

Multiculturalism -Social Cohesion and Conflict in Mistry's Fiction

Abdul Shamim
Department of English
Renuka College
Besa, Nagpur

Kapil Singhel
Department of English
Vasantnao Naik Government Institute
of Arts and Social Sciences, Nagpur

HHH

Abstract

Cultural diversity has become a global phenomenon in today's world. Most of the countries have become multicultural. Each cultural group wants to keep its cultural identity intact, sometimes it leads to cultural conflict in the society. It is charged that cultural diversity is the hindrance to a cohesive society; it brings cultural conflict in the society. India is one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. The researcher has selected the works of Rohinton Mistry -Such A Long Journey, A Fine Balance, and Family Matters which have portrayed India and its social milieu. Multiculturalism is a socio-political theory that is used in a multicultural society. The theory of multiculturalism deals with the problems of diverse cultural groups. The present paper is an attempt to examine whether the theory of multiculturalism resolves the problems of cultural diversity and makes cohesion or it leads to cultural conflict in the society.

Keywords- culture, diversity, multicultural, society, cohesion

Modern societies appear to be vibrantly multicultural because cultural diversity has been accelerated due to the augmentation of immigration, technological advancement, and globalization. The presence of multiple cultures existing in the society is labeled multiculturalism. One cultural group differs from another cultural group on account of cultural diversity. Culture includes religion, cuisine, customs, manners, dress, rituals, language, law, belief, morals, knowledge, and art. As far as the etymology of the word culture is concerned, it has been derived from the Latin word 'cultura' meaning tending or cultivation of land. It is the physical meaning of the word -culture; the mental meaning implies the intellectual development of an individual as a member of the society through thoughts, beliefs, knowledge and value system of the community. The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as "a particular form or type of intellectual development in a society generated by its distinctive customs, achievements and outlooks". The literal meaning of the term culture is quite simple but its implication in cultural studies is subtle. Edward B. Taylor defines "culture as the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and

habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1874:1) Culture is embedded in the personality of an individual as a member of a respective cultural group.

Multicultural means a society where people of different cultural groups live together retaining their cultural identities but these groups face some problems living harmoniously and that are managed and controlled by multiculturalism. So multiculturalism is a policy or programme to deal with the complications of the multicultural society. Multicultural, according to Hall, "is the social characteristics and problems of governance posed by any society in which different cultural communities live together and attempt to build a common life while retaining something of their 'original' identity". Whereas he defines "Multiculturalism," by contrast, denotes "the strategies and policies adopted to manage and govern the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multicultural societies throw up" (qtd in Chin 18, 19).

Multicultural society is altogether different from Monocultural one where there is a dominance of majoritarianism; it believes in homogeneity. The minority groups are expected to assimilate into the culture of the majority. In contrast, multiculturalism does not compel any cultural group to assimilate into the dominant cultural group but it relies on the integration of all the cultural groups. Multiculturalism is a cultural mosaic; it is the society of 'difference' not of 'sameness'. It brings social cohesion in the society. Multiculturalism is a cultural mosaic; it brings social cohesion in the society as no culture is whole and complete. In a multicultural society, there are diverse and distinct cultures, each culture borrows and lends something to others to complement each other. It brings diversity in food, clothing, arts, language, celebration and festivities. Sometimes cultural diversity leads to culture shock resulting in social conflict in the society.

Rohinton Mistry is an Indo- born Canadian writer. His literary works consist of an anthology of short stories- Tales from Firozhsa Baag and three novels - Such a Long Journey (SLJ), A Fine Balance (FB) and Family Matters

(FM). Mistry captures the society in his fictional works which constitute the people of different cultures. They come in contact with each other and enrich their everyday experience in a multicultural society like India. Though Mistry lives in Canada, he writes about the panorama of India. Gustad Noble is the protagonist of the novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991). He works in a bank. He is a religious man who performs his kusti prayer daily in the morning regularly. He has a small and loving family consisting of his wife, Dilnavaz, his elder son Sohrab, Darius and Roshan. He lives in Bombay the city that is the symbol of multiculturalism in Khodadad building where the members of the Parsi-ethnic community dwell. The novel covers the period of 9 years and the three wars that India fought with its neighbours -China and Pakistan from 1962 to 1971. Noble comes from a very well-to-do family whose grandfather owns the shop of furniture maker but it has been ruined due to the evil habits of his uncle of drinking and gambling. He has a close friend Jimmy Bilimoria who lives in the same building but he has disappeared all of a sudden without informing him. So he is quite disheartened and it is aggravated by the decision of his elder son Sohrab who declines to take admission in IIT.

