

The Depiction of India in Neelum Saran Gour's *Invisible Ink* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*: A Critique

Abstract

Both Neelum Saran Gour and Rohinton Mistry belong to the contemporary writing of fiction. Both of them set their novels in India. Their works unfold multiple aspects of Indian society. In their novels, they depict India's history, politics, tradition, culture, life and communal harmony. The story of *Invisible Ink* moves around Amina, Rekha, Danish, Mehru Apa and Leela while *A Fine Balance* revolves around Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohlah, Dukhi, Ishvar, Omprakash, Thakur Dharamshi, Raja Ram and the Beggar master. Neelum Saran Gour as well as Rohinton Mistry hit hard on patriarchy, religious propaganda, social discrimination and riot, etc.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Gender Discrimination, Communal harmony, Castism, Orthodox.

Introduction

"It was the best of the times, it was the worst of the times . . . it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us" ((ATTC 1). These paradoxical lines of Charles Dickens in his milestone novel *A Tale of Two Cities* rightly reflect the contemporary transition period of Indian society. The present paper will try to find out the depiction of India in Neelum Saran Gour's *Invisible Ink* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. The former is set in the 'City by the Rivers' while the latter is set in the 'City by the Sea'. *Invisible Ink* witnesses slow change while *A Fine Balance* changes rapidly.

Aim of the Study

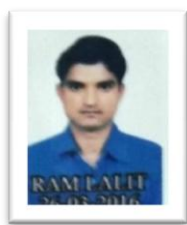
The world has become a village. All countries are connected to one another through media, trade, religion and culture. At present India is struggling with poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, terrorism, homelessness, corruption, religious extremism etc. Though India is suffering with several problems but it has a tendency to tolerate and come out from all the sufferings. Hence, the aim of the present paper is to analyze the social depiction of India in the novels of Neelum Saran Gour's *Invisible Ink* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

Review of Literature

Both *Invisible Ink* and *A Fine Balance* depict a multicultural aspect of India. Both novels open with the arrival and departure of trains, "The morning express bloated with passengers slowed to a crawl, then lurched forward suddenly, as though to resume full speed . . ." (AFB 3). Indeed, the same surprise and emotion can be found through the narration of Gour, "But how unspeakably thrilled I am . . . at the station she has alighted and is standing surrounded by piles of luggage, looking awkward and uncertain" (I.I. 1). Gour does not give a description of the train's arrival and departure and the jostle of people in it. However, *Invisible Ink* has a witty and humorous opening, while *A Fine Balance* is more descriptive of the events. Mistry shows the rush of Indian trains and how the vendors manage to sell their items through it, "Plastic hairband unbreakable, plastic hair clip, flower shape, butterfly shape, colourful comb, unbreakable . . ." (AFB 4,5)

The story of *A Fine Balance* moves around Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohlah, Dukhi, Ishvar, Omprakash, Thakur Dharamshi, Raja Ram and the Beggar master while the story of *Invisible Ink* circulates around Amina, Rekha, Danish, Mehru Apa and Leela

Both writers portray social changes through their characters. Both of them narrate the life of common people as well as of the higher class. Both of them give sufficient space and time to the female characters to



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develop, and to represent their position in society. Commenting about Mistry's women characters Nandini Bhautoo Dewnarain writes, "... I would like to suggest that his women characters are meant to be read within the social and material conditions of their existence. Mistry's purpose is not to transform social reality as to uncover the layers of tyranny and injustice in everyday life..." (Bhautoo 57).

However, most of the above mentioned points are applicable to Gour's women characters too but Gour moves one step ahead of Mistry in the portrayal of women. While most of the women characters of Mistry yield against the hardships and struggles of life, Gour's women characters stand, struggle and remain independent. They are not slaves of patriarchy. Mehru APA has the courage to write against the orthodox, religious bigots and patriarchy. Leela has the courage to take care and fight for the life of her guest. Rekha has dared to live her life on her own terms.

Though we are living in the twenty- first century yet Indian society seems to be trapped in social evils like discrimination between the male and female child, castes, untouchability etc. Both novelists point out the gender discrimination and their subjugation in family and society. In *A Fine Balance* Rupa a woman from a lower class offers fruits, good food, and sweets to her sons Narayan and Ishvar when they come from the city, while their sisters remain confined to household work and are never offered sweets, fruits etc..

