

Revisiting History in the Novels of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract- Rohinton Mistry is an important member of Indian Diaspora. He was born in Mumbai but migrated and settled in his land of dreams, Canada. Although, a resident of Canada, and recognized as one of the best-selling authors of the land, Rohinton Mistry writes very little about Canada. Being a Diaspora writer his fiction reflects his own experiences of alienation and dislocation suffered as an immigrant. His fictive world is replete with India and Indians. Mumbai the city of his birth comes alive in his creative works to give some of the finest accounts in fiction. Literature and history are intimately linked with each other. Literary writers often mix historical facts with fiction to re-examine the incidents, views and assumptions of the past. Rohinton Mistry's works present an in-depth study of the various dimensions of socio-political history of India. In his three novels under study, *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry has reflected his acute political consciousness. Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* is set in 1971 during the war between India and Pakistan. Rohinton Mistry's second novel *A Fine Balance* is set during 1974-75 and captures a realistic picture of India during the state of Emergency. Mistry's third novel *Family Matters* is set in mid 1990's where he has presented the riots that rocked the city of Mumbai. The present paper is an attempt to explore the historical contexts re-narrated by the novelist and to examine the close bond between the life and literature.

Keywords: Diaspora, Alienation, Immigrant, Emergency, Political consciousness.

Literature is rightly regarded a reflection of the life in all its varied forms and shapes. The creative writer strives to recreate a world almost similar to the real world in the pages of his books. This aspiration of the literary writer is served suitably by the powerful genre of fiction which provides an ample opportunity to present the age in a descriptive and analytical manner. The novelist records the social, political, cultural and historical growth of society in his narrative. His creative art allows him to blend the historical events beautifully in the plot to present a veritable picture of society. The fiction writer closely observes the social reality of the age and tends to explore the multiple dimensions of the relationship between man and society in his works before weaving the threads of imagination. Salman Rushdie points out "Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official, politicians' version of truth" (Rushdie, 14)

Rohinton Mistry in his novels revisits history and narrates the events in the light of his own interpretation. He is a widely acclaimed Indian Diaspora writer. He was born in Mumbai on July 3, 1952 but migrated to Canada in 1975. Despite his status as one of Canada's best selling writers, Rohinton Mistry's writings focus very little on Canada. India, particularly Mumbai forms the basis of his books. He is a socio-political writer and his writings mainly focus on the relation between life and literature. Rohinton Mistry's novels are not just the product of his imagination but are well observed critical comments on the political conditions of India and the world. The novels present an in depth study of the political backdrop against which the characters are delineated. In his three novels under study, *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry has reflected his acute political consciousness. Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* is set in 1971 during the war between India and Pakistan. Rohinton Mistry's second novel *A Fine Balance* is set during 1974-75 and captures a realistic picture of India during the state of Emergency. Mistry's third novel *Family Matters* is set in mid 1990's where he presents the vivid account of riots which occurred as the aftermath of the demolition of Babri mosque. The paper throws light on the socio-political life of India in a particular historical context. The study aims to analyse Rohinton Mistry's narration of the history of his country of origin in his novels

Mistry grew up in Bombay and his memories helped him in depicting the life of the Parsis in India in particular, against the backdrop of the grim socio-political condition of the city in general. Rohinton Mistry's fictive art lends a deep insight to the life of his parsi characters who acquire relevance on the wider national framework. As Amin Malak has said "The immigrant imagination is dichotomous by nature, locked on the horns of a dilemma, neither affiliated with the old root culture, nor fully fitting with the new adopted one. Accordingly, writers negotiating and articulating such an experience have to inhabit an alternative world, a *third world*: a world of their imagination, their memory, their nostalgia (Malak,52) Mistry himself agrees that his first two books – a short story collection called *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and the novel, *Such a Long Journey* were the distillation of his own life before he left Bombay. He says, "Writers write best about what they know. In the broad sense, as a processing of everything one hears or witness. All fiction is autobiographical. Imagination ground through the mill of memory. Its impossible to separate the two ingredients."(Lambert, Anjela. "Rohinton Mistry: Touched with Fire")

Mistry's novels are rooted in India's social and political history of Post-Independence era. His novels are the outcome of his understanding of historical details that help his Parsi characters to explore their identity. His novels illustrate his complex role as a critic of political and cultural history of the nation he left behind. In an interview to Oprah Winfrey, Mistry remarked, "Perhaps my main intention in writing the novel was to look at the history from the bottom up."(Interview with Rohinton Mistry. Oprah.com.)

