



Realist Fiction as the Rightful Genre of our Time: Realist Fiction after the Postpositivist Intervention



Firouzeh Ameri

Assistant Professor of English Literature, The University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran.
f.ameri@tabrizu.ac.ir

Abstract

Realist fiction, which had a pivotal place in 19th. Century literature, has lost its central position in the contemporary literary scene as modernism, postmodernism and poststructuralism have raised some serious challenges against it, advocating experimentalism in fiction, instead. Still, in our age, when globalization and capitalism breed different forms of marginalizations and injustices in societies, it is the realist fiction that better than any other form can depict the struggles and pains of these marginalized lives. Thus, realist fiction deserves to be considered a major genre of our time rather than a second-rater. This paper attempts to investigate into the present state of realist fiction in the literary scene, and it argues that, with the significant theoretical backing from the postpositivist realist critics, it can move toward reclaiming its position in literature today. Postpositivist realists base their defense of realist fiction on the notion that the representation of reality, identity and experience in realist fiction, in spite of being theory-mediated and affected by ideologies and discourses, is possible, as these objects of representation are real and important for being real. The paper maintains that the postpositivist support can favorably affect the present place of realist fiction. Still, the rightful realist fiction of our time, in tune with the developments in the theories of knowledge and fiction, unlike the 19th. century realist fiction, has patches of experimentalism, while keeping its realistic ethos, which further indicates that the contemporary fiction is the fiction of an era affected by postpositivist realist concepts.

Keywords: experience, identity, Postpositivist realism, Poststructuralism, realist fiction, reality

Received date: 2019/10/25

Accepted date: 2021/11/11

DOI: [10.22034/jpiut.2021.36379.2435](https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2021.36379.2435)

Journal ISSN (print): 2251-7960 ISSN (online): 2423-4419

Journal Homepage: www.philosophy.tabrizu.ac.ir

1. Introduction

All stories have some grounds in reality and realistic elements can be found in all stories that human beings have been telling each other all through the ages. However, Realism as a school in literature emerged in the middle of 19th. century in Europe, with Honore de Balzac as a major advocate of this mode at the time. Focus on the external circumstances of the lives of characters chosen from ordinary life, linear plots and omniscient narrators were some of the major features of this genre. Many elements contributed to the emergence of Realism in the second part of 19th. century in France and later in the whole Europe, among which we can refer to the social changes as a result of Industrial Revolution, the scientific and empiricist spirit of the time as well as the dominance of positivism in 19th. century philosophy. An important tenet of realism is the idea of verisimilitude in the sense that the fictional text offers the illusion of giving a true representation of the lives of some people in the outside world. According to Pam Morris, realist fictional texts are the ones that “gesture towards a non-verbal materiality” (Morris 2003, p.155), and are based on a “consensual contract with the reader that communication about a non-textual reality is possible” (2003, p.162). In other words, the implied reader is encouraged to accept that there are some people in the real world whose lives might be similar to the people imagined in these novels. As Kitsi attests, the mirror metaphor is applicable to this form, especially the 19th. Century version of it, as the realist writer, in line with the eighteenth-century philosophies of Enlightenment and nineteenth-century positivism with its emphasis on empirical evidence and observation as the main sources of knowledge was “supposed to observe the world and document facts, holding up a mirror to reality and offering to the reader a slice of truth” (p. 128).

Realist fiction, after the advent of modernism in the 20th. century, to a great extent lost the prestigious position it enjoyed in the 19th. century. Modernism’s demand for the depiction of the complexity of the inner worlds of the characters in literary works was what the realist fiction of the time could not provide. Postmodernism’s further questioning of all certainties including reality and the representationality of reality was another blow to the traditional form of realist fiction. In fact, various strands of modernist, postmodernist and especially poststructuralist criticism, from the early 20th. century onward, have raised some challenges against realist fiction, describing realism as inadequate in portraying the lives of contemporary men and women. These critics of realism, instead, advocate more experimental modes of fiction in which, in various degrees, the plot is not linear, the mode of narration is complex, the text self-reflexively mocks the truth of its representation and the focus is more on the inner worlds of the characters rather than the outer circumstances of their lives.

