

Grotesque Realism and Narrative of Marginality and Resistance in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to read the corporeal dimension of Rohinton Mistry's famous novel *Such a Long Journey*. It takes into account the fact that the historical representation in much of recent Indian English novels is based on the corporeal or bodily specificities. This paper would examine how Rohinton Mistry's famous novel *Such a Long Journey* reproduces the strategies by which a crucial phase of the history of the sub-continent is represented through the 'body', and it goes on to examine how Mistry deals with issues like marginality and resistance. Such a reading is framed in the Bakhtinian theory of "grotesque realism" and the idea of the subversive "carnival." The paper would examine how this grotesque realism played on the site of the body problematizes the totalizing structure historiography and reveals the repressive and degenerating state of the nation and postcolonial Indian body politic.

Key Words:

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1. Introduction:

This project of imaging the nation in alternate ways has been addressed quite distinctively and forcefully by many Indian English writers. Indian English novels, especially those that emerged in the 1980s and since, are engaged in a fundamentally ideological conflict over how to represent the nation. Though this aspect has been dealt with elaborately by scholars, it has often ignored that the dominant image of Indian nationhood to which these writers subscribe is not that of the land but the body. The novels by writers like Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, I. Allan Sealy, Mukul Kesavan, Rohinton Mistry to name a few, intervene in the ideologically charged issue of imaging the nation by making powerful use of the body metaphor as a way of assessing the severe social problems afflicting postcolonial India. The writers attempt to make sense of the disintegration and dissolution of the social body through the exploration of the grotesque condition and dissolution of the fictional bodies.

This paper would examine how Rohinton Mistry's famous novel *Such a Long Journey* reproduces the strategies by which a crucial phase of the history of the sub-continent is represented through the 'body', and it goes on to examine how Mistry deals with issues like marginality and resistance at a time when the body politic of Indian democracy was cracking under both internal and external pressures. Such a reading is motivated by the fact that the most important questions of agency of the oppressed, the colonized and the marginalized, and of postcolonial identity and crisis can, to a large extent, be tackled through a close reading of the corporeal metaphors deployed in literary texts, because, as Stallybras and White contends "the body cannot be thought separately from the social formation" (Stallybras and White, 1986: 192)

2. Materials and Methods:

This paper mainly explores body images in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism. It attempts to examine how this grotesque realism played on the site of the body problematizes the totalizing structure and meaning in historiography and the nation itself. It is generally seen in the case of recent Indian English novels by writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, I. Allan Sealy, Nayantara Sahgal, Mukul Kesavan, Rohinton Mistry, Shauna Singh Baldwin etc. that the alternative historiography of these texts disrupts the fixity and monologism of official totalizing History. The historical novels that emerged in the wake of Salman Rushdie's path-breaking novel *Midnight's Children* also point to the

possibilities of opening up spaces for different discourses. This process of disruption and creation of new structure and meaning of historiography goes hand in hand with grotesque realism. It will be argued that “The traditional historiographic trope of ‘the body politic’ is undermined by stressing the discontinuous and excessive nature of the body” (Mee, 2000: 106). The broken, fractured bodies in these texts which emerged at a crucial phase of Indian democracy metaphorize the postcolonial nation with all its hegemonic tendencies to subjugate, control, and limit the pluralistic essence of Indian identity, and on the other hand, the excessive and carnivalesque nature of the bodies subvert and contest hegemonic power structures and discourses, be it colonial or postcolonial. The excessive bodies in these historical novels are seen “to imply that the body politic is not a closed and definite form” (Mee, 2000: 106). While these historical novels project history as discontinuous, fragmented and not contained by the logic of linear objectivity, the grotesque, excessive body becomes the preferred image to show “the unruliness of the history...of the country...” (Mee, 2000: 106). Eating and other bodily functions also play crucial role in this re-presentation of history and the nation. Next to grotesque realism, this paper will explore politics of ‘othering’ or marginalization on the basis of corporeal difference. Finally, it will examine the depiction of sickness, markings, scars, torture, and disabilities in the bodies to show how the violent effects of history and a repressive nation are seen on the texts of individual bodies.

