certain myths served your community well. With the present state of society, those same myths can make misfits of men. Even the British knew when to observe their myth of 'not cricket, old chap' and when to hit you below the belt, kick you in the balls, poke you in the eyes. (212-213)

Vilas's discussion of the creative nature of myth tastes wry though, as he uses it in defence of his own realism, which he claims is transparent and true.

However, Mistry's further comments on realism, which specifically envisage literary realism, pre-empt Vilas's argument. *Family Matters* is suffused with intertextual references to Enid Blyton's realist books for children. The stories that relate the adventures of the Famous Five are fed to and greedily consumed by Murad and Jehangir, as they were by their father Yezad. Yezad believes that the English books of

Enid Blyton are unsuitable for children living in India, as they function in the mode of neo-colonial alienation.

Yezad said it did immense harm, it encouraged children to grow up without attachment to the place where they belonged, made them hate themselves for being who they were, created confusion about their identity. He said he had read the same books when he was small, and they had made him yearn to become a little Englishman of a type that even England did not have. (97)

Further in the story, Yezad remarks that "what they needed was an Indian Blyton, to fascinate them with their own reality" (117). When Murad and Jehangir have grown up, also they realize that they cannot be served by the English realism of Blyton, because it presents an unreal fantastical world for Indians as well as for the English. Mistry here recognizes that realism is not to be but on a par with reality, and that there is a gap between the 'original' reality and the reality of words. Moreover, what may be real for one may be unreal for the other, certainly in the case of cultural difference. The cultural discontinuity between Indian and English reality scathingly uncovers the artifice of Enid Blyton's realism. To phrase it by means of Homi Bhabha's jargon, Blyton's realism is unable to install itself on Indian soil because it is itself characterized by mimicry, ambivalence and slippage between reality and language.

Mistry's acknowledgement of the divide between language and reality is also evident from his suspicion towards ideology and his obsession with the issue of (re-)naming. First of all, he turns Bombay's change of name to Mumbai into a theme. Second, Jehangir Chenoy repeatedly expresses his wish to be renamed to John Chenoy, so that he can really feel English. Also Nariman connects words to ideology, and recognizes that renaming and rewriting amounts to alienation.

He became the husband of Yasmin Contractor, and formally adopted her children, Jal and Coomy. But they kept their

father's name. To change it to Vakeel would be like rewriting history, suggested his new wife. The simile appealed to his academic soul; he acquiesced. (16)

And finally, also the "treachery of English vowels" leads to estrangement, next to puzzlement and amusement (11).

As a result of the ambivalence of realism, the distinctions between reality and fantasy, and between realism and magic realism collapse. For Nariman Vakeel, professor of English and grandfather of Murad and Jehangir, the streets in Bombay convey an experience of magical synaesthesia, as they throb with the colours of mercantile life and dance to the rhythms and sweet tones of street musicians. Indian reality is "all magical as a circus, felt Nariman, and reassuring like a magic show" (5-6) – Nariman's observation reminds of the defence of magic realism by Latin-American writers. Consequently, there is no need to distinguish between different modes of artistic representation of reality, as both realism and magic realism are strangely but certainly connected to the squalor of reality in a double bind anyway.

Sometimes, when Mr. Kapur spoke about 1947 and Partition, Yezad felt that Punjabi migrants of a certain age were like Indian authors writing about that period, whether in realist novels of corpse-filled trains or in the magic-realist midnight muddles, all repeating the same catalogue of horrors about slaughter and burning, rape and mutilation, fetuses torn out of wombs, genitals stuffed in the mouths of the castrated. (151)

Mistry's reference to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* indicates that he does not blindly write in the mode of realism, but that on the contrary he is self-consciously aware of the various modes of representation. He acknowledges that his realism is only one way to represent reality, and in this way tones down the absolute veracity of his story.