However, the notion that poststructuralist and postmodernist lenses should be the only ones through we can observe and analyze contemporary literature has been challenged by a number of critics. Günter Leypoldt, in this regards, states that, “the

suspicion that postmodernism's essential flaws have to do with a self-defeating epistemology and an escapist moral detachment has been a key theme of the recurring critiques of postmodernist fiction since the 1970s, as metafictional and fabulist experimentation lost its innovative luster" (2004, p. 20). Tom Wolfe, an influential critic of the exclusive dominance of postmodernist views on contemporary fiction, has published what we can dub a "realist manifesto" in 1989 in *Harper's Magazine*, the main thesis of which has been thus articulated by Leypoldt: "postmodernist writing reflected an overreaction to the "radical" philosophy of the 1960s, and ... a more sober approach would reinstate realism's former cultural authority (2004, p. 21). Likewise, Kristiaan Versluys reiterates the criticism of poststructuralism's obscurity, confusion and moral detachment, and underscores an epistemological flaw in postmodernist/poststructuralist negative evaluation of realist fiction: "Nonetheless, we all know, in those moments we stop being intellectuals and return to life as ordinary human beings, that the real IS real and that, if one kicks a stone, it hurts. [Realism is an] enduring tradition in fiction which takes this bedrock truth as the center of its program" (1992, p. 7).

Undoubtedly, the lessons of postmodernism cannot be forgotten; however, contemporary realist fiction requires solid theoretical backup from philosophy to be able to regain its cultural authority, and the present paper, proposes that postpositivism, which critiques positivism without totally rejecting it, can provide a suitable theoretical source for the best realist fiction of our time, a fiction which does not repeat the mistakes of some naïve realist fiction of the 19th century, but is still proudly realist.

The present paper sets to explore the status of realist fiction in our time, investigating the challenges as well as the opportunities that the present dominant climate of its criticism has provided for it. The paper argues throughout that realist fiction still has enough support from other theoretical stances, most importantly postpositivism, to be able to claim its rightful position in the literary scene; however, survival of this genre invariably depends on how it evolves and adapts itself to the new conditions of the time. In other words, it is argued that the rightful realistic fiction of our time is not identical with the early versions of realism and needs to bear the marks of our time while remaining realistic.

2. Discussion

2.1. Criticisms of Realist Fiction

The modernist and postmodernist criticism of realist fiction is particularly based on three factors: the representation of reality, the representation of identity and the representation of experience. In what follows these three strands of criticisms will be explored.

One important premise of realist novels, namely that knowledge and communication about an external world is possible, has been the subject of criticism by modernists, postmodernists and poststructuralists. Virginia Woolf complains that reality is too elusive to be put within the orderly frames of the realist novel (1924, 1925). Poststructuralists, such as Ronald Barthes, insist that our knowledge of the world is mediated through language and the discourses of our time and they stress the fictionality of all knowledge (1957). Adorno and associates of the Frankfurt School, linking the realist novel to the Enlightenment view of rational knowledge and human progress, believe that realist novels naturalize the status quo and bourgeois morality. They carry the message that this is the way things are (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Morris 2003, pp.14–44).

Another criticism posed against realist fiction is that realism supposes a fixed identity and/or self which is knowable and has an essence, and the development the character experiences happens to this fixed essence. Poststructuralists, instead, believe that a notion of identity that sees it as unified and fixed is no longer tenable, and stress that, identity, in our time, is conceived as “becoming” rather than “being”, evolving, and always in a state of being re-constructed (Dillon 1999, p. 250). According to Gayatri Spivak, identity is not predetermined but is multifaceted and variable. In Spivak’s words, “there are many subject positions that one must inhabit; one is not just one thing” (Spivak 1990, p.60). Stuart Hall is also against an essentialist model and argues for a discursive model of identity formation, in which discourses have a significant role in the construction of identity. As he puts it, “identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions” (1996, p.4). Hall sees a very close relationship between identity and representation. According to him, “identities are ... constituted within, not outside representation” (1996, p.4).

The representation of experience in realist fiction, is another point of challenge, in addition to the representation of reality and identity, for critics of this form. Experience has been defined as “the fact of personally observing, encountering, or undergoing a particular event or situation” (Moya 2002, p. 38). The notion of experience, like identity, has undergone various re-evaluations in cultural studies in recent years. That experience is to be taken as incontestable evidence and the origin of knowledge, as some historians treat it, has been challenged by poststructuralists, such as La Capra (1987) as this way of viewing experience, they argue, essentializes identity, naturalizes experience and ignores the role of discourses in the construction of experience. As Joan Scott, for example, argues, when we conceive experience in this way, what happens is that:

Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are

left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. (Scott 1991, p.777)

The evidence of experience in representations has thus strongly been challenged by poststructuralists.