3. Discussion:

In any discussion of Indian English writing, it has rarely been pointed out that the narrative styles of much of this writing employ grotesque images and tropes that can be related both to grotesque satire and the Bakhtinian “grotesque realism”. The idea of grotesque was brought into prominence by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In his formulation, the grotesque encompasses a wide range of meanings from an aesthetic category denoting fantastic hybrid creatures to ideas of corporeality connected with popular/folk rituals like the carnival, and finally a representational mode that involves exaggerations, excesses, caricatures and other forms of linguistic excesses. Grotesque as a literary mode is an effective means for satirizing and critiquing social and political conditions. Among various definitions of the grotesque in literature, Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque realism is chosen as the main groundwork for this chapter. Before we go on to explore the employment of grotesque realism and the corporeal images employed by the writers, it would be useful to outline some of the basic tenets of Bakhtin which are relevant to my discussion.

Mikhail Bakhtin proposes “his grotesque realism” in his famous work *Rabelais and his World*. He emphasizes its focus on the material bodily principle in the context of the culture of carnivals of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Corporeality plays a key role in the concept of “grotesque realism”, and this corporeality centres around images of food, drinks, defecation, sexual and other bodily activities. Bakhtin reveals how the human grotesque physical features are sites of social and political conflicts. In Bakhtin’s idealized account of the carnival, the stress on the collective or communal aspect of corporeality as opposed to the “private egotistic form” is prominent (Bakhtin 1984).

Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque and his idealized account of the carnival emphasize the functions of the “lower bodily stratum”. The notion of the carnivalesque celebrates the crowd and emphasizes resistance, disruption and subversion through parody and satire of structures of power. Like the mechanism of the carnival, the emphasis on the “lower bodily stratum” also effects a kind of degradation which is a debunking of the dignity usually associated with all things high, spiritual, ideal, abstract:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, pregnancy and birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect but also a regenerating one. (Bakhtin, 1984: 21)

Connected to this idea of the joyous celebratory aspects of carnival degradation is his notion of the “grotesque body”. The grotesque image points to that which protrudes from the body, to all that seeks to go out beyond the body’s confines. Special attention, Bakhtin writes, is given to the “shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside” (Bakhtin, 1984: 16). This “grotesque body” is a key element in Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, which he developed based on his studies of early European folk culture. In *Rabelais and his World* he writes:

The essential roles belongs to those parts of the grotesque body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus. These two areas play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization. (Bakhtin, 1984: 317)

This description applies very accurately to the grotesque, excessive bodies employed by writers like Rushdie, Sealy, Chandra and Mistry, which through an overemphasis on bodily functions, excretions, and sexual acts can cause the destabilizing, scandalous behaviour that they use to subvert, and desacrilize hegemonic discourses and established hierarchies. In their project of unseating of colonial and nationalist historiography, as well as their scathing critique of the postcolonial, neo-colonial nation-state, these grotesque bodies play crucial functions as they disrupt and destabilize the monologic ideal of hegemonic powers and discourses. The grotesque bodies in these texts, though, victimized by power and harried at the hands of history, show their subversive potential by intervening effectively in to dominant discourse. It is seen that in a writer like Rohinton Mistry, the narrative style often straddles both these notions of the grotesque. These abused, broken, grotesque, excessive bodies provide an impetus for a subversive and debunking critique of prevailing socio-political conditions and historiography. Mostly, this critique is directed against the postcolonial nation that is governed by ruthless autocratic authority in tandem with a corrupt bureaucracy. In this case, the bodies are very much grotesque products and victims of, and at the same time in contestation with history. On the other level they employ a Bakhtinian grotesque realism of collective corporeality of the subaltern class.

In Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey*, we see the mass of marginal, poor, ordinary common men and women offering resistance, in their own grotesque ways, to the growing fascism of a corrupt state. The folk humour, shrewd skepticism and zest for life demonstrated by these people debunk the ideals of the brutal, annihilating nation-state. They see the pettiness of their leaders and understand the failure of the state in providing them the basic instruments of civic service and civil liberty. They also transform the crisis of the war into a carnival, debunking the operations of a ruthless realpolitik with their quotidian concerns of survival, food, drink and sex. The obscene, scatological jokes and corporeal imageries used by the characters in discussing the war and historical events show irreverence that has all the elements of Bakhtinian parody. Driven by the "lower bodily stratum", they reduce political grand rhetoric as well as history to absurdity through parody and burlesque.

Dinshawji's reductive account of the Cold War describes the CIA's "anus-fingering tactics" (SALJ 145) which provoke an Indo-Pak conflict and destabilize Indira Gandhi's power because America does not approve of her friendship with Russia:

Makes Nixon shit, lying awake in bed and thinking about it. His house is white, but his pyjamas become brown every night". (SALJ 145)

In another incisive political analysis he demands unabashedly:

Where is *madder chod* America now? Not saying one word. Otherwise, if Russia even belches, America protests at the UN. Let Kosygin fart, and America moves a motion in the Security Council... No one cares because these are poor Bengalis. And the *chootia* Nixon, licking his way up into Pakistan's arsehole. (SALJ 76)

The corporeal imageries in Mistry's novel are not just metaphors; they also become a means of literal protest also, as can be seen in the office peon Bhimsen's grotesquely comic account of children being made to defecate on newspaper pictures of Kissinger as part of the Indian proletariat's anti-imperialist propaganda (SALJ 299).

The character Peerbhoy Paanwala in the novel is a folk figure who is a teller of lurid, grotesque tales and the maker of aphrodisiacal *paans* like "*paalangtode*" which promise endless potency. He is described as having "wrinkled, old-woman dugs" which hung over a "loose-skinned belly equipped with a splendid ageless naval" (SALJ 175). During the war time, he tells lewd stories which are in fact complex political satires. These stories abound in images of open orifice, protruding body parts and vulgar sexual zest. He narrates the story of an ageing and impotent drunkard in the "West Wing" who tries out guns to revive his flagging sexual interest and sends out men to the "East Wing" to slaughter the Bengalis. The story ends with the triumphant intervention of the Indian army and the selling of the "patriotic paan".

The wall and the activities revolving around it are crucial elements in *Such a Long Journey*. Deepika Bahri writes:

From Gustad's perspective, the wall offers a retreat from the maelstrom of a burgeoning and hostile metropolis seeking to reorganize the space of the city in the name of development or in the majoritarian quest for a univocal identity by replacing colonial street names with nationalist ones. (Bahri, 2007: 115)

The wall also divides the hapless, dark underbelly of the city who do not figure in the master-plan of the modern metropolis. It also functions as a safeguard to the Noble family and other members of the Parsi community from the outside world. But this wall comes under attack as the government decides to push it further back to widen the street, and Gustad is apprehensive of this fact:

The compound would shrink to less than half its present width and the black stone wall would loom like a mountain before the ground-floor tenants. More a prison camp than a building all cooped up like sheep or chickens. With the road noise and nuisance so much closer. The flies, mosquitoes, the horrible stink, the bloody shameless people pissing, squatting alongside the wall. Late at night it became like a wholesale public latrine (*SALJ* 16).

The bodily deposits of the population bereft of public facilities and access to sanitation bespeak the abjection of the common men as well as the vacuity of the ideals of modernization and progress by the nation-state. But the common men and women in the novel display a subversive humour and carnivalesque zest for life that defies the failed reasons and corrupt ideals of the bourgeois nation which bring upon them more and more misery and abjection in the name of progress and modernity. The unmanageable mass of copulating, defecating, urinating proletariat mass continue to resist the operations of an evil, warring state with their bodies and the stubborn rhythm of unspectacular everyday living.

