

Narrative Form in the Novels of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of narrative form in Rohinton Mistry's fictional works comprising of three novels and an anthology of short stories provide penetrating insights into the social reality of India. Mistry's narrative modes are eclectic and draw upon different culture. Specific narrative styles. Such hybrid narratives are also found amongst other postcolonial writers. In Mistry's case these relate to the western realistic narrative mode combined with eastern modes of narration. Mistry's narratives thus draw upon western realism, the Arabian Nights Sheherazadic mode as well as Indian narrative styles which foreground the role of the narrator or Sutradhar.

Key Words:- Social reality, hybrid narratives, postcolonial writers, Realism, Sociopolitical, Indian narrative styles

INTRODUCTION

Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a collection of linked stories that although written in an apparently realistic mode does display several modes of alternative narrative techniques. There are micro narratives in many stories as well as intertextuality and a story teller as in the oral narrative mode.

The very first story in the collection 'Auspicious Occasion' showcases almost all the above modes of resistance and challenge. What would strike most readers first are the hybridization of language and the foregrounding of the robust Parsi version of Indian English. Syntactically such as English is no different from most varieties of Indian English but it is at the level of lexis that Parsi English comes into its own. Mistry's scatological and black humour is also notable at the linguistic level. This

reminds one of the latter years of the Parsi theatre, when it had lost its early socio-political moorings and descend to the level of the farcical. Mistry's discourse does not remain at the level of the farcical or the merely shocking. It engages with the political and social and at times soars to enviable heights on the wings of sensitivity. Indian English of the Parsi variety makes an appearance "at the very beginning of the story as the main protagonist, Rustomji emerges from the W.C. with undone pyjama strings and bellows to his wife:

Mehroo! Arre Mehroo! Where are you? He screamed. 'I am telling you, this is more than I can take! Today, of all days on Behramroje. Mehroo! Are you listening?'" (Tales 03)

The scatological aspect too gets a look in soon after as Rustomji elaborates upon his problem:

“That stinking lavatory upstairs is leaking again! God only knows what they do to make it leak. There I was squatting barely someone started when someone pulled the flush. Then on my head I felt-pchuk – all wet! On my head” (Tales 04)

The resistance to socio-political hegemony by the dominant group in postcolonial societies appears when Rustomji on his way to the fire-temple is inadvertently spat upon by a paan-chewer. Rustomji protests in no uncertain terms:

”Saalagandoo! Filthy son of a whore! Shame-less animal spitting paan from the bus! Smash your face I will, you pimp...” (Tales 20)

The inevitable crowd that gathers around Rustomji rapidly goes from being sympathetic to taunting him:

“Bawaji bawaji, dugli looks very nice now, red and white, just like in technicolor...” (Tales 20)

When Rustomji retaliates with a few well chosen words of abuse, the crowd turns belligerent and threatens to beat him up. He gets away unscathed only by removing his dentures and playing the clown-thereby reinforcing the crowd-turned-mob’s perception of Parsis as comic and quaint old folks. In this story as well as in his novels Mistry expresses the threat perceived by the minorities in independent India.

In this we find that set mostly in a Bombay Parsi tenement. Tales from Firozsha Baag is largely concerned with constructing a narrative culture and identity for India’s Parsi community. This concern is manifest in the opening story “Auspicious Occasion”

which focuses on the everyday life and cultural practices in these lines:

“She came from an orthodox Parsi family which observed all important days on the Parsi calendar, had the appropriate prayers and ceremonies performed at the fire temple and even set aside a room with an iron frame bed and an iron stool for the women during their unclean time of the month.” (Tales 03)

Although the Firozsha Baag residential complex functions as the space that delineates Parsi identity, Mistry subtly blurs its boundaries through two types of movement – journeys that take the Parsi characters away from the enclosed and the incessant shuttling between India and North America (usually Canada) for reasons of education or migration.

Thus, from the first story, “Auspicious Occasion” to the stories in the middle section, such as “Squatter” and “Lend me your light”, which bridge India and Canada through the characters incessant journeying back and forth, and then to the final story in the collection, “Swimming lessons”, we move from a distinct and isolated cultural system with clearly demarcated boundaries.

Mistry’s views about the fluidity of cultural and national configurations are also evident in his subsequent works. The symbolic resonance of water in ‘swimming lessons’ stands in contrast to the image foregrounded in ‘Such A Long journey (1991)’. As a chronicler of Parsi community, Mistry is keenly aware of his community’s predicament. In the recent years, a large numbers of young Parsis have chosen to migrate to the west. Mistry, who belongs to

them also, hopes to recover a life of comfort and pride. All the works of Mistry foregrounds the heterogeneity of identity within Parsi community and the dynamic nature of Parsi community itself. Mistry's works seeks to evolve a vision that involves both the community centered existence of the Parsis and their involvement with the wider national frame work. His novels are concerned with the experience of the Parsis in India. One of the most important features of Rohinton Mistry is that it brilliantly captures the life of India. His novels are closely linked with social and political background of India.