Gustad Noble becomes a distressful soul due to his confrontation with untold miseries, his charming daughter Roshan has suddenly fallen ill in spite of regular medication and constant nursing, she does not show any sign of improvement. The unfortunate letter from Jimmy has worsened his trouble in addition to that his meager income is swallowed by the medical bill of Roshan. He looks for solace and peace in the church of Mount Mary and the solution of his innumerable problems in the prayer of Mount Mary. Though he belongs to the Parsi religion and is an ardent Parsi, he visits the church with his friend Malcolm Saldanha and offers his candles of different shapes for easing the trouble of his near and dear ones. "Gustad joined his hands, bowed his head and thought of Roshan, wishing her healthy and well again; of Dinshawji, that his sufferings may ease; and of Sohrab, that his good sense be restored him. He did not bother about his hip; it was really not that important" (SLJ 2003:228).

Mistry has brought the event of everyday multiculturalism where he reflects how the people of different cultures exchange their religious and cultural practices to provide comfort and rest to the troubled soul. "Gustad learned more about the church, how it had a tradition of welcoming Parsis, Muslims, Hindus, regardless of caste and creed. Mother Mary helped everyone, she made no religious distinctions" (SLJ 2003:222).

Mistry has well carved another incident of multiculturalism which also brings together the people of different faiths irrespective of their religions. The residents of the Khodadad building were fed up with the stink of urine around the compound wall. Gustad Noble convinces the artist to adorn the wall with pictures of the gods, saints and messengers of the followers of different faith and beliefs. It becomes the sanctuary and the residents not only get rid of foul smell and mosquitoes but feel the sweet fragrance of incense sticks.

Gautam Buddha in his Lotus Position under the Bodhi Tree; Christ with Disciples at the Last Supper; Karttikeya, God of Valour; Haji Ali Dargah, the beautiful mosque in the sea; Church of Mount Mary; Daniel in the Lions' Den; Sai Baba; Manasa, the Serpent-Goddess; Saints Francis Talking to the Birds; Krishna with Flute and Radha Holding Flowers; the Ascensions; and finally, Dustoor Kookadaru and Dustoor Meherji Rana (SLJ 2003:212).

The wall becomes the symbol of the cultural mosaic. Mistry presents the embodiment of multicultural society which provides space to every religion as the wall gives space to every religion. As the gods, saints, and prophets live harmoniously bedecked the wall, it implies that the people of different religions can coexist peacefully and enrich the cultures of one another keeping their cultural identity intact. It helps to make society more cohesive.

When the municipality workers come to demolish the sacred wall, the protesters (crowd of demonstrators) happen to pass by the wall agitating against the corrupt corporators and politicians. The protesters consist of every religion and occupation from Peerbhoy Paanwala to Dr. Paymaster to Fernandes brothers to Hema- a prostitute. They halt to the sacred wall of Kodadad building before moving to the municipality office. The leader of the demonstrators affirms:

What better place than this sacred wall of miracles to pause and meditate upon our purpose? The wall of gods and goddesses. The wall of Hindu and Muslim, Sikh, and Christian, Parsi and Buddhist! A holy wall, wall suitable for worship and devotion, whatever your faith.....Let us ask blessings for future endeavours ! Let us pray that when we reach our destination we will achieve our purpose! Let us pray that in the spirit of truth and non- violence we will defeat our enemies! (SLJ 2003:326).

The multitude of people is shocked when they come to know that the sacred wall will be demolished by the municipality. They get enraged and take an oath that they will not allow the sacred wall that has been the symbol of

multiculturalism to be demolished. The incident infers that the people of different religions and strata of life are ready to stake their life in order to save the fine fabric of cultural diversity and ethos of India. The corrupt and petty political leaders try to break the unity and integration of the people engaging them in skirmishes over cultural diversity. Mistry underlines here the fact that if people respect the cultural diversity of each group; they can be united and to disintegrate them is impossible. They can lay down the lives in order to save the integration of the multiple cultural groups.

