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CULTURE AND PUBLIC LIFE: IN THE FICTION OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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Abstract: Rohinton Mistry has emerged as a significant literary figure during the 20th century. He is an Indo-Canadian writer. Mistry was born on July 3, 1952 in Mumbai, India. Rohinton earned his Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics and Economics from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai in the year 1973. In 1975, he along with his wife migrated to Canada where he worked in a bank as a clerk for a short time before returning to his studies. He earned his degrees in English and Philosophy from the University of Toronto in the year of 1982.

Keyword: Public Life, Culture, Rohinton Mistry, literary figure.

INTRODUCTION:

As a writer of Diaspora, Mistry has occupied a remarkable place for himself. As a writer, who lives and writes from Canada, Mistry's writings focus mainly on India. Like other expatriate writers, he continues his relationship with his country in his fiction. His writings deal with his community that is Parsi community, social and political situation of India, communalism, casteism etc.

This paper will attempt to explore an Indian politics and policies of government in the fiction of Rohinton Mistry.

Before coming to the subject of this article 'Culture and Public life' in Rohinton Mistry's fiction, the core values of culture should be enumerated. The core value of Indian culture is truth. Gandhi equated spirituality and religion with truth, but he also drew our attention to the fact that truth should be carried out and implemented peacefully. For him, truth and peace went together. All our sages and savants and prophets centralize truth. In Upanishads a sharp distinction is made between truth and untruth. The path of truth is termed as Shreya and that of untruth is termed as Priya. Shreya can be unpleasant and ruthless. Priya in course of time takes one to untruth, even falsehood. In political terminology, it takes one to populism making tall promises that one has no intention to deliver or one in no position to deliver. The present day Indian politics is afflicted with the syndrome of populism. Consequently no attempt is made to take on problems and solve them.

Another core value in Indian Culture is tolerance. We should never forget that India is home to many religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and even Zoroastrianism. In addition to these main religious streams there are tribal religions practised by one fourth of the tribal Indian population. So pluralism is the natural corollary of toleration which must be embraced and lived in public life. Unfortunately, despite our religion espousing pluralism, despite its enshrinement in the constitution and laws central and state, pluralism is violated again and again in Indian Public life. From time to time we have religious

conflicts and sectarian violence. Our public life falls woefully short of tolerance and pluralism. Meaningful public life should express the core values of the culture.

In addition to numerous religions, traditions and modes of worship associated with the traditions and their expression in public, India is home to many principal languages which are spoken in different regions: east and west, north and south. In addition to these languages there is no dearth of dialects spoken and even written. All the linguistic expressions have to be respected to express our rainbow culture.

India is home to five thousand communities, many castes and sub-castes. The communities have their own ethnicity which has to be valued. Again unfortunately in our public life this is not valued. We have the slogan of unity and diversity and diversity in unity but it is not vivified in actual life.

Compassion is another core value in Indian culture more so in Indian culture than perhaps in another culture because of the stress of compassion in Hinduism and its culmination or fulfillment in Buddhism. Rohinton Mistry in his fiction holds up the fault lines and the violation of these values in his fiction which shows how our public life shows the ugly face of caste, religious, regional and ethnic discrimination.

Rohinton Mistry does not didacticise the positives. They are implicit in his Zoroastrian sansakaras.

Our public life should express that only the core values of truth, peace, tolerance, compassion, etc. but also subsidiary values of active commitment to these values which Rohinton Mistry shows in depth and abundance, being a Parsi. In private life when we violate these core values in existential relationships or in family dynamics, the ill effects are confined to the small locale but when the violation takes place in public, the result is violence mayhem, breakdown of civil order and holding of institutions to ransom.

In the present article I'll explore this fact through narrative and characters. In public life we should manifest

higher consciousness.

Unfortunately, the core values are violated because of sub-rational expansion of consciousness. There should be no room in public life for superstition, bigotry, fanaticism, but we don't stop there. In fact, we become barbaric beast.