His debut novel “*Such a Long Journey*” appeared in 1991 and established Rohinton Mistry as an international literary force. The book won many literary awards and was short listed for prestigious Booker Prize. It was translated in German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Japanese. The novel has been adapted for a film with the same name which was released in March, 2000. The action of the novel takes place in 1971 in Bombay at the time when war breaks out between India and Pakistan, over the issue of Bangladesh. The novel also highlights India’s war with Pakistan over Kashmir in 1965 and defeat at the hands of Chinese in 1962. Mistry admits that the plot of his first novel *Such a Long Journey* was created from the story he had heard from his parents and friends in 1971. “A Parsee Major had embezzled money from the bank to finance the resistance movement in East Pakistan. Within our community the main question was “How could a Parsee have done this.”(Lambert, Anjela. “Rohinton Mistry: Touched with Fire”) Mistry’s first novel *Such a Long Journey* narrates the historical events related with war between India and Pakistan in 1971. The war remains omnipresent throughout the novel in the form of dialogues, air raid, sirens, and unexpected blackouts. Mistry weaves in the plot of the novel, the role of the Indian Secret Service’s RAW which is presented as actively providing military and financial aid to the Mukti Bahini force fighting for the liberation of East Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh. Mistry makes a scathing attack on the selfish motives of the leaders in power. The novel throws ample light on the national and international political scenario of the period and also gives a detailed account of the Indo-China war and the consequences of India’s defeat. Mistry describes the turbulent times of 1971 when the relations were strained between India and Pakistan which finally resulted in two week war. The novel also offers valuable insight about some of the major events of the political history of India like the circumstances that led to the creation of Bangladesh, the death of Jawaharlal Nehru the first Prime Minister of India, the untimely death of Lal Bahadur Shastri, policies of Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi.

The political relations of India and Pakistan and the freedom struggle of the East Pakistan are frequently discussed in the novel. Gustad tells his wife Dilnavaz about the headlines of the paper, “It says that the Republic of Bangladesh has been proclaimed by Awami League.....They were saying that General Yahya should allow Sheikh Mujibur Rehman to form the government.(SLJ,12) Mistry brilliantly uses the details of the world history to make his stories more realistic. He also hints at the controversy surrounding the sudden death of Lal Bahadur Shastri. He writes, “Shastri boarded a plane for Tashkent where Kosygin had offered to negotiate a peace between India and Pakistan. The night the Tashkent Declaration was signed, Shastri died on Soviet soil, less than eighteen months after he became Prime Minister. Some said he had been killed by the Pakistani’s and others suspected a Russian plot.”(SLJ,114)

Rohinton Mistry, effectively utilizes his dialogues to make the readers aware of the larger historical and political realities of the world. Gustad Noble explains the complex issues of international politics to his friend Dinshawji in his quotidian talk on the tea-table. Mistry explained the complex foreign policy of America:

“.....Pakistan is very important to us, because of Russia” But why?

Gustad illustrated the geo-political reality, “Look this samosa plate is Russia and next to it my cup, Afghanistan very friendly with Russia, right? Now, put your cup beside it, that’s Pakistan.....Nothing South of Pakistan, only the sea and that is why America is so afraid. If Pakistan ever becomes Russia’s friend, then Russia road to Indian ocean is clear.”(SLJ, 76)

Major Jimmy Billimoria acquaints Gustad Noble with the details of the ceremony celebrating the birth of Bangladesh. Rohinton Mistry has severely criticized the political ambitions of Indira Gandhi and used sharp words to convey the damage caused to the nation due to her follies. Ghulam Mohammad utters his fears, “And his mummy (Indira) herself has many enemies. Makes more and more everyday, from Punjab to Tamil Nadu.”(SLJ, 323)

Rohinton Mistry’s second novel *A Fine Balance* set during 1974-75 faithfully mirrors all the oppression, cruelty and corruption of India during Indira Gandhi’s infamous state of Emergency. The novel ends in 1984, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in New Delhi and vividly portrays the riots that erupted resulting in the torture and massacre of Sikhs. The novel presents a moving account of the misery of the people during the Emergency. Mistry intends to throw light on Indira Gandhi’s miscalculations and to reveal her failures before the world. The reading of the novel obviously reveals the fact that Mistry is especially infuriated by the misuse of power that took place during the Emergency. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry realistically emphasizes the brutal atrocities committed on the poor and marginalized sections of society. The novel highlights the most painful period of the Post- Independence era. The depiction of poverty, despair and violence in the backdrop of Emergency in India ruins all possibilities of happiness in the lives of poor men. The forced sterilizations, slum clearance, religious persecution, bureaucracy, exploitation, corruption and the caste system all are described in the book. During Emergency MISA, was enforced, “MISA.....Maintenance of Internal Security Act.....allows detention without trial up to two years. Extensions also available on request.”(AFB, 560) The act permitted media censorship, imprisonment of the academics opposing the Emergency. The elimination of slum areas was another way of torturing the poor. Family planning clinics and vans distributing free radios in exchange for a vasectomy was a common sight. Mistry in this novel exposes the most horrifying facets of the Emergency. The heroine of the novel Dina Dalal is warned by a goonda, “Lots of people have disappeared in the Emergency.”(AFB, 570) Mr. Valmik the scribe cum lawyer explains the shortcomings of history with its tendency to favour a political activity without analyzing its effects on the poor and ignorant. They suffer because of the whims and blunders of the politicians:

