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The Interface of Writing Fiction and Righting History in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract:

The present article is an attempt to give a new historicist reading to Rohinton Mistry's major text *A Fine Balance*. As the theory proposes the historicity of the text and the textuality of history are analysed. Here, the text is *A Fine Balance* and the context is Indian history especially the period of Emergency. The historicity of the text is read using the biographical and historical details with regard to Rohinton Mistry. In Mistry we see Indian history being written from a Parsi view point. There happens a textual reconstruction of the past in Mistry's words. It is an Indian-born Canadian talking about the context of India while being in Canada. There is the interplay of two spaces in the reworking of the history of an area. The textuality of history is analysed on those records which show the text involved in the making of the history of its time. The text and its author come under the genre of Canadian literature but the context, or the co-text, owes its lineage back to Indian history. The interface of spatial and historical dimensions is examined. What lies in between is exposed as a play of power. The study elaborates on the context of Parsi creativity. The trauma of place and 'placelessness' is also exposed to draw out the politics of space.

Keywords: historicity, textuality, context, co-text, new historicism, power, place, past, present.

Introduction

The period between late 1970s and early 1980s showed an interest in the relationship between literature and history and this has been on increase ever since. The matter has made an entry into the academic circle in the denomination of "New Historicism." The New historicist approach, advocated by the American critics, tends to make a parallel reading of literature and history. In this, literature is taken not as a passive reflector of the context it exposes. Instead, the analysis focuses on how the text has contributed to the formation of the respective context and how the supposed authentic context is read as a co-text. Furthermore, there is always an attempt to expose the modes of power underneath the making of the text as well as the context.

The American literary theorists Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose have extensively worked on Renaissance drama. They have attempted to expose how Shakespearean plays engaged with the formation and particularities of time. Elizabethan

plays were juxtaposed with the historical happenings to expose the modalities of power. Tracing the colonial policies of the English inherent in the Renaissance writings was the major work of the new historicists. Later critics like Catharine Gallagher, Alan Liu, Hayden White, Jon Klancher, Stephen Bann, Jonathan Arac and others have been extensively engaged with the concerns relating to new historicism. Many texts from different time periods and from different languages are placed within the frame of new historicism. But the nature of the frame is that it is quite frameless. And this is the most enticing part of a new historicist approach. As Catharine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt explains in the introductory part of their book *Practicing New Historicism*, "new historicism becomes a history of possibilities" (16).

The new concern with history and literature has widely been applied in the Indian context as well. Texts are placed within the context and "history" is replaced by "histories." Works of Salman Rushdie, Sashi Tharoor, Manohar Malgonkere and so on are given new historicist reading by critics. In addition to these writers there are various others whose works can be approached in a new historicist way to reveal exciting and engaging issues under cover. One such writer is Rohinton Mistry.

Placing Rohinton Mistry and *A Fine Balance*

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian of Parsi origin residing in Canada. He was born in Bombay in 1952 and in 1975 he immigrated to Canada. Though Mistry lives in Canada, his writings come back to the homeland of memories and get stuck in a place where he grew up. He has three novels to his credit namely, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1996) and *Family Matters* (2002). *Tales from FirozshaBaag* (1987) is his short story collection and *The Scream* (2006) is his novella. In Rohinton Mistry's novels precise historical reality forms the backdrop to the narratives. While *Such a Long Journey* is set at the time of Pakistan's war with Bangladesh, *Family Matters* is set in post 1992, the year of Babri Masjid crisis in India. And the most acclaimed novel, *A Fine Balance*, has to its background Emergency in India during the time of Indira Gandhi.

A Fine Balance is set in one of the most troubled times in the history of India. The state of internal Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in India in the year 1975 sets the story in motion through an intense sphere of struggle. Human endurance through a time of such brutality is intensely documented by the novelist.

Om and Ishvar Darji are the two "chamaars" from the village dreaming a bright future in the city. Dina Dalal, a widow, provides them with the job of tailoring. And there they get a new companion Maneck Kohlah. The initial squabbles are settled and the four emerge as one family. The peace is but short-lived. The upshot of the declared Emergency grapples the whole country. As part of the so called "beautification" program by the government most of the poor in the country lose their dwelling. The residents have no place other than the streets to move to. In a beggar raid by the police, Ishvar and Om are captured and sold to a labour camp. But the Beggarmaster helps them escape and they return to Dina.