However, not only the lower class girls and women are subjugated and punished but upper caste women are also the victims of the same discrimination. It is biologically proved that men are responsible for the birth of a girl child; still women are accused of being responsible for the birth of a girl child. They are harassed and beaten by their husband and family members for begetting a girl child: "It was hard for them to be regretful. The birth of daughters often brought them beating from their husband. . . . Sometimes they were ordered to discreetly get rid of the new- born. They had no choice but to strangle the infant with her saddling clothes, poison her, or let her starve to death" (AFB 99,100).

In *Invisible Ink* Rekha is addressed as 'kalmuhi', 'little daku' while her younger [new born brother] is addressed as "Bhaiya -raja". Rekha too is treated like Rupa's daughters. The pain can be realised from the following lines: "I shut myself in and turn on the tap and splash bucketfuls of water to drown out my sobs. I can't eat a thing Everyone has forgotten I exist, ever since that wretched baby came" (I.I.164). Likewise, Gour comments on the purdah system. She discourses that it is imposed on women only, while men do not come in its circumference. Indeed, Gour does not stop here. Like Mistry she gives a heart- rendering description of gender prejudice in India:

You could learn from the example of that village in Madhya Pradesh. Morena, I have heard it is called. They used to fill the baby girl's mouth with tobacco and fling her into a drain. Easy! There was a popular midwife . .

. Moti Bua – who charged a fat fee to relieve her clients of any unwanted girl children as soon as they were born . . . she used to place one leg of the cot or the stool on the neck of the baby. Then she would sit on the cot or the stool, murmuring, "Go, bittto, go. Send your brother instead." (I. I. 72)

Untouchability, and castism are some of the drawbacks of Indian society. Both Mistry and Gour narrate it intensively. Gour traces the origin of castism in India as she writes, "... Brahmcreated the Brahmins and the Kshatriya and the Vaishya and the Shudra..." (I.I.103)

Mistry's portrayal of upper castes' treatment to the lower castes seems realistic. It has a resemblance to Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. The upper castes inflict inhuman punishment to the lower castes for trivial mistakes, "No, it is Bhola's turn. But where he was working, they accused him stealing . . . they chopped off his left- hand fingers today. 'Bhola is lucky' said Dukhi's mother 'Last year Chhagan lost his hand at, the wrist. Same reason . . . Dosu got a whipping for getting too close to the well" (AFB 96).

Teachers are considered very responsible and the conscience of society. They can discourse on justice and injustice with anyone. But even the teachers discriminate between the upper and lower caste boys, "Shameless little donkey's! Off with you or I will break your bones. . . . You chamar rascals ? Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school! He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry . . . Is this what your parents teach? (AFB 200)

The West assumes the East to be magic charmers, orthodox and superstitious. Both writers touch this belief of Indian society. In India Baba's, moulavis, ghosts and jinns are highly influential. In *Invisible Ink* Mehru APA is an independent lady. She is an author. She needs privacy. Hence, she comes to live at Leela's home as a tenant. In order to maintain her privacy she does not talk or meet anyone. Rekha provides food in her room. But she has a lot of misconceptions about Mehru's room. She assumes her to be a she moulavi and possessor of jinns. Rekha has read about jinns in story books:

There was the jinn who could just reach out and out and switch off the light without even getting out of bed There are also those jinns who come on Diwali nights and buy up sweets And Akhtari auntie told us (?) array of jinns and spirits. . . they didn't like the railway line being laid in the desert by the angrez log and so they chewed up the steel railway tracks like one chews up these sticks of sugarcane . . . (I.I. 42, 43)

However, in every street there is a maulvi-sahab and pandit-ji, who will drive away the ghost and Jinn. They will make amulets and will demand handsome money for it. Gour also hints about this taboo through the conversation of Rekha and Mehru APA, "So do you make amulets and blow through your mouth and scold the jinns and beat them with brooms and drive nails into walls? I had never met a she maulvi- sahib before. Not even a she pandit - ji."

(I.I. 44) In *A Fine Balance* Raja Ram is forced to live a poor life. Firstly he is dependent on his monkeys for his livelihood and later a barber's profession and hair collection. In order to achieve the beautiful hair of two beggars he murders them. He flees to the Himalayas in order to escape from the reach of the police. Finally he returns and becomes famous as Bal Baba. People wait in long lines for his darshan, who is a self-proclaimed holy man:

Over the entrance a sign proclaimed; Welcome to one & ALL FORM HIS HOLINESS, BALBABA- DARSHAN AVAILABLE FROM 10.00 A.M. TO 4.00 P.M. EVERY DAY INCLUDING SUNDAYS & BANK HOLIDAY. Who is Bal Baba? Bal Baba is a very holy man, said the attendant. He has returned to us after many many years of meditation in a Himalayan cave. (AFB 591)

