



Social, Cultural and Political India in the Novels of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract

This paper discusses the depiction of social, cultural and political India in the novels of Rohinton Mistry with respect to *Tales from Firoz Bagh*, *Such A Long Journey*, and *A Fine Balance*. Rohinton Mistry is an expatriate Indian-Parsi writer who lives in Canada. As a Parsi and also an immigrant in Canada, he looks at himself as a symbol of double displacement and this sense of displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works. His historical situation includes development of a new identity in the nation to which he has migrated and a complex relationship with the political and cultural history of the nation he has left behind. The focus is on the culture and life style of the Parsi community in the works of Rohinton Mistry. These novels are written in the backdrop of the India-Pakistan Second War and the period of Emergency declared during the time when Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister of India. The research paper tries to throw light on Rohinton's perception of the Indian Parsi society and culture from 1960 to 1990 in Bombay. Rohinton Mistry's works seek to evolve a vision that involves both the community-centred existence of the Parsis and their involvement with the wider national framework. His novels are concerned with the experience of the Parsi in India. Mistry, re-narrates the history of his community and country as it has been in the post-Independence era.

Keywords: Bombay, Culture, Rohinton Mistry, Parsi, culture.

Introduction:-

Rohinton Mistry is an Indo Canadian novelist who was born in Mumbai but at present he resides in Canada. As he belongs to the Parsi community, his ancestors originally belonged to Iran who migrated from Iran to India at that time. The same is the reason as to why Rohinton Mistry feels a double sense of migration, as his ancestors migrated to India and he migrated from India to Canada. This took the form of diasporic concept or in other words identity crisis in his novels like *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*. In order to break away from the shackles of untouchability, they both learn the art of a Muslim tailor. Rohinton Mistry's characters are ordinary people belonging to the lower middle class of society. At the same time, the goodness of Mistry's characters, that likens them to the epic heroes of ancient literature. Mistry locates innate goodness in compelling circumstances. The author focuses on how an

ordinary person, by sheer grit and imagination, overcomes stupendous problem. Thus, Mistry has very poignantly captured the tumult brought the heroism in ordinary people. The heroism of the ordinary people embodies the true essence of man, because the ordinary man dominates the world in terms of number – which should be the criterion now that kings and queens are gone. Many critics find Rohinton Mistry's female characters are unidimensional and limited. They are seen to be house bound, rarely leaving their apartments, complexes while their male counterparts venture far and wide, not only in and around Bombay but also places such as Delhi. By attending the social contexts of his female characters' lives from a feminist perspective, this analysis examines the ways Mistry interprets the situations of women – their experiences, histories and responsibilities as wives, widows, mothers and single women – within the cultural rubric of Parsi India. Rohinton Mistry has emerged as a formidable writer on the world literary scene. He is a very popular member of Indian diaspora. He occupies a significant position as an Indian diasporic writer. In almost all the works of Rohinton Mistry we find an Indian setting. They brilliantly capture India and its environment. They deal with images of Indian culture and they are closely linked with the social and political background of our country. They deal with the streets of Bombay, the Parsi way of life and the people of the city. In his fiction he not only portrays the picture of his contemporary social and political life but also offers commentary on the historical situations and raises a national debate.

Review of Literature

Albertazzi, Silvia :Rohinton Mistry (1952) is an important contemporary novelist for a number of reasons. For one, he occupies a significant position as an Indian diasporic writer alongwith such names as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth, Sumiti Namjoshi, Bharati Mukherji, to mention a few. Secondly he is among the few contemporary writers who have written 'back' from his/her place of migration critically about India, Indian political scenario, minorities, regional identities, history, environment, cultural pluralism, the question of gender, among others. Thirdly, Mistry, as is well-known, himself belongs to minority community in India – Parsis to be specific – and he has lived through many complex variants of Parsi culture and history, and has a deep nostalgia about the Parsi past with all its richness and intellectual qualities, besides its elegance and sophistication. However, Mistry's stance, far from being positive or self-assuring, is extremely suspicious of the role of dominant cultures and communities that systematically oppress and subjugate the minorities for their ulterior motives and nationalist agenda.