2.2. The Significance of Realist Fiction in Our Time

With all these criticisms and the flourishing of modernist and postmodernist texts, which through the use of various experimental techniques including stream of consciousness, fragmentation, non-linear plots, multiple narrators and points of view, self-reflexivity, pastiche and collage, have shown the nonfixity of identity, experience and reality, the realist fiction has been relegated to a second class position in the contemporary literary scene, losing the pivotal place that it had in the 19th. century literature. In many contemporary literary circles, people do not condescend to discuss realist fiction. However, realist fiction characteristically has some potentials that make its degradation or weakening losses both to the world of literature and the wider world. First of all, unlike the fragmented and sometimes far too complex modernist and postmodernist stories, realist fiction can satiate our eternal thirst for hearing stories. The sense of pleasure that one can get from hearing stories through literature is extended to a wider range of readers if the medium is realist fiction. Moreover, it can be claimed that no form better than realist fiction can render the everyday lives of people. When this capacity is utilized for narrating the lives of marginalized groups of people in society, the significance of realist fiction becomes even more evident as many issues in the lives of these people are related to their social lives and the treatment they receive from society. In fact, there is a need for the narration of life circumstances of these people so that their everyday struggles and, in many cases, their undeserving and unjust life conditions can be underscored. Thus, realist texts do not deserve to have the second class position that they have in the literary circles of our time, especially when globalization and capitalism breed all types of marginality in our contemporary world.

2.3. Postpositivism and its Defence of Realism and Realist Fiction

As the dominance of poststructuralism has been an important reason for the downgrading of realist fiction in literature today, if this form can soundly be defended in theory, then there will be a firmer ground for its reclaiming its position in contemporary literature. Among sustained theoretical frameworks, postpositivism has more decisively supported realism and realist fiction. Postpositivism is an epistemological stance that critiques positivism and at the same time amends it. Postpositivists, and more specifically postpositivist realists, do not negate the

positivists' objectivity; however, they argue that the theories, ideologies and biases of the observer can affect his or her objectivity.

Nick J. Fox in *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods* gives a summary of the history of emergence and development of postpositivism. Fox first defines positivism as “the philosophy of science that emphasizes the importance of observation for the growth of knowledge” and “rejects non-observable (and hence un-testable) sources of knowledge as unscientific” (2008, p.660). Fox points out that positivism has been criticized for limiting the sources of human understanding to human experiences and ruling out other sources of knowledge such as human interpretation. As he puts it, postpositivism emerged in this context of the criticism of positivism and started with the ideas of Max Weber, who was a late nineteenth century and early twentieth century sociologist. Weber put forward the idea that it is the subject with interpretive capabilities rather than the observer that understands social realities. Moreover, we need to understand that the ones who are studied are also active producers of their social reality rather than simply the objects of social study. Weber's departure from the objectivist positivist perspective in the study of the society, was further strengthened by people such as Thomas Luckmann, Alfred Schutz, and Peter Berger, who also emphasized the partly constructed nature of the social world (Fox, 2008, pp. 660- 661). However, Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science also bears the mark of this postpositivist approach as this brand of philosophy recognizes “the social production of all scientific knowledge, in both the natural and social sciences” (Fox, 2008, p. 661). Fox further elaborates on Alfred Schutz's contribution to this project which underpins that both the objects and subjects of social study are interpreters and producers of the social world and as a result, there is a “need for social scientists to be reflexive about their interpretative work, both to aspire to detachment but at the same time to accept its ultimate impossibility” (Fox, 2008, p. 662). In short, and based on the views of the aforementioned thinkers, Fox thus defines postpositivism: “Post-positivism is a critique of both the ontological and epistemological foundations of theories of knowledge. It is a range of perspectives that have in common a rejection of the positivist claims to be able to discern a single social reality and to observation as the sole technique for its discernment” (2008, p. 664). Fox rightly refers to two opposing perspectives within postpositivism which can be broadly referred to as postpositivist realism and constructivism. Both perspectives reject the absolute objectivism of positivism; however, the realist side “adheres to the notion that there is some objective reality to the social world”, while emphasizing that “interpretative” and “subjective sense-making” of the world makes the discovery of that reality complex, value-laden and partly based on the observer's ideologies and interpretations. The constructivist or the poststructuralist side, on the other hand, believes that “there is no objective reality to the social world”, is “highly skeptical to truth”, and highlighting the pivotal role of language as the mediator between human beings and reality pinpoints the constructed nature of reality (2008, pp. 662-663). In

