



Moral Dilemma, Deception, Reality and Redemption: An Explorative Study of Select Novels of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract: Rohinton Mistry's fictional works intricately weave a tapestry exploring the complexities of lies, facades of appearances and a frenetic pursuit of truth in tumultuous milieu of post-independent India. Like proverbial Plato's simile, the characters' judgments remain clouded accentuated by their prejudices, myopic vision and narrow interests. Their real identity gets unravelled by a propitious train of events or by an epiphany rediscovering the true nature of the characters only towards the denouement. The end of the narrative also brings, in its wake, the much awaited reconciliation underscoring the significance of timeless family values and love. The present research article is an attempt to explore the subtle interplay of deception, shadows and truth in the select works of Rohinton Mistry. The paper also intends to investigate the characters' struggles with their inimical fortune and how they strive to atone for their past actions aiming towards ultimate redemption.

Keywords: Plato's simile, ethnic atrophy, shadowy apparition, purgation, redemption.

Born in a Parsi family in Bombay in 1952, Rohinton Mistry graduated in Mathematics from the Bombay University. He along with his wife emigrated to Canada in 1975 and settled in Toronto where he worked in a bank. While pursuing his part-time courses in English and Philosophy, Mistry developed a passion for fiction writing which continues unabated even now. His collections of short stories and novels have earned him international acclaim and many prestigious awards. Some of his accolades include Commonwealth Writers' prize, Giller Award, The Los Angeles Times award and the Governor General's award. Hailing from a Parsi background, Mistry is fully conscious of his community's ethnocentric outlook and idiosyncrasies. He is also an astute observer of Parsis' predicament, insecurities and social anxieties which they confront in Post-colonial India.

The vignettes of Parsi's life we witness in his works inform his broader perspective on life per se. Hemlatha attributes Parsi community's dwindling numbers or 'ethnic atrophy' to their "single-minded pursuit of prosperity, extreme individualism, craze for urbanization, late marriages, low birth rates" (19).

The fictional personas invented by Mistry are often enveloped with mystical haze whose true nature is revealed only as the narrative trudges along. *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry's first novel, recounts the life of Gustad Noble, a conscientious and devout Parsi who woefully gets entangled in political intrigues of the time. The narrative is set in late 1960s and early 1970s when country was reeling under financial straits and Second Indo-Pak War was rapping at the door. Memories of Indo-Sino war and its horrors were still fresh in the minds of people. The blackout papers on windows blocking out sun rays from entering Gustad's house is reminiscent of traumatic times when Chinese bombers entered Indian territory and India was grappling with issues not only political but also socio-economic. The food shortage marred the nation and rationing was the order of the day. The political air was also thick with intrigues, stratagems with threat of another war hanging over already battered nation.

The novel also traces the political upheavals ensuing Nehru's death and scramble for power among congress leaders for supremacy. Rise of Indira and her tactful manoeuvrings, Sanjay Gandhi and Bangladesh liberation war are intertwined in the narrative and supply complexity to the story. In the wake of political slugfest between East and West Pakistan and subsequent entry of Indian troops to help their Bengali brothers set the political background of the narrative. The poignant narrative is also characterised by the individual struggles of the characters to "preserve the things of the past as a bulwark against inevitable immutability" (Morey 77). Gustad's stubborn tenacity at keeping the outside turbulence from entering his family illustrates a common householder's desperation of safeguarding his family during troubled times. He strives to "restrict the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial". But despite Gustad's all-out efforts, outside world infringes on his private space and brings in its trail, lawlessness and destruction. The tranquility and peace of Khodabad Enclave is jeopardised not only by Bilimoria's political manoeuvrings but also by the government's ambitious plan of demolishing the boundary wall in order to widen up the road. The Khodabad Enclave is inhabited by the residents of Parsi community wherein they all with their idiosyncratic behaviours and distinct cuisine, dresses and other cultural trappings lay protected from outside world.