In addition to espousal of core values in public life because of his Zoroastrianism, Rohinton Mistry also expresses the above listed essential values, essentially as existential values. One's existence must become the foundation for the expression of these values.

The makers of the constitution named or baptized India as Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, and Democratic Republic. Let us begin with the first word, Sovereign. Sovereign means supremely independent, it is not subject to any other power, or entity. Historically speaking one may ask as to why the framers of constitution named India as Sovereign. The answer is that prior to India becoming free in 1947, India was under the British for practically two hundred years. Before that it was under the Muslim rulers for practically eight hundred years. So we were becoming free after a thousand year of slavery. Of course, in today's world of interdependence no country is wholly Sovereign. However, there is no need to open the subject as it is not germane to our limited discussion.

Sovereignty of India however entails certain duties for us as its citizens. As citizens we have to uphold the Sovereignty of India. In the event of war or conflict as citizens we have to fight and protect the independence of our country. Viewed intrinsically, we have to protect and safeguard its integrity from internal disturbances. Unfortunately, despite sixty five years of freedom we have horrible problems; we have religious riots from time to time.

In the novel of Rohinton Mistry *A Fine Balance* behind casteism which constitutes a major part, several other issues such as communal riots, politics and corruption are also highlighted in all the three novels of Rohinton Mistry.

A Fine Balance is an enthralling novel by Rohinton Mistry. The story is based on four major characters belongs from different culture and parts of India. The protagonist Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck Kohlah. All of them come to meet at one place in the city, though the circumstances of all the four are different. Dina Dalal is a Parsi lady, daughter of Dr. Shroff but the sudden death of her father brought her a great shock. Nusswan is a brother of Dina, is a brutal and callous figure in the novel. After the death of Dina's father, responsibility of family comes upon his shoulders. The first thing Nusswan did to cut the help of an ayah to Dina and her mother by saying that now it is not possible to afford an ayah for chores. Secondly he stopped Dina's education at a young age and made her to do the chores. Dina passed her childhood under her ruling and callous brother and entered in her youth period. At her young age Dina met a fellow Rustom Dalal whom she started liking and both decided to go for a marriage. Dina got married with Rustom. She was happy with Rustom and in her new routine in Rustom's flat. But this happiness was short. On Dina's third wedding anniversary Rustom met with an accident and died. Dina was all alone. She has disgust for her brother. But for the mean time Dina went with her brother to stay with them after her husband's death. Nusswan compelled Dina for

a second marriage but Dina was stubborn lady she didn't accepted the proposal of her brother and she decides to come back to Rustom's flat and earn her livelihood by herself. She started taking the tailoring orders for Export Company by the help of her school friend Zenobia. In starting she done all by herself but at the age of forty-two her eyes started giving her trouble now to proceed with the same business she needs two tailors and for which she gave the advertisement. On the other hand Ishvar and Omprakash belongs to the rural part of the country, a village, both of them belonged to a chammaar community. They were the sufferers of casteism in their village. The discrimination between the upper caste community and lower caste community forced them to leave their forefathers profession and they went to nearby village to learn tailoring by the friend of Ishvar's father Ashraf chacha who was a Muslim in the other village. In starting two sons of Dukhi mochi Ishvar and Narayan went to learn tailoring but Narayan come back and then his son Omprakash the nephew of Ishvar, starts learning tailoring with his uncle Ishvar. After becoming skilled Ishvar and Omprakash decide to go in city and earn there for better living. With the dreams in their minds of the city they (Ishvar and Omprakash) come in Mumbai. The fourth character Maneck Kohlah is a Parsi boy son of Aban kohlah and Farokh Kohlah belongs from north – east part of the country. In the town the family of Maneck Kohlah was running a departmental store but the condition changed when the planning started in the town of constructing new buildings and dams which make Mr. Kohlah annoy, to ruin their beautiful town. Maneck Kohlah was sent to city by his parents to continue his study, as he was not willing to leave his native place but then to obey his parents he finally come to city, Mumbai. The opening scene is of railway platform where the three characters happen to meet and the destination of the three is same that is Dina Dalal house. Ishvar and Omprakash going as tailors to assist her and Maneck Kohlah as a border to stay in her house. In this way all the characters come under one roof and started living.

