

Depiction of Violence in Rohinton Mistry's '*Such a Long Journey*' and '*A Fine Balance*'

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Paper Received on 10-01-2023, Accepted on 20-02-2023,
Published on 24-02-23; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.1.176

Abstract

This paper analyses the way in which Rohinton Mistry reflects the post-Partition violent conflicts and ensuing traumas in his novels *Such a Long Journey* (shortlisted for the 1991 Booker Prize and winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize) and *A Fine Balance* (Winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book, the Winifred Holtby Award and Giller Prize). His treatment of violence, largely metaphorical though sometimes acquiring realist nuances, seems to prolong the silence embraced by the written discourse of official history and at the same time to undermine it denouncing its falsity. His novels start from simple stories centered upon families and weave an entire web of side stories and histories that create a larger context where violence, most of the time related to post-Partition events and the Emergency period, is dissected down to its articulations and exposed in its subtler manifestations. The purpose in analyzing different types of violence and the ensuing traumas, the crises of identity, family or community they provoke, is to exorcise the suffering that continues to haunt the alternative history of India, which still waits to be rewritten.

Keywords: casteism, Kanthapura, Rohinton Mistry, Partition.

Rohinton Mistry seems particularly interested in the forms of violence induced by communalism and casteism in India. The violence he depicts can always find an antidote in human solidarity but he generally focuses upon those cases where the sense of commonality is destroyed by the absurd accidents of history caused by political errors. In terms of casteism, he is ranked among the few writers who have successfully tackled the matter. Mulk Raj Anand before him, giving a realist description of the low-caste in *Untouchable* and Raja Rao's complex representation of the Indian caste system in *Kanthapura*, might have influenced Mistry in approaching the difficult issue of caste.

Mistry excels in portraying the honorable low-caste. In *A Fine Balance* the untouchables come from a long tradition of cobblers, "belonging to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers" (1995, p. 95), and break this tradition when they become a tailor's apprentices in a brave attempt to transcend their caste. The status of the untouchable is metaphorically suggested by their inherited stink of dead

animals translating their condition of living dead, doomed to a life of humiliation, sufferance and injustice, bearing the mark of the "invisible line of caste" (96). Once again, Mistry's arguments are disposed around contrasting images mainly focusing upon politicians' hypocritical speeches which equate the low-caste with a disease that has to be cured, "purged from our society, from our hearts and from our minds" (107), and the series of atrocities against the low caste occurring in the villages and their squalid living conditions on the outskirts of the city.

The declaration of the Emergency coincides with the much-praised operation of beautification of the city advertised by such slogans as "The City belongs to you! Keep it beautiful!", "Small families are happy families" (315), "The nation is on the move" (303) and triggers a violent series of events that shatters people's dreams and lives, puts them in the street by destroying their humble abode, erases their memories and denies them the right to have a family. Mistry uses this ironical gap between the slogans and their violent materialization in real life and it is in order to create a gloomy "semi-eternal saga of 'human' misery" (Khair, 2001. 145). The novel can be read as a profoundly human political parable dissecting the Emergency period and criticizing its tendency to find "sacrificial scapegoats, usually the marginalized and disenfranchised" (Gopal, 121). The novel ends on a pessimistic note, with Dina losing her independence and with her employees reduced to the status of beggars, displaying a total lack of trust in

the political world and with a strong affirmation of human fragility. "People forget how vulnerable they are despite their shirts and shoes and briefcases, said the Beggamaster, how this hungry and cruel world could strip them, put them in the same position as my beggars" (Mistry, 1995, 493).

In his analysis of the hiranyagarbha syndrome, Tabish Khair draws attention upon the general problems encountered when tackling casteism. Though most of the Indian writers living outside India prefer to leave aside the thorny matter of depicting low-caste characters and commenting upon their status within Indian social hierarchy. Khair's first observation concerns the lack of a "common language" that might ensure the communication between different castes. In Mistry's novel, this dialogue is successfully established and strikes the right though ephemeral balance in the protagonists' lives. Mistry was forced, according to Khair, "to concoct a common language of communication for his characters [though] any such attempt automatically reduces the autonomy of the "other" experience depicted in an Indian English novel as the language concocted belongs to the dominant section (from which both the author and the reader hail)" (140-141). The kind of individual resistance professed by Mistry is doomed to perpetuate the past, in Khair's opinion, finally leading to a "repetition of oppression" (144) recurrent in the "eternal epic of the victim". For Khair, the attempt to place any type of fictional endeavour

outside a Babu, Brahminised, slightly westernized discourse is a utopian attempt, always affected by what he calls the hiranyagarbha syndrome.

