

ROHINTON MISTRY'S *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY* AS A SITE OF POSTCOLONIAL MARGINALISATIONS

Dr Anand Bajaj

Assistant Professor, English
Department of Applied Sciences
DAVIET, Jalandhar

Abstract

The paper traces the different structures and mechanisms adopted by the master discourses of religion and patriarchy to subdue and silence the voice of the marginalised. Through the analysis of *Such a Long Journey* through the theoretical lens of Postcolonialism, the paper highlights how the religious minorities are always othered so that the dominant religious group can forge its own identity. Using the Saidian idea of stereotypical othering, it highlights how along with religious minorities, it is the women and the elderly at the home front who are constantly othered and marginalised. It also traces the ways in which the Indian state was transformed into a Fanonian neocolonial state under the emergency imposed by the then prime minister. The paper also points out how such neocolonial tendencies have been carried forward by the dominant to the present times as well.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Postcolonialism, stereotypical, Neocolonial.

Rohinton Mistry, has established himself as a major voice in the field of Indian Writing in English owing to the sensitivity and conscientiousness with which he constantly highlights the plight and the suffering of the marginalised and the downtrodden. He is an ardent observer of life with the penchant to tell poignant tales highlighting the plight of the subalterns who are eternally silenced owing to the operations of master discourses of caste, patriarchy and religion in the postcolonial India.

In his fiction Mistry depicts the irrationality of the then contemporary reality, against which all the characters struggle to maintain a balance. This irrationality is created by misuse and misappropriation of power by the powerful and the dominating. His novels are a chronicle of the modern Indian history and through his writing he tries to depict how the marginalised were ill treated and wronged by the ISA of religion and family and RSA of police. While writing, he presents multiplicity of narratives within the framework of an overall omniscient realist narrative. His characters do revolt a bit against the tyranny of the dominating classes but they do not succeed in overthrowing the powerful. This 'lack' should not be treated as a weakness rather it becomes the strength because it highlights the plight of the dominated and suppressed. Even if they want to stand for their rights, their circumstances do not permit them to opt for the tough

path. When some of them do try to change the system they have to pay heavily with all that they have and in extreme cases their lives too.

Before an analysis of fiction of Rohinton Mistry is done it is imperative to have a brief overview of some of the important nuances of Postcolonialism. Postcolonialism is the study of the text/ worldview from the perspective of the dispossessed. Under it, the assumed values about the order of things are questioned and efforts are made to find out as to how the colonised were subjected to extreme exploitation and how the colonial masters benefitted from this exploitation. Postcolonialism asserts that overturning colonialism does not simply involve handing land back to the dispossessed peoples, returning power to those who were once ruled by Empire. It is also a process of overturning the dominant ways of seeing the world, and representing reality in ways which do not replicate colonialist values (McLeod 22).

The question of the formation of the other and the role it plays in forging the identity of the oppressor is also of paramount importance. As stated by Edward Said, the West/ dominating creates a set image of the east/ dominated, so the marginalised (either on the basis of religion, caste or gender) are treated as objects about which prior stereotype has been created. They are expected to behave in exactly the same way and any deviation from the norm is treated as unnatural. This is done by creating others out of people with the help of Ideological State Apparatuses of Religion and Family and Repressive State Apparatus of Police. These stereotypes always present them in an inferior/ negative light. Groups are marginalised on the basis of religion and they are dubbed as anti national as has happened with Muslims in modern day India. The situation of Parsis is not remarkably better as they have not been assimilated into the mainstream Indian life. They are presented as exotic, mysterious and backward who still stick to their antique customs and traditions. It is because of this stereotyping that the Parsis never feel at home and they look back at their prosperous past with longing and pride. The lack of assimilation into the Indian mainstream has made them stick to their values and culture with additional passion. In a text like *Such a long Journey*, it is the character of Rustomjee who epitomises some of the insecurities of a person belonging to a minority community which has been constantly othered by the master discourse which operates on the basis of religion. Rustomjee is caught in an in between position wherein he is not sure whether to opt for the modern way of life or stick to the Parsi way of life. Even in day to day life Parsis are treated as people who are clownish and never intelligent. In *Such a Long Journey*, Rustomjee is involved in a dispute in the bus. He is easily sidelined on the basis of his religion and is only able to save himself by playing the part of a clown to perfection. This behavior like a clown saves him because it fits exactly with the stereotype of a “crazy bawaji” that the dominating group has of the Parsis. The important point to note is that hidden behind the mask of a clown lies the anguish and pain of an individual whose group has had a superior status in past and which has been reduced to a level of stereotypical eccentric assemblage of people.