Major part of the novel *Such a Long Journey* is dedicated to Major Bilimoria who propels the plot forward though his whereabouts and loyalties remain elusive. His first impression is that of a treacherous friend who disappears overnight and covers all his trails. Contrary to readers' expectations, he resurfaces not as a saviour or messiah but apparently as a manipulative, unprincipled and a dubious man. Much of Gustad's trials and tribulations could be attributed to him. But towards the end the apparent 'perpetrator' turns out to be a veritable sacrificial goat, victim of a grand political conspiracy. The ambiguity about Bilimoria's character remains unresolved as readers struggle to seek the truth till the very end. Contemplating about the complexity of Bilimoria's character Morey writes, "At one point Jimmy poses alongside a projection of the crime-fighting superhero, the shadow to entertain Gustad's children, but is later described on his deathbed as nothing more than a shadow. The shadow of the powerfully-built army man who once lived in Khodabad Building" (83).

The tapestry of shadows, appearances and reality continues when other characters also get entangled within its diabolic design. Miss Kutpitia, an inmate in Khodabad building initially comes across as apparently callous and emotionally detached person but as the plot progresses and novelist gradually unravels her character, we begin admiring her nature and especially her undying love towards dead nephew 'Farad'. Though Farad died about 35 years ago in a tragic car accident, she did not dispose off his clothes. The readers can still find her deeply engrossed conversing with the shadowy apparition of Farad. This warm, loving and compassionate side of Ms. Kutpitia does not seem to reconcile with the dry, austere and eccentric delineation of her character in the beginning of novel. Her resilience, compassion and sense of dignity even in the face of adversity embolden Gustad and help him tide over the crisis. She is adept at concealing her trail of sorrow, personal loss and regrets behind a tranquil and serene visage. Mistry does not attempt to explore her tragic past at length and only drops hints about her infelicitous past. Despite all her foibles, she stands out as a beacon of hope, benevolence and solidarity. In a world fraught with political intrigues, turmoil and subterfuge, Ms Kutpitia comes across as a guiding light symbolising enduring love, kindness and empathy. Fire, symbol of purity, energy and truth is also emblematic of purgation and restoration of life. In Plato's simile, fire in the cave implies reflection of truth deriving its energy and power from the Sun. The cataclysmic incident of fire which engulfs Ms Kutpitia's flat and burns down her belongings including Farad's clothes-all things which Ms. Kutpitia held dear, brings about a purging effect in her life. After the fateful accident, her life returns back to normal as if purified by the 'ordeal by fire'.

Apart from portraying political landscape of the time, fraught with deceit and corruption, there is also an interplay of shadow, reality and appearance analogous to Platonic proverbial simile. Plato in his magnum opus 'The Republic' dwells at length on the concept of form and appearance. Through the illustration of cavemen chained and removed from the outside reality Plato unravels different layers of truths, each successively and incrementally closer to the ultimate reality. The men lodged and incarcerated inside the cave since birth view shadows of objects as true forms and base their entire notion of life upon their movements and silhouettes. Readers of *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters* also traverse the same treacherous path vacillating between reality and appearances. Discussing about the nature of shadows and reality, Morey writes, "Throughout the book, the lure of the illusion, of what one wishes to believe, is stronger than that of reality" (84).

Major Bilimoria, though divested of any active agency in the plot, propels the story forward. His stature and complexity of his character keeps changing as the plot unfolds. In the beginning of the novel he is introduced as a close friend of Gustad who left the city without any prior intimation. His spectral presence looms over the plot till the time Gustad receives a letter asking him to deposit money into some bank account. Whether it is his friend Bilimoria or some other imposter, readers have no clue about it. Towards the denouement Gustad gets a chance to meet Major Bilimoria in person where he confides how was being used as a scapegoat by the erstwhile ruling dispensation for political gains. If Major Bilimoria was really a sacrificial goat or he just fabricates a plausible story to vindicate himself in the eyes of Gustad, the readers have no idea. Even after we finish the novel, our impression about Bilimoria remains sketchy. Sometimes we feel that he was a staunch patriot who sacrificed his life in the service of nation without any recognition. But considering the hardships and risks faced by Gustad because of Bilimoria's letters, no amount of justification can absolve Bilimoria of his wrongdoings. Bilimoria

