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Excess and Design in Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance

ELI PARK SØRENSEN

After all, our lives are but a sequence of accidents—a clanking chain of chance events. A string of choices, casual or deliberate, which add up to that one big calamity we call life.

Mistry, *A Fine Balance*

Introduction

In recent years, the contemporary field of postcolonial studies has increasingly been haunted by the negative effects of institutionalization. Having successfully secured its position within the institutions of academia as an established and recognized approach, postcolonial studies' new-found authority is in danger of transforming its radical insights into a series of dogmatic, institutionalized, and self-congratulating practices. This is particularly the case regarding the field's relation to the literary. Even if the literary text still represents one of the most important objects of study in postcolonial studies, the literary dimension has often been reduced to serve a narrow set of canonized expectations of what constitutes a proper, and properly representative, postcolonial literary text—that is, expectations of the potential of specific forms, styles, techniques and modalities that are seen as politically radical and resistant. Implied in this logic are also the ways in which non-canonized postcolonial forms, styles, techniques, and modalities have been channelled into equally, if not more, stereotypical conceptions of their allegedly negative potential—for example, literary realism.

A number of recent scholarly works have addressed some of these issues, including Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Deepika Bahri's *Native Intelligence* (2003), Nicholas Harrison's *Postcolonial Criticism* (2003), and Nicholas Brown's *Utopian Generations* (2005). In this article, I want to take a closer look at literary realism from a postcolonial perspective, partly because this literary form is still widely used by postcolonial writers,¹ and partly because the status of postcolonial realism largely remains—despite the current debate on literariness—unchanged. The scant interest in literary realism is far from characterizing postcolonial studies alone; decades dominated by anti-realist literary theories have effectively monopolized the practice of literary analysis to

I would like to express my gratitude to Celia Britton, Nicholas Harrison, and Pamela Thurschwell for critical comments on earlier versions of this essay.

¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of contemporary postcolonial realist writers, see Moss, "Infinity."

the extent that, whatever can be said about this literary form, it is hardly compatible with the radical identity claimed by contemporary theory.²

To many postcolonial critics, realist form constitutes a problem because it seems to promote the naïve illusion of an unmediated, thus “authentic” or “original” (re)presentation of the experience of otherness, while hiding the ideological underpinnings of Western capitalist and imperialist discourse.³ Many postcolonial critics hold to the notion that it is demeaning to read postcolonial literary texts in terms of a realist aesthetic.⁴ Arguably for that reason, postcolonial literary criticism seems to have developed what one could call a “schizophrenic” perspective—a thematic approach when it comes to realist postcolonial texts, and a more sophisticated formal-textual approach in connection with non-realist postcolonial texts. One might think of the postcolonial treatment of social realist writers such as Ousmane Sèmbene, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, and Festus Iyayi, whose novels have generally been read along a socio-political trajectory, whereas the aesthetic and formal potential of non-realist novels have been offered considerably more critical attention.⁵ But if the field of postcolonial studies is currently undergoing a crisis arising from the negative effects of institutionalization, fetishization, and canonization, it is vital to expand the field’s aesthetic and political codifications, which means developing a critical perspective broad enough to include literary strategies not necessarily corresponding to the dominating convictions promoted by postcolonial studies. In developing such a perspective, it goes without saying that it is crucial to avoid another essentializing genre definition of realism, which would merely change the emphasis of the fetishized opposition between realist/anti-realist in contemporary critical theory, rather than move beyond it. Much more productive, it seems to me, would be to elaborate a critical perspective which is above all sensitive to the singularity of the realist text itself and considers how this singularity relates to the text’s specific socio-historical circumstances. Besides an emphasis on the realist aesthetic dimension in distinctly realist texts, like Sèmbene’s *Les Bouts de bois Dieu* or Iyayi’s *Violence*, such a postcolonial perspective would also be receptive to literary texts that are not in a strict sense deemed *realist* texts but which, like Sembène’s *Xala*, or even some of Coetzee’s most allegorical novels, contain elements of a realist impulse.

The novel I will focus on in this article, Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995), is an almost classic example of a postcolonial realist text: a novel whose

² In recent years, a number of prominent literary scholars have turned their attention toward literary realism; see for example the collection of essays edited by Beaumont, which includes scholars such as Bowlby, Žižek, and Jameson. The journal *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* has similarly devoted special issues to realism in recent years.

³ For views along this line, see especially Bhabha and Brennan.

⁴ For critical discussions of the general aversion to realism in postcolonial studies, see Moss, “Rohinton”; see also Carter.

⁵ The most obvious examples would be J.M. Coetzee’s allegorical novels and Ben Okri’s magical realist novels. I should perhaps clarify that my focus here is specifically on how these novels have been treated within a *postcolonial* perspective, rather than on the critical reception of these novels as such.

realist dimension symptomatically has been treated either with suspicion or, paradoxically, as a critique of realism. My reading of this text will attempt to reactualize the novel's realist aesthetics and demonstrate how integral this particular aesthetic strategy is to the novel's *interpretive/utopian* potential as a postcolonial literary text. To this end, I will—momentarily—return to a few Lukácsian issues, the purpose of which is partly to address the realist dimension of Mistry's text in a way that differs from typical (and stereotypical) conceptions of literary realism.⁶ In an indirect way, my reading will illustrate the dangers of critical institutionalization in order to argue that the contemporary field of postcolonial studies may learn an important lesson from the trajectory of Georg Lukács's changing reflections on the novel.

From *The Theory of the Novel*, in which he develops an argument about the interpretive/utopian potential inherent in the dynamics of novelistic form, to his realist theory from the 1930s, where this potential is to some extent transferred to a set of extra-literary norms (legislated by the Lukácsian Marxist critic), the trajectory of his thinking on the novel reflects the increasingly institutionalized and dogmatic context in which Lukács found himself situated. Postcolonial studies is similarly haunted by the negative effects of institutionalization (without thereby saying, of course, that the situation of postcolonial studies is identical to the situation of Lukács). Focusing on the potential of a "non-canonical" postcolonial literary form—i.e. the realist dimension in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*—may be one way of countering these negative effects, as well as reframing the question of the literary.