Mistry's undermining of the truth-premises of realism even extends to the form of art that is for some critics responsible for the move away in the literary arts from realism to

modernism, namely photography. Photography, until recently, was long considered to be the epitome of realist representation. Mistry questions the photographic link to the real alongside that of literary realism. Mr. Kapur, Yezad's employee, possesses pictures of the neighbourhood where Yezad grew up. Upon seeing them, Yezad experiences the effect of the real, to put it in Roland Barthes's words. Mistry's choice of words reveals the creative faculty of art: the pictures *conjure up* the real (224). While looking at the pictures, Yezad is bedazzled by their magic: "He ran his fingers over his eyes, and the ghosts receded. 'It's like magic, this picture' " (225).

Some of Mistry's self-conscious comments even come close to metafiction: "Nariman Vakeel's life would make a good novel, but it's not a bedtime story for a child" (235), " 'It will take time,' he consoled him. 'Only in novels do you get instant results' " (337). In a genuinely postmodern novel, these extracts would be interpreted as metafiction. However, as Linda Hutcheon taught us, metafiction aims at foregrounding the gap between fiction and reality, between literature and the real: it radically opens the representational abyss by continuously pointing to the unresolved nature of the word. I think that Mistry's writing, conversely, tries to close the gap, without losing sight of its presence. His poetics reveal an awareness of the informative insights of postmodernism together with an attempt to think beyond them. In Mistry's realism, narrative closure is never complete, no matter how hard he tries to realize it.

Rohinton Mistry's writing defends realism without letting go of a continuous vigilance over the illusory nature of language. Like Vilas Rane, he proclaims the urgent need for a scrutiny of detail in postcolonial India, where corruption is rife and little white lies degenerate into ubiquitous illusion.

"Some things can only be taken seriously!" Vilas's voice rose, and people passing assumed the two were quarrelling.

"Little white lies are as pernicious as big black lies. When they mix together, a great greyness of ambiguity descends, society is cast adrift in an amoral sea, and corruption and rot and decay start to flourish. Such is the time we are now passing through. Everything is disintegrating because details are neglected and nothing is regarded seriously." (212)

Vilas does not side with the anti-realists of the story, the actors Bhaskar and Gautam. According to Vilas, they are "too pseudo ... they become blind to real life with their intellectualizing. Stanislavsky-this and Strasberg-that, and Brechtian alienation is all they talk about" (210-211). However, unlike Vilas, Mistry pays tribute to the principle of representational distance, which he borrows from the anti-realists. In a postcolonial setting where difference should never be synthesized, he needs and embraces Gautam's observation that "an actor without awareness is a wooden puppet", even if "in a culture where destiny is embraced as the paramount force, we are all puppets" (331).

Mistry's use of intertextuality functions in the same way as his self-conscious commentary. It aims at scrutinizing the cracks in the realist code, while at the same time trying to overcome them, even if this does not completely work. One character remarks:

Everyone underestimates their own life. Funny thing is, in the end, all our stories – your life, my life, old Husain's life, they're the same. In fact, no matter where you go in the world, there is only one important story: of youth, and loss, and yearning for redemption. So we tell the same story, over and over. Just the details are different. (228)

Instead of inspiring *ennui* – to use Barthes's words again – as in postmodern epistemology, intertextuality can offer the possibility of redemption and of postcolonial international communication. As Pam Morris observes, the world-wide ubiquity of narrative may be the means with which to restore greater justice and less exploitation (2003:146). In *Family Matters*,

Mistry draws upon European as well as Indian textual resources and writerly techniques. The Parsi population in Bombay has, as a consequence of the doctrine of British colonisation, little Indian sources to quote, as Mr. Kapur remarks (303), which holds a *fortiori* for Rohinton Mistry as a writer of the Indian diaspora. Still, he peacefully cites Europe's greatest – including Shakespeare, Coleridge, Tennyson, Voltaire, as well as Greek myth – next to ancient Persia's and India's best – the centripetal text here is Firdausi's epic *Shah-Nama*, and many more intertexts are enshrined in Yezad's holy cabinet and bedroom (461-463). And yet, even if Mistry insists on the need for realist intertextual engagement, he acknowledges that international storytelling is limited to *yearning* for redemption: the problems of communication will never be completely overcome (428).