The second novel of Rohinton Mistry is *-A Fine Balance* published in 1996 written at the backdrop of the Indian infamous emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1975. Mistry has drawn the characters from different parts of India. Dina Dalal, is the central character, a Parsi widow, who engages two tailor's duo-Ishvar and Omprakash, who come to Bombay become the permanent residents of Dina along with Maneck -a paying guest. Ishvar and Omprakash are the victims of caste-ridden society. Dukhi Mochi, Ishvar's father belongs to the Chamaar caste (lower caste according to caste system) works in tanning leather. Fed up with the oppression of the high caste Brahmins, he decides his sons to change their occupation so he asks his friend Ashraf to teach his sons -tailoring. He immediately agrees and keeps the two sons of Dukhi-Ishvar and Narayan at his small home. He treats them as his own children initially Roopa - the mother of Ishvar and Narayan fears how to stay her children at the house of the Muslim. Dukhi clears the doubts of her wife and persuades her to allow the children to be with Ashraf Chacha. This is the perfect example of multiculturalism in which the people of different religions help each other to grow and make them self-reliant without any discrimination. Ashraf Chacha keeps them at his house and teaches the skills of stitching which assists them to earn their bread and butter and live with honour in society.

When the riots break out in the locality between Hindus and Muslims, the house of Ashraf Chacha is the lone Muslim house in that area. He gets so anxious and fearful that he makes the plan to flee but he has been consoled and convinced by his Hindu neighbours- coal merchant, baniya, miller and hardware store owner to feel safe among them. They will not allow any untoward incident to happen if the Hindu mob comes to attack his family. The frantic mob does come, carries swords spears, tridents and clubs, knocks at the door of Ashraf Chacha but the whole family of Ashraf has been saved by Ishvar and Narayan by putting their lives in danger telling lies that their father owns the shop and there is no Muslim here.

The mob does not accept the words of Ishvar and Narayn and demands to remove their pyjamas to check their identity. But they are not satisfied they want to intrude in the house where the family of Ashraf Chacha has hidden but at the last moment the hardware owner shouts in the threatening tone - "I am! And also the owner of this hardware store! If I give the word, the whole street will unite as one to make mincemeat of you! Don't you have somewhere else to go?" (FB 2004:148).

Mistry has underscored that if the people of different beliefs and religions become the custodian of the lives and properties of the other ethnic/ minority groups; they can make a more cohesive society for the multiple cultural groups. He highlights it is not only the responsibility of the state but also of every member of the community to protect the life of each cultural group to make a peaceful and progressive society with diversity.

But on the other side of the village for a low caste tanner to change his occupation has brought havoc in the village. According to the upper caste Brahmins, Dukhi is boycotted in the village; he has to go far off the village in search of work. When Narayan opposes in the election and asserts his right to vote as per his free will, the goons of Thakur Dharmasi sets the whole family ablaze to teach lesson to the people of lower caste except Ishvar and Omprakash as they were in the town. "What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society's timeless balance. Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity, said Thakur" (AFB: 2004:175).

The theory of multiculturalism gives the opportunity to each individual and community irrespective of their caste and creed to live with dignity and has equal right to its members to enjoy all the freedom which any member of the society enjoys. But the violation of the rights of the marginalized members of the society is highlighted by Mistry. It is the responsibility of the state to ensure that the rights of the suppressed should be safeguarded. When the society is diverse, there is a possibility that it may lead to conflict so it is the collective responsibility of the public and the state to protect the rights of each community.

Mistry has focused more on the ordinary citizens to create a multicultural society and be the guardians of each cultural group to make a more cohesive society. The perfect example is set by Dina Dalal who doesn't give shelter to Ishvar and Omprakash after the brutal death of their family members but also shares food with them. She gives them the chance to prepare food in her kitchen even though she feels quite repulsive at the beginning because she belongs to the Parsi religion and hails from a well-

educated family, brought up in the metropolitan city. She even gives her consent that the prospective wife of Omprakash can also stay in her rented house. Mistry emphasizes that the people of their own religion drive them away from their homes and hearth and the lady from some other religion helps them to lead a life of dignity and liberty. Auge Fleras affirms that "the term multiculturalism represents a normative response to this fact, together with a belief in the righteousness of respecting cultural differences and promoting social equality as a positive basis for society building and living together" (2009:5). Mistry brings home the point if people strive to make the society a multicultural one they can. It helps each member to grow and enjoy his life.