fact, the poststructuralists did not consider realists such as Schutz as postpositivists, due to their different views about objective reality. Nevertheless, postpositivist realists, maintaining their points of departure from positivism and constructivism/poststructuralism alike, continue to leave their mark on the intellectual world. As it has been discussed throughout this paper, the present research draws on the views of postpositivist realist scholars to provide support for its argument that realist fiction is still valid and even absolutely essential even in our poststructuralism-stricken world. Importantly, in the discussions of this paper, the terms postpositivism and postpositivist realism are used interchangeably, and they are not supposed to be confused with constructivism.

John H. Zammito, in his description of postpositivism, first refers to the Vienna Circle, which was a group of twentieth century philosophers who tried to reconceptualize positivism and empiricism; however, they restated even more forcefully “the core epistemological tenets” of the nineteenth century positivist tradition. Zammito, then points out the decisive roles of two twentieth century philosophers, Quine and Kuhn, in the formation of postpositivism and states that “the post-positivist theory of science was the result of the challenge posed primarily by Quine and Kuhn to the dogmas of logical positivism articulated by the Vienna Circle early in the century and still dominant in the philosophy of science after World War II” (2004, pp.7-8)

Paula Moya, the Stanford-based literary critic, in her definition of postpositivism, in line with the focus of the present paper, especially contrasts it with postmodernism or the constructivist/poststructuralist approaches and states that postpositivism is :

...an epistemological position and political vision ... [and] an alternative to the reductionism and inadequacy of essentialist and postmodernist approaches to identity ... While [postpositivist] realists will readily acknowledge that ideologies have constitutive effects on the social world such that 'the world' is what it is at least partially because of the way humans interact with and understand it, they will insist that reality is not exhausted by how any given individual or group perceives it ideologically. (2002, p.27)

Some scholars, including Paula Moya herself, have done studies which link postpositivism to the study of literature. Such studies define how postpositivism can give us insights especially into the notions of identity, experience and representation, issues that we can link to some different understanding of realist novels.

As will be further explained below and briefly referred to before, postpositivist realists, as contrasted to constructivists, who do not believe in the possibility of objective knowledge because of [the] “problems of interpretation” (Fox, 2008, p. 662), in spite of believing in the role of ideologies and discourses in the formation of knowledge, identities and experiences, still assert that objective knowledge is possible,

and people's identities and experiences are, in some sense, real, and valuable for being real. In spite of the valid arguments in the constructionist approach to representation, postpositivist realist critics, in tune with some other critics, warn us of its excessive emphasis on discourses and language, and argue that there are some realities in the world which exist independently of discourses. As Linda Alcoff puts it, "it is possible for human beings to have knowledge that is about the world as it is ... we are not caught in the 'prison house of language' to such an extent that we can know nothing about the world at all" (2000, pp. 315–316). In other words, postpositivists believe that there is an extra-linguistic reality which should be emphasized as much as language and discourses when thinking about representation, and that objective knowledge, though mediated by language and theoretical presuppositions, is possible. Thus, following these arguments, a strong case in defense of realist fiction is made. In what follows more specifically, this postpositivist defense of realism has been further elaborated on.

2.3.1. Postpositivism and Representation of Reality

The first criticism of realist fiction raised by poststructuralist, as already argued in this paper, addressed the following two points: the idea about the possibility of having knowledge of the world and the idea about the way the realist novels produce this knowledge of the world. With regard to the idea about the knowledge of the world that we can have, postpositivist theorists, for example, argue that we do not have to accept either of the extremes that reality is an object that can be understood by us, the subjects, the project of Enlightenment rationality, or that reality cannot be grasped by us at all, the poststructuralist proposition. Postpositivists, such as Donald Davidson, take the middle ground and argue, first like postmodernists, that the world we know is always an interpreted world and the contact with reality is always mediated by language; however, they also maintain that it does not mean that objective reality does not exist (Davidson, 1984). Moya, also thus describes the postpositivist conception of objectivity: "(1) all knowledge and observation is theory mediated (that is, mediated by language, bias, or theoretical presuppositions—as, indeed, postmodernists argue) *and* that (2) a theory-mediated objective knowledge is both possible and desirable" (2002, p.14). Then, based on this theory, it can be argued that the fictional world that the realist novels represent is a mediated one, but the point is that this mediated objective knowledge of this world, this reality, is possible. In Matthew Beaumont's words, "in realism the assumption is that it is possible through an act of representation to provide access to reality... which though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness, by language, is nonetheless independent of it" (2007, p.2).