also comes across as a self-centred and self seeking individual who knew how to grease his palms at the cost of others. He not only brought misfortune upon himself but also anathematised the lives of his friends. Till the very end readers are ambivalent whether to treat Bilimoria as a hero or as a traitor who betrayed the sacred bond of friendship and love. The character of Bilimoria is modelled on a real RAW sleuth named Nagarwala, a Parsi officer. In 1971, a State Bank of India cashier purportedly received a call from the then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi directing him to withdraw 6 million rupees and pass it on to someone he would find waiting on the road. The bank official complied with the instructions. Later erstwhile Prime Minister as well her office expressed complete ignorance of such orders. The person who received the sum was identified as Captain Nagarwala who confessed his involvement. It was believed that he was arranging money for funding guerrilla operations in Bangladesh. As per Morey what raised the hackles was “the hasty and highly unorthodox manner in which Captain Nagarwala’s trial was conducted. A few months later he was moved to the hospital complaining of chest pains, where he died in March 1972” (73).

Deliberating upon the incident, Batra writes, “Mistry was critical of the way the Indira Gandhi government sought to malign Mr. Nagarwala. He felt it was an effort to silence the voice of the marginal by an imperial centre. State is seen as replicating the oppressive imperialist structure even though those wielding power have changed” (72). Like the case of Mr. Nagarwala buried in the govt. files and no clarity about his indictment, Mistry portrays Jimmy explicating the political stratagem in a drug induced delusion. Morey writes, “Mistry partly undercuts these shocking allegations by having Jimmy utter them on what turns out to be his deathbed, in disjointed fashion and in a drug-added daze. Yet they do appear to represent more insistent, gnawing malefactions in the body politic as a whole” (74).

The then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the political unrest is also intertwined in the narrative though Mrs. Gandhi does not directly partake in action. Her shadowy presence is perceptible in the political landscape where common citizens lose their free will and are reduced to a mere tool to fulfil the grander political agenda.

Gustad seeks help from his friend and colleague Dinshawji who enriches the plot by his energetic humour and selfless love. His joviality and magnetic presence lends a human dimension to the narrative. Through his character, Mistry dwells on the values of loyalty, enduring love and benevolence. His first impression of being a flirtatious and witty gentleman bears a dent when Mistry further reveals his terminal illness. He wears the image of a Casanova to conceal his anguish and inner pangs. He puts forward his charming and affable facade to hoodwink his friends and colleagues to cover up a deep chasm within. Even Dilnawaz recalls him as a “man who had laughed and sung that night, drunk beer and recited rhymes” (187). She found it difficult to reconcile his previous impression of being a jovial and spirited man with “a shrunken and visibly sick (figure)” (187). His innocuous flirting with new secretary Laurie Cautino and calling her his own ‘little Lorri’ albeit the term connoted the word ‘penis’ in Parsi language reveals his mischievous side. Later, on learning about the sexual undertones implied in ‘lorri’, Laurie abhorred Dinshawji’s crude sense of humour and found it demeaning and vituperative. However, his relentless support to Gustad during his most trying phase without flinching, despite being fully acquainted with the risk involved, is what endows him with endearing and heroic qualities. In spite of grappling

with the personal health issues and inner turmoil, he renders the most timely help to his friend Gustad. He emerges as an embodiment of humanity and true friendship. Though he appears to be frail and weak, his succour to Gustad helping him to tide over his ordeal raises him to an angelic figure.

In his another novel, *Family Matters* Mistry deals with complexities of familial ties woven inextricably with the threads of deception and intrigues. The novel also explores the quest for cultural identities punctuated with family discord and eventually aiming for redemption and peace. The narrative centres around an elderly patriarch, Nariman Vakeel who falls on bad time owing to his hipbone injury. His Parkinson's disease and consequent fall takes a toll on family dynamics and tests the familial relations to their limit. In its wake, the tragic fall also sets off a train of events that expose the superficiality and pretensions of family ties within the household of Prof. Vakeel. In the novel, Mistry conjures up a realistic Indian family and how it deals with an unprecedented situation at home. Coomy and Jal the stepchildren of Nariman and Roxona spar as to who should take care of the ailing father. Virtually all members of the family fail miserably and the masks of compliant and acquiescent children wear off unravelling at seams, ugliness and hypocrisy of human relations.

