

Historicising Rohinton Mistry and Textualising Indian History

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Abstract

The present article is a new historicist practice on the select areas of Indian history and Rohinton Mistry's select texts. As the theory is a double-edged contestation, both the historicity of the text and the textuality of history are analysed. The texts include the novels *A Fine Balance* and *Such a Long Journey* by Rohinton Mistry. The context is Indian history especially the period of the Emergency, partition and Bangladesh conflict. Post colonial texts and contexts become raw materials for the study. The contextuality of the text is read using the social, cultural and historical details of Rohinton Mistry, an Indian-born Canadian writer. Mistry realises a writing of Indian history based on his Parsi identity. Consequently a textual reconstruction of the past emerges in Mistry's letters. A combination of two main spaces and many more is realised in the reworking of the history of an area. Indian history of the selected period is textualised to shatter the idea of one single history and promote histories. The study also works on the context of Parsi creativity and an exposition of the politics of space, of place and of 'placelessness'.

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

Introduction

The late 1970s and early 1980s caught a clarion call for a varied intellectual orientation with new interests in literature and history. It reached the public under the denomination of 'New Historicism'. New historicist approach, advocated by the American critics, tended to make a parallel reading of literature and history without privileging either one of them. Texts need to be contextualised as they are neither stable entities nor sole products of a creative genius whom we call the author. Texts, including their writers, are formed by the contexts that they have been a part of. In turn they make ripples in the very contexts that have created them. It is no one way process. Consequently context, which we usually name by the term of history, needs to be textualised. Textualising history would result in the production of histories. And the common current underlying both a text and context get exposed as nothing other than the play of power.

A study of new historicist practices reveals that the American literary theorists, Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose, focused on the productions of Renaissance. They got immersed in the engagements of Shakespearean productions with the conduct of the time. Elizabethan plays were read in parallel with the culture and context of the time to expose the patterns of power. New historicists worked to trace the colonial policies of the English, indirectly interwoven in the Renaissance writings. Later critics like Catharine Gallagher, Jonathan Arac, Hayden White, Alan Liu, Jon Klancher, Stephen Bann, and others made extensive efforts to practise new historicism. Texts from varied contexts and from different disciplines can all be brought under the frame of new historicism. But the frame had a special nature of

being quite frameless. And this is the alluring 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).

Over the ages new historicist approach has widely been applied in the post colonial Indian context. Texts of Salman Rushdie, Manohar Malgonker, Sashi Tharoor etc. are read on a new historicist plane. Apart from these writers many others also open up vast opportunities from a new historicist perspective. This is how our respective author, Rohinton Mistry, and his texts come to the limelight.

Historicity of the Text: Contextualising Rohinton Mistry and his Texts

The renowned new historicist, Louis Montrose, comments in “The Poetics and Politics of Culture”, “By *the historicity of texts*, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing” (20). Texts cannot be isolated from their contexts and no writer is in a state of *tabula rasa* and thus the historicity of the text becomes a matter of great concern. Contextualising Rohinton Mistry demands attention to the mixed identities and historical turbulence that the writer is related with.

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born Canadian writer with a deep sense of Parsi identity. His identity is formed on mixed grounds of being an Indian, being a Canadian and also being a member of a minority community in India. He was born in Bombay in 1952 and in 1975 he immigrated to Canada. Being a Canadian does not prevent Mistry from coming back to the homeland memories. Three of his novels include *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1996) and *Family Matters* (2002). *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) is his short story collection and *The Scream* (2006) is his novella. Rohinton Mistry’s novels have historical events forming the narrative context. *Such a Long Journey* is set at the time of Bangladesh challenge, *Family Matters* is set in post 1992, the year of Babri Masjid crisis in India and *A Fine Balance* is set in the Emergency of 1975 to 1977 in India.

A Fine Balance, with the Emergency as its context, is a documentation of human endurance in a bitter and brutal period of time. Caste related questions come to the focus as a major plot in the novel. The two *chamaars*, Om and Ishvar Darji, expecting an escape from the casteists of the village, come to the city. The widow, Dina Dalal, takes them as tailors and gradually a family feeling is built up. But situations turn for the worse with the emergency and common men lose their dwellings. Government runs family planning missions widely and wildly. Om and Ishvar are caught and sterilized brutally crushing every one of their dreams to the ground. Consequently they become beggars in the street, the ones who had come to the town with loads of dreams.

