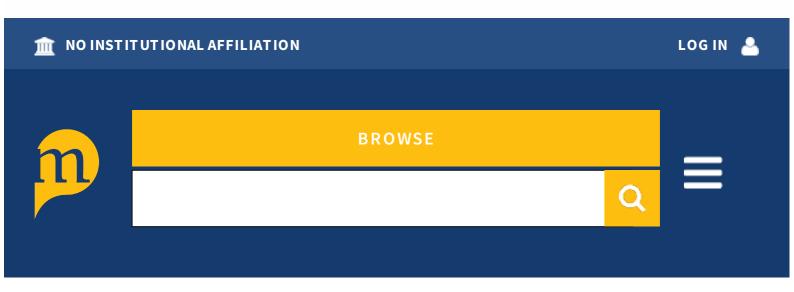
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Visible and Visitable: The Role of History in Gita Mehta's Raj and Rohinton Mistry's A Fine



# (1) "Visible and Visitable": The Role of History in Gita Mehta's Raj and Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance

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# In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"Visible and Visitable": The Role of History in Gita Mehta's Raj and Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance Beverly Schneller The title of this essay derives from Henry James' comments in his preface to The Aspern Papers about the qualities of the novel. He liked to read about a past that was both "visible and visitable," i.e., a past which was alive, relevant, and the creation of its author. Recent post-modern discussion of historiography has also taken a similar approach to the nature of historical narrative and the kinds of meaning historical writing produces. Hayden White, the leader in this debate, argues that there is little

difference between historical narrative and the type of prose narrative associated with fictions. As is now
well-known, he posits that the historian's point of view towards the material used in historical writing is
$equivalent \ to \ the \ fiction \ writer's \ point \ of \ view \ when \ creating \ a \ plot \ for \ a \ novel. \ Whether \ or \ not \ White \ is \ right in$
his analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, but what is of interest in his work is the idea that history is an
authorial creation: history is a text shaped by its writer's intention and interpretation of what should be
"fact." The implications of White's ideas bear on the name and nature of historical fiction of which Raj and A
Fine Balance are two recent South Asian examples. JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory 31.2 (Summer 2001): 233-
254. Copyright © 2001 by JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory. 234 JNT Gita Mehta and Rohinton Mistry are writers
of popular novels; hers in 1989 and his in 1995. Their subject is the sweep of Indian history; hers before
independence from Britain in 1947 and his since. As historical fictions, both Mehta and Mistry are willingly
$engaged\ with\ the\ burden\ of the\ past\ and\ participate\ in\ what\ David\ Cowart\ has\ defined\ as\ the\ historians'\ task$
of advancing "cultural self-knowledge" typically associated with such "humanistic studies" as history (25).
Mehta chooses a female central character, Princess Jaya of Balmer, as the lens through which she transmits
her versions of late empire; in contrast, Mistry creates a cast of interrelated characters whose lives offer
different but complimentary visions of lower caste Indian life in the 1970s. Neither novel has received much
critical attention with most of the existing commentary coming from book reviews in popular periodicals. My
purpose in this essay is to compare these two novels in their uses of history; to show how they rely on
historical information which they shape to fit their plots; and to discuss how these popular novels perform
as history for their readers. To broaden the focus of the essay, I briefly compare how Mehta and Mistry use
history in their novels to some recent work by Bapsi Sidwha, a Pakistani novelist, and by Hanif Kureshi, an
Indian nove list living in Britain. Because Raj and A Fine Balance are historical novels of differing types, they
provide a window on the ways novelists can incorporate history into their works to teach as well as to
delight. Historical novels, in light of Hayden White, may now be considered as kind of historiography and it is
as historical novels that Raj and A Fine Balance need scrutiny. In the opinion of some book reviewers,
Mehta's and Mistry's use ofhistory is problematic. Some have asked the question, "Are we reading history or
fiction?" While a few, such as Ian Buruma, identify the challenge facing the South Asian historical novelist. In
The New York Review of Books, Buruma wrote, "in few countries is the legacy of history, in spirit and form, so
apparent as in India" (9). For Pico Iyer in Time, Mistry has created "the Great Indian novel" (85) while for The
New Yorker's anonymous reviewer, A Fine Balance is "a novel that can stand with the best of Dickens" (93).!
Mehta, praised by Buruma for writing of the Raj "without nostalgia or bitterness" (9) sets Princess Jaya's
story across the end of the colonial period including the first elections for the Indian Congress, in which she
places her name as a candidate. Mehta's story

# "Visible and Visitable": The Role of History in Gita Mehta's Raj and Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance

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