
Navigating Cultural Identity : A Study of Rohinton Mistry's Fiction

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the convoluted and nuanced portraiture of cultural identity in Rohinton Mistry's fiction. Through a critical analysis of his select works namely *Tales from Firozsha Baag* , *Such a Long Journey* , *A Fine Balance* , and *Family Matters* , this research examines how Mistry navigates the tension between cultural heritage , national identity , and personal experience. By drawing on post colonial theory , cultural studies and literary criticism , this study reveals how Mistry's fiction challenges and subverts dominant narratives of identity , belonging , and cultural authenticity. Ultimately , this research demonstrates how Mistry's work offers a powerful exploration of human condition , one that highlights the complexities , contradictions , and subtleties of cultural identity in post colonial world.

Keywords: Cultural identity , Post colonial Literature , Literary criticism , Cultural authenticity , Nuanced portraiture.

The fiction of Rohinton Mistry centers around the diverse facets of Indian socio-economic as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life and religion. Mistry in his works focuses on the lives of Parsis and their contribution in the extensive substructure of Indian economy. He is both an insider as well as an outsider and delineates Indian society most vividly and in a dispassionate manner. Mistry in his works deals not only with the basic human emotions but also reveals how the change of place and environment causes displacement and feeling of insecurity.

This paper highlights Rohinton Mistry's significant thematic concerns, particularly his portrayal of the socio-political landscape as an expatriate living in

Canada. Mistry authentically expresses the Indian diasporic experience, primarily focusing on the Parsi community in his early work, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. His insider-outsider perspective grants him unique insights into the strengths and challenges of the Zoroastrian community, enabling him to depict their lives with both authenticity and irony.

The narratives reflect the adaptability of the Parsi community amidst westernization and expatriation, emphasizing the emotional richness and complexities of their experiences. While some critics argue that distance may hinder Mistry's realism, others see it as a source of clarity and nostalgia, allowing him to convey deeper truths about his heritage.

In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry intertwines history with fiction, using contemporary events like the Nagarwala case to explore the Zoroastrian values of charity and resilience. The protagonist, Gustad, embarks on a symbolic journey of self-discovery, moving from despair to hope while confronting the chaos of his surroundings.

Similarly, *A Fine Balance* addresses the impact of historical events, particularly the Emergency imposed by Mrs. Gandhi, on ordinary lives. Mistry critiques societal injustices and the plight of marginalized communities, offering a powerful social commentary through the struggles of his characters. His narratives resonate with the realities of the Indian experience, emphasizing the hidden dimensions of history.

Family Matters characterizes the familial turmoil of a Parsi family in Bombay against the backdrop of trouble-torn years of the Post-Babri Masjid demolition period. In this novel Mistry locates the marginalized within the family setup, as *Family Matters* takes up issues such as geriatrics and caring, familial bondage and human relationships. Other issues like secularism, corruption and communalism, suffering and death, immigration, alienation and sense of belongingness are also dealt with authentically.

Mistry emerges as a prominent voice of the Parsi community, skillfully blending personal and political narratives. His work captures the essence of Parsi identity, showcasing his unique linguistic style and cultural insights. Through his novels, Mistry provides a profound exploration of the human condition, underscoring the complexities of belonging and identity within the broader tapestry of Indian society.

He is an insider to Firozsha Baag and Bombay. Obviously, his vignettes are naturally authentic. He, being an expatriate, is able to achieve authenticity by distancing himself from the experience. Mistry has a dual advantage: he is an insider and outsider. As a Parsi, he knows the strengths and limitations of the

Zoroastrian community. He gives us a vivid glimpse of the exotic life of the Parsi community. At the same time, he is an outsider ; who stands on the fringes of the experience depicted in the narratives and describes it with amused detachment. Here, Mistry's vision comes strikingly close to Narayan's. His vision is ironic. He projects the gap, in artistic terms, between appearance and reality. Thus, in the case of Mistry too, irony becomes a mode of perception. It enables him to be detached in his effort to deal with 'felt' experience. It is difficult to agree with Rama Swamy when he says that Firozsha Baag is Mistry's "Malgudi." Firozsha Baag is not the locale in any of the subsequent works of Mistry whereas Malgudi is a place of action in all the short stories and novels of Narayan. Nevertheless, it is 'two inches of ivory' but Mistry is quite formidable in that he is aware of his limitations as a storyteller. The local colour he brings out in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is unmistakably Indian. His descriptions are graphic and comprehensive.

Eight stories in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, focus on the adaptability of the Parsi community to the various levels of westernization. In another set of stories viz. "Squatter", "Lend me Your Light" and "Swimming Lessons", Mistry deals with the impact of expatriation on the lives of the young Parsi protagonists. He employs omniscient narration in some tales whereas the protagonist himself is the narrator in "Swimming Lessons." Thus, there is a rich variety in themes as well as narrative techniques in Tales.

Kai Nicholson, in his discussion of expatriate sensibility in commonwealth fiction, observes:

Mistry's Indian world will stop growing unless he returns and plunges back into Bombay's hybrid culture Of course, he could continue to write in the present vein, but after a while, the vividness of his world can start fading and imagination will replace realism. (Nicholson, Kai, Vol. IV, 1992-93, p.2)

Nicholson, however, does not discount the power and beauty of Mistry's imagination. His contention is that Mistry's imagination will be frozen to his time in India, since both *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Such a Long Journey* are full of documentation.