The theme of problem-solving and universalism recalls the liberal humanist tradition. In *Family Matters*, the vicissitudes of the nineteenth-century universalism are remote. The novel is set in post-colonial India: the British have taken to their homeland, and the country is ruled self-sufficiently. The departure of the British implicates that the Parsis can no longer enjoy the benefits of colonialism, and have consequently descended a few steps down the social ladder. The Shiv Sena (army of Shiva) party, consisting of extremist Hindu nationalists, insists on getting rid of all the traces the British have left behind. This political programme includes renaming the colonial Bombay to the independent Mumbai. Yet, the downfall of colonial universalism has not resulted in a post-colonial attention to particulars, as it has been replaced by its neo-colonial doppelgänger: globalization. The characters in *Family Matters* avidly consume Fanta, Michael Jackson and Elvis, and the possibility of migration to the West looms large, even if the roads to the land of milk and honey are thickly strewn with the impediments of opportunism and racism.

Considering this contextual evidence – the persistence of alienating and difference-negating universalism – it would be surprising if *Family Matters* did not cry out against the common denominators of realist time and space. Some critics fault Mistry for his heavy reliance on linear plot. I believe, however, that *Family Matters* draws more on the cyclical time of epic and myth than on the linear pattern of resolution. Of course, superficially, the plot covers the linear development from Nariman's fall to his eventual death, but the narrative is suffused with circular time and repetition. The only moment when historical time is strikingly present in the story, is when Yezad feels that he has got hold of the world, that he will make promotion at his work and will eventually be able to pay for his family's needs. "How comforting its ticking, reassuring, like a steady hand guiding the affairs of the universe" (375). In this particular instance, historical time is intimately linked with progress. As for the remainder of the story, historical time is thwarted, which is symbolized by the continual rewinding and failure of Yezad's clock (93, 231). Time conveys a sense of loss and isolation, rather than gradual progress and liberal humanist wholeness. Young Murad's realization that mankind is like Sisyphus, repeating the same squalid actions day after day (117), prefigures the circular resolution of the novel and the endless repetition of human misery. At the end of the novel, Murad, who is a Parsi, gets infatuated with a non-Parsi girl, which was exactly the cause of his grandfather Nariman's familial trouble. On the political level, there is the disillusion and subsequent death of Mr. Kapur, who initially intended to run in the elections in Bombay and turn the city into a better place. As far as economy is concerned, every character loses his job. Finally, even education in Bombay is corrupted, and Jehangir is forced to abuse his position as a homework monitor by extorting money from his class-mates to provide his family with food. Loss and failure figure at the personal, familial, political, economic and educational level.

So, the temporal structure of *Family Matters* is characterized by loss and circularity, which, according to Homi Bhabha, hardly identifies it with the linear conception of time in the realist tradition (1984:115).

Moreover, in contrast with historical time, there is often no clear delineation of past, present and future in Mistry's novel. *Family Matters* defies temporal division in the conflation of past and present. Nariman, one of the novel's central figures, claims that at his age, the past is more present than the here and the now (128). Mr. Kapur's photographs narrate a story that throbs with the epic cadence of a vague past: "They will know that once there was a time, here, in this shining city by the sea, when we had a tropical Camelot, a golden place where races and religions lived in peace and amity ..." (303-304). The novel relies on memory, trauma and the demoniacal rather than on the ongoing march of historical liberal time. Mistry pits the notion of memory against that of history: "permeating everything, occupying the room as solidly as the furniture, a *timeless* smell ..." (280, emphasis added). For Yezad, the same timelessness is present in religion, which he becomes completely engrossed in at the end of the story (342). Trauma inhabits Nariman's sense of time: the portraits of his forefathers reprimand him for fondling with a non-Parsi girl and demoniacally make the past present in the present: "As they marched down the passageway, Nariman opened his eyes. From his supine position he saw the glum portraits of his forefathers on the walls. Strange, how their eyes looked at him – as though they were the living and the dead" (89, see also 17, 265).