Luhrmann, T.M :Mistry is a fine story-teller, an absorbing writer of human experience and its complexities, for fictionalizing which he occasionally uses postmodernist technique and fantasy that shape his fictional universe As stated earlier, much of Mistry's work is both informed and influenced by his situation as a younger generation Parsi in India, and the related issues with Parsi background, culture, history, identity and experience. In order to have an estimate of Mistry's work, art and imagination it is therefore imperative to focus upon some of the above-

related preoccupations as they surface as themes and narratives in Mistry's fiction. Interestingly, it may be pointed out at the outset but to cut it short, indentured labour was a kind of semi-slave situation, though minus the great oppression and brutality in the slave-system.

Faber and Faber "Auspicious Occasion" depicts the domesticity of Rustomji and Mehroo with close insight, not missing the underlying conflicting aspects of the relationship. The story excels in Zoroastrian rituals, Parsi customs costumes and cuisine, collective Parsi identity. But the Parsis here are not what they are often taken as – they are middle-class, ordinary, without importance, engaged in daily battle with interrupted water supply, dilapidated, old homes, peeling paints, falling plasters and leaking WCs – reminding us of the larger portrayal of the same disorder in *Such a Long Journey*. Rustomji, the central character is more farcical as a Parsee, a trait that has been exhibited in literature and cinema. The story also focuses on the bad conditions around the Parsee areas of residence and the inefficiency of the 'Panchayat' of Parsees.

Duresh, J.G : Thus, Rohinton Mistry's novels are perfect blend of love, intrigues, begrudges, politics, friendship and lewdness. There is also humor with lewd jokes, intentions and pretensions. There is fledgling democracy and the hopelessness of defunct civic system. It is emphatically clear that the above novels of Rohinton Mistry explore socio-cultural and political realities of India between 1960 and 1990. They closely examine the social, political and economic problems of people arising out of emergency, exploitation, social evils and wars.

Uma Parameshwaran: In *Stories from Firoz Baag*, Mistry depicts the life and customs of Parsi Community where female characters are exposed to several atrocities and injustice. Here we see the gloomy conditions of modern Indian Women. In one short story entitled *Auspicious Occasion* a 50 year old Rustomji, is married to a young girl Mehroo who was just 16 years old. Mehroo is in her adolescence while Rustomji in his dotage is not physically appealing at all. To hide his weakness he treats his wife like servant shouting at her all the time. Rustomji has amorous intentions for Gajra, a new servant in his house. In his doddering even he has fantasy about Gajra's naked body; beautify breasts and gossamer sari and blouse. In a certain way Gajra represents an ideal woman for a man like Rustomji, he even secretly dreams of seducing her. Here writer delineates the physical as well as mental incongruence and incompatibility between the couple due to age difference. The couple is spending their days monotonously treating one another either as elder brother and sister or as father and daughter as no mention has ever made in the novel about their sexual life.

Rohinton's Novels themes:- Rohinton's novels focus on themes relating to age difference between life-partners (married couples), domestic violence, women exploitation, superstitions, political influence in social life of people especially that which affect Parsi community, sex crimes, parental influence on child's love relationship and married life. Through his novel *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry criticizes Jawaharlal Nehru's temperament, his alleged political deceitfulness, his influence on his daughter Indira that, according to some people, spoiled her

marriage life and her relationship with her husband Feroze Gandhi, who was a Parsi. Thus, Rohinton Mistry's novels are perfect blend of love, intrigues, begrudges, politics, friendship and lewdness. There is also humor with lewd jokes, intentions and pretensions. There is fledgling democracy and the hopelessness of defunct civic system. The novel deals with an authentic portrayal of the Parsis, and the customs and rituals related to their community. The novelist accustoms one to another way of life, and graphically describes the Parsi religious customs, prayers, and funeral rites. The cultural distinctiveness is asserted through the use of untranslated, specifically Parsi words.