The process of othering an individual or a group is not limited to the level of society alone. The process is so deep rooted that it has been internalised by each and every member of the society(Parsis included). The tendency to forge ones identity by casting the other as the inferior is carried forward to family from the society. Those in the family who can be dominated are dubbed as the ‘other’ who invariably happen to be women and the old. Women as subalterns are expected to play second fiddle to men and are not allowed to stand for their rights. Even when they are in commanding position, they do not do the rational things but become surrogate tyrants upholding the traditional patriarchal systems and values. Although, Mistry has been censured for not being able to provide complex portraits of women characters in his writing, yet

we must remember that a person can revolt depending upon his/ her circumstances. In his fiction, Mistry has given ample space to women within the prevalent patriarchal social paradigm to show their plight and suffering. Be it Dina Dalal of *A Fine Balance*, or Dilnavaz of *Such a Long Journey*, women never have equal rights as those of their male counterparts. Mistry, does not intend to be a social reformer intending to change the societal structure, he is more of a social chronicler who wants to highlight the wrongs done to women through the medium of his narration. The texts are no doubt told from the perspective of the male protagonists and the perspective of the females never dominates, but such is the social reality of India where women are never at the centre stage. In addition to it, selection of a male protagonist disempowers and marginalises the women at the very beginning but this is more of a conscious decision rather an accident as it renders all the women to the periphery.

Yet another group of subalterns is that of the old people. In the Indian social structure, the old people lead a very neglected and forlorn life. They are perpetually condemned to the status of second class citizens. In this sense they occupy the same space as that of women. They do not have any rights, are ill treated and lead their life at the periphery of the master discourse. It is not that throughout their lives they have led such a powerless existence, it is only when they become dependent, they are ill treated and considered as burden. Michel Foucault said that power relations are never stationary. Any one who wields power at one time becomes the object of it sooner or later. The same applies to old people in the Indian context. At one point in time, they held all the power but with the passage of time instead of wielding power they yielded to the power relations. This process of shifting of power relations is a complex one and the concept of othering lies at the base of it as well. A common man is thwarted in his plans and beaten every day in the race of life in the society. The same system which is supposed to work for him, in reality works to grind him slowly. The common man has no independent existence in the outside world. Thus home becomes a place where he can forge his own identity and can be in control of things. He then starts this process of othering wherein he is the superior individual, capable enough to taking care and rescuing the others who are women and the aged. The same pattern of discrimination and exploitation starts as was done by the colonial powers in the name of civilising and rescuing the colonised natives. The native had no right as he was on the periphery and incompetent to take care of his life; the colonial master had to talk for him and patronise him. Like wise the man in the family(along with his associates) makes women and the aged the others who need to be taken care of and patronised. Thus this creation of “others” is an important step in identity formation be at in the colonial times or in postcolonial times when national identities are forged by marginalising some groups as others. Likewise at the level of society and family as well, the process of marginalising the weak as the other continues, so that the dominating ideology and the dominant class can form his identity. At the level of society women are ill-treated and any attempt by them to mimic the male counterparts is strongly dealt with. Miniscule number of them succeed; others have to pay a heavy price by losing their rights, their independence, honour and in extreme cases their lives. At the level of family, the aged are the worst lot as they cannot revolt or mimic any one. They are doomed to suffer utter humiliation at the hands of the dominating family members. Till the time, the aged is independent, he is respected and he is consulted on all major issues, the moment he becomes dependent he is cast aside as a parenthesis.

