

Socio –Political Upheavals during Sixties and Early Seventies in India in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract - Rohinton Mistry is a significant writer in contemporary common wealth literature. He has emerged as a formidable writer on the world literary scene. His three novels *Such A Long Journey* , *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* reflects the deep rooted angst trauma and struggle of post-independence middle class India. His novels explore the social and political conditions of India. He explores the gaps in Indian history the present paper shades the light on social political upheavals in India.

This paper covers various issues in novel such as the wars between India and Pakistan, India and China, the emergence of Bangladesh, Political schemes and intrigues, minority anxieties, Hindutva ideologies, corruption in India exclusively in high places and Mistry's book-banning/burning etc. Thus, history provides effective back drop in the novel. The novel revolves around the personal and political upheavals of Gustad Noble ,The protagonist. The major events of history of post-independence India have been included in the main plot. It is observed that the Nagarwala incident was the basis of novel. Mistry combines known facts from history with the stories of the people .fact and fiction come together in his writings.

Keywords:- Social, Political, Corruptions, Chaos, History.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry is an important figure in contemporary commonwealth literature. He occupies a significant position among the writers of Indian Diaspora. Mayapavithralal vinai rightly observes that

"Rohinton Mistry can be regarded as one of the foremost names amongst the Indian writers in English. His three novels *Such A Long Journey*, *A fine Balance* and *Family Matters* reflect the deep rooted angst, Trauma and struggles of post-independence middle class India. The bustling city of Mumbai, the place that was an integral part of Mistry's formative years and its fascinating people with their varied idiosyncrasies, comes very alive in his all the three novels and his collection of short stories".(2013:63)

With three novels and an anthology of short stories to his credit, Mistry's place in the literary hall of fame is secure. Even though the literary world is keen to welcome more fictional writing from him. As a writer of Indian origin in Canada, unlike Bharati Mukherjee, Neil Bissonadth and Nazneen sadiq who are similarly placed-he is unique in his selection of themes for his fiction is extremely rich as it portrays diverse facets of Indian socio-political life and parsi customs etc. Mistry's can portray Indian society most vividly and in an objective fashion.

Rohinton Mistry's first novel *Such A Long Journey*(1991) won governor General's Award for fiction in English in Canada in 1991 and the common wealth prize in 1992.It was also short listed for the booker prize in 1991 the novel creates a vivid picture of Indian family life and culture

through the fluctuating fortunes of the protagonist Gustad Noble ,the writer projects the socio-political turmoil in the sixties and the early seventies in India. The novel is based on real experiences of life. The back drop of the indo-pakistani war also helps the socio-cultural scenario appear real. The protagonist's remembrances of his childhood day-expose the rich past of the parsi in India. And his present experiences are closely linked to the contemporary political crisis. The crisis in Gustad's life is rendered as a part of the corrupt dynastic rule that hardly bothered about the well being of the common people. Gustad's personal life is also projected as a part of the parsi community in india, the inhabitants of the khodadad building are representatives of a cross-section of middle class parsi who express the anxieties of a minority class in multi-racial India as well as the age -old superstitions and customs that have cornered them and have also alienated them from the main stream. The novel highlights the extent to which political and personal realities are inter-twined.

II. ISSUES IN THE SUB CONTINENT

The novel encompasses various issues and is woven around the background of various upheavals in the sub continent, like the partition of the subcontinent and ensuing violence, The wars between India and Pakistan and India and China, The emergence of Bangladesh. The novel courses through a series of political events touching on various issues such as corruption in high places, Minority complexes, majority adventurism, increasing fragmentation of the social order and the advent of a personality-oriented political scenario. Thus, history provides as effective back drop to the novel. Mistry skillfully interweaves public events involving Indra

Gandhi with the misfortunes of the protagonist of the novel. The focus of the novel is on the personal rather than the political, but the political is allowed to intrude in a major way into the text in the manner in which it impacts on the life of characters.