The whole area is in turmoil. Family planning agendas are widely and quite wildly being run in the area. Amidst the troubles Ishvar has got the sweet hope of finding a wife for Om. While the two are on their way, they meet the upper-caste Thakur Dharamsi. Dharamsi had hanged Narayan Darji, Om's father, for having demanded a ballot. Om spits on seeing the upper caste who in turn pledges to have revenge for the disrespectful act of a silly chammaar boy. The upper caste gets his chance when the two hapless men are trapped and sterilized as part of the family planning process. The vasectomy takes place. Thakur compels the doctor in charge to give Om a castration. Infection spreads to Ishvar's legs and he succumbs to amputation. The tailors, one amputated and the other castrated, become quite literally beggars. They wander through the streets begging who had come to the town with loads of dreams.

Rohinton Mistry mixes up the subaltern plight with the political and historical scene of the country in his novel. The time of Emergency has added to the shackles of injustice in the scene. Om and Ishvar, the Chamaars, become victims of the family planning schemes. Forced implementation of vasectomy is adopted as a measure to bring about a balanced population in the country. The consequence is sheer imbalance where people grapple with the rule of lawlessness. The supposed balancers of the law and order are totally ineffectual in such situations. When Ishvar and Om go to seek justice it is mercilessly denied by the authorities. "We are fed up with you ignorant people. How many times to explain? Nussbandhi has nothing to do with castration. Why don't you listen to our lectures? Why don't you read the pamphlets we give you?" (620).

The violated men wander through the streets, begging. Even their friends fail to recognize them. The balanced figures have been brutally mutilated and disfigured by the merciless iron hand of the fake balancing system. Mistry has taken the country at the juncture of this imbalance and has titled his work quite ironically as *A Fine Balance*.

Contextualising Rohinton Mistry

Louis Montrose, the American literary theorist, has used a suitable phrase to give the essence of new historicism in nutshell. In his essay titled "The Poetics and Politics of Culture" we see it as "the historicity of texts and textuality of history" (*The New Historicism*, 23). Montrose further explains that "by the historicity of texts I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing" (*The New Historicism* 20). Literary work is to be placed in the time frame where it is set. The place and circumstances of the writing are also considered. The focus is not on how a literary work reflects its time but on how the time has influenced the text in its production and also how the text has contributed to the making of the time.

A new historicist approach to Mistry and his fiction would open up ways to regard the dynamic exchange that happens between literature and history. There is a deeper understanding when we analyse how the times had contributed for the composition of a novel like *A Fine Balance*. And there can also be questions as to how the publication of a novel of that sort resulted in the construction/re-construction of the past.

The contextuality of the writer and his writing would demand an inspection of the social factors, the psychological background of the author and other related issues that would shape a writer's consciousness. In an interview with Veena Gokhale, Mistry admits: "My novels are not 'researched' in the formal sense of the word. Newspapers, magazines, chats with visitors from India, chats with people on my infrequent visits to India – these are the things I rely on" (Dodiya). We can understand that, being a Parsi writer, a kind of Parsi creativity and devotion had played largely into the making of Mistry's thinking. In *Parsiana*, the International Zoroastrian Community Magazine based in Bombay, Rohinton Mistry is cited as one who takes "writing as an act of faith, and not a competitive sport" (21 June 2015). The religion of Zoroastrianism, upon which the Parsis form their basis, demands the followers to promote good in society and contest the evil in the name of their God Ahura Mazda. To retreat from the societal concerns is not a good sign of a believer in Zoroastrianism. Instead there is always a call to raise voice at the sight of injustice. It is with the same involvement that we see Mistry engaging himself in his writings and making his characters get engaged.