2.3.2. Postpositivism and the Representation of identity

Postpositivists also propose their defence of the representation of identity in realist fiction, representations which normally introduce identities which have some degrees

of stability. Postpositivist realists agree with postmodernists that identities are not essences, which have to be discovered; however, they believe that identities are not free-floating or totally constructed by discourses and forces beyond our control either. Identities, in the views of postpositivists, are partly determined by our social contexts. Postpositivists also take the view that individuals have agency in interpreting their identities. As Linda Alcoff argues:

the postpositivist realists are against the conclusion that identities are merely fictions imposed from above ... Identities are socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world ... They are always subject to an individual's interpretation of their meaningfulness and salience in her or his own life. (2006, p.4)

Paula Moya explains that according to the postpositivist realist theory of identity, identities are both constructed and real: “identities are constructed because they are based on interpreted experience and on theories that explain the social and natural world, but they are also real because they refer outward to causally significant features of the world. Identities are thus context-specific ideological constructs” (2002, p.86). Importantly, postpositivists also argue for the epistemic status of identity, believing that the way we interpret the world is largely determined by our identity (Moya, 2002, p.187). In this regard, Satya Mohanty argues that “identities are ways of making sense of our experiences. They are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways” (1993, p.55). According to this view, then, holders of different identities can have different interpretations of the world partly because of their different identities.

2.3.3. Postpositivism and the Representation of Experience

Postpositivists also have arguments about the third challenge against realist fiction, which is the representation of experience in this fiction. They believe that although poststructuralist arguments against naturalizing experience are important, they should not distract us from the importance of experience to the extent that we ignore it completely. Shari Stone-Mediatore critiques Joan Scott's work, arguing that although she is right in drawing our attention to the crucial point of the discursive nature of experience, experience and narratives of experience still need to be taken as important, especially because of their role in social resistances. Drawing on the ideas of Chandra Talpade Mohanty on experience, she proposes a description that does not explain experience as unquestionable evidence (Stone-Mediatore 2000, p.116) or as “transparent and prior to language” (Stone-Mediatore 2000, p.119). However, in this view, experience is not defined only as a mirror of available discourses (2000, p.115) or a “linguistic event” (Stone-Mediatore, 2000, p.112, quoted from Joan Scott 1991, p.793), as the poststructuralists might argue. This notion recognizes the role of cultural

processes that help create experiences and identities (2000, p.116), yet it does not dismiss experience and especially recognizes the importance of stories of experience in resistance praxis. Postpositivists affirm a close relationship between identity and experience, arguing that one's experience largely affects one's social identity and vice versa. Thus, for the postpositivists, experiences are “not wholly external events”; “experiences happen to us” and they are mediated by theories in the sense that “the meanings we give our experiences are inescapably conditioned by the ideologies and theories through which we view the world” (Moya 2002, pp.38–39). Also postpositivists argue for the epistemic component of experience. As Moya puts it, postpositivist realists believe that 'experience *in its mediated form* contains an epistemic component through which we can gain access to knowledge of the world' (2002, p.39; italics in original). That is to say, in the same way that experience is informed by discourses and ideologies, the experiences that we have themselves partly cause us to have certain ideas about the world.

Postpositivists also emphasise that the experiences that we are likely to have are largely determined by our social location (such as gender, race, class, and sexuality) or identities. As an example Paula Moya argues that in North American society the experiences that a person who is “racially coded” as ‘white’ has differ significantly from the experiences of a person who is “racially coded” as black (2002, p. 39).