Rohinton Mistry tries to construct and reconstruct a past that he has witnessed. For him the context turns out to be one unparalleled in Indian history. He writes of an India that he has experienced and has read about. 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” (The Times, 1996. Pg. 3). Mistry seems to question societal injustices by taking the contextual base of his time. Parsi creativity and religious inclination to act had played largely into the

making of his thinking and writing. This is an attempt to 'right' history. 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 Parsis, Zoroastrianism, demands the pious followers to establish good in society and contest the evil in the name of their God Ahura Mazda. This religious base in the consciousness of the writer makes him create texts and characters of such orientation. Though her name is not mentioned in *A Fine Balance* there is conspicuous evidence of the author's dissatisfaction with and revolt against Indira Gandhi especially regarding family planning and forced conduction of vasectomy. The author laments in the voice of one of his characters, Valmik: "What are we to say, madam, what are we to think about the state of this nation? When the highest court in the land turns the Prime Minister's guilt into innocence, then all this" (651).

Mistry's Parsi identity also weaves a tight thread regarding displaced existence. Parsis were a group who migrated to India from Iran between the eighth and tenth centuries of CE unable to suffer the cruelties of the Muslim Arab invaders. The pain of displacement runs deep in the blood of each Parsi and no different is Mistry. There is no wonder the pain gets reflected when Mistry presents his characters. "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) But home is no more home for the Chamaar caste and neither is any other place. Turning the pages we can see that nothing is as difficult as one's native place. The village from where the Chamaars came is an area of caste discrimination. Mistry says, "the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere" (*A Fine Balance* 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) The plight can easily be connected with a Parsi consciousness. Every Parsi can understand the pain of 'placelessness' in one's own place and a total displacement in another's place. Mistry also tries to portray religion based questions in India especially with regard to the partition and the challenge of Bangladesh.

History documents that the whole of Pakistan was formed on the demand of a land of religious unity. The very term, Pakistan, is a Persian derivation wherein *pak* means pure and *stan*, country or land. But on its formation a homogenous religious identity failed to work and we see the conflict between East Pakistan and West Pakistan and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh. Though East and West regions had a religious homogeneity, for which they initially demanded freedom, the same ideology abandoned them sooner or later. There is an indirect questioning of this in Mistry's selection of the respective contexts. Mistry, a member of a religious minority, also portrays the emptiness of religious fanaticism. In *A Fine Balance* the author grooms up a family feeling between the Chamaars and a Parsi widow irrespective of religious differences. There was a time when the Parsis, in their land, had to bow down to Muslims for having a different religious orientation. Mistry, a man of such lineage could easily associate the pain in the Hindu-Muslim conflict that grappled (is grappling) India for centuries. This particular consciousness had worked in his selection of the context of East- West Pak conflict in *Such a Long Journey*.

Such a Long Journey also reflects the pain that the writer's community once had to endure. Mistry fictionalises the historical Nagarwala case in the novel trying to reconstruct a (his) story that would suit his community. Nagarwala, the Parsi secretary to Indira Gandhi, was accused of amassing a huge amount, was caught and died in custody. In Mistry's novel, the Nagarwala substitute, Jimmy Bilimoria is portrayed as a scapegoat. In Bilimoria's words: "it is beyond the common man's imagination, the things being done by those in power" (280). The character voices author's concern over a matter that has once painted his community black.

While the historicity of the fiction of Mistry is revealed, it is also on the affirmative that the fiction has participated in making the history of its time. 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). Mistry, being a Parsi writer, has been engaged in an expository effort to project the process of subjugation in society. But on publication of Mistry's texts they themselves have fallen victims of the very process of subjugation. This is well recorded in the wide ranged protests on 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 had 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.

Textuality of History: Co-textualising Indian History

In new historicism attempts queue up to know how the past has formed the present and how the present has reshaped the past. Renaissance critics like Louis Montrose have tried to show how life creates literature and literature in turn affects lives. In *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* it is detailed:

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)

History is treated in a similar way in the the text of Rohinton Mistry. Rohinton Mistry tries to 'write and right' 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* and also

in *Such a Long Journey*. 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). In *Such a Long Journey* Mistry tries to ‘right’ the Nagarwala case written in 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.

Historical texts on India also have stories of their own especially on turbulent times. 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*, “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 get 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 at exposure in his text. Mistry tries to write a history to echo the unheard notes 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 that has taken stands from Michel Foucault. There are a lot of possibilities when the freedom associated with new historicism is applied to the writer’s text. Thus Mistry and History make a play of reading under the aegis of the theory of new historicism.

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