Reading the history and evolution of the Parsi population settling in India, we can understand that though they had been an ethnic and religious minority, their relationship with the majority had been quite complex. The Parsis in India lead a life of alienation. "They lived quietly until the beginning of the European colonial era when trading posts were established first at Surat and later at Bombay" (Morey 10). During the colonial period they worked closely with the colonisers. Parsis had "historically favoured the British and adopted British cultural values in the days of the Raj" (Morey 5). But "in postcolonial India the Parsis have seen their prominence decline and their previously disproportionate influence shrink, as Indian society has shaped itself through secular, and latterly, Hindu paradigms" (Morey 11). Even when the Parsis migrate to foreign countries the uniqueness of their community makes them displaced. The question of displacement is quite explicit in the consciousness of a Parsi and it is quite conspicuous in Mistry's fiction. In *A Fine Balance* this question of displacement is portrayed through the lives of Chamaar caste people who leave their native area in hopes of getting placed. But the situation is disturbingly ironic when even one's supposed native area becomes a place of "placelessness."

We have also come for a short time only," said Ishvar. "To earn some money, then go back to our village. What is the use of such a big city? Noise and crowds, no place to live, water scarce, garbage everywhere. Terrible." "Our village is far from here," said Omprakash. "Takes a whole day by train-morning till night-to reach it. And reach it, we will," said Ishvar. "Nothing is as fine as one's native place." (7)

In the novel we can see that nothing is as difficult as one's native place. The village from where the Chammars came is an area of caste discrimination. Mistry says, "the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere" (106). Chamaars are addressed as "Chamaar donkeys." Even the birth of a male child in a Chamaar family is taken to be quite offensive and profane by the upper caste. They say: "Why two sons in an untouchable's house, and not even one in ours?" What could a Chamaar pass on to his sons that the gods should reward

him thus? Something was wrong, the Law of Manu had been subverted” (*A Fine Balance* 111). It is about this “native place” that Ishvar talks about. It reflects the dream of one about one’s own native place which in reality is at odds. Yet there is an attempt to go back, as it is for Mistry at least in imagination. This complexity is conspicuous in Mistry’s relationship with India. Even when he resides in Canada, Mistry’s memories go back to India with which while being at spatial terms he had contested against.

The very contestation can be underlined in Mistry’s portrayal of the Indian government and society in *A Fine Balance*. In this novel he sets the story at the time of Indira Gandhi’s infamous state of Emergency (1975-1977). The whole stage is set to contest the very basic slogan of the time “Indira is India and India is Indira”(Morey 98). The ironic statement that Mistry makes one of his characters utter goes like this:

Yes, my brothers and sisters, Mother India sits on stage with us, and the Son of India shines from the sky upon us! The glorious present, here, now, and the golden future, up there, waiting to descend and embrace our lives! What a blessed nation we are! (309)

The time, as Mistry portrays, becomes a witness of bodies getting mutilated, men getting forced sterilisations and castrations, people thrown out of their homes, and sudden unnatural disappearance of those who dared to talk. Yet the leader of the “democratic” nation confidently says:

There is nothing to worry about just because the Emergency is declared. It is a necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will make things better for ordinary people. Only the crooks, the smugglers, the blackmarketeers need to worry, for we will soon put them behind bars. And we will succeed in this despite the despicable conspiracy, which has been brewing since I began introducing programmes of benefit for the common man and woman. There is a foreign hand involved against us—the hand of enemies who would not wish to see us prosper. (307)

Consequently the “crooks” put behind bars include a group of innocent natives, “common man and woman”, who had “conspired” to have a peaceful country. As a Parsi mind would demand, in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry charges himself with the responsibility of voicing his strong protest against the injustice meted out to the subjugated. In an interview with Robert McLay, Mistry says:

So while this city is certainly important, I wanted to give a strong sense of the 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. (18)

Thus the contextual base has worked into the making of a novel like *A Fine Balance*. The historicity of the fiction has also participated in making the history of the time. It is observed that in Rohinton Mistry’s fiction a pure reflection of the social reality is not all that happens.

As theory contends “literature does not simply reflect relations of power, but actively participates in the consolidation and construction of discourses and ideologies. Literature is not simply a product of history. It actively participates in the making of history” (Bertens 177).

