



ROHINTON MISTRY'S EMOTIONAL PERCEPTION ON INDIANISM

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to bring out the Canadian author Rohinton Mistry's views on India in the emotional aspects. This research tries to show how he is heavily influenced with the Indian emotions and culture. Immigrants from India have been settling in Canada since 1904. Since then, thousands have made Canada their new home, bringing with them their talents and skills, and the hope of contributing to their new country. This research depicts how a Canadian writer, Rohinton Mistry, is heavily influenced by the Indianism. This research studies emotional aspects of the author in his works.

Key words: Rohinton Mistry, Indianism, Culture, Emotional aspects

Introduction

Societies are always structured unequally and individuals are born with differences and deprivations. Being conscious of social imbalances, political thinkers and social scientists along with creative artists have raised questions and have tried to offer solutions. India has earned the sobriquet "sub-continent" because of its variety and neatly divided castes and classes. Religion and language certainly divide the people. Further, such divisions are engendered by devaluing others. Especially, he has shown in the preceding chapters that caste and religion have affected the social functions and indirectly, the social institutions. As a result, disenchantment, disaffection, and despondency become a part of everyday life and grossly affect the social fabric, which is already near the breaking point.

Individuals who seek the freedom of making choices find the social restraints in the name of caste system as nothing but social injustice. Many forces are engaged in perpetuating such injustice. Rohinton Mistry, from the post-independence times, sees 'community' as pivot of all social changes. His analysis becomes a social critique and offers the readers a unique insight into the working of social institutions. Mistry concentrates on the fragmentation of lives and registers his protests against the social apparatuses that bring about social imbalances. His principled stand stems from his faith in humanism. If man is the ultimate measure of all things then the society or community in which he lives must repose its faith in man, dismissing all other externalities, which impose identities and distinctions based on caste, religion, and economic disparities.

Man loses his identity and becomes a faceless person in the crowd that labours and toils ceaselessly. Suppression and oppression become their lot in life. In the Indian context, untouchability and religious discrimination are so glaring. Mistry stands up against this atavistic by making bold statements in his novels.

It is true that globalization and media have created awareness and have raised human consciousness to new novels. Mistry pictures broken human personalities under the socio-economic cultural pressures and stimulates the human individuals to develop an intimate growth and adopt him to the respective social milieu. According to Mistry, the untouchables and the suppression of the untouchables in the name of religion are inhuman and bestial.

Rohinton Mistry uses history as well as geography to his advantage in his writings.

Employing his characters in historical and geographical contexts, he achieves a balance in characterization. Mistry does not display any obsession with history but all the events in his novels take place with history as its backdrop. Mistry is accurate in his descriptions of the towns, villages, and the hills when considered geographically.

Mistry's characters are too real enough to be ignored as fiction. Readers get familiar with Bombay as a judicious with a credible combination of fact and fiction. Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey* undergoes the trials and tribulations of an urban middle class and middle-aged man. Sensitively portrayed, Mistry raises Gustad's sufferings to the level of a tragic hero. Unwittingly he gets into scandal because of his association with Major Bilimoria. His son Sohrab forgoes the opportunity to study in IIT. Thus, a series of misfortunes befall Mistry's protagonist Gustad Noble. Mistry's choice of the locale and the theme is to be appreciated for its uniqueness. His novels refuse to bog down into ordinaries and pedestrian haranguing. His social vision is backed by concrete proposals for a better society. Mistry tries to fulfill his mission to instruct and impart a society that is callous towards the morass it has got into. Social balance may remain a distant dream, a utopia, or a mere impossibility, if there is not any oneness of spirit among the members of the society. Mistry's writings succeed to a greater measure in bringing such awakening.

Mistry's style is little rambling because it is not a closely-knit and well structured writing. The reason is that Mistry tries to include the whole lot about Bombay and its environs. The disjointed writing instead of spelling doom accommodates all and sundry about Bombay's Cosmopolitan life. Mistry finds it difficult to escape from the Parsi identity. The Parsis are the urban community and their religion is alien to Indian religio-cultural ethos. This results with closed mindset only aggravated by self-protective instincts. To break out of their besieged mentality and to reach out to other communities, it requires the will of spirit. To a certain extent, Mistry succeeds but the "gravitational pull" of his religious identity is too strong to resist.

