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## "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 Sidhwa, a Pakistani novelist, and by Hanif Kureishi, an Indian novelist 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 of history 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*

Beverly Schneifer

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