Co-textualising Indian History

In new historicism we seek ways to know how the past has formed the present and how the present has reshaped the past. In the above discussion we have journeyed through the process of the past making the present. Simultaneously we notice the present reshaping the past or literature participating in the making of history. Renaissance critics like Louis Montrose have tried to show how life creates literature and literature in turn affects lives. As it is detailed in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*:

Thus, the cult of the Virgin Queen is both fostered by literature like Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and a whole range of court masks and pageants, and at the same time generates such literature: life and literature stimulate and play upon each other. Elizabeth can project herself as the Queen whose virginity has mystical and magical potency because such images are given currency in court masques, in comedies, and in pastoral epic poetry. Conversely, the figure of Elizabeth stimulates the production and promotion of such work and imagery. (Barry 173)

The same reading can be projected on to the text of Rohinton Mistry. Mistry, being a Parsi writer, has engaged himself in an expository effort to project the process of subjugation in society. But on publication of Mistry's texts they have themselves become victims of the very process of subjugation. This is well-recorded in the wide-ranged protests about Mistry's texts.

There have been upheavals on the publication of Mistry's novels. It is documented that the Rashtriya Shiva Sena group demanded the Mumbai University to withdraw Mistry's novel, *Such a Long Journey*, from the B.A. syllabus condemning it for anti-Shiv Sena comments. And quite literally, the university made the book disappear the very next day. The play of power politics had worked into the denial of the book by the powerful. This had in turn stabilised the process of injustice that the book had always been contesting against. In Mistry's own words this was an “appeal to the worst in human nature.” Just when the writing and the writer tries to reveal the injustice at work, the same injustice waits at the reception dusk. Thus texts write a history that has always already been engaged in writing the text.

Rohinton Mistry's attempt to ‘write and right’ history can be analysed on the theoretical frame of the textuality of history. Mistry is making an outright claim in *Such a Long Journey* that “this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true.” There are historical reasons for a Parsi Indian writer to be turning against the Prime Minister of the Emergency period and creating a historical fiction against the rule as he does in *A Fine Balance*. Mistry makes one of his characters utter:

The Prime Minister cheats in the election, and the relevant law is promptly modified. Ergo, she is not guilty. We poor mortals have to accept that bygone events are beyond our clutch, while the Prime Minister performs juggling acts with time past (563).

This is also visible in his first novel *Such a Long Journey*. Mrs. Gandhi had nationalized the banks which in turn troubled the Parsis' engagement with the banking system. History has records of a Parsi, Nagarwala, amassing a huge amount of money. It is known in history as the Nagarwala scandal. But while Mistry talks about it in his novel *Such a Long Journey*, Nagarwala is portrayed as a scapegoat in the hands of the government which is highly corrupted. Mistry's had been an attempt to 'right' the already written history. This is also an extended attempt to challenge the metanarrative of history. The concept is quite explainable with an example from the historical naming of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 as India's first War of Independence by the Indian patriots and as *Sepoy Mutiny* by the colonisers. Thus history varies and there is the birth of histories. Mistry's had been an attempt to make a history among the existing histories. The basic reasoning behind this is that the dream of an 'autonomous subject who knows' (the ultimate truth) is only a dream. In new historicism the 'one who knows' is only a construct.

Co-textualising historical texts on Indian Emergency, it becomes evident that there are varied perspectives from the part of different historians on Mrs. Gandhi. While there are historical pieces that blame it on Mrs. Gandhi, others try to save the face of Indira Gandhi by directing the accusing hand on to others. For instance, a writer like Coomi Kapoor can be quoted from her book *The Emergency: A Personal History* as saying this: "The number of those in Indira Gandhi's prisons during the Emergency far exceeded the total number jailed during the 1942 Quit India". But P.N.Dhar, one of the closest advisers of Indira Gandhi, interpreted Emergency as an act against political corruption. Many other historical records have a negative portrayal of Indian Emergency. That is, history is also a text and hence the textuality of history.

Conclusion

Reading Mistry is such a great experience that we come to know of Indian history as well as the making of histories. It is especially engaging when the text is theoretically read under new historicism. Both the historicity of the text and the textuality of history can be analysed in Mistry. The power base that is the basic functioning in a society is exposed in his text. Mistry tries to write a history to echo the unexamined aspects and right a history that echoed suppressing notes. Here history is written from a writer's point of view to uncover the neglected chapters. This is in turn the basic reading of new historicism. There are a lot of possibilities when the freedom associated with new historicism is applied to Mistry's text. Thus Mistry and history make a play of reading under the aegis of the theory of new historicism.

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