

OTHERNESS: AN INSIGHT INTO ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

Dr. V. Asha Kumari
Assistant Professor of English
Centre for Postgraduate Studies and Research in English
Muslim Arts College, Thiruvithancode.

ABSTRACT

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry's literary and aesthetic sensibility of compassion for the dispossessed and the poor acquires larger political overtones as he proceeds to document the cruelties of urban and rural India. All his characters, major and minor, become representative of the struggle to maintain a stability against the irrationality of the real. The irrationality is created the misuse of power. Mistry's novels are not grounded in a timeless present. In all three novels, precise historical reality forms the backdrop to his narrative. *Such a Long Journey* is set at the time of Pakistan's war with Bangladesh; *A Fine Balance* is set during Indira Gandhi's Emergency and *Family Matters* is set in post-1992 (the year of the Babri Masjid Crisis) India.

Mistry's return to the tapestry of family life in *Family Matters* seems surprising. It is the story of Yezad who tries to balance his job, society and family. At the same time, this novel marks the reassertion of Mistry's identity as a Parsi and works to centre that experience as symbolic of the 'universal'. Although Rohinton Mistry is cited almost everywhere as a Canadian writer, Canada hardly features in his writing, except marginally – as a location for the immigrant experience in his first collection of short stories. Mistry chooses to revisit his 'Original' home, city and culture rather than detail the immigrant experience. In an interview, he discusses why he writes about Bombay, the world he has left behind.

Post-colonial discourse points to the way in which cultural/ethnic identities of the non-white cultures are often the 'Other' of the Empire. In addition to this celebration of the middle-class bourgeois self, the traditional novel, in its heyday, according to Edward said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) has been complicit with the creation of both a 'home' and an 'elsewhere': 'home' being Britain and 'elsewhere' being the colonies. By analyzing countless novels, he shows the gradual emergence of a discourse about Empire and its overseas territories which idealizes the centre of the Empire in contrast to the uncivilized, barbaric peripheries.

This dichotomy between the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’, the ‘self’ and the ‘Other’, becomes inscribed within the very form of realism, which implicitly hierarchises cultural identities in fiction whenever it deals with territories beyond Europe. This hierarchy of values privileges the Western world view over all others. Usually, the ‘Third World’ is perceived as chaotic and Western metropolises. Character delineation is re-appropriated into a similar binary.

This is why post-colonial fiction has worked for a long time by challenging the stability of the realist novel. By choosing to blur the boundaries between the rational and the irrational, authors like Ben Okri, Isabel Allende and Salman Rushdie have forcefully recreated fictional space for post-colonial cultural world views. The advent of magic realism as a narrative mode in the 1970s and the early 1980s was heralded both as a rejuvenation of Third World fiction and as a sign of the exhaustion of the realist form. However, the later years of the twentieth century have seen many authors returning to realism and transforming it to endow it with a new cultural reality. Rohinton Mistry is one such author.

Mistry refines the form and pushes it to new dimensions as his novels explore the tapestry of a nation in the making. In the process, he transforms the implicit cultural subtext of the traditional realist novel and expands its dimensions beyond the traditional bourgeois sphere of existence to include the working class subaltern (the disempowered poor) as well.

Despite the traditional perception of the realist novel, Mistry enables the cultural ‘Other’ to inhabit the centre of his realist narratives. This cultural ‘Other’ is both the traditional Parsi and the working class poor of India. Mistry’s novels prove to us that realism is not outdated. Straightforward realist narration can be as effective a way to introduce the history of the people and the nation as transformed narrative structures.

In *A Fine Balance*, the impression of narrative transparency and linear chronology is an illusion. The author brings four characters together through the life and fate of Dina Dalal, an impoverished middle-class Parsi widow who has to escape from the clutches of her domineering brother. It is thus that Dina, Maneck and the two tailors, Om and Ishvar, come together as the four protagonists of the novel. At one level of narration, the novel follows the changing nature of the relationship between these four characters. At the

second level, the narrative takes long breaks into each of their pasts to narrate the complexities of their social situations. It also gives insight into the material circumstances that produce complex and troubled individuals.

‘Otherness’ can be defined here as all that resists or refuses the stable neutralized middle-class identities that have been privileged by the Eurocentric realist novel. The world of Mistry’s fiction is replete with such characters that hover on the periphery of neutralized, international bourgeois culture and revel in the multiformity of their culturally located existence. Parsis, the working class, the women and the aged people in Mistry’s fiction play the role of the ‘Other’ to Hindus/Muslims, bourgeois/upper class, men and the young.

The Parsi becomes the ‘Other’ because s/he is depicted as a traditional, even conservative, religious-minded person in an Indian modernity that is supposedly secular. The Parsi in Mistry’s work is shown as resistant to change, as s/he holds on to belief systems that are antiquated and irrelevant, given India’s move towards secular industrialization and modernization. One mode of foregrounding Parsi uniqueness is the narrative emphasis on their rituals. Rituals become the site of ‘self’/‘Other’ debate in Mistry.

Mistry’s fiction is constantly in the process of exploring the resilience of tradition against the forces of modernity and change. In this sense, the Parsi identity could be seen as ‘Otherness’. However, because it is narrated from the perspective of the insider, the dichotomy between secularism and ‘Otherness’ is subverted and it is Parsi traditionalism that is privileged. By resorting to a series of narrative strategies – such as the use of traditional Parsi words and the description of rituals which presuppose an informed reader – the author refuses to live up to the traditional nations and boundaries of ‘Otherness’.