Social bankground of Rohinton mistry,s life:- Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay or present day Mumbai, India, in 1952, in a Parsee relation. In his late teens he joined a music school to learn music theory and composition. It was here that he met Freny Elavia who would later become his wife. Mistry was quite good at folk music and would often give musical performances. At this stage he even wanted to pursue a career as a musician. Initially he was not aware of his skill in writing and so he didn't opt to study literature. But since neither pure science nor medicine and engineering interested him, he instead pursued for a degree in mathematics and economics from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. Two years later, in 1975, when he was twenty-three, Mistry migrated to Canada. Soon after going there he married his girlfriend who had moved there a year before. In Canada, he initially worked as a clerk in the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, but, after three years, he and his wife, joined studies at the University of Toronto, and earned his graduation in English and Philosophy. Rohinton's novels focus on themes relating to age difference between life-partners (married couples), domestic violence, women exploitation, superstitions, political influence in social life of people especially that which affect Parsi group of people , sex crimes, parental influence on child's love relationship and married life. Through his novel *Such A Long Journey*, Mistry criticizes Jawaharlal Nehru's temperament, his alleged political deceitfulness, his influence on his daughter Indira that, according to some people, spoiled her marriage life and her relationship with her husband Feroze Gandhi, who was a Parsi. Rohinton's second novel, *Such a Long Journey* deals with the problem of India during India's second war with Pakistan. The action covers the period after 1970. It takes up the conflict between political and personal realities. The plot is drawn on the political canvas where Gustad Noble, a citizen of Bombay, the protagonist, is striving to become a responsible husband and father amidst his rebellious son Shorab, superstitious wife Dilnawaz, friend Jimmy Bilimoria and death of good friend Dishawji. He has anguish for his relation for brushing him off all the time and neglecting him. He feels all alone now and is completely misunderstood. He finds himself in the clutches of a dangerous government plot. In the novel, the lives of the characters are deeply affected by local corruption and government inadequacy.

Social Issues in Rohinton Mistry's a Fine Balance

A Fine Balance depicts the struggle of the four main protagonists beyond the plethora of numerous other socio-economically challenged characters. The fate of the marginalized and the dispossessed who find themselves at the mercy of the Brahminical and pseudo-secular elites shaping India is explored through the traumatic experience of the chamaars -turned-tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash. Dukhi, the father of Ishvar and Narayan sends them to be apprenticed as tailors under his friend, Ashraf -a Muslim tailor. Dukhi's daring to divert his sons to a different job becomes the talk of the town and he in turn earns the wrath of the so called chaste Hindus, "indeed was courageous, considering that the prime of his own life has been spent in obedient compliance with the traditions of caste system. Like his forefathers before him, he had accepted from childhood.

The occupation preordained for his present incarnation."(Mistry,109). Through the healthy relationship between Dukhi and Ashraf and the unhealthy bondage between the subaltern chamaars represented by Dukhi and the high caste chaste Hindu, Thakur Dharamsi, Mistry drives home the fact that "ideal human relationship should be above all the concept of caste, creed and colour. " (Kumar. 19) When Narayan returned to the village to cast his vote, Thakur Dharamsi, the Zamindar felt infuriated. Thakur's men beat Narayan and his friends to death and in due course the entire relation was burnt alive. The subalterns succumb to the arrogance of Thakur Dharamsi who strongly believed that crossing the line of caste was a serious offence and that such people should be stringently punished. Even police do not file an F.I.R calling Ishvar and Om, "filthy achool castes".

Ishvar and Om were quite forcibly taken to one such work camp where they are forced to undergo sterilization. In the aftermath, Ishvar develops infection and one of his legs is amputated, making it impossible for him to practice tailoring and earn his livelihood. Om who is a youth in his prime waiting to be married is also sterilized under the orders of the village Zamindar, Thakur Dharamsi. The needless arrogance of the upper class to maintain social supremacy led to the consolidation and Emergence of the Dalit consciousness in the Indian politics. Despite the new laws regarding untouchability, exploitation of the lower castes by the upper castes continues. Through Thakur Dharamsi, Mistry reveals the silenced histories and suppressed voices in centuries of violence and domination characterized by the Indian political and caste system. Mistry emphasizes the fact it is too difficult to fight against the deep-rooted caste system in India.

Social and cultural aspects of novel rohinton mistry:- The work of Indo-Canadian novelist Rohinton Mistry focuses on the personal struggles of individuals within society, largely within the Parsi group of people in which Mistry grew up in midcentury Bombay. His writing has been compared more frequently to Dickens, Balzac, Tolstoy and other nineteenth-century European realists than to the more contemporary, postmodern idiom of South Asian writers like Salman Rushdie and Vikram Chandra. Mistry's transparent style, combined with great psychological insight into character, supports his popularity throughout the English-speaking world and his numerous global awards. However, the critical reception of his work in India and North America reflects complex aesthetic, political and theoretical debates among his serious readers.

