



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

M. SEENI SULTAN IBRAHIM

Asst. Professor of English,
Syed Hameedha Arts and Science College,
Kilakarai. Ramanad District,
(TN) INDIA

DR. T. S. GEETHA

Associate Prof. of English
J. K. K. Natraja College of Arts
Komarapalayam.
(TN) INDIA

ABSTRACT

At the time of independence our country people want to create for their next generation a nation which was not "fragmented walls of secularism". But, as a nation we have miserably failed to do this objective. There is number of incidents of religious intolerance and communal hatred. This paper attempts to examine Rohinton Mistry's novels Such a Long Journey and Family Matters to find the fact of emergence and rise of communal and hatred politics in India, and its impact on the experiences of the common-man.

INTRODUCTION

At the time of independence our country people want to create for their next generation a nation which was not "fragmented walls of secularism". But, as a nation we have miserably failed to do this objective. There is number of incidents of religious intolerance and communal hatred, the latest communal clash about construction on a disputed site in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Social media, Television programs and adds are broadcasted to teach the importance of harmony and cooperation among people of various ethnic groups and

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religion. A recent incident that a group of pilgrims went to Sabarimala as pilgrimage but unfortunately the van which carries the passengers was collided to another lorry and they were wounded and hospitalized by local Muslims who were ready to go for their prayer to mosque. This is the time of Hindu pilgrims go to some other religious plays to perform their prayers and vows. On the way, most of the Muslim friends extend their help by giving waters and shelter at mosque. In recently Kaja cyclone in Tamilnadu most of the people from various religion stationed at temples, churches and mosques. The problem of religious barriers is broken, and love and humanity to be practiced. But, the question here is that why should we be preached the importance of the values of tolerance and friendship, should it not come out automatically to us; why do we fail to be harmoniously as peacefully as one nation? Why, have we failed to keep in curb, our differences especially the communal ones and allowed them to spread and create conflict? Why is it that the 'narrow and ignorant domestic walls' have still not been demolished?

Seeds of suspicion and hatred were sown in the hearts of the millions of the people during the colonial rule. This resulted in animosity and atrocity among various religious groups. The communal disharmony between the Hindus and the Muslims resulted in the Partition of India in 1947. India chose to remain secular and adopted no official religion. Equality liberty and all rights have been practiced to the people of all religious groups irrespective of caste and creed by us, and we have strongly condemned religious fanaticism. Despite our constitutional commitment to secularism, fundamentalist organizations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (which is banned more than one time in India) Bajrang Dal, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad have induced and encouraged hate policy and particular ideologies. The members of these movements have planned assaults on churches and mosques, even temples to turned the problem against as which is done by Muslims and other minority communities and created violent causing mass destruction of life and devastation of property. In the post-Independence riots of 1948 or the Ahmedabad riots of 1969 or the 1984 anti-Sikh riots or the 1992 riots continuing the demolition of Babri Masjid or the recent riots in Muzzafarnagar and cow vigilantes lynched two innocent Muslims and hanged them in a tree. These acts of terror and violence are not the outcome of hatred or malice practiced by people of one community towards people of any other community. Rather, they are the result of the political strategies by those are in political power. The riots are perpetrated by second rate politicians who can easily gather the masses, arrange lethal weapons and circulate money among them and manipulate the police. There is a best example of manipulation of police is the Gujrat carnage. Number of criminals are fear to get punishment in that case. In these sort of malcontent incidents is detected by higher police officer Hemant Karkare but who was shot dead by the goondas and the true perpetrators are hidden in the loop holes of the Indian constitution. People are forced to indulge in these communal clashes because they depend on these politicians for almost all sources. 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 and such kind of Perpetrator Nathuram Godsa done his duty as a fanatic by the conspiracy of the RSS workers. After the assassination of Father of the Nation number of innocent Muslims and Hindus were killed and mayhem spread all over the India. Still we are sacrificing the lives of so many innocent people every time, because of these kind of fanatics, there is an outbreak of violence. Because of these sectarian and fanatic attitudes, social and secular consciousness are becoming more and more question with each passing day. Violence aggravated by political leaders serves their ends but harms the common man and widens the bridge between various religious communities. Partha Chatterjee is critical of the failure of the state to keep religion and politics separate. This political exploitation and communal 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 portray the lives of Parsis in India. He depicts the rituals, cultures, beliefs and customs of the community and their experiences as the alien in India. He sternly expresses the experience of a community with the larger political, religious, and social background of the nation. The tension and alienation of his characters are universal, and not restricted to the members of a particular community. Mistry’s characters rise the voice the concerns of their own social group, but of the entire subaltern population. Mistry’s novels Reflect to us and show the fragmented nature of our society. They highlight the threatened state of the individual in such kind of society.