"Close to cultural practices are religious rituals, and traditions. Clothes, food habits and even ornament determine the cultural practices. Ever since the two nation theory has been proposed, this land has remained divided." (Selvam 76) Communal riots, murder, rape, and looting have become the major evils of India. Mistry exposes these evils in befitting way:

They brought with them stories of Muslims attacking Hindus in many parts of the country. We must get ready to defend ourselves, they said If they spill the blood of our Hindu brothers, the country shall run red with rivers of Muslim blood. Only bakery in town owned by a Muslim had already been burned down to the ground Everyday trains are crossing that new border carrying nothing but corpses. (AFB 122,126)

Gour too exposes these growing problems of India. People feel insecure and miserable. Their sufferings can be comprehended in the narration of Rekha to Amina:

After the Friday noonday prayers in the middle of the streets, they rose in hordes and among our familiar neighbours there were dozens of unknown faces, young men sprung from God knows where. They descended on shops, on people. Burning and looting, overturning carts, beating up hawkers attacking shoppers and trades people. More than a hundred vehicles were smashed or burnt up in their anger. We hurled back the stones they hurled at us. (I.I. 208)

However, the authorities and political leaders are also responsible for the rioting. Most of the leaders use inflammatory language to get the vote benefit in election. They want to polarise the civilians on the basis of caste, creed and religion. Even the responsible authorities for law and order do not pay their duty honestly:

Prashant had a large garment store his store was the one sandwiched between Jafri Leather Emporium and Shams Hardware.

The police arrested both Jafri and Shams, despite all Prashant's ranting and raving that Jafri and Shams had nothing to do with the arson and looting, and that the vandals were unknown men. . .

The police came late. They charged straight at the Muslim shops with their lathis, rounded up all the Muslim shop owners who were present, herded them into trucks and sent them to the lockups at the kotwali. They forced the Hindu shop – owners to open their shutters and resume business and when they refused they were threatened with arrest too on charges of inciting the riot. (I.I. 209, 210)

Indeed, both writers describe the rioting, killing and disorder but they don't forget to show the social fabric of love, care and the triumph of humanity. The appeal of Prashanta to everyone is a glimpse of the same:

. . . .When our women and our children and our servants were blowing conches and beating brass thalis at the auspicious hour that the domes of the Babri Majid fell. You came out of your shop and commanded everyone to stop. You said: have some shame and think of your neighbours and their feelings. (I.I. 212)

In *A Fine Balance* during a Hindu-Muslim riot Omprakash and Ishvar save the life and shop of Ashraf Chacha. They put the photos of Radha and Krishna and change the name of the shop. The rioters come in crowds. They humiliate Om and Ishvar and order them to remove their pyjamas so they may check their foreskin:

Listen, smart boy. If you are lying, I will myself screw you on the three points of my trishul. Why should I lie? said Ishvar. I'm the same as you. You think I want to die to save a Muslim? step on the pavement and remove your pyjamas, said the leader. Both of you. What? there was general argument that the foreskins were intact What's going on? Why are you harassing Hindu boys? Have you run out of Muslims? (AFB 129,130)

Both novels have a political theme. In *A Fine Balance* Rohinton Mistry covers the Emergency period and the 'Operation Blue Star'. It depicts the plight of Omprakash, Ishvar, Rupa, Dukhi, Narayan, Dina, Maneck etc. People regard Mumbai to be a place of great success, mirth and luxury. However, Mistry through his narration takes us to the slums and jhopadpattis of Mumbai to show the ground realities of Mumbai. He gives the detail of the roads and of people of Mumbai:

After stopping for tea in a stall at the street corner, the two spent a futile, frightening day locating the addresses. The street signs were missing sometimes, or obscured by political posters and advertisement. They had to stop frequently to ask shopkeepers and hawkers for direction.