Particularly in Canada, scholarly work on Mistry's fiction is the site of an ongoing discussion about postcolonial issues and Canadian identity politics, as well as trends in literary criticism and the government funding policies that support it. *A Fine Balance* was published in 1995; it won the Giller Prize and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize as well as another Booker nomination, and was the first of only two Canadian novels ever to be selected for Oprah's Book Club. *Relation Matters* (2002), is Mistry's most recent novel and again made the shortlist for the renamed Man Booker prize. *The Scream*, a short story, was released in 2009 as a special edition illustrated by Tony Urquart to benefit World Literacy of Canada. On the heels of his appearance on Oprah Winfrey's talk show in late 2001, Mistry was in the news for cancelling his US publicity tour for *Relation Matters*, fed up with the racial profiling that thwarted his travels in the wake of September. Otherwise he lives quietly in Brampton, north of Toronto, and grants few interviews. The Parsi group of people of Mumbai is the setting for virtually all of Mistry's published work except for *A Fine Balance*, which encompasses a broader cross section of Indian society. The Parsis are a tiny minority in India, but particularly visible through their philanthropy and artistic accomplishment. Since the Zoroastrian Parsis arrived in Gujarat in the tenth century, they have taken pains to maintain their identity with distinctive spiritual practices, a refusal to accept converts and the excommunication of those who marry outside the faith. They came into their own during the colonial era, when opportunities arose to work with the British as bankers, traders and industrialists. Parsis have also been prominent in literature, theatre and film. With Indian independence in 1947 and the ensuing communal tensions, they have felt increasingly threatened, although not specifically targeted. This anxiety, along with ambition for educational and business opportunities, is responsible for the disproportionately large Parsi diaspora, particularly focused on other Commonwealth countries. The 2001 census counted 70,000 Parsis in India; it is predicted that by 2020 only 23,000 will be left.³ Mistry, along with Bapsi Sidhwa, Sooni Taraporevala and Dina Mehta, has introduced Parsi civilization to English-speaking readers around the world. His first published work, *Firozsha Baag*, is a collection of short stories set in a Parsi apartment complex in South Bombay. The stories overlap and intertwine; a protagonist of one tale will show up as a minor character in another. Most are written in the third person yet are infected with the distinctive biases, blind spots and aspirations of their subjects, which are amplified or contradicted in later stories. Four of the stories – 'The ghost of Firozsha Baag', 'Of White Hairs and Cricket', 'Lend Me Your Light' and 'Swimming Lessons' – are told in the first person. The latter three are narrated by young Kersi Boyce as he grows up in the apartment block and, at age 19, immigrates to Toronto. As his age and activities roughly parallel Mistry's own, it is tempting to see him as an alter ego, particularly since in 'Swimming Lessons' he emerges as a writer of short stories about Firozsha Baag. Such a *Long Journey* (1991) is set in an apartment block much like Firozsha Baag in 1971. The focus here is on the relation of bank worker Gustad Noble, his wife Dilnavaz and three children. His eldest son, Sohrab, has been accepted at the Indian Institute of Technology, a matter of great pride, but Sohrab tells his father that he wants to study literature instead. Gustad's disappointment stems partly from his own sense of social decline since the loss of his

father's business during his childhood. His loyalty and judgment are tested on another plane when Jimmy Bilimoria, an old friend who has vanished from his life, suddenly returns and asks him to deliver cash from his bank for an unexplained and perilous political intrigue. The novel juggles Gustad's relation concerns with his commitment to friendship and moral responsibility.

Mistry's books portray diverse facets of Indian socio-economic life, as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs and religion. Many of his writings are marked as "Indo-nostalgic". His works propose to look at the anguish Parsi way of life and also wrapped up in thick coverings of Parsi ethnicity with the essence of Parsi spirit. Parsi people were persecuted in their homeland in Persia because of their distinct religious identity. They were provided with refuge in India many centuries ago. They had contributed much to the economy, politics and Society of India. Parsis proved themselves as an example for the rich society of India.

Being the miniscule minority in India, the Parsis do experience ethnic anxiety, they feel insecure, experience identity crisis and feel threatened by possible submersion in the dominant Hindu culture, a nightmarish prospect which they do not ever want to come true. Along with these, there are other disturbing features namely: declining population, late marriages, low birth rate, high rate of divorce, attitudes to the girl child, urbanization, alienation etc., All these issues find expression in the post independence Parsi writing in English.