Lukácsian Overtures

Lukács argues in *The Theory of the Novel* that the novel form must have "a strict compositional and architectural significance" (76) in order to constitute a meaningful, conceptual totality. This does not mean that every element and heterogeneous part must fit into a perfect, symmetrical pattern. Such a structure would be profoundly inauthentic and inartistic, since it would not generate that particular dialectic of ironic forces and counter-forces striving toward a point of immediacy and non-interpretation: a dialectic that the young Lukács sees as unique to the novel as an aesthetic medium. Rather, Lukács's argument about the compositional form of the novel is that the events and parts must not be represented as mere decoration, but must occupy positions where they receive particular meanings defined in relation to the overall structure.⁷

The novel's strict compositional form, however, only designates the first step within a dialectical process—an abstract architecture subsequently undermined

⁶ The primary goal of this article is not a revision of Lukács's work as such, but rather, a pragmatic attempt to reactivate, within the context of postcoloniality, some of the theoretical concerns that occupied Lukács at various points in his career, and with the specific aim of foregrounding some of the theoretical impasses in postcolonial literary criticism.

⁷ For more detailed treatments of the intricacies of this work, see in particular Bernstein's *The Philosophy of the Novel* (1984), Derwin, Bewes, as well as my own "Novelistic Interpretation: The Travelling Theory of Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*."

and subverted through irony, revealing the inadequacy of any interpretational schematic. This arduous dialectical trajectory produces a temporal insight that is also a *realist* ideal, a transient form of experience that “rubs the sharp edges off each heterogeneous fragment and establishes a relationship—albeit an irrational and inexpressible one—between them” (*Theory* 125). What the novel form does, then, is to interpret a string of events as causally related, while balancing, objectifying, or correcting this interpretation through irony, that is, the subversion of those events inferred to be causally related. It is through this dialectic that the novel form is able to strive for the transcendence of both its abstractness and its subversion, producing a temporal perspective in which events reverberate on their own, establishing relations between one another, echoing and mirroring each other in an unauthorized, and ultimately unformulable and indefinable pattern that merges the novel’s abstractly connected and disconnected parts and events into an imagined totality.

Relations, strings, balance: all play a major role in *A Fine Balance*, which represents perhaps one of the most unashamedly explicit examples of the workings of contemporary postcolonial realism. The historical framework of the novel spans nine years, from 1975-1984, set in Bombay during Indira Gandhi’s state of emergency. Indira Gandhi, as the leader of the Indian National Congress party, first became Prime Minister of India in 1966. Nine years later, Gandhi strategically declared a state of emergency⁸ as a pretext to stay in power, which lasted until 1977, when she lost the elections to the Janata Coalition Party, and subsequently accepted her defeat.⁹ In 1980, she succeeded in becoming India’s Prime Minister again but was assassinated by her own bodyguards in 1984, when *A Fine Balance* ends. These historical events constitute the background of Mistry’s novel, which depicts four individual characters—the Parsi widow Dina Dalal, the Parsi student Maneck Kohlah, the Hindu tailor Ishvar, and his nephew Omprakash—whose life stories the novel skilfully weaves together like strings in a huge, panoramic patchwork quilt (one of the text’s dominant metaphors). The novel balances the disruptive forces generated by the state of emergency and the experiences of hope, desire, and tragedy at the individual level, evoking a very concrete sense of the historical era during which these four characters toil and struggle through everyday life, constantly obstructed and regulated by what appears to be an endless series of accidents, coincidences, and random forces.

Accidents play a significant part in Mistry’s realist vision, as scales constantly tipping the balance of existence. “Without chance,” Lukács writes in the 1936 essay “Narrate or Describe?,” “all narration is dead and abstract. No writer can portray life if he eliminates the fortuitous”—an argument that could easily be applied to Mistry’s state-of-emergency narrative. More troublesome for Mistry’s

⁸ The state of emergency involved a series of totalitarian government regulations and initiatives such as strict censorship; the arrest of opposition leaders, union activists and radical critics; and the suspension of human rights and civil liberties. For an historical overview of the state of emergency, see Dube, 105-06.

⁹ Although Indira Gandhi is never named in *A Fine Balance* (just like the city by the sea in Mistry’s text is never named as Bombay), the novel is built around very specific and easily identifiable historical events.

novel, however, would be Lukács's immediate qualification that "[o]n the other hand, in his representation of life he must go beyond crass accident and elevate chance to the inevitable" (112). Stretching the quotation, one could see it as a crude summarizing of the trajectory of Lukács's critical work, from *The Theory of the Novel* to his realist theory of the thirties; the young Lukács would probably not disagree fundamentally with the first part of his later statement, while the second part—the necessity of elevating chance to the inevitable—remains an ideal in *The Theory*. In "Narrate or Describe?" it has become the critical norm, the hallmark of "serious" literature.¹⁰ One would be mistaken, however, to see the later Lukács's theory as a radical departure from his earlier work: rather, it would be more correct to say that the later Lukács is being dogmatically blind to the problems involved in fixing this ideal as a critical norm—to the extent that the potential of the literary, or what I (after Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*) see as its interpretive/utopian dynamic, is in danger of being eliminated. To define the potential of the literary in terms of a critical, extra-literary norm also transfers authority or legitimacy to critical activity.

Accidents and History

A Fine Balance begins with three interrelated accidents or coincidences. During a train journey, Maneck Kohlah accidentally drops his study books upon the Hindu tailor Omprakash; stumbling together coincidentally in an overcrowded train, they are surprised to discover a little later that they are heading toward the same address, Dina Dalal's apartment—Maneck, to rent a room, and Om and his uncle Ishvar, to work as tailors. The train suddenly comes to a halt as a body is found on the tracks: "'Maybe it has to do with the Emergency,' said someone" (5)—that is, the state of emergency announced on the radio earlier that day. Nobody among the train passengers is sure what the "state of emergency" actually means, except that it is "[s]omething about country being threatened from inside" (5), and that this event may be related to the "accident" on the railway tracks,¹¹ which causes the train suddenly to halt, and which in turn causes Maneck accidentally to drop his books upon Om's back, whereby the three characters accidentally meet for the first time and initiate a friendship. The historical

¹⁰ In "Narrate or Describe?" Lukács writes: "In narration the writer must move with the greatest deftness between past and present so that the reader may grasp the real causality of the epic events. And only the experience of this causality can communicate the sense of a real chronological, concrete, historical sequence" (133). Here, the "epic," which remains an unattainable ideal in *The Theory of the Novel*, has become the critical norm for contemporary writers. But even if the "epic," in the later Lukács, has become a critical norm, his theory is by no means reductive or simplistic. While the rhetoric of his realist theory from the thirties has become more authoritative, more politicized and aggressive, Lukács nonetheless continues to operate with a conception of the novel form's function and purpose similar to the one he outlines in *The Theory of the Novel*, as Carroll has argued (221).