Thus, fictional and non-fictional texts based on experiences of people, especially those based on marginal experiences, are also significant as these texts are sources of knowledge; they help readers see the world from the perspective of others, and they can show the tensions constituting those experiences (Mohanty, 1991). Such experience-oriented texts form the bulk of realist fiction. Mohanty, who especially focuses on the experience-oriented texts of third-world women, importantly, describes such texts as “significant mode[s] of remembering and recording experience and struggles” (Mohanty, 1991, p.33), and as a site for the production of knowledge about “lived relations” (1991, p. 35). Texts that deal with the experiences of the marginalized, as critics argue, can facilitate readers' rethinking their view of the world (Mohanty, 1991; Harding 1991; Stone-Mediatore 2000). In effect, we can recognize such texts as an opportunity for “thinking from the standpoint” of the lives of other people (Harding, 1991; Stone-Mediatore 2000, p.123). In other words, these texts help readers see the familiar world with awareness of issues that hegemonic discourses do not allow us to see. Moreover, these texts can show tensions within experience, 'tensions that reflect the kinds of agency, community, or consciousness' that hegemonic discourses do not often represent (Stone-Mediatore, 2000, p.123).

2.4. The Realist Fiction of Our Time

Thus far it was discussed that postpositivists have argued for the validity of realism and, by extension, realist fiction through maintaining that reality, identity and experience, which are the main materials of realist fiction, cannot be dismissed. This

theoretical backing can, to a great extent, consolidate the position of realist fiction in contemporary literary scene. Postpositivists, further, by arguing for the significance of identity and experience-oriented texts, especially those of the minority groups, have ever more emphasised that realist texts with such focuses need to be taken more seriously. Therefore, with this support of theory, realist fiction can rise from its abysmal place in contemporary fiction and claim its rightful place in the literature of our time.

However, there are some questions in this regard that inevitably engage our minds. Is the pre-modern realism the realism of our time? Can the 19th. century type of realist fiction satisfy the 21. century readers who have been exposed to all types of modernist and postmodernist experimental fiction and films? These questions are important ones, the answers to which can give us a more clear picture of where realist fiction stands in our time. It seems to be close to truth to say that the nineteenth century type of realist fiction might not exactly be to the taste of many readers among contemporary audience of literature. The realist fiction today needs to show awareness of all the recent developments in theory and fiction writing, while remaining faithful to its realist ethos. Realist fiction today should ascertain some degree of instability in the representations of reality, identity and experience and should, in some way, delve into the mind of the character as the battlefield for all competing ideologies and discourses and, of course, at the same time, remain realist. This form of realist fiction can be the true realism of our time. This form of realism tells us a story, even a linear one, can have an omniscient narrator and can extendedly describe the outward circumstances of the lives of characters. Still, this omniscience of the narration is sometimes interrupted by the techniques of stream of consciousness, free indirect style, self-reflexivity and other experimental techniques of narration so that the inner world of the character with all its waywardness is also laid bare. Such fiction, arguably, is the type that can get the approval of contemporary readers. It can be claimed that this possibility exists and we have noticed the emergence of texts which are predominantly realist, hence are dubbed realist fiction, but have patches of experimentalism to show all the valid instabilities and uncertainties. In fact, postpositivism which offers this theoretical support of realist fiction also takes this middle ground of both affirming reality and proposing the partly discursive nature of reality. Therefore, it is an important but perhaps neglected point that realism and realist texts that the postpositivists advocate are the ones that have both the sides of realism and experimentalism.

As a case in point, a brief reference to a 2006 novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, by Mohja kahf, the Syrian-American writer can be illuminating. This novel narrates the life of a Syrian-American girl, Khadra, in Indiana, the USA. The narrative follows her growth from childhood to adulthood and shows her and her Muslim community's different experiences and challenges, as minorities, in the 20th. century Western context of America. The novel ends when Khadra, after numerous outer and inner