They tried to follow the injunction repeated on several billboards; 'pedestrians! Walk on

pavement! But this was difficult because of vendors who had set up shop on the concrete. So they walked on the road with the rest terrified by the cars and buses, marvelling at the crowds who negotiated the traffic nimbly with an instinct for skipping out of the way when the situation demanded. (AFB 155)

Neelum Saran Gour also takes us on the roads and lanes of Allahabad to point out the historical importance of the city and to show the drastic change through which it is passing:

Amina is disappointed that we are riding in this rattling auto. She would have much preferred an old classic Allahabad cycle rickshaw, the kind which has a little lamp between the handlebars

I remember this rickshaw ride to the temple from my childhood, but of course, everything has changed.... the broad Fort road, noisy with traffic, and the fairgrounds of the Magh Mela, looking shrunken and unmysterious

This road, locally called the Kali Sarak street- was the one on which the travelling Sadhus lived . . .and we saw them sitting in their firelight, cooking or reading their chant books. (I.I. 5, 16)

Gour's depiction of Allahabad is very informative, realistic and thought provoking. She gives intensive and extensive details about Ghazi Mian, Magh Mela, Hanumanji, Akbar's fort, Akshy- vat, the underground tunnel, Someshwardev temple, Magh Mela etc.

'Hanumanji's tail was on fire because he set Lanka aflame. So he came and plunged into the river- there on the Ganga side. He lies cooling in his temple and every year, the river comes to touch his feet and he lies under water for a few days and we say the river has risen and Hanumanji is under water. (I.I. 64)

She delineate the security arrangements and the Shahi dip of Naga Sadhus:

'Out of the way! Out of the way! Don't get in their way! A dark stampede of naked ash smeared forms rushed past, trident brandished in the air waist long hair all caked and matted and snarled, streaming behind. Some withdrawn swords, some on galloping horses, some vaulting over tall spears, some turning cartwheels in a wild charge of explosive energy that took the river by storm. Their eyes were unseeing, blood- shot and their throat emitted fierce, guttural roars. (I.I. 68)

However, Neelum Saran Gour outlines Naga Baba's history and their concept of beauty:

'And who were the Naga Babas?' I asked her. 'Hindu ascetic warriors' she said. 'Sadhu soldiers from the eighth century.' Why did they not wear any clothes and why they smear themselves with ashes? 'Because they say that is how one comes into the world covered with ashes. The Indian beauty

undergoes the sixteen self- gracing embellishments, including the henna, the sandalwood and turmeric body unguents, the rosewater calving, the collyrium in the eyes and the scented anointings of the hair. The Naga Sadhus put on seventeen, with ash as the finishing grace. The beauty treatment before the bridal plunge into the Ganga, lasts the entire night.' (I.I. 88,89)

Indian Constitution provides every Indian right to equality. But the violation of human rights has become a trend of society. The influential people always try to disturb the fabric of society. This aspect of society is demarcated by both writers. Mehru Apa in *Invisible Ink* is forced to pass an underground life. She writes about the evils and orthodoxies of society. She points out the atrocities performed by the hard-core religious people. Danish reveals her address to them. The burglars don't take permission of Leela and they enter her home. They beat Mehru Appa brutally. They also beat Leela and her daughter terribly because she has given shelter to Mehru APA.

. . . I don't know how many there were. They pushed their way in, knocking me over and one dealt me a head knock on the head that sent me crashing on the ground. . . . Then there are more screams, someone else's voice coming from a long way off, a long-drawn piercing moan, then something heavy falling with a metallic jangle and crashing down each step of the staircase Help us, Akhtari APA, Amjad- Bhai! Help! Is everyone dead? (I.I. 172, 173)

Terrorism is a terrible threat to society. The whole world is facing this hazardous problem. In widest sense terrorism uses violence in order to achieve political, religious or ideological aims. It is also called fourth generation warfare. A lot of political organizations have supported actively or passively to gain their political objectives.

Terrorism may differ in various systems as per time and space. Terrorism may be caused by nationalists, orthodox lobbies, revolutionaries etc.. Neelum Saran Gour covers this burning topic in great detail:

And Gujrat, always that. It always came up to shame us. Sooner or later, the Babri Mosque came up, the Akshardham temple, the Parliament House blasts, the Varanasi, Banglore, Mumbai blasts, Ajmer and Mecca Masjid blasts. Train blasts, market blasts, conference and courthouse blasts, river- side blasts. The doomsday dates 9/11, 26/11, 7/7 A horrific chronicle of blood. (I.I. 201)

Gour does not only narrate the attack dates and places but also lets her characters pass through these incidents. Moreover, her gripping narration makes us stand at a juncture where we are left to feel the anguish, frustration, depression of the victims of terrorist attacks.

Amina's voice tremble, 'More than those vilayati girls, I am scared of those mad mullahs. Allah knows what is going on inside the heads of our sons and daughters. . . .