This paper attempts to examine Rohinton Mistry’s novels *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters* to find the fact of emergence and rise of communal and hatred 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 building 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 Former Prime minister Indira’s coming to power, the Indo-Chinese war and the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri. Amidst this political and social problem, Mistry places his protagonist-Gustad Noble and examines his personal, social and professional relationships. The novel examines the effect of the turmoil torment on the individual while discloses the lives of the Parsis living in the walled building of Khodadad Building. Through the novel, Mistry focuses light on the anxieties of the Parsi community which stems from the fact that they are a not a part of the mainstream the country India. By depicting the alienation 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 remembers the year as he looks at on the black paper he had taped on over the window and the glass panes of the ventilators. He recalls the year as the one in which his daughter Roshan was born; in this year he had broken his hip in order to save his son Sohrab from an accident. People had made contribution of all kinds to pledge and extend support to the nation during the war. While the war was going on, people had to cover their doors and windows as power cut 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 site 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. Whereas recently a few names of the streets in Delhi and railway station and other important places names also changed by RSS supported Government in Uttara Prathase. The idea of renaming was aimed to enforce 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 express 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 visitor even in the surroundings one is familiar with him.

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

"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 religious divisions, 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 cacophonous politics of those in power. He encourages us to be more liberal, social and more secular in outlook. His outlook of a secular and democratic society is expressed through the drawings of the pavement artist who believes in inculcating religious tolerance through his art in a society divided along religious, ethnic and linguistic lines. The following dialogue between Gustad and the painter brings out the artist's views:

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 Protagonist Gustad, throws light on each individual's preference for their own God and the Hindu majoritarianism predominant in the city. On seeing 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 picturize of Zarathustra to inaugurate the wall, but the 'triad' would be more helpful in dissuading the nature callers. Gustad brings the artist to paint images of Gods and Goddesses on the black stone wall of Khodadad building to restrict people from urinating near the wall. Gustad is



correct in thinking that the picture of their religious idols will stop them gradually from defecating and urinating near the wall. Now, the power of religion is highlighted. Religious concerns, and not humanitarian ones, have the power to dissuade them from making the place dirty. According to my point of view that somebody may urinate or to make the holy places irrespective by throwing carcasses of pig to lit the fire of religious beliefs. As the stink smell 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 faith 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 aids is not able to help much, his class mate 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 differences” Such ideas offer hope, they aptly say that religion is about faith and to offer solace, tranquility to the tortured and worried soul and not a reason to create discord and encourage sectarianism in the mainstream of the society.

The nuance of communal politics, sectarianism and dividing policy is stronger in Mistry’s novel *Family Matters*. The novel revolves around the lives of Nariman Vakeel, his step-children Jal Contractor, 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 order of his parents who were strong in their religious beliefs and deviate 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 propaganda of Hindutva ideology. The main plot of the novel revolves around the domestic lives of the Vakeels, Carpenters, and Chenoy 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 an employee in Mr. Kaptur’s Sports Association, Mr. Kaptur is the owner of Bombay Sports Association. Mr. Kapur is a passionate and liberal man who supports secular ideology and believes in the idea that his Bombay should emerge ‘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 extending 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 hesitation. He thought provokingly 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.”

According to him, this was the spirit of the city, unfazed by communal conflict and sectarian politics. This sight offered an idea for the entire nation in which violence was being waged on religious lines. This lighting of hope becomes more important 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. Markandey Katju, Former Chief Justice, twittered:

“The demolition of Babri Masjid was a greatest tragedy of India after Partition. The perpetrator must be punished; whatever time it takes”.

After the demolition more than eight hundred people died and several lost their home and property. Even the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai wasn’t out of danger. The conspirators of the riots were unpunished and came to power in 1995 and advocated the cause of Hindu Nationalism. These people also spread and preach 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, exploiting and gambling. Corruption and communalism had infused 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 massacred during the riots. It is a sort of genocide and to threat the minority community psychological. 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 allured 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 say that if ha charge more, then less people would come to get their letters written. Then, they might approach the Shiv-Sena members 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, nominates to contest the municipal elections to protect it. He feels that the essence of the city is being destroyed by the religious fundamentalists. In order to celebrate the secular spirit of Bombay, he decides to celebrate all festivals, carnivals and set an example before their neighbors and human beings. Later, on being refusal of his wife, Mr. Kapur decides not to contest the election. This disappoints Yezad who was expecting a promotion and a huge salary. He tries to persuade 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 and compassionate Mr. Kapur is murdered by Shiv-Sena fanatics 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 peace in religion. But, he finally becomes extremely pious 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 and traditional views on his children.

In his novels, Rohinton Mistry deals with the issues of fundamentalism, bigotry and religious orthodoxy and strongly condemns them by revealing the negative impact they have on the life of the individual. He traces the growth of communal politics by depicting the emergence of ShivSena and their campaign of renaming the streets in the 1970s in *Such a Long Journey* and showing the result of this campaign in *Family Matters* when the Shiv-Sena has come to political power and Bombay has been renamed Mumbai. Mistry not only critiques the sectarian societies that have evolved but also the failure of the state to secure 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, demolition of Babri Masjid and Kapur’s death, he says that ‘there is education as a passport to travel political power.’



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