struggles, comes to a more reconciliatory relationship with herself and the American society she is living in. This text can be easily categorized among the realist texts. The realist mode of narration of this novel allows the portrayal of discrimination and sufferings that she, as a member of a minority group, experiences in the USA. However, interestingly, the text also uses some techniques which are not realist as the delineation of the inner turmoil of Khadra and her changing understanding of her experiences necessitates the application of these experimental, non-realistic techniques. The novel, especially, through the use of stream of consciousness, fragmented language and magic realism, in different parts, shows both the working of diverse discourses in the development of her identity, and the evolving nature of her identity. Moreover, it problematizes a fixed interpretation of reality and experience. There are numerous instances of these experimental technical endeavours in this novel. One example is when she goes to Mecca and sees Kaba for the first time. In this scene, quite queerly and in deviation from the realist mode, the narrative gets experimental and blends American slang, phrases from American literature and pop music with Quranic verses and Muslim themes. Here, Khadra, on first seeing the sacred Kaba in Mecca, cannot stop her mind from thinking of the lines of a song by Phil Collins, the American pop singer which goes: , *"I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lo-ord... I've been waiting for this moment for all my life, oh Lo-ord..."*(Kahf ,2006, p.162; italics in original). This is a climactic experience for Khadra in terms of religious and spiritual feelings; however, this scene suggests that Khadra's identity formation is affected by various discourses, including those from both her Muslim and her American cultural backgrounds. No identity, as both the poststructuralists and postpositivists agree, is really shaped by a singular discourse. However, identities are real and call for the acknowledgement of their reality. Mohja Kahf's realist novel manifests both this points in its realist context.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, realist fiction, with all its capacities in resistance praxis, needs to reclaim its place in contemporary literature. After the critical challenges posed to realist fiction by postmodernist and poststructuralist theories and the consequent downgrading of it in the literary world, postpositivist defences of realism have come as fresh blood to revive this weakened genre. Postpositivist realism, with its proposition that reality, identity and experience are both real and theory-mediated and are not to be dismissed, has, to a great extent, established the validity of realist fiction in theoretical debates of our contemporary world. Peter Kreeft famously states, "Philosophy makes literature clear, literature makes philosophy real" (2005, p.9). The story of the relationship of realist postpositivism and realist fiction also testifies to this idea by Kreeft, as here again the philosophical perspective provides the means of support and explanation for fiction, and the fictional baggage, including the narrative, its reception in society

and its effects on the readers, provides some means of concretization of the philosophical stand. Still, this paper has proposed that the realist fiction that can represent the rightful realism of our time does not remain unaffected by the journey of theory and literature in the last one hundred years, and resultantly, as the realism of the twentieth and twenty first centuries, it has touches of experimentalism in it, is not neglectful of the inner worlds of the characters, and is discourse and ideology-conscious. It realistically tells the stories of struggles of the people of our time and experimentally taps into their complex psyches. Both are the requirements of our time, and neither contradict the main principles of postpositivist realism.

Acknowledgement: A portion of this paper is based on my PhD thesis with the title of “Veiled Experiences: Re-writing Women’s Identities and Experiences in Contemporary Muslim Fiction in English”, conducted at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia; however, the focus, purpose and direction of this paper are completely different.

References:

- Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1972). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Alcoff, L. M. (2000). Who's afraid of identity politics? In P. M. Moya, & M. R. Hames-Garcia (Eds.), *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (pp. 312-347). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. France: Editions de Seuil.
- Beaumont, M. (2007). *Adventures in realism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Davidson, D. (1984). *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dillon, M. (1999). *Catholic identity: balancing reason, faith and power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fox, N.J. (2008). Post-positivism. In L. M. Given (Ed), *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 659-664). London: Sage.
- Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: who needs identity. In S. Hall, & P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity*. London: Sage.
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kitsi, A. (2005). The British Novel in the Nineteenth-Century. In A. K. Kitsi (Ed.), *Movements and Trends in 19th and 20th-Century English Literature* (pp. 111-151). Athens: Hellenic Academic Libraries.
- Kreeft, P. (2005). *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind the Lord of the Rings*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press
- La Capra, D. (1987). *History and criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Leypoldt, G. (2004). "Recent Realist Fiction and the Idea of Writing 'After Postmodernism'". *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 49(1), 19-34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41157909>
- Mohanty, S. P. (1993). "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: on Beloved and the Postcolonial Condition". *Cultural Critique*(24), 41-80. doi:102307/1354129
- Mohanty, S. P., Moya, P. M., & Alcoff, L. M. (2006). *Identity politics reconsidered*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morris, P. (2003). *Realism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Moya, P. M. (2002). *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Scott, J. w. (1991). "The Evidence of Experience". *Critical Inquiry*, 17(4), 773-797. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1086/448612>

- Spivak, G. C., & Harasym, S. (1990). *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. New York: Routledge.
- Stone-Mediatore, S. (2000). Chandra Mohanty and the Revaluing of Experience. In U. Nayaran, & S. Harding (Eds.), *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World* (pp. 110-127). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Versluys, K. (1992). " Introduction". In K. Versluys, *New Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*(pp.1-12).Amsterdam:Rodopi.
- Wolfe, T. (1989, November).Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel. *Harper's Magazine*,45-56.
- Woolf, V. (1924). *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Woolf, V. (1925). *In The Common Reader*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.
- Zammito, J. H. (2004). *A Nice Derrangement of Epistemes: Post-positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.