MULTICULTURALISM AND MISTRY’S SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to show Rohinton Mistry’s vision of multicultural society and place of minorities in it. This paper shows how well the minority communities have integrated in Indian as well as Canadian society without losing their cultural and religious identity. My wish is to highlight the ethnic discrimination, explicit or covert, experienced by minority community in multicultural society.

KEYWORDS: Communities, Discrimination, Explicit, Integrated, Minority.

INTRODUCTION

While getting through Rohinton Mistry’s Such A Long Journey we are inevitably faced with the question can this novel be classified as a work having multiculturalism values? What confounds this vexed question is the puzzling remark in the blurb of the novel that Such A Long Journey (1991) is a brilliant first novel by one of the most remarkable writer to have emerged from the Indian tradition in many years. So, does it belong to the Canadian literary tradition or to the Indian one, can it be belong to both the tradition at the same time. Such a question has become increasingly urgent and persistent in the face of the fact that “national literature is not only increasingly seen as a product of the nation coming in to being, but it is also seen as playing a decisive role in the formation of the nation” (Smith: 20).

Underlying this notion of national literature being a product of nation are the specific issues of identity construction in the larger discourse of nation formation and space assigned to racial/ethnic minorities in it. In asking such a question one presumes that there are a host of
factors which coalesce to give to multiculturalism. Describing the ambivalence oh nation Homi Bhabha says:

The locality of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridism, incorporating new ‘people’ in relation to the body politic, generating other sides of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation. (127)

Canada has always been multicultural, at least, bicultural society because of the presence of both the English and the French settlers. Even in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the Anglo–Celtics who dominated both economically and politically had to contend with the French speaking people in Quebec. It is a matter of historical record that in the nineteenth century Canada, the mainstream Anglo-Celtic Canadians tried to suppress the French-speaking Quebeckers by denigrating them and describing them as the racial other, but met with stiff resistant they had to settle for a bicultural and bilingual society. So Canada has always been characterised by what Sutherland calls “two nation in one state” (76) or what McLennan calls “Two Solitude” (26).

The twentieth century saw new waves of immigrants from almost every parts of the world including India. Stranded between the French and the English mainstreams of Canada, Indian immigrant writers have experienced difficulties in making their voices hard. While the mainstream continues to pay lip service to the notion of multiculturalism, in actual practice it continues to ignore the immigrant voices. One the one hand, it is claim that Canada is multiculturalism mosaic and that immigrant literature has come of age, on the other writers of outstanding merit such as M.G.Vassangi, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Arnold Harichant Itwaru Arun Prabha Mukherjee, John Ramsaran etc. are not worthy to be included in the celebrated white anthologies or even to be mentioned in any history of Canadian literature written or complied by the white authors.

The marginalization of immigrant writers fails to deter them from writing their versions of Canada. From their position on the margin they create narratives which challenge the static borders of national and cultural identities by disrupting the dominant discourse of the nation. These narratives seek to extend the boundaries of the nation, neither by assimilation in to the dominant narratives nor by its simple subversion, but by hybridizing the discourse through the process of creative dialectic tension.

Living in a multicultural society and being characterised by an ethnic identity, the Indian community in Canada has been invariably required to negotiate the problem of ethnicity. They have been engage in active economic and cultural competitions. They have experienced ethnic discrimination either explicit or covert. Having a unique social-cultural history, the Indian community in Canada has evolved as distinct Diasporic identity. ‘Home’ for them becomes a mental construct symbolizing their distinct socio-cultural identity in an unsullied and distilled form. Safran has observed that it is a general characteristic of Diasporas that “they continued to relate, persona or vicariously, to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal
consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (18). Thus the Diaspora Indians do not serve their relationship with their ancestral land. And naturally the writer in his role as a preserver of the collective tradition, a folk historian and mythmaker, recreates this sense of community in his writings by invoking the past and history. Mistry is one such writer who invariably goes back to India in his writings, to the Parsi community to which he belongs. But this going back to his past is characterised by neither nostalgia nor bitterness as it happens in the case of the most of the writers of Indian Diaspora. He seems to have a matter of fact attitude in his portrayal of Parsi community in India. He does it with compassion and warmth but there is also sense of gentle irony. If there is sense of frustration at social injustice, corruption and numerous problems India faces, then there is sense of celebration and joy for the essential nobility and virtues of human life. In fact, invoking the past becomes a positive attribute with him as it become the strategy of cop with the present by resisting assimilation into the mainstream Anglo-section culture. By asserting and maintaining a distinct cultural identity he presents a better vision of the future by strengthening the multicultural fabric. From his position from the margin, Mistry presents alternative worldview which not only interrogates and challenges the hegemony of the Eurocentric discourse and worldview but also leads to a better appreciation and understanding Canada’s multicultural fabric. Sutherland points that ethnic writers distil their experience of Canada through a variety of rich cultural distillation that will become the distinct characteristics of Canadian literature.

Canada is paradoxically presented by its absence in Mistry’ Such A Long Journey. One cannot help but read this novel as an allegory of multiculturalism. It presents Mistry’ vision of multicultural society and place of minority in it. Set in Bombay in 1971 against the backdrop of Indo-Pakistan war and birth of Bangladesh as a nation, SUCH A LONG JOURNEY deals with the life of Parsi community in India. On the one hand, this novel opens up a new world for the readers in Canada_ the life and ways of Parsi community_ and thus helps them in developing a better understanding and appreciation in their culture. On the other hand it also presents to us a model of multiculturalism in its delineation of this minority community in India and how well they have integrated into Indian society without losing their cultural and religious identity. This can, Mistry proposes, act as a model of Canadian society and will go a long way in strengthening the fabric of multiculturalism in Canada.