“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”. (AFB,553) The censorship of Press during Emergency is also referred to in the novel. “Editorial.....has been silenced during her [Indira’s] regime” (AFB,583)

Ishwar and Om Prakash lose everything during Emergency. They lose their slum dwelling in Bombay as a result of the City Embellishment programme. His sufferings have no end when Ishwar gets sterilized in order to fill the day’s quota of vasectomies. His legs get affected with gangrene after his hasty operation and his both limbs are amputated after a great deal of physical suffering.

The tailor loses his legs and also his job because he no longer has the feet to work the pedals. People get forcibly sterilized against their will. Everyone is affected by the forced sterilization campaign which was the brain child of Sanjay Gandhi. Ashraf Chacha dies after his vasectomy. Maneck consults the Indian newspapers after nine years of the declaration of Emergency which attacked the crimes of Indira's government:

"There were articles about abuses during Emergency, testimony of torture victims, outrage over the countless deaths in police custody. Editorials that had been silenced during her regime called for a special commission to investigate the wrongdoings and punish the guilty..... Not many newspapers later...the ex-Prime Minister was poised to shed her prefix and return to power.....The editorials now reined in their rhetoric against her adopting the obsequious tone reminiscent of Emergency."(AFB,593)

Avinash, the student friend of Maneck, is tortured and killed by the police because of his speeches against Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi. The police cover up his death claiming "it was a railway accident." (AFB,489) Dina's sewing shop business fails due to the forced sterilisations of her workers Om and Ishwar which made them crippled. She has to suffer immensely as she has to leave her apartment and workplace, her machines and ultimately her independence. The novel brings to life the most terrible features of Emergency.

Mistry's third novel *Family Matters* is set in mid 1990's in overcrowded and politically corrupt Bombay. In this novel Mistry recreates a world governed by the free will of fate. Mistry has presented the historical backdrop of the riots which let loose after the demolition of Babri mosque. Jal says- "Just think back to the Babri mosque riots.....Sometimes hell does seep through."(FM, 4) Mistry paints the tragic plight of Hussain, the peon in Bombay Sport House who had to suffer immensely in the Bombay riots. Hussain's house and family were burnt alive by the mob. Rohinton Mistry has also visited history to give account of the bloodshed that was caused during the time of partition of India in 1947. He writes:

"Yezad felt that Punjabi migrants of a certain age were like Indian authors writing about that period whether in realist novels of corpse filled trains or in the magic realist, midnight muddles, all repeating the same catalogue of horrors about slaughter and burning, rape and mutilation, foetuses torn out of wombs....."(FM, 151)

Mr. Rangrajan's subtle comment on Indo-Russian relationship after the collapse of Soviet Union is brilliant stroke of irony used by Mistry to reveal his grip on history:

"After the fall of Soviet Union, welcome for Indians is not as warm as before. In the old days there was love between us-how many Russian boy babies were named Jawahar, girl babies named Indira. Nowadays, I don't think any Russians are naming their children Narsimha or Atal Behari."(FM,54)

Rohinton Mistry's disgust against Shiv Sena and BJP's Hindu extremism is openly revealed in the novel. Jal's suggestion, "May be the BJP and Shiv Sena coalition will improve things. We should give them a chance."(FM,31) is completely rejected by Yezad who holds them responsible for widening the gulf between the Hindus and Muslims. Yezad criticizes Shiv Sena for organizing Michael Jackson's concert, ".....Shiv Sena will pocket millions.....they've obtained tax free status by classifying it as a cultural event of national significance."(FM,32)

Thus, Rohinton Mistry in all his novels has presented the realistic picture of a particular period in history. His novels are the expression his socio-political consciousness and highlight the fact that the problems of corruption, communalism, poverty, caste and class distinctions have existed forever as the biggest menace for society. Rohinton Mistry's fiction is deeply rooted in his own past. Mistry's bond with his native land, culture, traditions and his concern for the deteriorating social and political conditions make him a novelist par excellence. His writings reflect his love and concern for the world that gave him an identity of his own. The canvas of his novels is painted with the realistic and compassionate picture of life which acquires new dimension when read in the light of social, political and historical contexts. The novelist acquires the role of a philosopher who tries to find new meaning in the ordinary, mundane things and with his breadth of vision transforms everything into a great saga of human struggle and achievement.

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