Mistry's character, Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey*, is true to his name, a noble soul. He is helpful to all around him. He discharges his

duties towards the members of his family well with his prayers. More than that, he translates the Parsi ideals of *humata, hukatha and huvarstha* (good thoughts, good words and good deeds) in action. This character surely epitomizes human nature that transcends the socio-cultural surroundings.

Rohinton Mistry's expectations of society are high. In his perception, a free India must necessarily harbinger peace and prosperity to all sections of the society. As a member of a minority community whose number is fast dwindling, he has reasons to fear for its survival. In fact, the parsis are the grand survivors. As a community, they have achieved economic self-sufficiency and are well on the road to prosperity. Mistry himself migrated to Canada in search of better life. The city of Bombay comes alive in his novel, *A Fine Balance*. Dina Dalal shows grit and a kind of urban sophistication. A city is no respecter of caste or community. She survives with her meager income and even offers home and sustenance to Ishvar Darji and Omprakash.

The poor tanners change profession and struggle not only for survival but also for human dignity. Ishvar's father Dukhi Mochi exemplifies man's indefatigable spirit. Because of the local Thakur's torment, he goes on to become a cobbler in the city. By presenting such characters, Mistry shows the way to the suppressed to break out of their perennial misery. Mistry's ire is directed against the Congress leader of the day whom he thinks, are responsible for the continued sufferings of the masses. The period of emergency, Mrs. Indira Gandhi's non-sensical yet autocratic approach to governing come in for pointed criticism. The nation's ills cannot be mitigated as the government shows no inclination or will to transform the society. Mistry believes that communal riots are well-orchestrated and choreographed events directed by self-seeking politicians. Mistry sees beggary as concomitant to continuing exploitation. Mrs. Indira Gandhi's slogan "Gharibi Hatao" (eradicate poverty) comes in for criticism since it is not matched by poverty alleviation schemes.

Mistry seems to believe in the essential goodness of man. There is a wide cross-section of society portrayed in Mistry's novels. His humanism is amply reflected in the treatment of characters occupying lower stations in life. In the novel *A Fine Balance*, apart from Om and Ishvar

who come from the countryside, there are the slum dwellers doing odd jobs like the monkey-man and the hair collector. But, there is hardly any character created by him who would embody evil only. For example, the characters of the Beggar master or the Rent Collector in *A Fine Balance*. To the outside world, a person running the 'business of beggary' is invariably a devil. However, after acquainting ourselves with the actions of the Beggarmaster we do not really hate him. Instead, we find that he is helpful to a harassed, Dina Dalal. His human feelings come to the fore in the treatment of his stepbrother Shankar, who is also a beggar. Similarly, Ibrahim, the rent collector, is at heart, a pitiable figure because he has to follow the diktat of his employer much against his wishes.

Dina's symbolic response to the fragmentation around her, and to the lessons of integration that she herself is learning, is the large, colourful quilt that she is making. The quilt consists of the pieces of cloth leftover from the garments stitched by Ishvar and Om. This quilt of assorted colours, sizes, shapes and textures is the central motif of the novel. Each piece of the quilt is associated with the memory of an event; the quilt thus becomes a collective record of the trials, tribulations and triumphs of their lives:

Calling one piece sad is meaningless. See, it is connected to a happy piece-sleeping on the verandah. And the next square-chapatis. Then that violet tusser. When we made masalawada and started cooking together. And don't forget this georgette patch, where Beggarmaster saved us from the landlord's goondas....So that's the rule to remember, the whole quilt is much more important than any single square. (AFB 490)

The centerpiece of this narrative quilt and the most convincing is the character of Dina Dalal. Facing a life of misfortunes with dignity, refusing to give in to debilitating memories, Dina leads a life finely balanced between hope and despair. *A Fine Balance* is a depressing novel set in a depressing period of Indian history, which makes it undoubtedly a 'fine' novel.