Rohinton Mistry, narrates the history of his community and country as it has been in the post Independence era. This narration of history in a way depicts consciousness of anxieties and aspirations, perils and problems of existence of individual communal and national issues. Mistry has taken some historical points of post independence and endeavour to think them and narrate about his community and country through the various narratives woven in the novels.

Rohinton Mistry's novels are brilliantly crowded with the life of India. He is very sensitive towards the various anxieties felt by his community. He has depicted this by responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community in particular, and also to the country in general. He presents his community through different narratives of his characters who express their views for their community and the changes that affect them. Since their fate is bound up with its fate, their stories tend to be the stories of their community.

Rohinton Mistry has centralized the facts related to the Parsi community in the novels and his characters preserve and protect themselves and thus throw light on the existing facts.

Such A long Journey is based upon real events which is set in 1971 during the Indira Gandhi administration. Set during the time of the India Pakistan war, its protagonist is not a conventional hero. Gustad Noble is a bank clerk and a family man who belongs to the Parsi community. He is a vulnerable figure. Whose world is haunted by the war with chian in 1962. Mistry strikes the opposition between the values of family and tradition and the corruption of the outside world. Noble has to experience a complete upheaval of his life owing to sudden blowing up of politics in his smooth everyday routine.

J.G. Duresh in his review of political motifs in Rohinton Mistry's novels expresses:

“Consequently his Indian perceptions are coloured by his (Mistry) Community consciousness and even by prejudices which are peculiar to the Parsi race. In short, among the Parsi writers who write about India, Mistry is the one who is hypercritical about even the frivolous political occurrences that may seem to affect the life of Parsi in India.” (44)

To conclude, the novel, Such A long Journey also describes the different idiosyncrasies and ethnocentricities of Parsi community. The last epigraph of the novel is taken from Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali:

“And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old

tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonder.”(SLJ i)

About the novel, the critic Uma Parameshwaran comments that:

“Rohinton Mistry’s *Such A Long Journey* (1991) has recently won the Governor General’s Award and the Commonwealth Prize. Its strengths lie in the authentic delineation of Parsi customs and way of life, the nobility of the central figure Gustad Noble and the finely crafted language and prose style.”(23)

Rohinton Mistry’s second novel, *A Fine Balance* is also an example of Indian Parsi writing. *A Fine Balance* is the novel which deals with the four main characters whose lives come to the same end in the novel. Although they belong to different places of the India but their sufferings are the same. Mistry has set this novel in three different backgrounds. Dina Dalal lives in Bombay. The tailors, Ishwar and Om represent rural India as they belong to a village. Other main character, Maneck Kohlah is from the Himalayas (North India).

The novel starts with Mistry telling the story through the cynical voice of the student, Maneck, sent to study in Bombay staying as a paying guest of Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow. At the same time, the tailors – Ishvar and Om Prakash, seek refuge in Bombay due to caste violence in their village. They get employment at the house of Dina Dalal. Thus these characters from different class back grounds start interacting with each other and get interconnected. The four main characters of this novel suffer from a sense of rootlessness. Oppressive caste violence has driven Ishvar and Om Prakash from

their traditional occupation to learn the skills of tailoring and from a rural background to over-crowded Bombay.

Similarly, Maneck moves from the invigorating atmosphere of his home in the hills to Bombay for higher education.

Dina has grown up in Bombay but her sense of independence after her husband’s accidental death keeps her away from her family. Social circumstances, loneliness and a sense of uprootedness bring them together and forge a bond of understanding to maintain, ‘a fine balance’ in their lives. In this process the author implies that at various levels of existence, there is a see-saw struggle between happiness and despair. Life never seems to follow a plane course in *A Fine Balance*.

In *A Fine Balance*, most upheavals take place because of the imposition of internal Emergency. The evictions of the poor from the cities, the forced labour camps, the sterilizations are the manifestations of the internal emergency.

The novelist also shows a nexus that emerges between the police and the established hierarchy either the upper dominance in the villages or the land/building mafia in Bombay.

In this way, *A Fine Balance* has been carved out artistically by Rohinton Mistry. The novelist has covered the most volatile and violent spectrum of the contemporary history, which shook the social political stagnation of the county. Rohinton Mistry has taken only those facts into account, which can be helpful in portraying the gloomy and glaring saga of the country during emergency.

