



## MULTICULTURALISM IN SELECT NOVELS OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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### ABSTRACT

Rohinton Mistry is an important figure in contemporary Commonwealth literature and he occupies a significant position among the writers of Indian Diaspora. A glowing star in the galaxy that contains luminaries such as V.S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth and Bharathi Mukharjee, to mention a few, Rohinton Mistry has drawn the attention of the world as an absorbing writer of human experiences. Having been born in a Parsi community in India, and having recorded the complex tradition of Parsi history and culture in his writings, Rohinton is also famous as a Parsi writer and is grouped along with Bapsi Sidhwa, Dina Mehta, Firdaus Kanga, Keki Daruwalla and Boman Desai. His scholarly insight into the Zoroastrian faith as well as his objective detachment and capacity for self-analysis enabled him to be regarded as an authentic Parsi writer of his time. An Indian born novelist settled in Canada, Rohinton Mistry has remarkable capacity for capturing the crowded, throbbing life of India. While reading Rohinton Mistry's such a Long Journey a reader is inevitably fed with the question can this novel be classified as a work of Canadian literature? There is hardly anything in the novel which connects it even remotely with Canada, neither the setting, nor the characters, nor the events—except for the two references in the acknowledgement where the novelist thanks the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for their assistance. And yet this novel has gone on to win the Governor General's Award and Smith's first novel Award in Canada besides having been short listed for the Booker Prize in 1991. The only criterion by which this novel would then apparently qualify as a work of Canadian citizen he lives in Toronto. What confounds this vexed question further is the puzzling remark in the blurb of the novel that "Such a Long Journey" is a brilliant first novel by one of the most remarkable writers to have emerged from the Indian Literary tradition in many years". So, does it belong to the Canadian literary tradition or to the Indian one, or can it belong to both the traditions at the same time.

Key Words: Diaspora, Zoroastrian faith, Canadian Literature

Such a question has become increasingly urgent and persistent in the face of the fact that 'nation literature is not only increasingly seen as a product of the nation coming into being, but it is also seen as playing a decisive role in the formation of the nation. Underlying this notion of national

literature being a product of nation are the specific issues of identity construction in the larger discourse of nation formation and the space assigned to racial/minorities in it. In asking such a question one presumes that there are a host of factors which unite to give rise to a Canadian identity and a work

is to be classified as such to the extent it conforms or does not conform to this identity. The twentieth century witnessed new waves of immigrants from almost every part of the world including India. Stranded between the French and the English mainstreams of Canada, the Indian immigrant writers have experienced difficulties in making their voices heard. While mainstream continues to pay lip service to the nation of multiculturalism, in actual practice it continues to ignore the immigrant voices. On the one hand, it is claimed that Canada is a multicultural mixture and that immigrant literature has come of age, on the other writers of outstanding merit such as Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Neil Bissoondhnath, Naznin Sidiqie etc. are not worthy to be included in the celebrated white anthologies or even to be mentioned in any history of Canadian literature written or compiled by the White authors. This refusal to give recognition to the voice of the 'other' is to be seen as Endeavour to contain the threat, on the part of dominant mainstream white Anglo-Saxon culture by the racial other. But this act of guarding jealously the national culture, or the very fact such a need has been alleged, sarcastically and strangely enough reveals the deep fissures in the façade of the nation which it is not given, natural and ancient, but it is made and constructed. This made upness reveals the element of oppression in forging this nation-ness, an identity which is only provisional and whose stability is constantly endangered by the oratory of the other lurking on the margins. The fringe thus becomes the space from where to escalate the challenge to the prevailing cultural discourse of the nation.

The marginalization of the immigrant writers fails to deter them from writing their versions of Canada. From there on the margin they create narratives which challenge the static borders of national and cultural identities by disrupting the dominant discourse of the nation. These narratives seek to extend the boundaries of the nation, neither by assimilation into the dominant narrative nor by its simple treason, but by hybridizing the discourse through a process of creative dialectic tension. Living in a multicultural society and being characterized by an ethnic identity, the Indian community in Canada has been in variably required

to negotiate the problem of ethnicity. They have been engaged in active economic and cultural competitions. They have experienced ethnic discrimination, either explicit or covert. Having a unique socio cultural society history, the Indian community in Canada has evolved as a distinct Diasporic individual. 'Home' for them becomes a mental construct symbolizing their distinct socio cultural identity in a faultless and distilled form. Safran has observed that it is general characteristic of Diaspora that 'they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to the in home land in one way or in another, and their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.' Thus the diasporic Indians do not sever their relationship with their ancestral land. And, naturally the writer in his role as a preserver of the collective tradition, a folk historian and mythmaker, recreates this sense of community in his writings by invoking the past and history. Mistry is one such writer who consistently goes back to India in his writings, to be specific. But this going back to his past characterized by neither reminiscence nor bitterness as it happens in the case of most of the writers of the Indian Diaspora. He seems to have a matter of fact attitude in his portrayal of the Parsi community in India. He does it with compassion and warmth but there is also a sense of gentle irony. If there is a sense of frustration at the social inequality, incompetence, corruption and numerous problems that India faces, then there is also a sense of celebration and joy for the essential nobility and virtues of human life. In fact, invoking the past becomes a strategy by strengthening the multicultural material. From his position on the margin, Mistry presents an alternative worldwide which not only interrogates and challenges the supremacy of the Eurocentric discourse and worldview but also leads to a better appreciation and understanding of Canada's multicultural fabric.