Mistry discussed the horrifying problem of India which is still persistent in our country. In the village casteism is rampant. Throughout their lives Ishvar and Omprakash dalits suffered due to the discrimination by the upper castes. They are not allowed to enter the school premises-

Dukhi, father of two boys got hurt by behavior of upper caste community towards his sons; he took the bold decision to sent his children in nearby village where his friend Ashraf was a tailor, to make his sons learn tailoring. While living with Asraf Chacha the two boys adjusted in the family like their own children, and learnt the skills of tailoring quickly which impressed Ashraf Chacha.

Communal riots which arose during the stay of Ishvar and Narayan in Muslim Chacha shop as apprentices of tailoring, Hindus started killing Muslims in the name of religion.

The stories kept multiplying: someone had been knifed in the bazaar in town: a sadhu hacked to death at the bus station: a settlement razed to the ground. The tension spread through the entire district. And it was all believable because it resembled exactly what people had been seeing in

newspapers for the past few days: reports about arson and riots in large towns and cities: about mayhem and massacre on all sides: about the vast and terrible exchange of populations that commenced across the new border.

The killings started in the poorer section of town, and began to spread: the next day the bazaar was empty. There were no fruits or vegetables to be bought, the milkmen did not stir, and the only bakery in town owned by a Muslim, had already been burned to the ground. (AFB-123-124)

From time to time in our country there are religious riots in which thousands of innocent people are killed. Om and Ishvar had moved from their village to escape the victimhood of the caste system. They took to tailoring with Ashraf and become a part of uncle's family, but the riots broke out and the family was in a disturbed state.

In 2002 there was Gujarat carnage. We have insurrection movements going on in North –East States. We have Maoism now. We have the imbroglia in Kashmir which has been going on since 1947.

Our Sovereignty is not comparable to that of U.S.A or European countries. Despite a million mutinees India has held on to its Sovereignty, Integrity and Unity. As citizens our commitment has to be to these three interrelated values. However in terms of our consciousness, conduct and behaviour and we have a long way to go. We have do not think of ourselves as Pan Indians. We are state encapsulated. As citizens it is our fundamental duty to abide by the constitution, honour the commitment to unity and integrity. We cannot allow fustian tendencies to break India, may them come from religions, ethnicities, and linguistic differences, etc. We have to uphold the flags, the National Anthem.

To continue with the story of Ishvar Darji and Omprakash Darji, downtrodden and sufferers of casteism in the village Ishvar and Narayan come to city for better life and earning. Every new day in the city comes with a new problem. When they find temporary place to stay in city, they are booted out by the government policies in order to make the city beautiful. In a beautiful city there is no place for beggars and their jhopad-pattis, government does not provide them any place to live. When Ishvar and Narayan are homeless they took permission from the night watchman to sleep in front of the chemist shop, in return they promised to mend the clothes of watchman but that was only for a short while some people came and forcefully drag Ishvar and Narayan on truck to work at construction site free of cost.

'It's terrible! He thinks they were mistaken for beggars- dragged into the police truck –the god knows where they are now!'

'I don't know.' Distraught, he did not detect her question's cynicism. 'It's not just them- everyone from the street, all the beggars and pavement-dwellers were taken away by the police.'

'Don't make me laugh, there's no law for doing that.'

'It's a new policy- city beautification plan or something, under the emergency.'(AFB-334)

Mistry also deals with the trauma of the millions of Mumbai's unhomed and homeless citizens, whose plight has not changed dramatically for the better since the dark days of the Emergency. The tailors have to sleep rough on the streets,

carrying their belongings in a trunk, until Dina finally relents and lets them keep it in to her flat. Initially, of course, she refuses to let the tailors live in her flat for fear of her landlord and also because of her own class and ethnic prejudices. The tailors are rounded up with other homeless people and dragged off to the beggar's camp. Most of the events in the novel revolve around the predicament of the poor.