One of the most important aspects which have been touched upon by Mistry in this novel is counter-hegemony. Multiculturalism is also a counter-hegemony. It asserts the rights, equality, opportunity and dignity of the marginalized, women and disabled. The hierarchy of the society is found to be patriarchal. But Mistry has delineated the character of Dina Dalal to counter the hegemony of male chauvinism. She gets married on the choice of her own; her brother Nusswan who dominates the family affairs imposes his order upon her. He brings many good proposals of his friends for her who are financially strong. She declines them. Her marriage is short-lived as she loses her husband in a fatal road accident but she does not return to the house of her brother. She decides to live on her and earns her own livelihood. So she devises a plan to take a contract of dresses from the big showroom and hires two tailors to stitch the dresses. Despite being a lone lady in the house, she keeps three males in her house- two as her hired tailors and one as a paying guest. Gradually she develops affection with them and makes them as her own family members. Hjort describes multiculturalism, as counter-hegemony, is often associated with identity politics rooted in the experiences of blacks, gays, women and other marginalized groups whose realities are structured by discourses of victimization (quoted in Fleras 2009:5). Multiculturalism brings the people of different religions and regions close to each other and develops a bonding that is not seen even in mono-cultural- society. They render each other to grow and live with dignity and fulfill their dreams.

Family Matters- is the third novel of Rohinton Mistry published in 2002, deals with the story of Nariman Vakeel, a retired professor of English in his seventies, who has three children -Jal and Coomy - his stepchildren and his biological child-Roxana. He gets married to a widow - Yasmin after his jilted love affair with Lucy Braganza. Mistry has presented the true spirit of multiculturalism

in the character of Mr.Kapur who has come to India as the victim of partition from Pakistan. He is the owner of Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium and Yezad and Husain are his employees in his emporium. Being the victim of partition, he understands the problem of riots and violence, he has employed Husain as his attendant because Husain too being the victim of Babri Masjid demolition. His whole family has been burnt alive before his eyes so he occasionally goes into a bout of depression; Mr. Kapur, a sensitive soul, always consoles and brings him back into normalcy.

Mr. Kapur's working place is a sort of multicultural society where the people of ethnic cultural groups live together and work harmoniously-Mr. Kapur- a Punjabi, Yezad- a Parsi, Husain - a Muslim and Vilas Rane - a Hindu- his neighbour. Mr. Kapur as a true multiculturalist makes up his mind that he will celebrate each festival with a lot of zeal and zest to respect the cultural diversity of multiple groups. "From now on," said Mr. Kapoor, "in this shop we will celebrate all festivals: Diwali, Christmas, Id, your Parsi Navroze, Baisakhi, Buddha Jayanti, Ganesh Chaturthi everything. We will decorate the windows, put up the appropriate greetings with light and all" (FM 2003:139). During the Diwali celebration, he displays the cutout of Ram and Sita circled with the oil lamps and Christmas has been celebrated with fervent. Mr. Kapur himself becomes the Santa Claus and greets, distributes the packed of sweets to the children. Mr. Kapur recounts a remarkable aspect of multiculturalism in the busy life of Bombay that he narrates to Yezad. He emphasizes that regular commuters of Bombay show the aspect of multiculturalism in which the people of different religions and beliefs more than often put their lives in danger while boarding the local train. They put their hands at the boarded passenger not knowing to what religions they belong to but they keep trust on the helping hands irrespective of their caste, creed, race and religion ."Whose hands were they, and whose hands were they gasping? Hindu, Muslim, Dalit, Parsi, Christian? No one knew and no one cared. (FM 2003:139). Mistry has portrayed the incident of everyday multiculturalism which truly proves that kind of event happens so frequently that makes the Indian society more cohesive and strengthens its socio-cultural fabric despite being one of the largest culturally diverse countries in the world.

Mistry has really portrayed various aspects of multiculturalism that can be examined at the close quarters that the people of multiple cultural groups strive to enrich the diverse experience in their day-to-day life. Multiculturalism always tries to instill feelings of kindness and tolerance towards other fellow beings. It

helps each member of the society to fulfill their dreams and live with honour and dignity. Sometimes it does create a conflict but mostly it brings them together to make a cohesive society that has been well recorded by Mistry in his fictional works.

Works Cited

- 1 Chin, Rita. *The Crisis of Multiculturalism in Europe: A History*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.
- 2 Edward.B.Taylor. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the*

Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom. Boston: Estes and Luriat, 1874.

- 3 Fleras, Auge. *Politics of Multiculturalism: Multicultural Governance in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
 - 4 Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. New York: RossetteBooks LLC, 2004.
 - 5 -. *Family Matters*. Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 2003.
 - 6 -. *Such A Long Journey*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003.
-