Family Matters also illustrates how outside commotion and corruption can impinge upon the personal spheres and smear the taint of stratagems and intrigues on India's most forward looking and westernised community. The title of the novel operates at two different levels- on one underscoring the significance of our families in our life, and on other level it connotes the unresolved and complex 'matters' which lie at the very heart of the narrative. It is also indicative of the complexities and alienation which result when family matters are not dealt with in a befitting manner. Sometimes overprotection and overmuch parental control citing prejudicial injunction against inter-religious marriages can have very damaging effect on an individual's life. The unfulfilled love between Nariman and Lucy Braganza kept haunting Prof. Nariman throughout his life.

The filial concern of Coomey and Jal fades away when their step father suffers a fatal injury and Coomey, in order to shirk the responsibility of taking care of the bedridden father, contrives a fool proof plan. Morey considers osteoporosis and Parkinson's disease of Nariman and partial deafness of Jal as some glaring examples of bodily corruption in the novel among numerous instances of external corruption eating into 1990s India (129). Not only Coomy conceives a devious plan to get rid of Prof. Vakeel, the other seemingly ingenuous and upright characters like Yezad and his son Jehangir fail to resist the temptations of easy money. Although the motives behind these aberrant behaviours are noble yet deceits and manipulations at household level bespeak the pervasive nature of moral degeneration and corruption of the time.

The both novels under study serve as Mistry's exposition of his idea of redemption. Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* has cathartic effect at the very core of the plot. The accidental fire, which acts as the purgation of melancholy and gloom from Ms. Kutpitia's life, aids in the reclamation of her life. Fire here, as a symbol of purity and rejuvenation plays a crucial role in the redemption of Ms. Kutpitia. Another instance of catharsis occurs in the novel towards its climactic scene where Tehmul's death brings about much awaited reconciliation between Sohrab and Gustad. This time water, emblematic of cleansing and purgation, symbolises not only the peace

between father and son duo but also proffers ample assurance to Gustad that the worst phase of his life is over. Gustad's redemption at the denouement provides the novel a rich emotional texture.

In *Family Matters* Yezad's employer Mr. Kapoor, an ecumenical figure also seems obsessed with the idea of redemption. While articulating his love for the city of Bombay, he remarks, "I wish to become one with the organic whole that is Bombay. That's where my redemption lies" (336). Though Mr. Kapoor idealises the city of Bombay, the city per se fails him time and again. It proved to be an illusory relationship where Mr. Kapoor's aspirations are dashed to the ground. The callous attitude of Bombayites and Shiv Sena's high handedness were incongruous with his idea of a cosmopolitan city. Mr. Kapoor's notion of an 'ideal' Bombay is analogous to Yezad's idealisation of Canada where he wanted to emigrate. Yezad's Canadian dream came crashing when he visited Canada embassy which reeked of xenophobia and racial hatred.

Likewise Mr. Vakeel grappling with his personal demons and previous blunders ends up as a pitiable character. His frequent meditation upon his failed relationship with his deceased wife torment his already guilt-ridden conscience. He incessantly yearned for forgiveness to redeem himself from his past mistakes. Coomey is also haunted by her callous and ruthless decisions she made in the past and seeks redemption by inflicting punishment upon herself. Yezad is another character who tries hard to get hold of his life after Mr. Vakeel's death. Both Roxona and Yezad grapple with their moral choices which went awry and long to make amends with their past impudence vis-à-vis Mr. Vakeel. Despite being confronted with internal conflicts and numerous ordeals, Mistry's characters invariably succeed in overpowering the spectres of the past and atone for their past sins. The adroitly crafted ending of the novels bring in its trail much needed peace and tranquillity and makes these fictional works incisive and delightful.

In his epistemological discussion on 'Theory of Knowledge', David Hume dwells upon the primacy of sense impressions that underlie our experiential knowledge. These sense impressions include our strong and vivid sensations and feelings derived either directly through sensory organs or through reflections (13). But sometimes these impressions may be misleading and deceptive, concealing a deeper truth within as Plato demonstrates through his famous analogy. Mistry, in his novels under investigation, ushers his readers into a complex web of puzzles, exhibiting an interplay of 'illusory' impressions, deceptive facades and unsettling realities. After traversing through a plethora of challenges and difficult moral choices, his characters eventually find succour by reclaiming their pasts and resolving to make reparation for their misdeeds. So chastened by vagaries of time, Mistry's characters reconcile with their present, make amends or turn towards a divine figure and that essentially brings about their much-needed redemption.

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