¹¹ Thus, while echoing Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the body found on the tracks forebodes the end, when Maneck commits suicide by throwing himself in front of a train, as well as the body of Avinash, which is found on the tracks (to make it look like an accident), a body clearly bearing the marks of torture.

event of the state of emergency here apparently constitutes little else than a blurred background of which no one, at the individual level, seems to take much notice, yet which embodies an uncertain initiator of a chain of causally related accidents. The state of emergency is at this particular level no more than a random, accidental force disrupting people's lives, "the cause of their delay" (6).¹²

This is not to say that History as such (or its concrete materialization as the state of emergency) constitutes an accidental force in Mistry's novel, but rather to stress the way in which it is experienced differently at the individual human level. Laws and controlling instances are at work everywhere in the novel, but we never receive a clear, concrete, and unified sense of power; rather, it operates in dispersed forms, embodied and manifest through representatives and agents, seeping through relations at all levels of society. This "effect" of dispersion has everything to do with the way the historical dimension operates in the novel. The meaning of the historical paradigm framing the text and its characters is to some extent separate from the level of individual experience. Coincidences, random events, and accidents (or what appear to be accidents) constitute a large part of the novel's mechanisms of cohesion, the bolts and screws holding the text's events together. The two levels—the trans-individual level (History) and the level of individual, quotidian experience—are inextricably intertwined without thereby becoming identical or symmetrically overlapping. The *difference* (which is also a force of irony) between those two levels consequently seems to be unable to escape its figuration as something coincidental or accidental in the novelistic discourse (despite being subjected to the regulative laws of the state of emergency).¹³ It is precisely this difference that shapes, or even allows, *A Fine Balance's* novelistic interpretation to emerge both as a symptom of this problematic and as its symbolic resolution.

The historical dimension of *A Fine Balance* has generated some debate among critics. Bharucha criticized Mistry's novel for failing to integrate history in a proper way: the novel, she writes, "appears to have been pieced together from fragments of newspaper reports, with the author riffling through pages of old newspapers from 1977 to 1986" (167). Ross has questioned whether "the exposé of political corruption and tyranny during Indira Gandhi's tenure still hold that much interest?" (240). Commenting on this passage, Schneller writes that "Ross

¹² The scene furthermore reveals, at a symbolic level, the contradictions generated by the impatient force underlying the state of emergency. As Morey, commenting on this scene, writes: "The equation of the railway with a preferred form of death is an instantly striking metaphor for a nation that runs over the people while, itself, going 'off the rails'" (175). Trains and railways of course metaphorically refer to connectivity and linking, but the body causing delay also becomes a figure of the opposite; the breaking of human relations, the suspension of individual connectivity, as well as the suspension of causality as such (e.g. causal explanatory power).

¹³ The novel elaborates a notion of history that is similar to what one may call an "absent cause," in the Jamesonian sense: "history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (Jameson 20).

appears to suggest that in Mistry's latest novel, history can be separated from the fiction, which I contend it cannot" (242-43). I agree with Schneller here, even while I understand Ross's and Bharucha's concerns. The problematic that Mistry's text explores, I would argue, is the link between the forces of history on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the toils and struggles of everyday life. That these two dimensions are inextricably linked is no doubt the case, but how these two dimensions are linked remains abstract—an abstractness that is concretized in and through the realist form of Mistry's novel. One should equally see the novel's sparse yet significant references to India's colonial past in this light: as a fading horizon, the effects of which reverberate in ways increasingly blurred and uncertain.

When Ishvar asks Dina what the state of emergency actually implies, she answers: "Government problems—games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us" (75). And yet, the whole novel is about how the intricate and indecipherable pattern of history—"government problems"—wraps its strings around the fates of the four characters:¹⁴ Om and Ishvar ending up as beggars, Dina becoming the servant in her brother's house after losing the apartment (and thereby losing her independence), while Maneck kills himself. In none of these cases is it possible to find a clear or direct link between a trans-individual, historical force and the outcome of a character's life, yet neither is such a link entirely absent; it remains, however, an abstract relation during much of the novel, occasionally breaking through in the form of random acts of political violence, demonstrations, or government initiatives (like the sterilization campaign, the beautification program, etc.).¹⁵

Mistry's novel, depicting a country's chaotic transition towards globalization, echoes Lukács's agonizing analysis of early capitalist society, in which specialized work-processes are determined "by pure calculation and which must therefore seem to be arbitrarily connected with each other" ("Reification" 88). When Dina is on her way to a music shop to sell Rustom's old violin, she "had to duck inside a library while demonstrators rampaged briefly through the street, breaking store windows and shouting slogans against the influx of South Indians into the city who were stealing their jobs" (61-62). Dina waits a few moments; no further comment on the episode is given, and the story moves on to the sale of

¹⁴ The historical force, at the level of the individual, is one that imposes itself on the characters like an Orwellian Big Brother. Morey sees the historical dimension of the text in terms of "the gargantuan body of Mrs Gandhi" (180). Schneller reads the historical force of the state of emergency as "a Hydra-like [sic] occurrence, in which the tentacles of government reached across the entire subcontinent, destroying lives in its wake" (243).

¹⁵ While history is shaped and formed by the ones at the top of the social hierarchy, its effects are most powerful upon the ones at the lowest step of the hierarchy—as represented for example, through the characters of Om and Ishvar, as well as Rajaram, the Monkey Man, Shankar, and the rent collector Ibrahim. Their concerns remain of the most rudimentary kind (to eat, find a place to sleep, to find work), and the motivations of their actions and doings remain limited to these concerns, which at the same time constitute the framework of possibilities of narrative motivation for much of the novel. "History is what hurts," Jameson observes; it "can be apprehended only through its effects" (88). It is through the obstruction of these rudimentary motivations that history, among the lower classes, manifests itself in the novel.

the violin in the music shop. A little later, she starts her sewing business in the apartment, hiring two people who have migrated to the city to find jobs. There are countless examples of similar tacit yet ironic constellations in the novel where the political-historical dimension briefly makes an uncommented and relatively un-disturbing appearance, whose implications are only felt or made explicit at some later stage.