Although Mistry has not yet indulged in politician bashing, a reference here and there is surely found hinting at the disapproval of the Machiavellian creatures. Thus late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Garibi Hatao programme launched during the emergency does find a brief mention in the story "the collectors :'" "the Bombay police, in a misinterpretation of the nation's mandate : garibi hatao – eradicate poverty, conducted periodic round ups of pavement dwellers, sweeping into their vans beggar and street vendors, cripple and alcoholics, the homeless and the hungry and dumped them somewhere outside the city limits: when the human detritus made its way back in to the city, another clean up was scheduled." Politics form an important subtext to the main action of all three novels. This preoccupation moves increasingly closer to contemporary times as Mistry tackles first, in Such a long journey, the Bangladeshi war with Pakistan, second Indira Gandhi's declaration of a state of emergency which affects the livelihood of the tailors of a A Fine Balance and finally in Family Matters, the impact Hindu fundamentalist agitation and the post – Babri Masjid riots on the life of the ordinary Indian.

On one side we are committed to our country, respecting its institution the parliament, the constitution. Rohinton Mistry comments on the pathological system of India-

The crowd in the front couldn't go forward, however, threatened by the Shiv Sena's waving sticks and an assortment of signs: RESPECT THE NATIONAL ANTHEM! YOUR MOTHERLAND NEEDS YOU DURING THE EMERGENCY! PATRIOTISM IS A SCARED DUTY! No one was allowed to leave till the flag faded on the screen and the lights came on.

'Why is patriotism a sacred duty?' laughed Om. They need to frighten people to be patriotic.'

'These idiots can't even spell sacred, and they are telling us what to do,' said Maneck. (AFB-282)

According to the city beautification programme the temporary huts of the poor people were destroyed with the orders of government.

The evening was on the edge of darkness. A vigorous lathi-charge had finally cleared the area near the front of the colony. Slippers and sandals lost by the fleeing crowd littered the ground, strewn like the flotsam of a limbless human tide. The police cordon, now firmly in place, kept the rage of the residents smoldering at a safe distance. (AFB-296)

Some people are forcefully removed by the policemen to vacate the space in which their jhopad-pattis were situated. Now these people don't have any place to sleep. Both the characters Ishvar and Narayan who have come to city in order to work, are now homeless, due to the new laws and policies of government against the poor.

CONCLUSION-

Rohinton Mistry in all his three novels revealed the true picture of Indian society, where one can see all the evils of the world. The characters Ishvar and Omprakash of a novel *A Fine Balance*, suffered through out because they belongs to low caste community that is chammaar community, came to city in order to find job in tailoring and for better livelihood but picture was almost reverse according to their imagination of the city life, starting from the first day at city they suffered till they got a place to live in Dina's house. After spending few months in Dina's house, where they lived like a family. They went to village for Om's marriage where they becomes the victims of vasectomization and finally turns in to beggars. The other two major characters Dina and Maneck Kohlah were the victims of emergency declared in 1975, Dina who was reluctant to go to her brother's house has to leave her flat and business and finally took shelter in her brother's house, Maneck Kohlah who got a job in Dubai after competing his degree came to India after eight years was shocked to see the plight condition of his friends Ishvar and Omprakash transformed from tailors to beggars and he finally commits suicide.

Mistry shows an Indian's knowledge about corruption being an ingrained part of life at all levels in India. He reiterates how an ordinary citizen can get nothing done without bribes. He described meticulously how, from the very top, whence all power flowed. There also dripped the pus of putrefaction, inflicting every stratum of society below. It is possible only in India that Mistry's Ishvar or Narayan, cobblers by caste and profession could be the cause of an upheaval in their village by deliberately changing their trade to tailoring.

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