

EXAMINING THE COMMUNAL CONFLICT IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S NOVELS *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY* AND *FAMILY MATTERS*

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At the time of independence our countrymen aspired to create for their children a nation which was not “broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.” But, as a nation we have miserably failed to achieve this objective. There is no dearth of incidents of religious intolerance and communal discord, the latest being the communal clash over construction on a disputed site in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Television promos and advertisements are broadcasted to preach the significance of harmony and cooperation among people of different ethnic groups; the most recent being the promo of KBC 8 in which a Hindu boy calls his elderly Muslim neighbour to ask the answer of a question: What does *As-salamu alaykum* mean? The Muslim neighbour tells the correct answer despite the differences between the two families. The barriers are broken, and love and humanity triumph. Will such advertisements be able to bring about a change in the mindsets of people or will they be dismissed as didactic and clichéd? This can't be said. Nevertheless, they are a good initiative. But, the question here is that why should we be taught the importance of the values of tolerance and friendship, should it not come naturally to us; why do we fail to live harmoniously as one nation? How, have we failed to keep in check, our differences especially the communal ones and allowed them to sprout and create discord? Why is it that the ‘narrow domestic walls’ have still not been broken?

Seeds of suspicion were sown in the minds of the people during the colonial rule. This resulted in animosity between various religious groups. The communal conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims resulted in the Partition of India in 1947. India chose to remain secular and adopted no official religion. Equal liberty and rights have been given to people of all religious groups by us, and we have strongly condemned religious fanaticism. Despite our constitutional commitment to secularism, fundamentalist organisations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Bajrang Dal, and

Vishwa Hindu Parishad have emerged and encouraged exclusivist ideologies. The members of these organisations have orchestrated attacks on churches and mosques, and triggered violent riots causing large scale destruction of life and property. Be it the post-Independence riots of 1948 or the Ahmedabad riots of 1969 or the 1984 anti-Sikh riots or the 1992 riots following the demolition of Babri Masjid or the recent riots in Muzzafarnagar-these acts of terror and violence are not the outcome of hatred or malice harboured by people of one community towards people of any other community. Rather, they are the result of the political strategising by those in power. The riots are perpetrated by politicians who can easily mobilize the masses, arrange weapons and money, and manipulate the police. People are forced to participate in these communal clashes because they depend on these politicians for almost all resources. Ward Berenschot in his article in Economic and Political Weekly describes the phenomenon as 'patronage networks.' He writes that 'these patronage networks are exchange networks: through these channels political elites mobilize (electoral) support, but also campaign budgets, while compensating their supports by providing them access to state resources such as jobs, public services or business contracts.'

We sacrificed Mahatma Gandhi to the fundamentalist attitude; we are sacrificing the lives of so many innocent people every time there is an outbreak of violence. Because of these sectarian and fanatic attitudes, social peace and secular consciousness are becoming more and more distant with each passing day. Violence fomented by political leaders serves their ends but harms the common man and widens the gulf between various religious communities. Partha Chatterjee is critical of the failure of the state to keep religion and politics separate.

This political corruption and communalist politics forms the background of Rohinton Mistry's novels. Mistry is an Indo-Canadian novelist who was born into the Parsi community of Bombay. His novels describe the lives of Parsis in India. He depicts the rituals, beliefs and customs of the community and their experiences as *the other* in India. He articulately waves the experience of a community with the larger political, religious, and social framework of the nation. The anxieties and alienation of his characters are universal, and not restricted to the members of a particular community. Mistry's characters voice the concerns of their own social group, but of the entire sub-altern population. Mistry's novels hold up the mirror to us and show the fragmented nature of our society. They highlight the threatened state of the individual in such a society.

The present paper attempts to examine Rohinton Mistry's novels *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters* to trace the emergence and rise of communalist politics in India, and its impact on the experiences of the common-man.

Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* revolves around the life of Gustad Noble and his family who live in a Parsi Enclave named 'Khodadad Building' in Bombay. The novel is set against the

Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and the emergence of Shiv Sena- a party that strongly espouses Hindutva and pro-Maratha ideology. The novel also mentions the political events of the 1960s- the death of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, his daughter Indira's coming to power, the Indo-Chinese war and the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri. Amidst this political and social upheaval, Mistry places his protagonist-Gustad Noble and examines his personal, social and professional relationships. The novel examines the impact of the turmoil on the individual while describing the lives of the Parsis living in the walled compound of Khodadad Building. Through the novel, Mistry sheds light on the anxieties of the Parsi community which stems from the fact that they are not a part of the mainstream. By depicting the isolation and concerns of a community on the fringes of the society, the author highlights the condition of the minorities in the Indian society.