The novel focuses on the lives of Gustad Noble and his family, residing in Khodadad building together with Parsi families in Canada in Colaba and how the Indo-Pak war impinges on their lives. Parsis are a closed and insular community, strictly regulating and preserving their cultural and religious identity by not allowing any intermingling with other communities at the familial, kinship and religious level. Having been driven away from Persia around eight century A.D., they have been living in India for 1300 years. Though declining in numbers, this minority community has maintained and preserved their separate identity and they have also contributed significantly to the public life as architects, industrialists, merchants, bankers, and statesman.

In its loving evocation of the details of the cultural milieu the novel manifests specificity and rootedness which are rare to be found in immigrant writings. It beautifully and faithfully renders the life of the minority Parsi community, its religious belief, rituals, social norms, modes of dress, food habits, linguistic habit and idioms. But amidst all these particularities which show their distinctiveness from other people, there is also emphasis on the universals of human
experience. There is tension between universal and particular. Even readers in Canada can easily identify themselves with these characters in spite of different socio-cultural space that they inhabit; they can find in them many similarities to their own situation. If these characters appear different outwardly in their religious beliefs, social norms and linguistic habits, inwardly there beats the same heart in all of them, betraying the same range of emotions and feelings – love, joy, happiness, anger, frustration, helplessness, anxieties universal in particular becomes Mistry’s ways of showing unity in diversity and thus presenting a paradigm of a stable multicultural society.

The Khodadad building with its Parsi residents comes to stand for the Parsi community. And the six feet high compound wall running around it becomes the symbol of insularity, protecting and sheltering it from the eyes of majority community, and thus rendering that space sacred where they can practice their faith unhindered. If this wall becomes the symbol of insularity, it also becomes the target of the attack of majority community which shows its contempt by pissing against the wall. Safe within this sacred space, they occasionally betray their anxieties and fear and insecurities as member of minority community, although they have done better than other communities including the majority Hindu community.

What kind of life was going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America twice as good as white man to get half as much. How could he make Sohrab understanding this? (Mistry 55).

The compound wall of Khodadad building, a symbol of the insularity of the Parsy community, is soon transformed into a multi-religious shrine, a mosaic of different religions and cultures, as a pavement artist draws pictures of deities of different religions and renders stories from epics of different religions on this wall. People of all faith and religion come to worship and pay their obeisance. This wall becomes a multicultural and multi-religious space where different cultures and religions exist in harmony. In the end the wall is brought down by the municipal corporation in the name of the widening the road but this does not happen without stiff resistance of the people who spontaneously rise up to save the wall. What the novelist seems to be suggesting here is that the multi-cultural fabric of the society to be preserved, sustained and strengthened only with the will and commitment of the people, not just through some official policy.

If the novel portrays the Parsi community in India on the large canvas with broad brushstrokes, then it draws the miniature paintings of individuals with fine brush strokes. At the Individual level, the novel tells the story of Gustad Noble, a bank clerk and the peculiar way in which the Indo-Pak war of 1971 makes an impact on his life as well as that of his family. It becomes the story of common man living and surviving in hard time. Now Gustad lives in straightened circumstances in the Khodadad building with his family. Gustad has dreams and aspirations which, though quite modest and ordinary, prove difficult. He finds it quite baffling that things do not happen the way he wants happen to. He dreams slowly crumble and his hopes die a slow death as he has one frustrating experience after the other.
Life for him seems to be an endless series of trial and tribulations. First, he feels betrayed by his long time friend, Major Jimmy Bilimoria, who suddenly decides to leave the Khodadad building without even bothering to inform him. Then his eldest son refused to enrol in IIT and it leads to quarrels and fights at home, and finally Sohrab leaves the home in huff. Then he is worried about his ten years old daughter Roshan. On the top of that, for the sake of friendship he gets drawn into a cloak and dagger operation of helping the Mukti Bahini on the request of Major Bilimoria. And then comes the illness and death of his friend Dinshawji. His problem seems to be endless. Mistry writes:

He returns to his desk, kneading his forehead. It was becoming too much to bear, Roshan’s sickness, Dilnavaz blaming him for potassium permanganate, Jimmy’s treachery, Dinshawji’s stupidity, Laurie’s complaint, Sohrab’s betrayal, nothing but worry and sorrow and disappointment piling up around him, walling him in, threatening to crush him. He moved his massaging hand from the forehead to his nape and closed his eyes (177).

What redeem his character in our eyes in his manner of facing his problems? There experiences fail to break him. Though angry and frustrated at time, he does not give into any prolonged bout of despair or cynicism. As his name suggests, he maintain the essential nobility of his character all through. He endures his trials with dignity, courage and equanimity without losing faith in humanity the novel is, in fact the story of his education that man does not always control his destiny, that there are focus behind his control and larger than he is and of his learning to come to term with it.

The ordinariness of his life makes gustad the symbol of everyman just as the khodadad building is the symbol of Parsi community. If on the one hand, gustad as an individual become every man in his aspirations and anguish, on the other he has a member of his community shows his independent cultural and religious identity. Though the character of Gustad, Mistry shows that in spite of the cultural and religious differences, there is a lot which people have in common with each other as human being and it is this commonness which unites people despite the differences. And this is Mistry’s way of offering a paradigm of multiculturalism for Canada, though Canada does not figure in the novel.

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