Superfluity, Interpretation, Causes

Ian Almond has emphasized the frequent appearance of what he calls the “superfluity of the incident” (206) in Mistry’s text. Take, for example, the episode just after the thugs or “goondas” have trashed Dina’s apartment. A stench fills the apartment, which later turns out to stem from Dina’s shoe (she has stepped in something outside). Almond comments:

She cleans it off, the story moves on. The vignette seems somehow unconnected with the surrounding developments, unstitched (to follow the book’s metaphor) to the complex fabric of the novel, until we realize that the unrelatedness of the incident is precisely the author’s point.... [T]here is no single source of evil responsible for the myriad difficulties Mistry’s characters suffer. Whether it is dog-dirt on the streets or goondas on the doorstep, difficulties rain down upon the characters from all sides.... In this sense, the reticence and sparseness of Mistry’s prose signifies a reluctance to stitch and blend the novel’s vicissitudes into a single diatribe, a single cry against a single foe. (206)

The banality of the example, its vulgar meaninglessness, resists any elaborate effort to interpret it within a larger context. The text is full of repetitive events, motifs and gestures of a banal, meaningless nature, as when Dina accidentally drops a shoe in the gutter while crossing some rotten planks to Nawaz’s place. Some hundred pages later, Om’s foot almost crashes through the same rotten planks (68, 153). Another recurrent type of accident, still apparently meaningless, yet of a more sinister character, is the traffic accident. Dina’s husband Rustom is randomly killed by a truck; likewise, Omprakash is hit by a car when he attempts to follow Dina to the place from where she collects the raw material for the dresses; and when Maneck arrives at his college for the first time, he sees an old man who has been hit by a bus (45, 189, 234).¹⁶ One is tempted to agree with

¹⁶ A third type of accident throws suspicion, in a political sense, on the dimension of the accidental as such. Avinash’s death is officially classified as a “railway accident” (thus reminding us of the railway accident in the prologue), but the body reveals that he has been tortured to death. When Maneck meets Avinash’s parents, the father says, “[w]e saw burns on many shameful parts of his body, and when his mother picked up his hand to press it to her forehead, we could see that his fingernails were gone. So we asked them in the morgue, how can this happen in falling from a train? They said anything can happen” (499). After the police’s brutal treatment of Ashraf, the hospital declares “the cause of death as accidental” (538). A fourth “type” of accident, no less political, includes events suddenly endowed with an allegorical dimension, such as a market suddenly destroyed by the police: “In seconds the square was littered with tomatoes, onions, earthen pots, flour, spinach, coriander, chillies—

Almond's conclusion that the unrelatedness of the incident is the author's point. But one may also say that it is precisely the impossibility of upholding a clear distinction between possibly motivated events (that is, events with a specific relational or causal significance) and random, redundant events, which on the one hand produce a sense of unrelatedness but also, on the other hand, point to the underlying conditions for the production of this sense in the first place.

What emerges is a historical framework haunted by randomness—a framework that cannot overcome its abstractness and thus cannot become truthful, or self-evident. The concrete meaning of the historical force that acts on the characters' lives, on the surface, is separate from any concrete doings at the quotidian level. However, its effects are present in most of the events narrated as mediated through an ironic or contradictory series of transformative and transforming parts, joints, and sequences. At the quotidian, individual level, it is difficult, if not impossible, to trace these effects back to their original cause, except in an abstract sense (for example, when the body is found on the tracks, as an accident that *may* be related to the state of the emergency but which has concrete consequences involving both tragedy at an individual level, and that which may result from delaying the train). In almost all of the characters' trajectories, it is possible to relate—in an abstract sense—the causes of the particular bends, creases, and folds in their life stories to a grand narrative of India's post-independence history: economically, politically and culturally.¹⁷ As Morey observes,

all characters and relationships are affected by the machinations of the capitalist economy: from the piece-working tailors and their well-intentioned employer Dina, who is nonetheless implicated as an exploiter of cheap, non-unionized labour ... to the beggars whose place in the warped economy of beggary is determined by the severity of their mutilation.... [It] emphasizes the text's interest in moral culpability and the impossibility of total insulation against the taint of money in a society where anything or anyone can be bought and sold. This is not to say that Mistry is nostalgic for some idealized, pre-capitalist rural society. He recognizes that the

patches of orange and white and green, dissolving in chaos out of their neat rows" (529). As Morey observes, the colors of the down-trodden vegetables are "the colours of the Indian flag" (181).

¹⁷ For example: the Kohlah family, peacefully running a store at the foothills of the Himalayas, is threatened by "the broad vision of nation-builders and World Bank officials" (215), which means "the transmogrification" of Mr. Kohlah's "beloved birthplace where his forefathers had lived as in paradise" (216), and which furthermore causes the father to send his son Maneck to the big city to get a university degree. Likewise, Om and Ishvar are eventually led to the big city because a new ready-made clothing store opens in their town. After Rustom's premature death, Dina struggles to maintain her economic independence, ruining her eyes on sewing work until she starts a business by employing Om and Ishvar to make dresses of raw material supplied by Mrs. Gupta's export firm. Dina is eventually forced out of her apartment by the landlord who wants to turn the valuable building into luxury apartments; she reluctantly moves back with her brother, the businessman Nusswan, whose business has profited from the policies of the state of emergency. In all these cases, it would be possible to inscribe their miseries and toils into a larger framework of global capitalism.

roots of India's problems lie also in the concept of caste, and portrays rural society as often brutal and superstitious. (181-82)

But within this interpretive framework, the question emerges as to what significance the “superfluity of the incident” exactly plays, that is, the unrelatedness to which I have referred; if the novel produces a sense of unrelatedness while also pointing toward the underlying causes that produce this sense, how should we read the text’s inscription in a larger, allegorical-historical framework of “the machinations of the capitalist economy”?

It is not so much because the novel does *not* suggest that such links should be made, that the root of evil should not be identified in the final analysis. Quite the contrary, the novel itself readily provides us with particular frameworks in which we can insert individual events. Yet, to suggest that the novel “shows” how global mechanisms impact the individual in postcolonial India requires a leap that cuts out another aspect of what is at stake in Mistry’s novel, namely, the exploration of the (im)possibility of positing such links in the first place and, by implication, the necessity of shaping such links into social critique.¹⁸ The way in which such a trajectory—or linking—is to be mapped so as to become effective as a critique of power is also somehow what the novel’s narrative economy refuses to render. It remains confusing, missing, and lost.