The story of *Such A Long Journey* focuses on the life of Gustad Noble, who is an ordinary bank clerk living in the parsi housing complex called khodadad building, situated in Bombay, now Mumbai. The major events of the history of post-independence India have been included in the main plot. As the story advances conflict envelopes the life of Gustad noble and his family. His son sohrab betrays him of his dream by refusing to enroll himself as an IIT student. His daughters illness and sudden disappearance of his intimate friend major bilmoria and at last his friend dinshawji's death are some of the tensions in his life.

Miss kuptitia, Tehmul langda and dinshawji's are some other characters who play significant roles. There is also the pavement artist and Gulam Muhammad who makes their persent felt. Dr. paymaster and peerbhoy paanwala lend an interesting touch to the story. The main plot, however, is centered around the nagarwala case, one of the scandals of the Indira Gandhi era. Major bilmoria is crafted in the image of nagarwala.

It is observed that the nagarwala incident was the basis of the novel. During the regime of the Indira Gandhi in India, One parsi gentleman Mr.Nagarwala was accused of imitating Indira Gandhi voice while talking over the phone to the chief cashier of a nationalized bank from where he took sixty lakh rupees for the fighters in Bangladesh. Mr.nagarwala was pronounced guilty by the court.Mistry got hurt and he decided to take revenge on Indira Gandhi through his fiction. Major bilimoria in the novel, the parsi gentlemen working for the raw is none but Mr.nagarwal Mistry gives Bilimoria a scope to justify himself when he arranges a meeting between gustad and bilimoria in jail. Bilimoria says to Gunstad.

"she[Indira Gandhi] said , I arranged for money ...because makti bahini must be helped....I have enemies every where. If they find out about this money, they will use the information against me...our country will suffer it government destabilized. She said, only problem is my telephone call to chief cashier ..he might talkbut he did not see me speakingwe can always say someone imitated my voicevery clever woman, Gustad. She said if my enemies try to make trouble , all you have to say is you imitated my voice...under the proper conditions, people will believe anything".(mistry,1991:277)

How a worldly wise man like jimmy could be so foolish Bilimoria says that after physical verification that money might be used" to finance her son's car factory" or for election. Bilimoria concluded, "Everything is in their controlcourts in their pockets..It is beyond the common man's imagination, the things being done by those in

power"(280). Indira Gandhi's role is further criticized through the reporter's comment on the acceptability of the P.M's phone call to the chief cashier of the bank. The reporter writer "

"It is routine for our national bank to hand over vast sums of money if the prime minister telephones? And was the chief cashier so familiar with Mrs.Gandhi's voice that he accepted the instructions without any verification what so ever? If yes, does that mean that Mrs. Gandhi has done this sort of thing frequently? These question cry out for answers ".(mistry,1991:195-96)

This direct attack on Indira Gandhi makes it clear that Mistry exposed the nature of corruption she was involved in and concerned for the poor Indian people , irrespective of religion and creed who were suppressed under corruption. It is right to observe Mukherjee comments when she says: Mistry's version (of the story)like many other version. Finds Mrs.Gandhi quality. He tells the tale from the perspective of nagarwala whom he casts as major Bilimoria. He places him in a community in Bombay and weaves a tale which is both history and fabulation.(Mukherjee,1992:85)

Here, the author questions the hastily nature of the trail, the general ambiguity surrounding the case, he unearths to question the gaps in the official truth disseminated by those in power. Probing the extent of the instability of received history is very often the favourite pastime of both the past modern and post colonial writer. Mistry is confronted with the hunting spectre of official history of his nation. He finds himself excluded and marginalized by the inherently hegemonic politics of mainstream discourse. Therefore, he subverts and questions the validity of official Indian history in his own way.Salman Rushdie's *Mid Night's Children* mixes myth fiction and history. Shashi tharoor also does the same in *the Great Indian Novel*.