Contemporary writers fictionalize the aspects of life -

The interplay of a variety of material and philosophical developments marks a shift in the nature and study of Indian English fiction. Now Indian English has become more complex and thematically richer. The writers settled in abroad and the other writers who divide their time between India and abroad have contributed much to this rapidly growing genre of English Literature. The writers like Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, and Kavita Dasvani provide an inside view of the problems faced by the displaced people in their adopted land. Their works are based on the concepts like home, nation, native and alien. Contemporary writers are hailing from the colonized nations particularly; in India explore the different forms of life that existed during the British rule. These writers also bring out the functioning of the power politics that defines the relation between the powerful people and the people who are kept at the margins after the end of the political imperialism.

Major things of Rohinton Mistry's life is social and political agendas:- This study is intended to work on the social, political and cultural issues in the Fiction of Rohinton Mistry. Mistry has described India and its social, political and cultural life in his novel. The social, political and cultural environment is the part of any literary work. The fiction is the best genre to present society and the aspects and issues in society. Rohinton Mistry has very keenly dealt with Indian civilization and his own Parsi civilization in India. Mistry has presented nations among

nation in his fiction. The group of people itself presents a little India with its cultural heritage. Rohinton Mistry is writer from Parsi origin.

In this study we found that Rohinton Mistry's novels are perfect blend of love, intrigues, begrudges, politics, friendship and lewdness. There is also humor with lewd jokes, intentions and pretensions. There is fledgling democracy and the hopelessness of defunct civic system. It is emphatically clear that the above novels of Rohinton Mistry explore socio-cultural and political realities of India between 1960 and 1990. They closely examine the social, political and economic problems of people arising out of emergency, exploitation, social evils and wars. Rohinton Mistry is an author belonging to Parsi group of people of Indian origin residing in Canada. He migrated to Canada in his early twenties as he wanted to become a Pop singer. He has confessed it even in various interviews that he migrated because it seems to be the fashion at his times. Youngsters of his generation used to migrate for better education, better career prospectus and other opportunities. Rohinton Mistry is one writer who basically deals with the themes of Immigration. Mistry in an author who is writing about a country namely India which he has seen and observed during his youth. Through his novels Mistry has beautifully expressed the pain and grief of immigrant writers who are born in India but staying away from their motherland.

Summary:- Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born Canadian author who is well-known for his short stories and novels. Born in a Parsee group of people, his writings are heavily influenced by his spiritual, social and cultural views. Even although he is settled in Canada, it is his upbringing in Mumbai that reflects in all his writings. The distinct Mumbai civilization, particularly the Parsee way of life, the people of the city and even the politics of India are major themes in his novels. His novels, such as 'Relation Matters', 'A Fine Balance' and 'Such a Long Journey', were shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize. His novels and short stories have been widely appreciated and were also bestowed with numerous awards and recognition. For instance, he has received the Annual Contributors' Prize from the Canadian Fiction Magazine, the Common Wealth Writers Prize for his novel 'Such a Long Journey', and the Giller Prize for his work 'A Fine Balance'. Mistry is the elder brother of Cyrus, a writer and playwright.

Rohinton Mistry is a well-known Canadian writer with roots in India. Well-known American writer and broadcaster Rick Gekoski once said: 'Mistry has a great eye and a huge heart, and if the world he describes is often cruel and capricious, his characters have a remarkable capacity to survive'. Rohinton Mistry has a rare achievement to his credit - he is the only author, all of whose novels have been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize'. His works slowly starts from a relation, proceeding gradually outwards along with the development of the characters and gradually widens into the social, cultural, and political backdrop. The ambiguous and ambivalent lives are the consequence of identity crisis and conflicts faced by the diasporic people. Many times when a person adopts a new world, (s)he is victim of that ignorance due to which (s)he becomes a secondary creature in a foreign land. The same thing comes out in the cases of the Parsis in Parsi literature, "both the Parsis who sought greener pastures in the West and those

who stayed all in India have experienced identity crisis and confusion” (Kapadia 16). They struggle to create their own space in the West as well as in India and the identical conflict of being a Parsi and the member of an exile community comes before their assimilation. As a consequence they lose their aspirations, hopes and ambitions and become marginalized in both places whether in India or in a foreign land.

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