Multiculturalism presents in Mistry's novels through his vision on a multicultural society and the place of minorities in it. Set in Bombay in 1971 against the backdrop of the Indo-Pakistan war and the birth of Bangladesh as a nation. Such a Long journey deals with the life of Parish community in

India. On the one hand, this novel opens up a new world for the readers in Canada-the life and ways of the Parsi community -and thus people developing a better understanding and appreciation of their culture. On the other hand it also presents to us a model of multiculturalism in its delineation of this minority community in India and how well they have integrated into the Indian society without losing their cultural and religious identity. This can, Mistry proposes, act as a model for the Canadian society and will go a long way in strengthening the fabric of multiculturalism in Canada. The novel focuses on the lives of Gustad Nobel and his family, residing in Khodadbad building together with other Parsi families in Colaba and how the Indo-Pak war impinges on their lives. Parsis as we know are a closed and limited community, strictly regulating and preserving their cultural and religious identity by not allowing any intermingling with other communities at the domestic, affinity and religious levels. Having been driven away from Persia around eighth century AD, they have lived in India for 1300 years. Though now declining in numbers, this minority community has maintained and preserved their separate identity and they have also contributed significantly to the public life of architects, Industrialists, merchants, bankers, statesmen etc. In its loving evocation of the details of the cultural milieu the novel manifests a specificity and rootedness which are rare to be found in immigrant writings. It beautifully and faithfully renders the life of the minority Parsi community its religious beliefs, rituals, mores, social norms, modes of dress, food habits, and linguistic habits and idioms etc. But amidst all these particularities which show their distinctiveness from other people, there is also emphasis on the universals of human experience. There is a tension between the particular and the universal. Even readers in Canada can easily identify themselves with these characters in spite of the different socio cultural space that they inhabit; they can find in them many similarities to their own situation. If these characters appear differently externally in their own religious beliefs, social norms, customs and linguistic habits inwardly there beats the same heart in all of them, betraying the same range of emotions and

feelings of love, delight, gladness, fury, annoyance, vulnerability, anxieties and qualms which ordinary human beings do. In fact, showing universal in particular becomes Mistry's way of showing unity in diversity and thus presenting an example of a stable multicultural society. The Khodadbad building with its Parsi residents comes to stand for the Parsi community. And the six feet high compound wall running around it becomes the symbol of its blinkeredness, protecting and sheltering it from the eyes of the majority community. The compound wall of the Khodadbad building, a symbol of the blinkeredness of the Parsi community, is soon transformed into a multi-religious shrine, a mosaic of different religions and cultures, as a pavement artist draws pictures of deities of different religions and renders stories from epics of different religions on this wall. People of all faiths and religions come to worship and pay their curtsy. This wall symbolically becomes a multicultural and multi-religious space where different cultures and religions exist in an accord. In the end the wall is brought down by the municipal corporation in the name of widening the road but this does not happen without rigid confrontation of the people who spontaneously rise up to save the wall. From the author's perspective it seems to be suggesting that the multicultural fabric of the society can be preserved, sustained and strengthened only with the will and commitment of people, not just through some official policy.

If the novel portrays the Parsi community in India on the large canvas with broad brush-strokes, then it also draws the miniature paintings of individuals with fine brush strokes. At the individual level, the novel tells the story of Gustad Nobel, a bank clerk and in peculiar way in which the Indo-Pak war of 1971 makes an impact on his life as well as that of his family. It becomes the story of a common man living and surviving in hard times. Having seen better days during the time of his grandfather and father Gustad now lives in straitened circumstances in the Khodadad building with his wife Dilnavaz, two sons Sohrab and Darius, and a daughter Roshan. Gustad has dreams and aspirations which, though quite modest and ordinary, prove difficult to fulfill. He finds it quite mysterious that things do not

happen the way he wants them to .His dreams slowly disintegrate and his hopes die a slow death as he has one annoying experience after the other. Life for him seems to be an endless series of trials and troubles. First he feels betrayed by his long time friend, major jimmy bilimoria who suddenly decides to leave the Khodaddad building without even bothering to inform him. Then, his eldest son, Sohrab, after having qualified for the I.I.T., refuses to join in and all his efforts to persuade him fail and it leads to quarrels and fights at home, and finally sohrab leaves the home in a bad mood. "How to make him realize what he was doing to his father, who had made the success of his son's life the purpose of his own? Shorab had snatched away that purpose, like a crutch from a cripple." Then, he is worried no end over the illness of his daughter Roshan whose condition continues to deflate even after medication. On top of that, for the sake of friendship he gets drawn into a shroud and dagger operation of helping the Mukti Bahini on the request of major Bilimoria. And then comes the illness and death of his friend Dinshawji.His problems seems to be endless.What redeems his character in our eyes is his manner of facing his problems. These experiences fail to break him. Though angry and frustrated at times, he does not give in to any prolonged bout of gloom or skepticism. As his name suggests, he maintains the essential nobility of his character all through. He endures his trails with dignity, courage and composure without losing faith in compassion. The novel is, in fact the story of his education that man does not always control his providence, that there are forces beyond his control and larger than he is and of his learning to come to terms with it.

The ordinaries of his life make Gustad the symbol of every man just as the Khodadad building is the symbol of the Parsi community. If on the one hand, Gustad as an individual becomes every man in his aspirations and distress, on the other hand he as a member of his community shows his independent cultural and religious identity. Through the character of Gustad, Mistry shows that in spite of the cultural and religious differences, there is a lot which people have in common with each other as human beings and it is this frequency which unites people in spite

of the differences. And this is Mistry's way of offering a pattern of multiculturalism for Canada, though Canada does not stature in the novel.

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