Mistry reveals the political conditions in India and plans of the politicians. The country's beloved panditiji , Everyone's cha cha Nehru turned bitter and rancorous after the Chinese war. He resigned himself to political intrigues and internal squabbles. Nehru never forgave feroze Gandhi for exposing scandals in the government. His one over whelming obsession of making Indira Gandhi the next Prime Minister after him. Lal Bahadur shastri, who became India's Prime Minister upon Nehru's death is prised in the novel.It was hoped that the stagnant waters of the government would at last be freshered and vitalized. In the 1964 war with Pakistan he shastri delt much better than Nehru had in the war with china. After shastriji's untimely death there were rumours that it was not natural death. It was reported as rumour, as it was not official news. Rohinton Mistry's concern was the whole of social-political-cultural conditions of India and that is why he includes the rumour in his novel.

"while the crowds cheered, 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 eighteenth months after he became Prime Minister. Some said he had been killed by the Pakistanis and others suspected a Russian plot. Some even claimed it was new prime minister's supporters who poisoned shastri, so that her fathers dynastic –democratic dream could finally come true."(mistry,1991:114)

After Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India, she used RAW like a private police force, sending men from RAW to spy on opposition parties, ministers.....anyone. For black mail. Even spying on her own cabinet RAW kept dossiers on her friends and enemies. Her friends become enemies and her enemies become friends so quickly so often. Black mail is the only way she can keep control, keep them all in line. Even when his elder son sohrab comments that Indira Gandhi misuses raw for her private affair gustad refused to accept his remakes as truth. Ironically, Gustad realized through his own experiences when he listens from his intimidate friend major Bilimoria in Delhi, that what ever sohrab had told and whatever had been written on the papers at new paper were all true.

The wretched condition of the country is also exposed through the views of other characters Dr Paymaster says:

"Imagine that our beloved country is a patient with gangrene at an advanced stage. Dressing the wound or sprinkling rose – water over it to hide the stink of rotting tissue is useless. Fine word and promises will not cure the patient. The decaying part must be excised. You see, the municipal corruption is merely the bold smell, which will disappear as soon as the gomprenous government at the centre is removed".(1991:313)

III. CORRUPTION

Corruption in government institutions is a reality in India and Mistry exposes that reality in his novel. The duplicity of the political leaders and their greed are also rudely exposed. Fund- raising at the time of war or any natural calamity is a common practice in India, but it is never made clear to the public how the amount raised through collections from the poor and underpaid is spent The novel also reveals that some of the articles revived from the people as donation to war-fund, were displayed in the Chor Bazar. Mistry pointed out how the poor people suffered financially at the time of the war. The refugee relief Tax is referred to again and again as a burden on the people. "The refugee Relief Tax is terrible" said Gustad "Its killing the middle class" "He described how working at the bank, he could see the trend, more and more people had to draw on their savings"(230). Gustad said to Dilnavaz, "This refugee relief tax is going to make all of us into refugees"(83). Talking about relevance of VibhutiWadhawan at this point

that Mistry tries to bring to the fore the searing issues of castiesm and corruption during the early pre – emergency years. Mistry's focus remains the nation's helplessness under a dynastic government rule that is corrupt to the core".(2014:63)

Besides the nationalization and dethroning parsis from their elite status, Indira fans the communal politics in Maharastra in the novel, GustadNoble expresses his fears and anxieties about the position and place of minorities in India, where he comments thus: "No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena Politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America – twice as good as the white man to get half as much"(55). The racist and communal forces lead racist agitations ultimately leading to massive violence. Dinshawji says that all these agitating tactics of the Marathas will upset the social harmony in Mumbai and there will be chaos all around them and the further says that: "And you know who is responsible for this attitude – that bastard Shiv Sena leader, who worships Hitler and Mussolini. They won't stop it till they have complete Maratha"(73), "wait till the Marathas take over, Then we will have real Gondaa Raj....., All they know is to have rallies at shivaji park, shout slogans make threats and change road names"(73). Dinshawjicomments on the change of the names he says: "Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared, in its place is DadasahebBhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac road now suddenly it is on LokmanyaTilak Marg. I live at sleater Road. Soon that will also disappear....., so what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life? Will I get a second change to live it all again....., rubbed out, just like that? Tell me!"