In this way we find that in *A Fine Balance* Mistry's canvas widens even more than it had for his first novel. In this book the Parsi world of Bombay is juxtaposed against rural India and the bourgeoisie characters are counter pointed with the poorest of the poor the street people of the city. The marginals, the dispossessed and the damned are given a voice here. Yet this is not a book in which the exploited gain a victory over their exploiters. There is subversion but the power matrices are not blown apart by the rag pickers and beggar brigade. Mistry has been criticized for such a passive approach to human tragedy especially by Marxist critics who see literature as a force for social change. However, *A Fine Balance* has been one of Mistry's most applauded books in the west and has acquired the status of Oprah Winfrey's Book of the month. This ensured it an even wider readership but left Mistry wide open to suspicions that "its popularity was due to the stereotypical western perception of poverty and misery in India." (Bharucha 2003) Mistry in his defence claims not to be ideologically motivated and has said:

"Fashions and trends are things for which I have no talent and it

Would be hard work for me to try and follow them... Faithfulness

To the story and the characters is what concerns me most." (Bharucha 45)

Mistry's *Family Matters* can be called a retreat into the Bombay Parsi world; Rohinton Mistry has portrayed the life of a middle class Parsi family of Bombay. The focus of the novel has shifted from the 1970s and the years of the emergency to the

more recent times. The Shiv Sena is still around the novel.

The time of the novel is the post Babri Masjid Bombay. Like the earlier novels, the main characters in *Family matters* are Parsis. Though the story is located in Bombay, it has a universal appeal. Both history and politics plays an important role in the development of the plot of the novel. Mistry is fully aware of several drawbacks of India's social and political life, as is discernible in his novels. The focus in *Family Matters* is more personal than political, though the political fallout does leave an impact upon the life and profession of Yezad Chinoy, one of the central figures, and other minor figures. Hussain, a peon of Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium is a tragic victim of the Babri Masjid riot. His wife and children were killed in the riot. Shiv Sena is involved in looting and burning the poor and innocent people.

Thus in all the three novels, Mistry has highlighted India in its historical, political and cultural significance. Mistry has well studied the historical boundary of India and he has also brought them in his novels. Although his novels are showing India in its true sense but he has not forgotten his identity as Parsi. Like other Parsi writers in his novels we can see that Parsi community emerges as a protagonist. He has presented his community through the narratives of his characters of the novels.

Mistry's novels may rightly be regarded as a domestic, social and political commentary concerning the Parsis. He throws light on the dwindling community in India to which Mistry himself belongs. His works are authentic accounts of the life styles,

customs, and traditions of the Parsis. The Parsis had already lost their homeland, And here in India, they were forced to live a secluded life.

Rohinton Mistry has portrayed their characters very realistically. The novels of Rohinton Mistry deal with the Parsi characters. The names of the central characters, are mostly Parsis as Gustad Noble, Dinshawaji Dilnawaji etc.

In Such A Long Journey; in A Fine Balance – Dina Dalal Nusswan, Maneck Kohlah etc.; and in Family Matters – Nariman, coomy, Yezad etc. Rohinton Mistry is figted with an extraordinary art of characterization. Such A Long Journey, A Fine Balance and Family Matters have variety of characters representing different classes, occupations and castes. At the same time Mistry's men and women are drawn from life directly, They are like real human beings we find around us in every society.

In the novel Such A Long Journey, the central character Gustad is a simple hearted man. He represents men from middle class. On the other hand the son, Sohrab seems to be in the roel of an angry young man. He revolts against his father and shatters his dreams about his future life. In the novel A Fine Balnace, Nusswan is the typical Indian man who wants to suppress his sister, Dina in order to control her. In the novel Family Matters, NarimanVakeel is a 79 years old Parsi widower lost in his dreams. Nariman is the embodiment of Parsicomunity . In his

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young age he suffered from mental agony as his parents were against his will to marry a non-Parsigrls, Lucy. On the countrary he had to marry a Parsi widow. But he could not forget his lady love in his old age and this led him to a miserable life until his death.

Though the death of Parsi characters in the novels Mistry is trying to show the fall of Parsi community. The death of Nariman Vakeel, Jimmy Bilimoria and other characters sysmbolise the fall of the Parsi community.

Conclusion:

In this way, Mistry's novels mainly deal with the history of Indian politics since independence. He has also pointed out the socio-political India in his novels. The novels mainly concern with the political events and the characters are moving around these political incidents. These novels are making the characters historical. These noels are making the characters historical. These events historicize the character and through these characters only Ministry has depicted the life of men during this time.

Thus, Rohinton Mistry has depicted the true life of common men in India.He has included the historical events of post-independence India in his novels. These historical dates are the highlighters of his fiction. He has made his characters historical figures in the novels by putting them in the middle of these historical dates.

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