Mistry himself admits that he lived a life of cocooned with his community people and had no experience and that his narratives are based on hearsay and observations. The theme of identity through humanism acquires global dimension in the novels of Rohinton Mistry. He considers literature as a true medium of humanism. In recent times, commercialization of

publication industries has done considerable damage to a writer's beliefs. Nevertheless, Mistry is steadfast in his creative engagement. The slices of life in his novels are too real to be ignored or dismissed as "figment of imagination." Ishvar and Om Prakash are characters who can be easily identified with millions of Indians. The poignant human situations in which they find themselves and the human relationships that determine their course of life are portrayed with a serious touch of realism.

Bharucha points out that in his work "Reflections in Broken Mirrors: Diverse Diasporas in Recent Parsi Fiction" that "This is also the dilemma of most Parsis, whose diverse diasporas throw back at them fragmented, fractured images – whose broken mirrors reflect their once glorious past, their reduced present and their insecure future". (Bharucha 35)

Mistry also shows the awareness of differences among human beings. He locates innate goodness, which at times, gets diluted or distorted by compelling circumstances, because human beings are not mythical gods. In the novel, *A Fine Balance*, we have a strong character in the name of Dina Dalal, whose delineation would warm the cockles of any feminist. Dina is driven against the wall due to the dominating attitude of her elder brother who would not brook her attempt to be self-reliant. But, she has it in her, so she struggles hard to be on her own to prove herself. When she is not able to carry on the sewing work due to her failing eyesight, she hires two tailors Om and Ishvar. She treats them humanely and stands by them when they need shelter in the overcrowded space-starved city of Bombay. She is threatened by the landlord and is indeed thrown out finally, but she fights till the end.

In his third and fourth novels, *Family Matters* and *The Scream*, Rohinton Mistry portrays the life of old men, who are at their last age. By taking up aged men as the protagonists of the novel, Mistry tries to prove that ageism is paradoxical. He views it as a dehumanizing humanist ideology as far as it rests on the unacknowledged essentialisation of the human as young, powerful, attractive and rational, particularly where the human character of a protagonist is considered. Viewed from this angle, it is found that the old people are driven to the outer margins of the properly human.

As far as religion is concerned, Mistry takes a functional view of it, as the religious humanists do. The religious humanists agree that most human beings have personal and social needs that can only be met by religion. They take it in functional sense by judging it with the role it actually plays in the lives of the people. If prayer helps one to raise high in the realm of consciousness as it did with Gustad Noble of *Such a Long Journey*, then it is fine. If this worked in all cases, then Mistry would be a religious preacher whereas, Gustad's is a noble mind who remains helpful to everyone around him in his life. Yezad of *Family Matters* is built of a different stuff, So, when Yezad tries prayer 24x7, to borrow a current coinage, he is merely lost to the world around him – his family and children as well without, in any way, gaining for him succor and peace in search of which he put on the religious mantle. Through this negative character, Mistry wishes to highlight the problematic parts of religion in contrast.

Thus by thorough examination of Mistry's works, we find that Mistry's humanism stands for essential human goodness despite individual differences, equal human rights, functionality of religion and end to socio-political exploitation of vulnerable sections of society.

Mistry's community consciousness comes to the fore when he makes his Parsi characters feel proud of their great tradition. Once Yezad's son Jehangir asks him whether he can change his name. To him, Yezad gives a piece of advice: "You are a Parsi so you have a Persian name. Be proud of it, it's not to be thrown out like an old shoe" (FM 239). Yezad's remark is not an individual's opinion, but it is the view of his race.

As a faithful historian of his community, Mistry does not fail to place on record the controversies that are going on between the orthodox and the radical Parsis. There are priests and people in the Parsi community who prefer to introduce drastic changes in serious matters like initiation and marriage. But, Mistry being a devout is at longer heads with them and debunks as "the poison for the Parsi community" (FM 126). No doubt Mistry's *Family Matters* serves as an unmistakable rendering of the history of his community, race and religious beliefs.

In fact, in *Family Matters* like in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry attempts to honestly depict the

truth of real life. Like Mistry's previous novel, this book can make readers "laugh and cry" as they read it. Even though in *Family Matters* there are no horrors, "the laughter and dignity of ordinary people" are present in every page. Moreover, the story is full of complicated religious and social conflicts, often related to the dynamics of the Parsi community, seems to be told on purpose to emphasize the impossibility of non-Indian critics to understand the Indian situation.