To depict the political chaos in the life of the nation, Mistry brings in metaphors of sickness and medicine in *Such a Long Journey*. Dr. Paymaster, the irresistible physician in the novel, compulsively uses images of a diseased body to discuss the plight of Bangladesh (East Pakistan during that time):

East Pakistan is suffering from a diarrhea of death...attacked by a strong virus from West Pakistan, too powerful for the Eastern immune system. And the world's biggest physician is doing nothing. Worse, Dr. America is helping the virus... Only the complete, intravenous injection of the Indian Army will defeat the virus. (*SALJ* 164-5)

The body has been redefined by the claim that it is not only a natural reality, but also a cultural concept: a means of encoding a society's values (customs, beliefs, oppressions, cruelty, histories) through its shape, size and ornamental attributes. "The body is...both an object represented...and an organism that is organized to represent concepts and desires" (Adler and Pointon, 1993: 125). A culture constructs meanings and its subject-positions through structures of signification with pervasive use of images of the body. Some bodies are regarded as normative while others are marginalized and unrecognized due to their differences—the sick, disabled, feminine bodies—who remain on the periphery of the system as the 'Others' of the normal bodies. We shall also see how structures of power attempt to contain and frame some bodies as 'others' in order to maintain and perpetuate dominance over them.

Frantz Fanon argues that Othering occurs on the basis of physical and verbal difference (Fanon, 1953). To that end, narrative desire—the impulse to tell stories—"underlies the ways we construct the so-called normal and the aberrant, and the ways we explain the disjunctions between the two" (Julia Epstein, 1995: 19). Similarly, Judith Butler writes that "the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside" (Butler, 1993: 3). Most of the time, this constitution of the abjected outside is part of what Alexander and Mohanty call a "citizenship machinery which excludes and marginalizes particular constituencies on the basis of their difference" (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997: xxxi). It is through an embodied politics of exclusion and marginalization that some people and communities are made to remain as the 'others' in a national system.

In *Such a Long Journey* by Mistry we can see this process of 'Othering' on the basis of corporeality. The Parsi community in Mistry's novel, like the Anglo-Indians, remains outside the

hegemonic construction of national identity. Discussing the fate of the Parsis in the city of Bombay, Chakrabarti and Ganguly write:

Never integrated in the formal 'master-plan' of the metropolis it is the unacknowledged but indispensable dark underbelly of the city, its grotesque 'other.' The inhabitants of this 'unintended city' are obsolete citizen, the masses who provide cheap labour... (Chakrabarti and Ganguly, 2007: 59)

The Parsi community in the novel lives isolated lives threatened by the growing fundamentalism in the city of Bombay. Gustad and other Parsis are apprehensive and sad about the fact that streets are re-named and Hindu right-wing parties are destroying the plural culture of the city. As in the time of the Partition, the nation is seen to be getting segregated and invisible boundaries are being drawn between people and communities. It is as if the nation is trying to consolidate and maintain its national identity by a process of "differentiation and displacement—the differentiation of the national [us] from aliens within and without" (Mary Poovey, 1995: 55).

This 'othering' process through which dominant narratives cast some bodies as normal/desirable and others are marginalized and kept outside the narrative of nation and history is also seen in the ways sick and disabled bodies are represented. Recently, postcolonial scholars have turned their attention to the issue of disability—both physical and mental—and the ways in which disabled and sick bodies suffer oppression and marginalization. The disabled bodies provide one such difference against which an able, total national body is defined. The homogeneous nation is identified with normalcy and well-regulated selves and bodies. In Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* Tehmul's decaying mind and body throughout the narrative function as a literal manifestation of Gustad's psyche and the state of the nation. Tehmul, a seemingly unimportant and mentally disabled character, is essential in Gustad's life, as he brings out the tender side of him and represents the innocence of life. Tehmul represents both Gustad's damnation and his salvation. Like Gustad, Tehmul has a hip injury, but while Gustad's accident left only a limp, Tehmul is physically and mentally crippled. Gustad sees Tehmul as a more unfortunate version of himself, so he treats Tehmul like a son and with gentleness. Gustad and Tehmul's lives parallel each other in their respective secret dealings. Tehmul with both physical and intellectual disabilities is portrayed as a passive victim of exploitation. People like Tehmul are not only expendable for normal people but later he dies for others. Tehmul, like Tridib in *The Shadow Lines* becomes the ritual sacrifice for the angry crowd. Tehmul, in his death becomes the innocent victim on the altar of national chaos.