Rohinton Mistry is a fervent advocate for India's multiplicity and protean identity and for the attempt to find a suitable means of dialogue. Though the solutions he offers are always metaphorical, they can be however translated as tolerance and mutual understanding. The epitome of this unity is symbolized in *A Fine Balance* by the image of the patched quilt sewn together by Dina, her tenant and her two hired tailors, a metaphorical way of illustrating India's diversity. This patchwork reminds them of their life together and their friendship: "I have cloth instead of a photo album, a scrapbook" (273); it is "a bedtime story", "fashioned with needle, thread and affection" (573), a metaphorical representation of storytelling or writing, the quilt being in the end "the tailors' chronicle" (385) engulfing the "pattern of each day" (388) and "the stitches of time" (489), making them "sail under one flag" (399).

The same balance and harmony temporarily achieved in *Such a Long Journey* are suggested by transforming an ordinary wall, reminder of the Berlin Wall, which is used as a public latrine and a physical divider between minorities as well as between a prosperous capitalist India and the other India of poverty, sufferance and humiliation. It is turned into an emblem of tolerance and inclusiveness after it is painted with all emblematic

deities belonging to all religious minorities in India. The wall is another example of Mistry's reversed symbols, a public latrine turned into a public shrine, translating a deep nostalgia for roots, stability and permanence, "a shrine for all races and religious" (1991, 338). As the quilt in the other novel, the wall plays upon self-referentiality, "a wall featuring a painting of the wall featuring a painting of the wall featuring a..." (340) and represents an appeal to tolerance and acceptance. "The wall of gods and goddesses. The wall of Hindu and Muslim, Sikh and Christian, Parsi and Buddhist! A holy wall, a wall suitable for worship and devotion, whatever your faith!" (384).

Whatever symbols and metaphorical images he might use, Mistry's India remains a land of contradictions, of stories and counter stories, of realities and alternative realities, "a world where roadside latrines become temples and shrines and temples and shrines become dust and ruin" (399). Beyond all contradictions and conflicts, dissensions and violence, "the secret of survival", according to Mistry, remains "to embrace change and to adopt" (1995, 230). "You cannot draw lines and compartments and refuse to budge beyond them. Sometimes you have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair [...] In the end it's all a question of balance" (231).

Though arguing for tolerance and "balance", Rohinton Mistry's novels present the traumatic consequences of disturbing this balance. Focusing upon families and human solidarity, he

temporarily creates domestic paradises of peacefulness and affection which are shattered to pieces when politics interferes and public history clashes with particular lives emphasizing the disastrous outcomes of the political strategies after the Partition, bitterly criticizing Indira Gandhi's oppressive regime, Mistry's novels end on a pessimistic note that concerns the destiny of a secular, plural India in front of rising Hindu fundamentalism. The somber hopeless future imagined by Mistry is translated by the process of forced castration imposed upon population during the Emergency in *A Fine Balance* and by the violation of the beautiful doll in bridal gown won in a school raffle by Gustad's daughter. The only remedy Mistry proposes against the erasure of communal identity, against the increasing violence engendered by conventional divisions, by political plots and induced communalist hatred, is the preservation of memories through story-telling which becomes sewing and quilt making in *A Fine Balance* or paan making associated to storytelling in *Such a Long Journey*. Preserving memories becomes from this perspective an imperative even if "even memories do not stay intact forever. Have to be careful, scrupulous, in dealing with them" (1991, 288).

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How to cite this article?

Piyush Kumar Singh ,“ Depiction of Violence in Rohinton Mistry’s ‘Such a Long Journey’ and ‘A Fine Balance’ ”Research Journal Of English(RJOE)8(1),PP:167-171,2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.1.176