Mistry does not provide a straight forward Parsi-as-‘other’ to the rest-of-India-as-‘self’ equation either. His narratives, by providing explicit criticism of Parsis, systematically refuse to idealize their adherence to rituals. While he advocates respect for the cultural particularism of ethnic/racial rituals (the ‘Other’) within any national framework, he recommends a critical stance towards dogma, orthodoxy and

fossilized rituals. That is, Mistry provides a simultaneous critique of the exclusion of the 'Other' in contemporary India and of the resistance to modernization from the Parsi 'Other'.

He provides examples of how Parsi orthodoxy and rituals have been misused and abused and have caused havoc and suffering. For instance, that there is good degree of self-seeking cunningness in the rituals Jaykalee's employer performs in her balcony in order to get rid of the supposed ghost (55). This precarious balance between respect and irreverence for religious rituals is also seen in Dina Dalal's story, which is presented at a safe distance from the Parsi world – focused as it is on the struggle of the individual, across communal divides. Gustad's earlier joke about the lustfulness of the priest materializes in *A Fine Balance* as the priest who loves touching young girls – Dustoor Daab-Chaab – against whom the young Dina has to devise strategies of escape (23).

Mistry here suggests that even though the Parsi is an 'Other', not all Parsis can be perceived as bigoted and hidebound. His portrayal of both orthodox and sceptical Parsis is meant to show how there is scope for change, questioning and assimilation within the Parsi community. Mistry feels the need to document the various aspects of Parsi belief. According to the latest census figures (2004), the Parsis are the fastest diminishing group in India. This can be attributed to factors both intrinsic to the community modes of socialization, in-group marriage, low birth rate, as well as migration. Perhaps Mistry sees his writing as a record of Parsi culture, in view of the rapidly diminishing Parsi population. The fictional transmission of cultural attitudes actively proceeds from grandfather to grandchildren, from parents to children.

However, Mistry's socialist sympathy with the poor, the downtrodden and the outcast finds a larger canvas in *A Fine Balance*. The sympathy with the poor here is not merely symbolic. In order to describe the world of the poor, there are many tangents to the main narrative of the story of the tailors, itself a story of horrors.

The story of the tailor allows Mistry to deal with those who are twice disempowered. Om and Ishvar are disempowered in the city as representatives of the rural poor encountering the senselessness and cruelty of the city. They are also disempowered rural inhabitants as representatives of the family of tanners, the

untouchable who have dared challenge the dictates of caste difference and oppression. Mistry works represent the mentality of class subalternity, brings out the nature of the challenge to the tanner/tailor/subaltern which the stories of Ishvar and Om represent. In doing so, he moves back into the past to the story of Dukhi and his wife.

Dukhi's wife Roopa has to steal from orchard of landowners to supplement her baby's food. In the process, she is forced to give in to the lust of the man who watches the grove. Dukhi's two boys are whipped by the schoolteacher for daring to venture into the classroom and play with the chalk and board. This is the proverbial last straw for Dukhi. He rebels against the system and sends his two sons to the city to learn tailoring from his Muslim friend Ashraf, who eventually becomes a surrogate father to first Ishvar and Narayan's murder, to his son, Om.

Om and Ishvar becomes representatives of the rural Indian with their move to the town and then to the city. Their trajectory allows them to encounter the dispossessed of both rural and urban areas. They become friends with slum dwellers and illegal squatters, beggars, thieves and circus players. They are at the receiving end of the insane plans of the government and it is through their fate displays the human dimensions of the theoretical and political plans for "City Beautification" and "Garibi Hatao", which lead to loss of homes and freedom of the poor. Om and Ishvar's experience of suffering from village to town and then city allows Mistry to speak of powerlessness and oppression, in both the city and the country, as a continuum. The powerless (rural and urban poor) are the 'Other' to both government and the wealthy.

The long episode of Om and Ishvar's experience at the stone quarry introduces a new series of experiences of poverty and oppression (405). While these two 'escape' through the intervention of Shankar and Beggar master, most of the people that they have encountered will perish in the place. The powerless 'Other' is one who is, however, more compassionate than people like Nusswan or Mrs Gupta. For instance, the thin, overworked woman (who is doubly 'Othered' as poor and as woman) who helps Ishvar.

The political power of Mistry's realism makes it obvious that subalternity, defined as poverty, oppression and disempowerment, has a momentum of its own. The narration of the stories of various kinds of 'Others' –

Om, Ishvar, Husain – functions to foreground subalternity. Mistry refuses to limit his canvas to the middle class. However, the experience of these subalterns is probably far removed from the experience of the majority of his middle-class readers, their hovering at the periphery of the middle-class consciousness. The strong empathy Mistry's narratives create for his subaltern characters reverses the balance between centre and periphery. Social marginality becomes centralized and the middle-class world of Nusswan and Mrs Gupta retreats to the periphery. In a sense, Mistry's style ensures that the 'Other' is at the centre of the narrative, though never at the centre of socio-political realities.

REFERENCES

Mistry, Rohinton, *A Fine Balance*. Faber and Faber, 1996.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17, 1991: 336-357.

Mantel, Hilary. "States of Emergency". *New York Review of Books*, 20 June 1996: 4-6.

McLay, Robert. "Rohinton Mistry Talks to Robert McLay". *Wasafiri*. 23, 1996: 16-18.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994.