

ROHINTON MISTRY: A VOICE OF A MARGINALISED DIASPORIC INDIAN

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ABSTRACT

Rohinton Mistry has emerged as a major novelist in the genre of Indian Writing in English. He emigrated to Canada at a young age but looks yearningly back to the homeland and raises the issues affecting the Indian Society and nation at large. He presents the Parsi life closely and highlights how in spite of being an affluent class they are being marginalized. Living in an era where Magic Realism as made popular by Salman Rushdie is the norm in writing he has stuck to realism to depict the Post colonial reality.

Key Words: *Homeland, Marginalised, Magic Realism, Realism*

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INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry, a Canadian by immigration and Indian by birth is a major voice in the field of Indian Writing in English. He was born in the year 1952 in Mumbai. He pursued his degree of graduation from the University of Bombay in the year 1974 and then emigrated to Canada along with his wife in the year 1975. He settled in Toronto, where he worked as a clerk in a bank. He pursued a degree in English and Philosophy side by side. He has written three novels namely *Such A Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1996) and *Family Matters* (2002). In addition to this he has written a collection of short stories entitled *Tales from Ferozshah Bagh*. He has got the Commonwealth Writers Prize for *Such a Long Journey*. All his novels were shortlisted for Man Booker Prize for fiction.

DEVELOPMENT OF IDEA

For some time, Mistry did live in America but ultimately settled in Canada as he felt that American life had its demerits. In one of his interviews he said:

“ I think I prefer [the Canadian] Multiculturalism to the direct racism of the [American] Melting Pot because I’d rather be alive and face the subtle discrimination. The overt racism of the Melting Pot often leads to a violent end”
(Hancock, 1989)

Mistry’s fiction describes Bombay and India in one form or the other, the city and the country where he was born and which he left for Canada at the age of 23. This ‘imaginary homeland’ for which Mistry always yearns has prompted the critics and the general public alike to compare him with another leading voice in contemporary fiction Salman Rushdie. Mistry deliberately writes about Bombay and India as it is his actual home, city and culture. In one of the interviews, he clarified the point when he stated:

“Going to Canada, faced with the reality of earning a living and realizing that although I had, upto that point in my life , read books and listened to music that came from the West, there was a lot more involved in living in the West. I felt very comfortable with the books and the music, but living in the West made the same music seem much less relevant. It suddenly brought home to me very clearly the fact that I

was imitating something that was not mine, that made no sense in terms of my own life, my own reality.” (Anjali Gera Roy, 2007)

Like Rushdie, Mistry also has strong views about the contemporary Indian History and in his writing he consciously raises issues related to lives of subalterns. But the similarity with Rushdie ends here as their writing styles differ markedly. Whereas Rushdie has perfected the art of magic realism, Mistry believes in realistic mode of writing to highlight the traumas and problems of the suppressed classes. Laura Moss argues that realism as adopted by Mistry is the most potent style of depicting the lot of the underprivileged. She states that :

“ realism is a feasible even indispensable form for political and social engagement in post colonial context. (Moss, 2001)

Mistry has opted for documentary narrative in which he uses realism to portray the story of the underprivileged and the marginalised. While giving an interview to Robert McLay, he talks about *A Fine Balance*:

“After writing my first two books, I became aware that they were stories about a very particular and a very special kind of city, and even then I had focused only on a very small part—the Parsi Community—and I made a conscious decision in this book to include more than this, mainly because in India, Seventy Five percent of Indians live in villages and I wanted to embrace more of social reality of India. And so I made the tailors come from a small village and Maneck from a hill station in the North. So while this city is certainly important , I wanted to give a strong sense of different locales and I wanted to root the reader in those places so that he has a very clear sense of where these people are coming from and what their difficulties are now.” (McLay, 2004)

The writing style of Mistry does not limit him to incorporate the various modern styles of writing. In patches his writing is overtly self reflexive which provides a chance to reflect upon the contemporary literature of India. Yezad in *Family Matters* states:

“Sometimes, when Mr Kapur spoke about 1947 and partition, 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 horror about slaughter and burning, rape and mutilation” (Mistry, 2002)

Critical responses to Mistry’s work have been appreciative and diverse. Nilufer Bharucha (Bharucha, 1995) studies Mistry’s Texts from the Parsi perspective. Robert Ross on the other hand did not agree that Mistry should just be studied as a chronicler of Parsi life. He writes:

“His [Mistry’s] meteoric career cannot be credited to the exotic nature of Parsis. Instead, he has turned their lives into a metaphor which stands for human experience; the collection can be compared to Joyce’s Dubliners and to Chekhov’s work—fiction that focuses on limited company but manages to unfold into a larger world. (Ross, 1993)

His three novels have been much commented upon. Hilary Mantel believes that *A Fine Balance* is

“an intensely angry book, a political novel that pulls no punches” which works with “cyclical pattern(s) of disaster in which Mistry has trapped his characters.” (Mantel, 1996)

Sharmani Patricia- Gabriel thinks that in *A Fine Balance*, the narrative is on the same lines as the fiction of nineteenth century which was influenced by European social realism. The narrative concerns have the same power of detail and intensity of engagement (Gabriel, 2003). The matter of fact style in which Mistry describes everything attracted the attention of Hilary Mantel, who in her review of *A Fine Balance* for New York Times Review of Books writes:

“When Mistry approaches the most harrowing event of this book[cheating the villagers of their right to vote in the village], his tone is deceptively cool, as if indignation were bleached out, as if the facts spoke for themselves.” (Mantel, 1996)

However it is not that critics have only praised Mistry. His inability to portray fully developed women characters has been criticized a lot as they are always relegated to the four walls of the house (Eklund, 1995)). The most stringent criticism was done by Australian feminist critic Germain Greer. While reviewing *A Fine Balance*, Greer made her utter disliking for the book very clear. Further she had problems with the depiction of Bombay in the book for it was not a realistic depiction as per her view. She wrote that the depiction of city is dark and dreary. She further wrote that Mistry has written the book from a distance and hence it is not the exact portrayal of the city. Not to be deterred by the criticism, Mistry did hit back by questioning Greer’s authority to talk about India on the basis of her four months stay in the city. Further he made a tongue in cheek comment on this criticism in his novel *Family Matters* where Yezad’s friend Vilas says:

“A while back, I read a novel about the Emergency. A big book full of horrors, real as life. But also full of life, and the laughter and dignity of ordinary people. One hundred percent honest—made me laugh and cry as I read it. But some reviewers said no, no, things were not that bad. Especially foreign critics. You know how they come here for two weeks and become experts. One poor woman whose name I cannot remember made such a hash of it, she had to be a bit pagal, defending Indira, defending the Sanjay sterilization scheme, defending the entire emergency—you felt sorry for her even though she was a big professor at some big university in England. (Mistry, 2002)

CONCLUSION

In his fiction Mistry very poignantly depicts the irrationality of the real. His characters struggle to maintain a balance against this irrationality. This irrationality is created by misuse and misappropriation of power by the powerful and the dominating. His novels are a chronicle of the modern Indian history and through his writing he tries to depict how the marginalised were ill treated and wronged by the ISA of religion and family and RSA of police. While writing, he presents multiplicity of narratives within the framework of an overall omniscient realist narrative. His characters do revolt a bit against the tyranny of the dominating classes but they do not succeed in overthrowing the powerful. This 'lack' should not be treated as a weakness rather it becomes the strength because it highlights the plight of the dominated and suppressed. Even if they want to stand for their rights, their circumstances do not permit them to opt for the tough path. When some of them do try to change the system they have to pay heavily with all that they have and in extreme cases their lives too.

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