In the very beginning of the novel, we find the mention of the Indo-China War of 1962. Gustad recalls the year as he looks at on the black paper he had taped on over the window panes and the glass panes of the ventilators. He remembers the year as the one in which his daughter Roshan was born; in this very year he had broken his hip in order to save his son Sohrab from an accident. People had made donations of all kinds to pledge support to the nation during the war. While the war was going on, people had to cover their doors and windows as blackout was imposed during the war. Gustad, like others, did not remove the black-out paper. Due to this, his wife Dilnavaz said, the house remained dark and felt depressing. The paper restricted "the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial." However, in 1965 during the war with Pakistan, the blackout was declared again and people were forced to spend their nights in darkness. The darkness that persisted in the Noble household is emblematic of the darkness of alienation that the Noble family suffers because of their belonging to a community that is not a part of the mainstream. It also symbolizes the hardships they would have to endure and grow accustomed to in the months to come. It anticipates the dark period in Gustad Noble's life, a period that will change him and make him tear off the black paper to allow divine light to illuminate his life.

The enclave in which the Nobles live is surrounded by a black stone wall that separates it from the city. The tall stone wall represents their isolation and marginalization in a city in which the pro-Maratha attitude was becoming dominant. The names of the streets, institutions and associations were being changed at the behest of Shiv-Sena-a rising regional chauvinistic party. The idea of renaming was aimed at asserting Maratha identity in the state of Maharashtra. Gustad's friend and colleague, Dinshawji, comments on the loss of identity and the sense of displacement and dispossession associated with renaming of streets. He remarks:

"Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared; in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it's on

Lokmanya Tilak Marg. I live at Sleater Road. Soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me!”

Names are associated with one’s identity and changing them implies a change in one’s identity. It disturbs your sense of security and creates a void that is difficult to fill. It can make one feel like a stranger even in the surroundings one is familiar with.

Apart from the campaign for renaming, other fundamentalist activities were being carried out in the city. These activities increased the insecurities and anxieties of the marginalized communities. In this respect, Gustad comments:

“No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense.”

As a result of the rise in sectarian attitudes and ethnic divides, and use of violence to enforce them, the sense of security became very fragile especially among the groups that were in minority. It heightened their alienation from the conventional society. Mistry here critiques the divisive politics of those in power. He encourages us to be more liberal, and more secular in outlook. His vision of a secular society is expressed through the drawings of the pavement artist who believes in promoting religious tolerance through his art in a society divided along religious and linguistic lines. The following conversation between Gustad and the artist brings out the artist’s views on the subject:

Gustad asks him whether he knows enough Gods to cover the entire wall? To this the artist replies:

“There is no difficulty. I can cover three hundred miles if necessary using assorted religions and their Gods, saints and prophets: Hindu, Sikh, Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Jainist. Actually, Hinduism alone can provide enough. But, I always like to mix them up, include a variety in my drawings. Makes me feel I am doing something to promote tolerance and understanding in the world.”

Another conversation between the artist and Gustad, throws light on each individual’s preference for their own deity and the Hindu majoritarianism prevalent in the city.

On looking a religious figure in the wall, Gustad asks the artist about it. The artist tells him that it was the painting of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva-the Trimurti of the Gods of creation, preservation and destruction. He asks Gustad if he wanted any change, to which Gustad replies

in the negative. He feels that though he would have preferred a portrait of Zarathustra to inaugurate the wall, but the 'triad' would be more influential in dissuading the urinators and defecators.

Gustad brings the artist to paint images of Gads and Goddesses on the black stone wall of Khodadad building to prevent people from urinating near the wall. Gustad is correct in thinking that the images of their religious idols will dissuade them from defecating and urinating near the wall. Here, the power of religion is highlighted. Religious concerns, and not humanitarian ones, have the power to dissuade them from making the place dirty.

As the stink and the mosquitoes vanish, instead of commending him for the initiative the residents of the Khodadad building rather grumble about the fact that 'why should all perijaat gods be on a Parsi Zarathosti building's wall.' This reflects the strong allegiance people have towards their religion.

The author highlights the power of religion to divide; and he also presents the power of religion to sustain and to heal. When Gustad's daughter, Roshan falls ill and medical help is not able to help much, his college friend suggests that he visit Mount Mary's Church. He learns that the church "had a tradition of welcoming Parsis, Muslims, and Hindus regardless of caste or creed. Mother Mary helped every one, she made no religious distinctions"

Such ideas offer hope, they suggest that religion is about faith and to offer solace to the tortured soul and not a reason to create discord and encourage sectarianism in the society.

The undercurrent of communal politics and sectarianism is stronger in Mistry's third novel Family Matters. The novel revolves around the lives of Nariman Vakeel, his step-children Jal Contractor and Coomy Contractor, his daughter Roxana and her husband Yezaad Chenoy and their children-Muraad and Jehangir. Nariman Vakeel had married Yasmin Contractor, mother of Jal and Coomy at the behest of his parents who were staunch in their religious beliefs and dissuaded him from marrying Lucy, the love of his life. The disastrous events that unfold in the novel are a consequence of this marriage.