There is a king of anxieties in the minds of minority people. The mood of factionalism is captured in the fear minority communities felt in the face of rising Hindutva Ideologies that holds the nation in thrall to Hindu fundamentalism. Propped up by Indira Gandhi for her personal gain, the communal politics is bolstered by the likes of Shiv Sena that epitomized majority's violence against minorities that goes against the grain of India's secular thinking. Mistry novels often focus on current political issues. Both history and politics form a major part of the theme of *Such A Long Journey* M. Mani Meitei observes:

"Though Mistry is highly imbued with an original writer's imagination in the development of a flawless story in *Such A Long Journey*, his awareness of the contemporary social and political situation of India, particularly the period of the 1971 Indo-Pak war, is extremely exciting. As a realist, he wields the weapon of satire, which makes him a ruthless artist, a stern political satirist and adevout critic of war. His attack on Nehru and Indira Gandhi is unprecedented". (Mani Meitei, 82)

Mistry's shock at the sight of stinking human condition and rampant corruption turn him into being a realist, who is

obliged to expose the world around him in an interview with Geoff Hancock, Mistry states that he writes with neither an audience nor message in mind and that “Politics and religion come in a secondary way” in to his writing. Concomitantly, discussion will go beyond the a political and cross reference to socio-political issues becomes inevitable. A work of literature is not created in a vacuum; the text is a social construct and the creator affected by the politics of the time and place.

Rohinton Mistry today could have been another author pushed into exile like Salman Rushdie had he been living in India. Recently, the Shiv Sena drew Rohinton Mistry into the eye of the storm when Mistry’s novel *Such A Long Journey* was dropped from the Mumbai University syllabus in 2010, following the Sena’s opposition through Mistry’s book – banning/burning. The Sena’s intolerance was reflected in their opinion that the book went against the ‘Marathi Manos’ in general and portrayed the sena in an uncharitable light. Book burning spectacle was chosen as a fitting political debut of Thackeray’s grandson Aditya, who was inducted into the family enterprise of parochial politics, anointed leader of its newly minted ‘Youth Wing’, hailed as the scion of an old morally bankrupt regime. The sudden withdrawal of the book as a result of the sena’s protests only showed that the sena’s intimidation still cover’s the city into subjugation (Mistry letter-2010).

The novel is set in 1971, the turbulent year of the struggle between what were then the East and West wings of Pakistan which eventually drew in India and culminated in brief two week war and the creation of Bangladesh. At the time of war in the East Pakistan, the number of incidents and references about the war increase, together with estimates of the number of rapes and massacres and the number of refugees (up to 7 million). Wars between nations, the complete lack of commitment on the part of the big powers, and so on show the degenerating political scenario in the interactions politics such as, the easy military triumph of China over Kashmir and East Pakistan to keep Russia away from access to a southern port and the rise of Indira Gandhi into power and her tear away son Sanjay—all these factors contribute to the lower middle class fear of destruction of their precarious standards of living. The sectarian thuggery of the ultra-right wing group Shiv Sena and mob violence in protesting against municipal corruption increase this fear of lawlessness and chaos.

There are very a few novels in Indian English that have effectively used the backdrop of the post-Independence. Indian political context particularly of the crucial period of the sixties and seventies. In *Such A Long Journey*, the novelist employs a two pronged strategy in the process of recreating a slice of this nation. What Morey calls “Interpretative possibilities of the whole of post-independence Indian history”, like Rushdie, the author make religion and politics intersect at primal points in order

to questions the historical accuracy of the past and the under handed ways of the government. (Morey 2004:93) By direct statement, the novelist offers commentary on the socio-political turmoil, which also facilitates the realistic mode and the straight forward narrative.

To conclude, in *Such A Long Journey*, Rohinton Mistry comes out as a critical realist so far as the treatment of social reality is concerned. Mistry unfolds the social and political conditions during sixties and early seventies in India. The ultimate villains are the power-and intrigue-driven Indira Gandhi and her greedy corrupt son. And to a large extent the novel tells some truths about India-truths that need to be told.

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