When Dina asks Valmik why the Supreme Court “turns the Prime Minister’s guilt into innocence,” he answers:

Who knows why, madam. Why is there disease and starvation and suffering? We can only answer the how and the where and the when of it. The Prime Minister cheats in the election, and the relevant law is promptly modified. Ergo, she is not guilty. We poor mortals have to accept that bygone events are beyond our clutch, while the Prime Minister performs juggling acts with time past. (563)

Quoting this particular passage, Morey comments that it sums up the “central absurdity” of the historical situation: “A nation which does not learn from the oppressions of the colonial past seems doomed to repeat them” (182). I would not fundamentally disagree with this reading, only add that it also strategically leaves out or even represses another problematic evoked in this passage: namely, the radical *disjunction* of socio-historical levels that undermines the legitimacy of

¹⁸ One may argue that the textual dynamic consists of a series of what might be motivated events, but events that do not possess the authority to be translated into a certain chain of motivation, except in an abstract sense. This, it would seem, is one of the literary ways in which the political-historical dimension works and is explored in Mistry’s novel. At the quotidian-individual level, the narrated events take on a “functional” appearance, in the Russian formalist sense of the term, that is, as events primarily orientated toward the outcome or the consequences. One cause may be replaced with another, but the consequences carry actual, concrete signification, while the meaning of the event itself takes on an accidental appearance. As the novel progresses, the accumulative force of the narrative unfolding eventually achieves a certain authoritative gravity which translates, retrospectively (that is, when all the novel’s many warnings, expectations, omens, forebodings, hopes, dreams, desires, fears etc., have either been confirmed, de-confirmed, fulfilled or unfulfilled), particular events into a particular chain of motivation.

establishing such an interpretation in the first place. That the interpretation of the historical force as it affects the individual, human level, is reduced to an abstract generalization (say, “the main problem identified in the novel is global capitalism or the caste system”) because the novel explicitly disembodies the two levels, is also a way of showing the ineffectiveness and rhetoricity of such an endeavour. One may see an allegorical representation of this kind of ineffective interpretive endeavour in the figure of Mr. Valmik; a figure that not only absorbs much of the rhetorical excess of the novel but also, at a meta-level, becomes the unflattering mirror image of the literary critic who mimics Mr. Valmik’s “high-flown manner” (563) and grandiose abstractions while Dina, Mr. Valmik’s listener, feels increasingly irritated. While his analysis of the condition of the nation may “ring true” (564), it helps little in her struggle to keep the apartment, that is to say, it changes little in terms of the actual, concrete toils and misfortunes of individual people’s meandering lives.

Antibodies and Blood

If Valmik’s high-flown rhetoric does not in the end save Dina’s apartment, this does not mean that he is merely to be seen as the false prophet’s messenger. His words do “ring true” in Dina’s ears; but what bestows Valmik’s speech with truthfulness, however abstract, ambiguous, or imitative? What kind of authority ultimately distinguishes the picaresque lawyer’s insights from ineffective ramblings? The dialogue between Dina and Valmik outside the courthouse constitutes a kind of meta-reflective miniature allegory of the overall dynamic of the novel. Valmik narrates “life as a sequence of accidents”; at the same time, we are told that there “was nothing accidental about his expert narration. His sentences poured out like perfect seams, holding the garment of his story together without calling attention to the stitches” (565). The act of telling, Dina reflects while listening to Valmik, seems to create “a natural design. Perhaps it was a knack that humans had, for cleaning up their untidy existences—a hidden survival weapon, like antibodies in the bloodstream” (565). Valmik’s words—however abstract—“ring true” to Dina, because she is able to “balance” their abstract truth with the experiences of her own lived life: “Here he goes again, she thought. But his words did ring true. She tested them against her own experience. Random events controlled everything” (564).

This “balanced truth” also designates what one could see as an effect of the “workings” of *A Fine Balance’s* novelistic dynamic; a dynamic in which two different yet mutually conditioning dimensions—Valmik’s “abstract truth” and the truth of Dina’s “concrete experiences”—achieve a certain symmetry, a “natural design,” or “hidden survival weapon.” The essential point here is that it is only insofar as these two dimensions *interact* with each other that a “balanced truth” emerges. Neither dimension can be seen as truthful in and of itself. Valmik’s reflections do not reveal the truth of Dina’s experience, nor does Dina’s experience constitute the truth, reiterated or articulated by Valmik. Seen independently, they constitute a symptom of the absence of truth as such. By holding these two dimensions up against each other as dialectical counter-forces, the novel develops a framework of meaning that seeks to combine disjointed,

separate levels; for example, the lawyer's speech reminds Dina in a symbolic way "of her languishing patchwork quilt" (565), just as Dina's sewing would presumably remind Valmik of his rhetorical abstractions.¹⁹

Moving from this meta-reflective scene to the novel as a whole, one may argue that *A Fine Balance's* novelistic dynamic produces a narrative form in which a series of events are implicitly inferred to be causally related—an act of inference which, however, in actuality has no truth-value. The "truth" of the novelistic dynamic does not mean that the series of events implicitly inferred to be causally related in fact are causally related in an absolute way, as the randomness of the events ironically cancels out this possibility in advance. Rather, the novelistic dynamic must be seen as simultaneously constituting an abstract interpretive schematic (or what the early Lukács saw as "a strict compositional and architectural significance") and a balancing structure of concrete events, through which it dialectically strives for a resolution of the contradictions in between the disjointed, split dimensions of society. Thus, the novelistic dynamic of *A Fine Balance* should be seen not only as a symptom of contradictions between disjointed discourses (each operating according to their own set of laws and rules) but also as the dialectical attempt to resolve them symbolically, or formally, in a world out of balance.

Games and Laws

Aesthetic form becomes a "hidden survival weapon" when laws do not operate according to absolute principles, but rather operate like arbitrary scales in a world so out of balance as Mistry's state-of-emergency epoch. "The epic world," in contrast, writes Lukács,

is either a purely childlike one in which the transgression of stable, traditional norms has to entail vengeance which again must be avenged ad infinitum, or else it is the perfect theodicy in which crime and punishment lie in the scales of the world justice as equal, mutually homogeneous weights. (Theory 61)

In Mistry's text, the Law, as legislated and enforced by representatives of Indira Gandhi's government policy, is "a grim, unsmiling thing" (566), as members of the lower classes constantly experience, while the high court has become "a museum of cheap tricks, rather than the living, breathing law that strengthens the

¹⁹ It is important not to confuse Valmik's abstract reflections with what I have referred to as the "abstractness" of history as such; history is abstract because it cannot be grasped or represented except in textual form. The textuality of history is fundamentally an interpretation or a representation of history, which is intended to transform the abstractness of history into a representable form; yet this interpretation or representation is equally in need of balancing its own abstractness in order to become truthful. The novelistic dynamic in Mistry's text can be seen as one that attempts to unify or combine the dimensions of abstract truth and concrete experience—that is, forming two irreconcilable perspectives—into one inseparable unity that generates glimpses of the transcendence of abstraction, albeit in a conceptual sense. In the postcolonial context of *A Fine Balance*, the necessity of such a perspective is also, I would argue, one of the reasons for the importance of the literary.