Roshan Shahani, on the other hand, points out:

Distance has given the author a certain lucidity of thought and clarity of vision, tinged with nostalgia though it might be. It permits him to perceive certain "home truths" about his old home and his people, a fact which sometimes eludes those too close to home. (Shahani, Roshan, 1994, p.37)

Thus, Shahani's argument projects the advantages of expatriation, at least in Mistry's case. Mistry continues to gather news and views of his homeland through the media, members of his Parsi community, in Canada and correspondence. If

Nicholson focuses on the adverse effects of expatriation, Shahani regards expatriation as a creative source.

Thus, most stories in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* dramatize the happy and adaptive lives of the Parsis wherever they are – Canada, New York or Bombay. They end in happy ‘resolution.’ They live in a ‘land of willing exile’, but they continue to receive sustenance from the Zoroastrian value system. In the conflict between the traditional modes and displaced attitudes, the achievement of the young Parsi protagonists in *Tales* lies in realizing ultimately for themselves and for others, a happy and dynamic life ahead.

Gustad in *Such a Long Journey* demonstrates the quintessential Zoroastrian values like charity and benevolence. Mistry’s narratives are a blend of history and fabulation. He examines the Indian society from the perspective of a marginalized community. His choice of an event from the contemporary Indian history is conscious and deliberate. It is the Nagarwala case which provides the main plot for *Such a Long Journey*. Since Nagarwala, the victim, was a Parsi, the tale could have been told only by a Parsi. *Such a Long Journey*, is a good example for ‘fact – based fiction.’ The insertion of popular, though mostly apocryphal stories which were in circulation is typical of a post- colonial text.

Mistry is not a myth maker, but he subtly employs the well-known Parsi myth of Sohrab and Rustum in the novel. If the confrontation between father and son in the myth ends on a tragic note, Mistry’s narrative ends on a note of reconciliation. Gustad regards Sohrab’s rebellious gesture as a threat to Parsi value system. What brings the son back to father is the strength of spirit demonstrated by Gustad after Tehmul’s tragic death. Thus, Mistry’s makes a conscious use of a popular myth to achieve the desired effect.

The foregoing analysis seeks to analyze the major thematic preoccupations of Rohinton Mistry. He has emerged as a socio-political novelist in the nineties. The socio – political concerns in his works has contemporaneous significance. He is an expatriate who lives in Canada. As an exile, he gives an authentic expression to Indian diasporic experience.

Significantly, diaspora becomes a major motif only in a few short stories in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Most of the short stories in this first work of Mistry deal with different aspects of the ethnic life of the microscopic Parsi community.

Such a Long Journey offers a vivid glimpse of the middle class Parsi life in India. In a sense, this novel is a tale of education. Gustad’s interaction with the hostile milieu and the conspiring circumstances contributes to the growth of his character.

Mistry's third work, *A Fine Balance* too deals with history. Mistry, like Rushdie in *'Midnight's Children'*, takes up a situation from contemporary Indian history and depicts its impact on average human beings. Like *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* too has urgent political agendas. Mistry employs popular versions of the real events in the narrative. Here the distance from his motherland gives him an edge to review the recent past.

Like Rushdie, Mistry too is critical of Mrs. Gandhi who imposed Internal Emergency in 1975. It brought only uncertainty, restlessness and anarchy. Innocent people suffered and things fell apart. Mistry deftly shows the disastrous impact of a major political event on four persons in an unnamed city. The upper –class people welcomed, as they believed that it would rid the Indian society of decay. The youth, who were inspired by Loknayak Jayaprakash Narain, were euphoric. They thought that they would be able to create a better society, a society in which there would be no corruption. Mistry's artistic success lies in dealing with the excesses of Emergency. He gives a kaleidoscopic view of the macabre events which followed the assassination of the Prime Minister.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry offers what Homi Bhabha calls 'alternative histories of the excluded.' The chamars are treated with utter contempt in North India by the upper caste Hindus. Mistry brings out the dimension of caste-based exploitation very effectively in the narrative. Their woes and sufferings go unnoticed. Om Prakash and Ishwar stand for the victims of Emergency. Parsis, on the other hand, were alienated as security seemed a mirage. That was, perhaps, one of the reasons why they opted for expatriation. India, the land which gave them asylum twelve centuries ago, is now hostile to them.

Mistry's *Family Matters* is quite different. It's a brilliant exploration about the various ways that family does indeed matter. The elderly professor Nariman is the central character around which four generations of family revolve. The complex relationships of his immediate and extended family and neighbors, as they wrestle with dilemma of how to care for him, provide the tension in the unfolding of the story. Mistry also explores the fears held by carers and elderly people. For Nariman being dependent weighs on his mind. Not having control over his bodily functions, or physical cleanliness and not having his 'needs' considered adds to his mental torment. *Family Matters*, as it relates the story of taking care of the aging and dying elders makes it universal in its appeal.

The four works of Mistry under the analysis viz., *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* show immense variety and richness, both in terms of themes and techniques. Canadian or Indian, Mistry is first

and foremost a Parsi. His Parsi identity is unmistakably manifest in all his creative works. This is precisely his accomplishment as a novelist.

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