

Rohinton Mistry's fictional forte as credited with powerful characterization and economy of his images and symbols

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to picturize Rohinton Mistry's powerful characterization through images and symbols so as to exhibit greater extent of corruption, criminal activities and underworld politics and to show how his writings portray the varied Indian socio-economic life, customs, religion with a focus on the historical backgrounds, mixed with humour, mystery and nostalgic elements, and examined how through his writings, he makes the people somewhat aware of the social happenings in and around the Indian society.

Key words: Social Issues, Symbolism, Imagism, Corruption, Political Issues.

It is generally held that Rohinton Mistry is such a notable writer who has consistently evinced keen interest in exposing the evils of the society both at the individual and at the collective level. Born in Mumbai, India, Mistry immigrated to Canada in 1975, after obtaining his undergraduate degree in Mathematics and Economics from Bombay University in 1973. He worked in a bank for a while, before returning to studies, leading up to a degree in English and philosophy. While attending the University of Toronto, he won two Hart House literary prizes for stories which were published in the *Hart House Review* and *Canadian Fiction Magazine's* Annual contributor's Prize for 1985. The literary journey which began in 1983 with the winning of Hart House Prize for the short story 'One Sunday', has progressed steadily through the collection of short stories. Tales from *Ferozsha Beag*, past the first novel *Such a Long Journey* taking in the hugely successful *A Fine Balance* to the latest *Family Matters* which came out in 2002.

The book provides 'an insider-outsider' view of Bombay at a time when it was witnessing the erosion of its famed tolerance and secularism. The city began to change in the 1960's with the rise of the extreme right-wing political party, the Shiva Sena. Thus began Bombay's engagement with sordid power-politicking, corruption at the highest level and the underworld – politician nexus that has since

criminalized public life in the city. Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, expanded not just his canvas, by taking in the wider Indian reality, outlaws also carefully conceptualized and this was signaled by one of the epigraphs which he had prefixed to the book: "He assembled the aged priests and put questions to them concerning the kings who had once possessed the world. 'How did they', he inquired, 'hold the world in the beginning, and why is it that it has been left to us in such a sorry state? And how was it that they were able to live free of care during the days of their heroic labours?.'" This quotation from Firdansi's *Shah Nama*, the Iranian epic, which told the tale of the ancient Zoroastrian civilization, is of the dialogue the legendary king Jamshed had with Zoroastrian priests at his glittering court at Persepolis. The questions put to the king are a precursor to the ontological orientations of Mistry's book itself. *Such a Long Journey* is not a modernist text that is epistemological but is postmodern and seeks to understand the processes that have gone into the creation of the world – here just the Parsi world, but the larger post-colonial India.

This is what made *Such a Long Journey* a very political book, a book that sought to understand how the Nehruvian dream of a secular India, degenerated into the real political world of his daughter Indira Gandhi. Mistry has marked the beginning of this change in the last years of Nehru's rule itself – the years after the defeat in the Indo-China war of 1962. This first novel also continued to showcase Mistry's concerns with bearing witness to a dying community. This very first novel *Such a Long Journey* which was published in 1991, won the Governor General's Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book, and the W.H.Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award. It was also short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize and for the Trillium Award. It has been translated into German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Japanese and has been made into the 1998 film *Such a Long Journey*. His second novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) was selected for Oprah's Book Club in November 2001 and in 2002, he wrote *Family Matters*. Try speaking, Mistry's writings do portray diverse facets of Indian socio-economic life as well as Parsi/Zoroastrians' life, customs and religion and most of his writings are markedly "Indo-nostalgic" and *Such a Long Journey* set in Bombay, India during 1971 and based on the novel by Rohinton Mistry, is a story of healing and reconciliation. And despite the complex historical background underlying the film's narrative tapestry, this is more of a character-driven tale than a plot-driven one. As the story begins, the major conflict between perennial enemies. India and Pakistan is about to break out. At the time - late 1971, Pakistan was in the midst of a civil war, with East Pakistan declaring itself independent and renaming itself Bangladesh.