sinews of society" (562). A recurrent figure in the text is the Law being aligned with rules in a game. To the Beggarmaster, for example, the state of emergency has "become a game, like all other laws. Easy to play, once you know the rules" (379). Although apparently operating on the other side of the official Law, "his laws ... are no different from those enforced by the state through the police, politicians, or courts" (Tokaryk 22). "Justice," in effect, has become an entirely abstract dimension, wholly disconnected from its concrete embodiment—a law that spreads terror and disruption among the population.²⁰

Avinash, Maneck's student friend, is the only one among the novel's characters who actively takes up a political fight against the injustice of Indira Gandhi's state, actively taking up the role of opponent in the game of the state of emergency. When Maneck reproaches him for no longer finding time to play chess because of his involvement in political activities, Avinash answers: "I'm playing it all the time. Everything I do is chess" (245). Later, when Avinash is in trouble because of his political activities, Maneck "remembered the early days with him, when their friendship was new. Everything I do is chess, Avinash had once said. Now he was under a serious check. Had he castled in time, protected by three pawns and a rook?" (271). Avinash has not, as it turns out, which Maneck eventually discovers when he tries to return his friend's chess set. Avinash's grieving parents inform Maneck that he has been killed by the authorities. Overcome by shock, Maneck forgets to give them the chess set. This apparently insignificant detail receives a larger symbolic importance within the narrative economy of the figure of Maneck as one of class consciousness gradually developing throughout the rest of the novel. Maneck's fateful realization of the concrete meaning of Avinash's words—"Everything I do is chess"—is a realization that does not become fully conscious until the epilogue of the novel precisely because it only works retrospectively, when the act of "forgetting" can be inscribed in an overall political-symbolic framework of remembering, which at the same time becomes a recognition of irretrievability, of human failure and futility.

Mistry's text dwells on a series of recurrent, fetishized objects, and in particular the chess set to which Maneck repeatedly returns, not only because it represents the memory of lost friendship but also because it represents his undoing. Significantly, he never finds someone with whom he can play chess after Avinash is gone. Instead, he plays by himself. When the apartment has been destroyed by the goondas, Maneck passively withdraws to his room: "Time is running out, you have still so much to do!" Dina angrily yells at him, but instead

²⁰ Om and Ishvar (and their "friends," the hair-collector Rajaram and the Monkey Man), for example, are excluded from participating in the "game" of the state of emergency. When the tailors are being forced to listen to one of the prime minister's political rallies, the text weaves together scenes of Om playing cards with Rajaram while the prime minister's speech is heard in between: "He played his card ... took back the card and played another, while the features of the new Twenty-Point Programme were outlined" (265). The ironic meaning of the scene is not only that the Twenty-Point Program, vaguely being heard in the background of their card game, as it affects the lives of Om and Ishvar, is decidedly not a "game" to them (Om is castrated, while Ishvar's legs are amputated), but that it is a game played precisely with the purpose of eliminating their significance (e.g. through sterilization campaigns).

of packing his things, Maneck “had the chessboard set up, and was staring at the pieces” (441). Why this inactivity, not only at this critical moment, but also more generally about Maneck’s Hamlet-like character—his pathetic melancholy and his chronic inability to face the brutal realities of the world?

It is true that he does take initiative on his own at times (for example, to finish the dresses for Mrs. Gupta, when Om and Ishvar involuntarily have been taken to a working camp), but both the decision to go to university and the decision to work abroad are made by Maneck’s parents; his most independent decision throughout the entire novel is, ironically, to commit suicide. The suicide appears as a strange, awkward (rather than tragic) and somewhat unresolved denouement of the novel. One might, however, see this awkwardness as related to the disjunctions generated by the political-symbolic meaning that is retrospectively bestowed on the chess set. Maneck forgets the chess set in Dina’s apartment before he travels abroad (and forgets everything else for eight years), and he forgets it in the restaurant when he returns home. On each occasion, it is returned to him. Originally, Maneck borrowed the chess set from Avinash and forgot to give it back to him, suggesting that the act of forgetting should here be seen as the ambiguous or unconscious realization of the fact that the chess set was meant for him (and no one else, to paraphrase Kafka’s gatekeeper), which only much later becomes a conscious realization—precisely through the act of remembering. The political-symbolic meaning of the chess set here becomes clear. It means action, political action, struggle, confrontation. The chess set symbolically embodies Maneck’s call for action, his chance to participate in the game of the state of emergency, to play the role of the opponent in a world where everything is politicized, which is precisely what Maneck has avoided by going to the Middle East.²¹

This explains not only Maneck’s suicide but also its awkwardness and why the novel’s epilogue is set seven years after the state of emergency officially ended. By the time Maneck returns eight years after he left the country, it is too late to act. Much earlier in the novel, Maneck taught Om to play another kind of game, where strings were collected in a ball: “We used to play a game when I was little, unraveling it and trying to remember where each piece of string came from” (490). Avinash’s chess set represents such a string of remembering and all the implications attached to it. The chess set at this particular moment represents Maneck’s failure, his undoing; the last thought that passes his mind before he dies “was that he still had Avinash’s chessmen” (612).

Stitching, Narrating, Describing

In Mistry’s text, the act of returning is a potential figure of disaster. After having been trained as a tailor, Ishvar’s brother Narayan returns to their parents’ village

²¹ Among the novel’s four main characters, Maneck is the only one who possesses a real opportunity to voice critical resistance; in contrast, Om’s resistance is limited to the defiant, yet in the end foolish and harmless, act of spitting at Thakur Dharamsi, which causes the latter to demand the castration of Om. The character of Maneck stands between Om and Avinash and lets both of them down in the end.

with great success, which provokes hatred and jealousy among higher-caste people. Among them is Thakur Dharamsi, who eventually kills the family in one of the cruelest scenes in the novel. Ishvar and Om narrowly escape, but when they return to the area for Om's wedding, they encounter the family's old nemesis Thakur Dharamsi, now a prominent politician, who orders the doctors to castrate the coming bridegroom. For much of the novel, Dina struggles hard not to look back, following closely the mantra "[t]he road towards self-reliance could not lie through the past" (56). Eventually, she is forced to give up her self-reliance and return to her brother's house, where Maneck meets her, each nearly unrecognizable to the other. As Dina returns the chess set to Maneck, he is returning to attend the funeral of his father, as well as to visit, he imagines, "Om, happily married ... and Ishvar, the proud grand-uncle ... and Dina Aunty, supervising the export tailoring in her little flat" (598). These great expectations, as evoked during the stay at his parents' home, stand in contrast to an existence abroad in total alienation, "now as it had been when he had landed there eight years ago" (585). The description of his life in Dubai, or what he remembers of it, resembles the problematic that Lukács saw as characteristic of the *naturalist* style, where the "so-called action is only a thread on which the still lives are disposed in a superficial, ineffective, fortuitous sequence of isolated, static pictures" ("Narrate" 144). What Maneck's life has become abroad is precisely such a thread upon which static, isolated images indifferently pass by.