But the carnivalesque presence of the grotesque body of the 'Other' is itself a disruptive act of resistance. The grotesque bodies of the Muslim nationalists and the Anglo-Indians do not disappear despite the oppression of hegemonic power. In these texts the subversive agency of the grotesque body cannot be missed. The grotesque figures in these novels enact what Bakhtin calls a "gay relativity", eliciting an insistent sense of comedy, caricature, parody, or carnival irony which often gives them some agency despite their oppressions (Bakhtin, 1984: 39-40).

The deployment of the carnivalesque can be read as an attempt at recuperating lost, suppressed, invisible, ignored subjectivities by dismantling constructions of the docile (colonized/oppressed) body in favour of an "unruly body that always threatens to loosen institutionalized authority's grasp on representation" (Helen Gilbert, 2002). In other words, the carnivalesque foregrounds an element of resistance on the part of those figures who have been victims at the hands of history by dismantling the hierarchized corpus of the dominant/imperial culture without simply perpetuating the victim/victimizer cycle. Despite the rejection by the British and the long history of marginalization and erasure at the hands of history, the Anglo-Indians have remained and the very presence of these 'other' bodies disrupts the monologic narratives of a unitary Indian identity.

The common men and women in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* stage such a disruptive, carnivalesque act by the collective protest march against the apathy of political authorities. In their struggle to survive and assert human needs, these poor people forge solidarities and relationships across class boundaries. Mistry describes the grotesque appearances of these people as they march in protest:

All manner of vendors and trades people, who had nothing in common except a common enemy were waiting to march. There mechanics and shopkeepers, indefatigable restaurant

waiters, swaggering tyre retreaders, hunch-shouldered radio repairers, bow-legged tailors, shifty transistors-for-vasectomies salesman, cross-eyed chemists, sallow cinema ushers, hoarse-voiced lottery ticket sellers, squat clothiers, accommodating women from the House of Cages. (SALJ 312)

This joyous, carnivalesque crowd enacts an act of resistance, though it is not something revolutionary, and ultimately, it is crushed by the police. Though small and feeble, such acts of resistance nonetheless threaten the logic of authority, and therefore they are sought to be contained, punished and broken. In Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* we have the character of Major Billimoria who is tortured by the authority to silence him because he knew too much. Once he serves the purpose of aiding in the nefarious design of the corrupt government activities, he is thrown into jail and tortured to death. In Mistry's other novel *A Fine Balance* we have depictions of tortured bodies (forced vasectomies, killings, murder etc) which reflect the menace of a brutal nation-state. The politics of exclusion and marginalization, embodiment and "othering" on corporeal terms are closely allied to the logic of hegemonic perpetuation of oppression and dominance. Bodies are sites where power writes terrible messages. History and its train of traumatic events leave their marks on human bodies.

4. Conclusion:

As we have seen, the writers under the present study invest their narratives with the corporeal specificities of the violence and chaos inflicted by history. Recent theoretical understanding of the body has made it possible to conceive of the body as a site of historical investigation which in turn can flesh out and shed new light on many seemingly disembodied historical processes. What finally emerges is the truth that the body is inevitably a signifying body, and hence a site on and through which we can construct a specific account of the colonial and postcolonial experience and politics of embodiment, including questions of oppression and resistance, disease, violence, consumption, sexuality and gender. The body and corporeality become a powerful trope for reading the postcolonial Indian nation or its history. The excessive, carnivalesque bodies signify the teeming plurality and the fluidity of Indian identity. The brutality of an authoritarian state and unrelenting pressure and chaos of history get inscribed in the cracking, disintegrating, sick, distorted bodies of the characters. The politics of othering and exclusivity of an increasingly xenophobic state create marginal people whose unhomely, uncertain lives are mirrored in paralyzed, diseased, neglected bodies. In the novels of Mistry, Kesavan, Baldwin and Sahgal also we have such mutilated, sick, dying, mad bodies harried by history. But in most of the cases, these bodies, by going against the normative and imposed categorization, disrupts the high status of classical, ideal bodies, and offer an alternative perspective to history, power and the nation.

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