Family Matters also challenges the linearity of causality, which is intimately linked with reason and individualism. Rational causality is replaced by the irrationality of coincidence or destiny. Yezad, who in the beginning of the novel was the incarnation of sovereign undertaking, completely loses the will to shape his own destiny and becomes a religious fanatic. In the end, he only thinks that "Man proposes, God

disposes" (410). Causality no longer falls under the jurisdiction of the individual, but under that of God. Roxana, Yezad's wife, "agrees with him that the entire chain of events, starting with Grandpa's accident and ending with Mr. Kapur's murder, was God's way of bringing him to prayer" (464). Further, the intertextual reference to Voltaire's *Candide* (58), which equally opposes to the Enlightened illusion of liberal individualism, is thus not a coincidence. Even two centuries after its introduction on the Indian subcontinent, European individualism continues to clash with the Indian and Parsi spirit: "The only things we have to worry about are notions of individualism. Poison. Pure poison, that's what these ideas are to the Parsi community" (414).

As far as space is concerned, a similar anti-realist definition haunts the realist tendency in Mistry's *Family Matters*. In his novel, family matters function as an allegory for national-political struggles. Mistry copies the rhetoric of Mahatma Gandhi who defined the nation as one extended family: "in work and in play, we, the children of Mother India, must be as one family in order to free her from the chains in which she was enslaved" (215). To achieve this goal, he believed that the mosaic of India, consisting of Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Europeans and the other ethnic and religious groups, should mingle into a unitary nation and together make the Indian dream come true.

Though Mistry is very much in the shadow of the Gandhian rhetoric, aspiring to a family-like nation, he still questions the idea of a unitary family-nation. The text of *Family Matters* is a scar tissue of broken and mended families. First of all, the Parsi religion and the community's dwindling birth rates prohibit cross-cultural marriage. Marriages outside the community are thus considered to be unnatural. Mistry, however, questions this natural conception of the family and the community through Nariman's and Murad's infatuation with Catholic girls. Nariman's subsequent wedding with Yasmin Contractor, a Parsi

widow with two children, leaves him with fundamental unhappiness and eventually leads towards his death. Mistry's choice of names is indicative of his criticism. In the context of the novel, contracts symbolize the annihilation of difference into a supposedly natural unity. Yasmin Contractor's family name thus echoes the orthodox Parsi insistence on purity and sameness. Moreover, Jal and Coomy, the children of Yasmin, who has meanwhile died in a fight with Nariman's non-Parsi girlfriend, hire a clumsy contractor to destroy the flat of their stepfather Nariman in order to get rid of his burden on their household. Edul Munshi, the contractor, praises himself in saying that "to get a contractor who is honest, knowledgeable and affordable is very hard" (298). His statement obviously applies to the Contractor family as well. Mistry thus criticizes the Parsi imperative of natural, pure marriage by punning on the name Contractor and by having his male characters fall in love with non-Parsi girls.

What is more, Nariman plays a pivotal role in Mistry's relation to the former British ruler in India. He is not only a stepfather to Jal and Coomy, but as a Parsi also to the Indian people as a whole. His position as a professor of English confirms his allegiance to the British colonizer. Moreover, Nariman's body functions as a metaphor for the disintegration of Bombay after Independence. The cripple and old Nariman is unable to keep himself clean and has to rely on his family members for his personal sanity. His health problems may be metaphoric of the squalor in which the British left Bombay after Independence: " 'Millions of people live in the gutters of Bombay!' Roxana shouted back. "Eating and sleeping next to drains and ditches! This whole city stinks like a sewer! And you are worried about Pappa's bedpan? How stupid can you be?' " (169-170). The Bombayite family, like the Vakeel-Contractor family, is putrid.