The story is set at a time in Mumbai when Shiv-Sena had become an important influence in the political mainstream from being a fringe party advocating Hindutva ideology. The main plot of the novel revolves around the domestic lives of the Vakeels, Carpenters, and Chenoy's but the sub-plot involving the tactics employed by Yezad to instigate his employer Mr. Kapur to run in the next elections so that he can take his place at the shop, as this would increase his salary and he would be able to support his family better, explores the impact of communalism on the experience of the individual.

Yezad is employed by Mr. Kapur, the owner of Bombay Sports Association. Mr. Kapur is a compassionate and liberal man who espouses secular ideology and believes in the idea that his Bombay should epitomize 'the spirit of tolerance, acceptance and generosity.' He presents a wonderful picture of the all-embracing city of Bombay. He gives an example of the people on a train grabbing a hand and lifting a passenger and thus, enables him to board the train. The passenger attempting to board the train trusts complete strangers to help him and they do so without any reluctance. He thoughtfully says:

“Whose hands were they, and whose hands were they grasping? Hindu, Muslim, Dalit, Parsi, Christian? No one knew and no one cared. Fellow passengers, that’s all they were.”

This, to him, was the spirit of the city, unfazed by communal discord and sectarian politics. This sight offered hope for the entire nation in which violence was being waged on religious lines. This glimmer of hope becomes more important considering the time during which the novel is set-approximately three years after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and the communal riots that ensued after its demolition. More than eight hundred people died and several lost their home and property. Even the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai wasn’t spared. Those who perpetrated the riots were unpunished and came to power in 1995 and advocated the cause of Hindu Nationalism. These people also fostered anti-Muslim sentiment. Communal tension was very high during these years. Apart from inciting violence and encouraging religious divide, these people in power were involved in various illegal activities like smuggling and gambling. Corruption and communalism had permeated almost every aspect of national life in the 1990s.

A victim of the post-Babri Masjid massacre was employed by Mr. Kapur. The man named Husain did errands in his shop. Husain’s entire family was butchered during the riots. Husain narrates the gruesome account in the following words:

“Sahab, in those riots the police were behaving like gangsters. In Muslim mohallas they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning, neighbours came out to throw water. And, the police? Firing bullets like target practice. These guardians of the law were murdering everybody! And, my poor wife and children... I couldn’t even recognize them...”

Besides inciting violence, these regional chauvinistic parties also forced or lured ordinary citizens into indulging in communal propaganda and 'violent methods of political persuasion.' This aspect of communal politics is exposed through Vilas Rane, the salesman at Book Mart who also wrote letters at meagre prices for those who couldn’t write them on their own. Yezad tried to convince him to charge more, but he refused saying that if he charge more then less people would come to get their letters written. Then, they might approach the Shiv-Sena Shakhnas where, he

feared that they might get exposed to ‘vicious communal propaganda and violent methods of political persuasion.’

Mr. Kapur, who really loves and appreciates the city, laments the fact that it is being ruined by crooks, and he “cannot stand by and watch the thugs” so he, at one point, decides to contest the municipal elections to protect it. He feels that the essence of the city is being destroyed by the fundamentalists. In order to celebrate the secular spirit of Bombay, he decides to celebrate all festivals and set an example before their neighbourhood.

Later, on being discouraged by his wife, Mr. Kapur decides not to contest the election. This disappoints Yezad who was expecting a promotion and a pay hike. He tries to encourage him to run in the elections because of his love for the city. When Mr. Kapur is not persuaded, a desperate Yezad plots to convince him. However, the plot fails. In the end, the liberal, benign and compassionate Mr. Kapur is murdered by Shiv-Sena Gundas because he refuses to change the name of his shop from Bombay Sporting Association to Mumbai Sporting Association.

The impact of this tragic death, and other disturbing events of his life force Yezad to seek solace in religion. But, he eventually becomes extremely orthodox in his beliefs, and towards the end of the novel, he appears to have turned into a Parsi fundamentalist, who tries to impose his orthodox views on his children.

In his novels, Rohinton Mistry deals with the issues of fundamentalism, bigotry and religious orthodoxy and strongly condemns them by showing the negative impact they have on the life of the individual. He traces the growth of communal politics by depicting the emergence of Shiv-Sena and their campaign of renaming the streets in the 1970s in Such a Long Journey and showing the culmination of this campaign in Family Matters when the Shiv-Sena has come to power and Bombay has been renamed Mumbai. Mistry not only critiques the fragmented societies that have evolved but also the failure of the state to prevent it. Through characters like the pavement artist and Mr. Kapur he shows a faint glimmer of hope... hope of living in a nation which is not broken up into ‘narrow domestic walls.’ However, by depicting the wall’s demolition and Vikram Kapur’s death, he says that ‘there are miles to go before we sleep.’

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