The fiction of Mistry is a direct commentary on the state of affairs prevalent in our country. The nation which was developed on the ideals of equality and fraternity soon fell into the hands of ‘greedy few’ who controlled the governments. Thus the transformation into a

neocolonial state was complete. Neocolonialism as propounded by Fanon is the mechanism wherein the interests of minority powerful people overshadow the interest and good of the majority powerless. It resulted in large scale atrocities on people which culminated in the form of emergency imposed by the government led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. The decaying state of affairs in the country is accurately depicted in the fiction of Mistry. The dominating were busy filling up their coffers with misappropriation of funds while the minorities which were marginalised were struggling hard to have access to basic amenities of life. In a novel like *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry talks about the anxieties and anguishes of the minority Parsi community in the city of Bombay which is on the same lines as Dhondy's *Bombay Duck*. The novel has historical dimension as well and the straws are present all over the novel. The novel is a commentary on various national and political issues like the partition of the subcontinent and the resultant violence, the wars which India fought against Pakistan and China, the formation of the nation of Bangladesh and how the community of Indian Parsis responded to all these occurrences. The novel traces the fortunes of the Nobel family which pays the price of the nation's adventures/ misadventures at the border. The novel is set in the background of India's war with Pakistan. On the ploy of helping the state of Bangladesh the funds are misused and lives of common people become tougher with each passing day. The things which were once necessities became luxuries. In the novel, the war has direct impact on the availability of goods and the prices of essentials shoot up:

She [Dilnavaz] purchased the milk and remembered the days when ration cards were only for poor or the servants, the days when she and Gustad could afford to buy the fine creamy products of Parsi dairy farm... before the prices started to go up, up, up, and never came down (Mistry, *Such a Long Journey* 3).

On occasions, Indo- China war is also referred to, to bring out the true nature of the money laundering politicians. The war with China seriously dented India's resources and national pride. The memory of the loss and the subsequent riot still affects and troubles the common man like Gustad. Common people felt the brunt of the war but politicians used it as an opportunity to make money. In the novel, Gustad reminisces:

“ No Chinese soldiers approached Khodadad Building. Instead, teams of fund-raising politicians toured the neighbourhood. Depending on which party they belonged to, they made speeches praising Congress government's heroic stance or denouncing its incompetency (Mistry, *Such a Long Journey* 10)

The neocolonial state relied on misusing and abusing the patriotic feelings of the common man. The novel *Such a Long Journey* - as A. K. Singh and Nilufer Bharucha among others, view – is a retelling of the 1971 Sohrab Nagarwala conspiracy case, involving the personality as important as the Indian Prime Minister and the then huge sum of Rs. 60 lacs. The novel tries to defend Sohrab Nagarwala who is disguised as Major Bilimoria. In the novel, the major is a close friend of Gustad Noble and asks him to transfer funds into an anonymous bank account. Gustad Noble and Dinshawji reluctantly agree to do the work. The driving factors for them are the call of the motherland and the desire to prove their alliance towards the Indian cause(they being Parsis). The state on the other hand has no qualms in using the citizens to meet its vested interests. Major Bilimoria is put behind bars and is accused of the fraud while the leaders in the government go scot free. This incident is a pungent commentary on the ethos of the Indian system. Here, being on the right side of truth does not mean that everything good will happen to you. One needs to have the right contacts and a lot of money if one has to survive in

the system. The common man neither has the money nor the contacts and is manipulated and used by the dominating masters of the system.

Thus it is apparent from the perusal of literary oeuvre of Mistry that he is a conscientious writer fully aware of the dynamics of the society. He realises that the angst and despair experienced by people is not class, caste or religion specific. He takes special pains to present to the reader a wide variety of characters who have been marginalised in the society. He does not provide any easy solutions to the problems because that can take the shape and colour of a propaganda. He presents the stark and dark underbelly of the Indian society realistically and shakes the reader out of the deep slumber into which s/he had fallen. Thus this neutrality of tone allows him to stir the conscience of the reader who realises and identifies the various mechanisms through which individuals and groups are marginalised in the Indian society.

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