The photographs had made him aware how much the street and the buildings meant to him. Like an extended *family* that he'd taken for granted and ignored, assuming it would

always be there. But buildings and roads and spaces were as fragile as human beings, you had to cherish them while you had them. (228, emphasis added)

Mistry criticizes the solid realist concept of a nation-space, by pointing to the fact that the nation, like the family, is an *imagined community*, in Benedict Anderson's terms, and not something natural or given. The nation, like the family, consists of step- and half-combinations that betray the naturalness of the whole and show that nothing can be taken for granted. In *Family Matters*, space is not unitary, but fragmented. As in *A Fine Balance*,

While holding fast to the depth of engagement and specificity of historical detail inherent in the realist construction of the nation, Mistry nevertheless sets out to destabilize those aspects of the realist narrative that contribute to the homogenization of the nation's time-space continuum.

(Gabriel 2003:88)

Still, Mistry strongly believes that family matters: he does not give up the attempt to reconcile differences, the different positions in hybrid relationships and step-combinations. As his character Yezad, he knows that "the half is the most important part" (32). His fiction implies an attempt to restore the fragments of the modern nation-space without forgetting that the nation, like the family, is always built on fragments.

To conclude, Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* is an example of how the realist genre can be critically engaged in a postcolonial context. Mistry does not use the realist mode blindly, but questions realism while at the same time endorsing it in an attempt to establish meaningful communication. Still, he recognizes that communication may fail because of the cracks in the realist code. Mistry's realism is denaturalized because it distrusts issues of transparent representation, common time and space, universalism and individualism – the same issues that were central to and naturalized in eighteenth- and nineteenth

century philosophical realism – and foregrounds literary conventions rather than masking them. As a result, this denaturalized, critical and resilient realism meets the postcolonial demand for maintaining difference and distance, and does certainly not operate in a political vacuum. Finally, Rohinton Mistry's realism and the postcolonial condition do not oppose to each other, but may be said to participate in a project to make the best of this ever chaotic world. The family is the perfect metaphor for his critical realism, because "without family, nothing else matters, everything from top to bottom falls apart or descends into chaos. Which is basically the malady of the West" (182).

chapter four

conclusion

In its current form, postcolonial literary theory displays a bias towards realist fiction. Poststructuralism charges (classical) realism with the denial of its own artifice, and with the tendency to naturalize narrative, which amounts to closing the gap between reality and language. In a postcolonial setting, the so-called realist negation of the world-word chasm is all the more problematic because it scotomizes the differences between cultures. As a result, postcolonial theory privileges narrative forms which foreground gaps and differences between cultures such as magic realism, anti-realism or postmodernist narrative. However, the spectre of realism refuses to leave the postcolonial scene, since realism, as poststructuralist theory has equally indicated, is also capable of displaying ambivalence, irony, political difference or narrative distance. Although realism tends to fill up narrative fissures, it also rationalizes the act of storytelling by pointing self-consciously to its mode of narration.

Rohinton Mistry's fiction is the perfect example of how realism may be equally valid a postcolonial narrative form as anti-realist strains. His critical realism is not European or naïve because it is ever aware of the difference that informs narrated life. Mistry does not side fully with European realism since he stays true to the tenet that "for the Indo-Anglian author, the hiatus between language and reality is always problematic", and moreover, he takes the edge off the claim that "while realists pretend that the gap does not exist, counterrealists use it to their advantage" (Kanaganayakam 2002:16). What is more, contrary to the claims of many reviewers and critics, Mistry's writing is not naïve nineteenth-century realism, because it recognizes the central axioms of the

postmodernist turn: an awareness of the creative and thus distorting power of language, the recognition that language is never objective but ideologically charged, and a tendency to denaturalize narrative. However, and this is where Mistry differs from postmodernism's fragmentation, he tries to think beyond the chaotic and insurmountable differences of postmodernism and argues that the joining of hands in the postcolonial era is an equally effective way of dealing with difference as is the postmodernist method.

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