In the end of the century, India's extended families where the old people are looked after and protected are no longer the rule. Like everywhere else in the world, the needs of a sick old father are at odds with low salaries, small flats, lack of public assistance, and with the unaffordable costs of private nursing. Faithful to his promise to describe real life honestly, Mistry gives the naturalistic picture of a family whose harmony is threatened by the demands of a bedridden parent with bad smells, hygienic problems, all sorts of unpleasant situations that are well described in such precise way.

Family Matters and *The Scream* are almost completely set within four walls. In the novels, Mistry does not merely understand Parsi community's fear as a form of degeneration both spiritually and culturally. These novels show a particular way of family matters. These are not only merely Parsi family but also the family of every man. Such actions are investigated as part of the novel's moral ambiguity and causality that often centers on the distinction between duty and free will. Mistry explores the inevitable fragmentation of such ideals in practice and compulsions of duty to family.

In *Family Matters* and *The Scream*, Mistry focuses attention on family relationships particularly parents-children relationship and the problem of looking after aged parents. Mistry, however, does not suggest any remedy, but through his protagonists, he emphasizes the inadequacy of any legal measures, "How can you force people? Can caring and concern be made compulsory? Either it resides in the heart, or nowhere" (FM 121).

Mistry does not spare even the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and very candidly holds her responsible for framing Major Bilimoria (Nagarwala's substitute) in order to save her skin which could have been singed very badly as she diverted the funds meant to help the

Mukti Bahini of Bangladesh to fund her son's car project.

Again, in the novel, *A Fine Balance*, we find the Emergency era of Mrs. Gandhi under scanner. Om and Ishvar are the representatives of common Indians residing in the countryside. As they settle down in Bombay because of the compulsion of their vocation, we also get acquainted with the urban poor thronging the slums of Bombay. How the politicians make use of the poor to further their personal agendas is effectively portrayed by Mistry. He highlights how the poor are promised for food and money and thus lured to attend election rallies. The Prime Minister likes to maintain an army of sycophants. While she cares two hoots for the court judgement setting aside her election because of malpractices, she sermonizes to the countrymen to be discipline. In the name of removing poverty, she gets poor removed to forced labour camps. The common people are not fools and they do observe the tricks of the politicians' trade. Om's father and grandfather as also their wives had been butchered by the same politicians back in the village at the time of election. This novel also describes in detail the Emergency-era sterilization camps where vasectomy operations were performed on all – old as well as young men, on women past childbearing age, on men already sterilized and even on unmarried young boys. By giving these details, Mistry highlights the violation of human rights of the poor people. His large canvas to the scum of the earth speaks volumes about his humanist credentials.

All the works of Rohinton Mistry are created with a sense of plurality, which is typically Indian. Moreover, the careful construction of the collection allows the author to play at liberty with characters, time and plots. The distinct Bombay culture, particularly the life of Parsi, portrayal of the sons of the soil and even the politics of India are the major themes in his novels.

Mistry as a writer has enjoyed an exceptional start. When Geoff Hancock asked him in 1989 how he reacted to reviews, he replied: "In all modesty, I must admit that so far, I have only received positive reviews. I haven't felt the sting of a bad review" (Geoff 147). That phenomenon still holds generally true. Hancock continues to stress how well Mistry has done in such a short time and proposes, "Is writing a gift

you have?" Mistry counters the question by asking "Is it a gift? or a fortuitous confluence of events? Is it because Multiculturalism is fashionable? (Geoff 146) Asked about his sense of audience, Mistry responds rather grandly, "I suppose the world is my audience," than qualifies the claim by adding, "At least, I wish it." (ibid). To a degree, the English-speaking world has become his audience, even though the wide reception of Mistry's fiction set in the milieu of a minority religious community and focused on Indian political events.

Conclusion

The portrayal of the characters and the incidents that take place in his novels are the illustrations of Mistry's emotional perception on Indianism. Though he is a Canadian writer, his works truly bring out fervent attraction towards India and Indianism.

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