In "Narrate or Describe?" Lukács stresses the importance of what he calls "the natural principle of epic selection" (130). Epic selection is particularly important, he continues, if one wants to avoid the Sisyphean task of *description*, which entails, Lukács contends, the rejection of any principles of selection. It is the principle of selection that stands at the heart of the novelistic dynamic (in the early as well as the later Lukács) as a de-reifying force paving the way for a re-conceptualization of relations between humans and things (the subject-object problematic). Consequently, "the loss of the narrative interrelationship between objects and their function in concrete human experiences means a loss of artistic significance" (131). For objects to be "related to men's life," their function must be exposed "in the mesh of human destinies, introducing things only as they play a part in the destinies, actions and passions of men" (137). Otherwise, Lukács ominously observes, "everything in composition becomes arbitrary and incidental" (134).²²

We see how the novel conceptualizes and re-historicizes the relationship between objects and human life through the principle of selectivity, when Maneck, shortly after his father's funeral, finds some old newspapers in the basement:

In a corner of the cellar stood a stack of mouldering newspapers.... The newspaper dates went back ten years, and jumped haphazardly over the decade. Strange, he thought, because Daddy used them up regularly in the store, for wrapping parcels

²² Although, as I argued previously, in the later Lukács's writings from the thirties, the authority of this principle of "epic selection" is ultimately deferred to a process outside of the literary work itself.

or padding packages. These must have been overlooked.... There were articles about abuses during the Emergency, testimony of torture victims, outrage over the countless deaths in police custody. (592-93)

Going through the horrors, injustices and misfortunes of the state of emergency, and the time following it (that is, everything of which Maneck was not a part), Maneck randomly, and without much interest, summarizes ten years of history compressed in a stack of moldering newspapers until he suddenly discovers the story of Avinash's three sisters, who have hung themselves for similar reasons as Thomas Hardy's *Little Father Time*. It is at this point that the "object" of the newspaper transcends itself, revealing a dimension of history not as abstract and impersonal but as the trace of concrete, human struggle that is under erasure, almost forgotten and lost in a dark, humid basement that has become the temporary sanctuary of human defeat.

The newspaper is here inserted in the narrative dynamic through which Maneck's reified relation to history is re-conceptualized, generating anew "experiences of hope and memory" (*Theory* 124).²³ It is after this episode that Maneck, filled with hope, decides to leave Dubai permanently in order to take over his father's shop and visit Dina and the tailors in Bombay. To return to "the strange magic" (574) of memory in the way Maneck does is at the same time necessarily restricted to, and subsumed within, the confines of an already-written history. It is an already-written history that Maneck has left behind, and which in his absence has taken a bend that leaves him incapable of reconnecting with it again when he returns, ironically because of his memory.²⁴

If chapter 15 ("Family Planning") tells the undoing of Om and Ishvar, chapter 16 ("The Circle is Completed") tells the undoing of Dina. After Dina has moved back to her brother's house, that is, after she has lost her apartment, she "covered herself with the quilt and took to recounting the abundance of events in the tightly knit family of patches ... If she stumbled along the way, the quilt nudged her forward" (573). What makes Dina able to start looking back (something she has distinctly refused to do throughout the novel) is the fact that the patchwork quilt by now is finished. The closure of the quilt's design symbolically fixes and

²³ As Tokaryk argues, *A Fine Balance* puts a lot of emphasis on individual objects, "in an effort to explore the 'systems' of which the objects are a part, not because the objects are significant in and of themselves" (16). Recurrent objects, used in different situations and for different purposes, taking on a variety of different meanings, include for example umbrellas, plastic-folders, nameplates, and hair. In each of these instances, it would be possible to interpret them as being part of a wider process demonstrating how the overall system, in which they are inserted, functions.

²⁴ When Maneck meets Dina again after eight years, she unsuccessfully tries to "breathe life into him" (606). When Maneck later meets Ishvar and Om, now beggars, he becomes paralyzed, unable to utter a single word. Later, Om concludes that "[h]e didn't recognize us" (613). As we know, however, Maneck did indeed recognize them, and it was precisely because of the shock of this recognition that "his words of love and sorrow and hope remained muted like stones" (608). Maneck, we are told, "saw that Ishvar was sitting on a cushion. No, not a cushion. It was dirty and fraying, folded to the size of a cushion. The patchwork quilt" (613). The patchwork quilt, now "dirty and fraying," is one of the prevailing metaphors of epic memory in Mistry's text.

frames the story of the time that the four main characters have spent together, the stories they have told each other, and the experiences they have gone through.

The novel does not end here, because we still need Maneck's story—but his story is absent (like the missing corner in Dina's finished patchwork quilt), or at least postponed. The thread of his life is eventually taken up in the novel's epilogue, which takes place eight years after the adventurous time in Dina's apartment, and we hear very little of what has happened to him in between. And when it is told, Maneck's undoing (an undoing ultimately caused by the knowledge of the other characters' undoing) has already become an excess, a waste, one of the "leftovers of fabric" (194) after the textual patchwork has come to an end—an undoing which thus furthermore becomes the symbolic undoing of the novel as a whole, leaving it undisturbed to its work of remembrance.²⁵

Conclusion: Realism, Form and Balance

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is perhaps one of the clearest recent examples of a postcolonial novel employing a realist style. While any number of critics agree on this point, it is an agreement often followed by some qualifications. Sharmani Patricia Gabriel's Bhabha-inspired discussion of Mistry's text argues that the novel "appears to have been influenced by the narrative concerns of nineteenth-century European social realism.... *A Fine Balance* is fuelled by the desire to root narrative in the realities of the diverse social, political and class formations of Indian national life" (87). Symptomatically, Gabriel follows this "concession" with a qualification: "However, although Mistry accedes to the representational power of the realist novel ... he is also aware of the inadequacies of the traditional realist novel to represent the kind of imagined community that is the nation" (87). What Gabriel sees as the "inadequacies of the traditional realist novel" more or less correlates with Benedict Anderson's rather simplifying notion of the realist novel as embodying "homogeneous, empty time" (25). The fact that Gabriel credits Anderson here as the final authority on whatever the traditional realist novel does and desires, tells us, I would argue, more about the framework of criticism from which Gabriel's reflections emerge than about literary realism proper. What we see is a critical construction that allows Gabriel to formulate a dichotomy between a "bad realism" (as embodying an Andersonian imagined community) and a "good realism" that "sets out to destabilize those aspects of the realist narrative that contribute to the homogenization of the nation's time-space continuum" (88). Although Mistry's text initially appears to be realist, Gabriel concludes, it turns out in fact to be a critique of realism.