The main character in *Such a Long Journey* Gustad Noble, is a Parsi and many of his actions are colored by the code of beliefs he has inherited. When his eldest son, Sohrab, disappoints him by refusing to go to a technical institute, Gustad refuses to acknowledge his existence. Yet he treats the local idiot,

Tehmul with a degree of respect that no one else exhibits. When disappointed or uncertain, he retreats into memories of a comfortable and sheltered past. Meanwhile, Gustad's wife, Dilnavaz up happy at the way in which her family is falling apart, consults a mystical woman who lives upstairs. The old witch proposes a number of spells that may prove useful in remedying. Dilnavaz's situation, *Such a Long Journey* contains aspects of a political thriller, although the ultimate purpose of these scenes is to affect a transformation in Gustad's character. An old friend and member of the RAW, Jimmy Bilimoria, contacts Gustad after several years of silence and requests a favour. He wants Gustad to meet with his right hand man, Ghulam, receive a package, then act an instructions in the parcel, he recognizes that Jimmy's "Favor" could jeopardize his career and his family's safety. In its own quiet way, the central theme of *Such a Long Journey* has to do with the need to embrace emotions, specially sadness, and not to run from them. In a telling, flashback, Gustad claims that he will never shed tears because it is unmanly. Since he lives by this creed, there are times when he lives by this creed, there are times when he is unreasonably stern and cold only when events force him to confront his grief and acknowledge his frailty, he is able to rediscover important things in his life that he thought to be forever lost to him. It's a story of Gustad Noble and the events in his life. At one point of time, Gustad's daughter Roshan falls ill, his son Sohrab frustrates him by refusing to take his hard earned IIT seat and leaving home and his long lost friend Jimmy Bilomaria asking him a weirdfavour. This is the story line in brief. Towards the end, after several accidents, incidents and deaths, the book ends. What makes the whole narrative interesting is obviously Mistry's style which mixes humour, satire, mystery, nostalgia and sentiment in appropriate proportions and makes reading a pleasure. The language and his play of words are very enjoyable. It is under this genre of books which is called as "Parallel history" or "history of common man". This novel discusses two topics in history. The first one being politics of the 60s – 70s in India and the second one is the Parsi life style. One comes to know a lot of things about the political scenario in those days and how public were affected by the two wars – China war and Bangladesh war.

A Fine Balance set in mid 1970s in India, tells the story of four unlikely people whose lives come together during a time of political turmoil. Through day of bleakness and hope, their circumstances and their fates – become inextricably linked in ways, no one could have foreseen. Mistry's prose is alive with enduring images and a cast of unforgettable characters. Written with compassion, humour and insight, *A Fine Balance* is a void, richly textured and powerful novel by one of the most gifted writers of our time. Mistry's two books have been widely reviewed in Canada, Britain, the United States and India. Most of the reviewers have praised his books for their realistic but humorous portrayal of Bombay Parsi and recognized his control and craftsmanship. He has been specially credited with powerful characterization

and for the economy of his images and symbols. His fictional world has been compared in its microcosmic quality to R.K.Narayan's Malgudi novels; for its realism, to Anita Desai's fiction; for the elegance of his writing to V.S.Naipaul; for its tragicomic quality to Charles Dickens; for its epic grandeur to Salman Rushdie.

Family Matters (2002), which tells the story of an elderly Parsi widower living in Bombay with his step children. *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* were both short-listed previous years for the Booker Prize for Fiction, and *Family Matters* was short-listed for the 2002 man Booker Prize for Fiction when his first two novels were set in the 1970's and were essentially 'historical' fictions, Mistry's *Family Matters* depicts contemporary Bombay set in 1990's. At the centre of the book is an old man, a Parsi which Parkinson's Disease. Nariman Vakeel is a retired academic whose illness places renewed strains on family relations. A widower with skeletons in his closet, Nariman's memories of the past expose the reader to earlier moments in the city's and the nation's history in a novel that moves across three generations of the same family.

Thus, in all works of Mistry, it is clearly evinced that he is well aware of the social happenings and hence his works are deep rooted in society. But for *A Fine Balance*, all his other works delight in "Parisiana" but through the interaction of the Parsis with outer world, he clearly embraces the entire society in an inclusive manner. One could find the Parsi world being a microcosm representing the larger world. Mistry's unflinching approach to issues with his neorealistic lens has paid rich dividends and has placed him on par with Rushdie in unmasking the hidden ugliness of the seemingly placid Indian society.

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