



Depiction of 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*. 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 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.

Keywords: parsi, emergency, social, cultural, Indian scene

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is the only Indian writer in English who has the privilege of his all novels short listed for 'The Man Booker Prize'. Rohinton was born and brought up in India and he belongs to the Parsi community. Rohinton Mistry migrated to Canada in 1975.

Rohinton Mistry embarked his journey as a writer with short stories which brought him two Hart House literary Prizes. Later on, his 11 short stories were published under the title *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firoza Baag* (1987). His second novel, *Such A Long Journey*, was published in 1991. It won the Governor General's Award, the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best Book, and the W.H. Smith/ Books in Canada First Novel Award. It was also shortlisted for the renowned Booker Prize and for Trillium Award. His third novel, *A Fine Balance*, published in 1995, won the second Annual Giller Prize in 1995 and in 1996, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction. Selected for Oprah's Book Club it won the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize and was shortlisted for the 1996 Booker Prize.

In his novels, Rohinton Mistry depicts the Indian socio-economic and political life as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs beliefs and religion. His character develops gradually from particular to general, depicting their idiosyncrasies, follies and foibles, from individual to family and gradually widening into the social, cultural and political world. His novels have a leisurely pace without ever losing the reader's interest and attention. The characters change and develop subtly and totally engrossed the reader.

Mistry's characters and background revolve round the multistory of Mumbai. His stories mostly concerned themselves with the tribulations and the idiosyncrasy of Bombay Parsis. In his book *Tales from Firoz Baag*, a collection of short stories, he describes the daily life of Parsi residents in an apartment in Bombay. Mistry explores the relationship of Parsis in their community, their cultural identity and uniqueness of their community living. Simultaneously he throws light as well as embraces the

attempt to reconcile or unite different or opposing principles, practices, or parties of dispersed Parsi experience.

Rohinton Mistry is a member of the Zoroastrian Parsi community whose ancestors were exiled by the Islamic rulers from Northeastern Iran. Rohinton frequently uses Parsi culture, Parsi names, Parsi Characters and Parsi language in his novels.

Themes of Rohinton's Novels

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.

Again a story of spoiled filial relationship dealt with in the short story "The Exercisers" from the collection entitled 'Tales From Firoz Baag' where a begrudged mother, Mrs. Bulsara, destroys and ruins the nascent love between her son Jehangir and his girlfriend Behroze. She fulfilled her treacherous motive through emotional blackmailing, bickering and by hiring services of a guru to persuade Jehangir that Behroze is trying to snare him through seduction and will ruin his life.

Such a Long Journey

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 family 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.

A Fine Balance

His another novel *A Fine Balance*, published in 1995 is a story about a widow Dinabhai who manages her livelihood by sewing garments and letting of a room in her apartment. The other characters of the novels are her husband Late Rustomji, her mother Mrs. Shroff, her brother Nuswaan, the priest Dustoor Framji and her tenants Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck Kohlah. Dina is a shrewd lady in contrast to her brother Nuswaan, who is ambitionless and jealous of his sister. He hates his sister because she is beautiful and sexually attractive. He punishes her by pinching her nipples and threatens her to cut off her tongue as well as breast when she teases him. He observed her secretly after bath when she stands naked before the mirror.

Another obstacle of her life is Dustoor Framji, the priest who ogles her and looks her with amorous intentions. The only aim of his life is daab-chaab, i.e, to spend lustful and lewd life. Dina's mother is mentally unfit to be a protector for her. After death of Dina's husband her brother Nuswaan looks after her as per Indian tradition and custom. He, however, mistreats her, beats her, asks her to perform menial tasks at home and forces her to follow and serve his wife unconditionally. Dina was strong lady faces all the adversities of her life and decided to live alone even after her husband's death. Ishvar and Omprakash, her tenants, have to lose their slum dwelling due to city embellishment programme. They have come to Bombay in hope of finding work. Ishvar's legs are infected with gangrene and both of his limbs are amputated. He has lost his job of tailoring as he is no longer able to work on the paddles of sewing machine. Despite this, he never lost his hope. Maneck Kohlah, is a student from village situated somewhere in Himalayas to study in the city school. Avinash, one of his friends, is tortured and killed by the police because of his Anti Indira, Anti Sanjay and Anti Emergency outburst; police cover up the case claiming that it is merely a railway accident. Avinash's parents are psychologically tortured and his three sisters commit suicide to relieve their parents from financial burden of making arrangements for their marriages.

A Fine Balance presents the picture of Indian Society during mid-Seventies when Indira Gandhi declared Emergency. Fascism, realism and emergency are the inspiring sources behind the novel. It was the announcement of Emergency that brings the destiny of four characters together. Declaration of Emergency inspires the plots and characters to develop gradually and strengthen them despite mourning in the lives.

“Mistry is a master blender of the picaresque and the tragic . . . To say he captures the textures of India well and creates larger-than-life characters is to note the least of his achievements. If anything, his success is to make life seem so much larger than the characters – a far tougher task for the novelist . . . Enthralling.” Observer (mostlyweeat.org/doc)

Stories from Firoz Baag

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.

To Conclude

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 pretentions. 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.

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