What emerges from this critical maneuver is also a startling blindness, maintained by an institutionalized postcolonial vocabulary of constantly repeated mantras such as "hybridity," "incommensurability," "the liminal," the "anti-hegemonic," the "ambivalent," "difference"—as if these concepts were to be seen

²⁵ Significantly, the novel does not conclude with Maneck's suicide. It ends with a small, banal episode—like one of those small snippets left over when the overall design has been completed—during which Dina secretly feeds Om and Ishvar while her brother and his wife are out. While they are eating, a "thread had unraveled from the quilt" (614).

as natural synonyms of the figures of the postcolonial. Exemplifying this blindness is Gabriel's reading of one of the dominating metaphors in Mistry's text, the patchwork quilt:

For Mistry, the national narrative of Indianness, like the novel's patchwork quilt, is construed not through the presumed unities and homogeneities of nationalist narratives but through what Homi Bhabha calls the "incommensurability," which takes into account multiple and contending realities. In this way, the nationalist fantasy of the national "people-as-one" is constantly challenged and disrupted in the novel by the reality of the resistant discourses of minorities. (94)

But one should also ask what a patchwork quilt is if not also unifying? It may be, as I have tried to show, a very different operation of homogenization and unification than the stereotypical notion of "national homogeneity" that Gabriel has in mind. To ignore the text's configuration of sewing, linking, stitching, and putting-together in order to focus on disruption, subversion, and incommensurability is to ignore the novel's realist aesthetics in order to focus on its alleged critique of realism.²⁶

Much of the critique of literary realism within a postcolonial perspective is undoubtedly related to the critical fetish of literary resistance. As Moss observes, "the prevalent view—both popular and academic—is that, for whatever reason, realism and resistance do not converge" (158). Opposed to such prevalent views, Almond calls Mistry's text "a novel of social protest—but one in which all the happy, surviving characters are those who have decided to work with the system, not against it" (211). This argument suggests that the novel is ultimately one of defeat and resignation, which should, I think, make us hesitate before judging the novel merely in terms of resistance or resignation along a political barometer that itself has become a homogenizing device. As I have tried to demonstrate, I am not against a reading of the novel as one of social protest or resistance. Quite the contrary, I have tried to stress that one should also follow Gayatri Spivak's pertinent advice from *Death of a Discipline* and avoid drawing "too-quick conclusions about gender, freedom of speech, and modernity" (61). Indeed, my own reading of the novel does not argue against reading it as a critique of the impact of globalization and neo-colonial structures of economy on the lives of citizens in India during the 1970s, but rather that we understand how such a reading involves a leap, an abstraction that cuts out the literary dimension of Mistry's text.

Literariness here should not be equated with a collection of anti-realist textual strategies that in turn are being equated with "hybridity" or "incommensurabil-

²⁶ Other examples include Morey, who writes that whereas "several critics" have misrecognized Mistry's text "as merely perpetuating the traditions of the nineteenth-century European realist novel," it uses "patterns of recurrence and cyclicity and metafictional elements," and should be seen as "post-colonial metarealism" (183-84). Almond reads *A Fine Balance* as a novel that "re-orientalizes" the East, a process that competes with the text's "more political vocabulary of social realism" (215). Tokaryk offers an explicit "defence" of Mistry's realist form, referring to both Shaw's *Narrating Reality* and Lukács's realist writings but choosing instead to read *A Fine Balance* in terms of Bakhtin's notion of "grotesque realism" (25).

ity" in a wholly predictable and formulaic way, as opposed to "the inadequacies of traditional realism." What I see as *A Fine Balance's* interpretive-utopian potential—the potential of literary realism as it works within a particular postcolonial context—is the exploration of how such leaps are constructed, shaped, and motivated. As Jonathan Culler recently observed, "[o]ne problem of postcolonial studies ... is the absence of good accounts of *literary* norms against which postcolonial authors are said to be writing" (11, emphasis added). I stress the word *literary* here because there are plenty of norms and normative jargon in postcolonial studies. On this issue, I think a reconsideration of literary realism—as an interpretive-utopian potential—is of vital importance to postcolonial studies. Considering literary realism from a contemporary perspective, I have attempted to show the value of taking into account Lukács's still relevant insights on literary realism and literary norms at a time when the field of postcolonial studies itself is in danger of becoming dogmatic and prescriptive.

Mistry's novel, focusing on a moment of crisis in India's transitional period—an intensified and ambiguous historical moment capturing the fading memories of a colonial past and an approaching global future—lends itself to a Lukácsian approach in various ways, although not in a dogmatic or mechanical sense, but rather by pursuing the potential of a realist modality that offers a renewed perspective on the historical discourse from which the novel's story emerges. As I have argued, *A Fine Balance* can be seen as an attempt to explore, negotiate, and ultimately maintain a formal balance between different levels of postcolonial historicity, as they are brought together through a specific, causally inferred plot: a "truthful" design working through, in order to establish, a narrative dynamic that integrates abstract truth with concrete experience, and thus attempting to resolve the contradictions as experienced in between different levels of historicity. It is a process of resolution that ultimately becomes an attempt to transcend the abstractness of representativity as such—a transcendence which, in its ideal form, produces an immediate, spontaneous sense of history, or what the early Lukács calls "experiences of hope and memory." In *A Fine Balance*, the national history of India, as shaped and determined by its colonial past, is woven together with the lives of individuals from different classes and backgrounds through a narrative dynamic scanning and revealing the contradictions, leaps, and abstractions as well as the concrete effects and consequences generated in between those levels. Events in the novel, as they are experienced at a concrete, human level, appear accidental and meaningless. By exploring and interpreting the ways in which such events become connected, disconnected, attached, or detached to and from one another within the framework of a particular historical epoch, that of India during Indira Gandhi's state of emergency, Mistry's postcolonial realist form shapes and unifies irreconcilable perspectives into one inseparable unity—a novelistic dynamic that traces the possibilities of *de-fetishized* forms of experiences. Mistry's novel provides an interpretive-utopian perspective integrated with, and confirmed through, the experiences of concrete human struggle—a fine balance in a world out of balance.

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