She uncovers her face and it is harrowed with dread. I don't want my children gunned down. I don't want my sons to take guns and bombs. All I want is for us to live our lives our way, earn our living. We're plain ordinary people. I want my husband and my sons and daughters to come home safe in the evening, sit down and eat together. I want my children to marry and settle and have kids and bring them up, our way. As everyone else does. . . (I.I. 199)

The major destructions in this world are brought by selfishness, hatred, self-proclaimed esteem and taboo of society. Leela has two children. Her husband "rejected her because she bore him no sons." (I.I. 36) He does not stay with her. He does not send enough money on time. Consequently, she is forced to earn money by sewing, and keeping a tenant [Mehru Apa, a Muslim] to collect some money. Leela's brothers and sisters-in-law come to know about the truth. The harshness they show towards Leela is heart rendering:

We are writing this letter to you with much regret and anguish. We are disappointed in you and your recent conduct . . . more, it is reported that you have, without a word to us, kept a lodger in your house these many many months, a Mussalman, who is the father of your child.

What has come over you, sister-in-law, that you should bring such a disgrace upon us? Had you no thought to the marriage of your nieces and nephews, to good name to our family? No, had you no regards for your daughters' future? Ever since we received these disturbing tidings, the food will not go down our throats nor sleep visit our eyes. Do not ask the name of the person-or persons who brought us this news. It is enough that your brother desires me to tell you that henceforth, all connection between you and us should cease, that for us it shall be as though you are dead. We have conferred with Rajesh-bhaisaheb and Ravindra-bhaisaheb and we are all of one mind as a family. Please don't trouble to send any rakhs or tika for Bhai-duj in future, nor shall we send our customary gifts of saris and bangles for Teej. With very great pain we must tell you that we cannot go on paying your daughter's school fees nor assist you in any way, pecuniary or otherwise. Words fail us when we think of the disgrace you have brought upon our family and we can no longer look our friends and relatives in the eye. (I.I. 182,183)

In *Invisible Ink* Ghazi Mian plays a vital role in promoting communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Hindus visit his shrine and regard him as a cow protector and a saint who cures mentally disordered. Muslims regard him a martyr a leading face of Islam. Both communities believe that his blessings can cure "the barren and the depressed and the schizophrenic" (3). Everyone feels free to visit his shrine.

Here, Ghazi Mian rested all the year round, presiding over exorcisms and cures, blessing the barren and the depressed.... and the devotion of Hindus and Muslims and anyone

else who felt like coming to him with a problem. But once, a year, he roused himself to go wed his bride and she was variously named in various cities. In ours she was called Phoolmati. Ghazi Mian's wedding procession at his shrine in Secundara on the river and everyone came gifts of sheets, gram, rice and puris and some bought offerings of sherbet, liquor chicken too.

(I.I. 3)

India is also known for its different festivals, garments, culture, tradition, belief, food etc. It has lavish dishes. Both writers narrate the richness of food in India.

Mehru continued, 'In my childhood we even had sweet parathas. We called them "Mehboobi Parathas"- parathas for love. Parathas are Muslim creations, like the sheermal, the naan and the bakharkhani, puris and kachowries are Hindu creations as are dal-puris and non baris. But honestly if you ask me, my stomach craves them all. . . (I.I. 23)

Neelum Saran Gour's characters are a blend of modernity and tradition. They think and take care for their family. They adhere to all the traditional clothes and rituals, at the same time, use laptops, cell phones, listening to songs on their mobiles. But they chose to listen to traditional songs like "Mere piya gaye Rangoon, kiya hai wahan se telephoon" etc. Likewise, Mistry's men and women in *A Fine Balance* remain traditional. The novel remains in its time. His characters didn't use laptops and cell phones.

Conclusion

Thus to conclude, we can say that both novels are brilliantly narrated, they take us on a journey of India for minute observations. Rohinton Mistry sometimes gives bitter, sarcastic and apocryphal detail of India while Neelum Saran Gour remains very particular and realistic. She uses humour and imagination to tell the truth in an epigrammatic style. The plot of the novel is well-knit. It keeps us curious about the next move. The Telegraph writes, "Neelum Saran Gour shows a profound knowledge of the language and even deeper understanding of the nuances of Indian society, culture and psyche". (*Invisible Ink* cover page)

Suggestion

Both Rohinton Mistry and Neelum Saran Gour present a brilliant, dazzling, sardonic, bitter, incredible journey into the pulsating heart of India. Both writers start their novels with a single incident and knit it in detailed and strict plot. However, the writers don't touch the issues like agriculture, education, unemployment, rift growing between young and old etc., which can make the novel more rich.

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