



## REPRESENTATION OF THE PARSI COMMUNITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

In the post-colonial Indian English literature, Rohinton Mistry is a diasporic (Indo-Canadian and an immigrant) writer from the Third World but now he has settled in the First World. He represents the social life, cast system, Parsi community and their lifestyle in Bombay (now Mumbai). The Parsi community is a minority in the Indian caste system devoted to Zoroastrianism. Like Thomas Hardy's Wessex, Mistry depicts the Mumbai Parsi community which is the main concern of my paper. Through his selected novels and short story collection, minority caste system, politics and particularly Zoroastrianism, Parsi community and its historical background are conveyed to the readers. There are many examples of the Parsi literature of Rohinton Mistry including *Tale from Firozsha Baag*, *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matter* in which, he uses the Parsi name, Parsi characters and Parsi language and declares the status of the Parsi community in Bombay (now Mumbai). This paper attempts to declare how Rohinton Mistry creates the depiction of the Parsi culture and Zoroastrianism.

**Keywords:** Parsi, Zoroastrian, Community, Novjote, Diasporic, Cultural Studies

**INTRODUCTION**

Before 3500 years, Indian literature was the oldest literature in the world. The Vedas (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) were written in that period. Today, Indian English literature is a distinguished contribution to English literature and has attained an independent status of Indian English literature. While, Indian English literature continues to reflect on the culture, tradition, social values of India as well as, Indian history and depiction of Indian life, English writing in India begins with the work of Michael Madhusudan Dutt followed by R K Narayan, Mulkraj Anand and Raja Rao and other who contributed significantly for the growth of Indian English literature. But it was Bikram Chandra Chatterjee who wrote the first novel *Raj Mohan's Wife*. There are many diasporic writers such as V S Napoleon, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie etc.

Before 2000 years, the Parsi community immigrated into India from Iran because they were illtreated in their homeland. The Parsi people's contribution is glorious to the Indian economy, polity and society, represented themselves as a model community and religious community and rich society as well. In Parsi Literature, there are many Parsi authors including Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Dina Mehta and Boman Desai who belong to various countries namely India, Pakistan, England, United States and depict the culture and religion of Parsi community in their works. Rohinton Mistry is one of them and the best known as the foremost diasporic (Indo-Canadian) writer in the post-colonial India. He belongs to a middle-class Parsi family and grew up and brought up in Mumbai (Bombay) and immigrated to Canada at the age of thirty. His fiction is not only associated with the experience of a diasporic writer but also associated with the Parsi community and Zoroastrian minority. Rohinton Mistry, as a minority writer, becomes the voice of the mute minority and awakens the loss of chronicle sense of his community. Rohinton Mistry uses the Parsi characters with a glorious past and dismal future and describes the various facts of Indian social and economic conditions of the Parsi community, their

culture and religious life and also their contribution to society, economy and politics in India.

In his fiction, Rohinton Mistry reflects on the Parsi life and the Parsi culture and social issues and raises various matters in his fiction such as politics, the Parsi life, urbanism, inequality, caste system, communalism and minority issues. In the post-independent era, Mistry is one of the most powerful evocative voices talking about the reality of the socio-political and cultural conditions of India. In an interview with Ali Lakhani, Rohinton Mistry comments:

"Well, I suppose it does work in that way. In a sense this novel, will, when the Parsi has disappeared from the face of the earth, will preserve a record of how they fared, to sum extant."<sup>1</sup>

Rohinton Mistry is one of the most important postcolonial immigrant writers and third-world writers. He is a good observer of the contemporary fiction in the post-independence era. His main objective is to throw significant light on the Paris families in Bombay/Mumbai with a detailed analysis of their culture, tradition, customs, and lifestyle. In the words of Mamta Pattarkine--"Rohinton Mistry, the diasporic writer has painted the picture of post-independence India in his colour combinations--realistic, diasporic and post-colonial being a few among them-----Mistry highlights themes like politics, the overall Indian economic disparity, the alienation of the marginalized communities and cultures."<sup>2</sup>

In 1987, Mistry published his short stories collection *Tale from Firozsha Baag* and in the USA, it was published with another title *Lesson and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. It contains 11 stories which show the real aspects of Parsi community such as Parsi tradition, social practices, nostalgic

<sup>1</sup> Lakhani, Ali. 'The Long Journey of Rohinton Mistry', Interview at the Vancouver International Writer's Festival, publication details not available.

<sup>2</sup>Pattarkine, Mamta. "Researching Rohinton Mistry: A Perfect Blend of Facts and Fiction" Chennai.2019



experiences, differences, as well as trust, the issues of the old and the young, dilemma arising out of the migration and about the residents of Firozsha Baag, a Parsi dominated apartment.

The first story 'The Auspicious Occasion' is an ironic portrayal of the Parsi way of living that negotiates about the customs and traditions. The protagonist Rustomji, (much younger) his wife Mehroo is preparing to go to the Fire-Temple on the day 'Behram Roja' but it is not a fine day for Rustomji because he passes his toilet into his pant. His wife, Mehroo, who would not let this thing dampen her favourite special day, dutifully makes all the observances and even takes steps to get the plumbing fixed; she then goes by bus to the Fire-Temple- only to find a murder has occurred there and all prayers and ceremonies have been cancelled. Rustomji is insulted by the nearby people in the bus. In the second short story, 'One Sunday' Mistry portrays the central character Najamai who lives alone in the flat because her children have settled abroad. Another character is Francis who goes in her flat without him so he is bitten badly and Kersey Boyce sees and saves him. In the third story 'the Ghost of Firozsha Baag', Mistry shows Jaakaylee as the centre character whose mistress sees a ghost at the night. The ghost tells about its life. Mistry, with humour, uses the symbol to talk about the sexual urges of the central character. In the fourth story 'Condolence Visit', Mistry portrays the character of Daulat Mirza and her husband Minocher. The loss of Minocher after his prolonged illness is unbearable for Daulat to cope with the dreadful situation. In the fifth short story 'The Collectors', the centre character Jehangir Bulsara is a sensitive boy and he has an unpleasant childhood experience. Mistry highlights the fragility of human relationships in this story. He suggests that relationships are extremely tenuous and that the trust that cements these is easily broken or damaged. Mistry brings out the changing attitude at the passage of time based on the protagonist's character Kersi and his grandmother in the sixth short story 'Of White Hairs and Cricket'. The

seventh short story is about the behaviour of Boman. Kashmira and Khorshedbai and Ardesar have tenants. Boman and Kashmira decide to share their small room with their meagre income. After some time, Kashmira needs some space to relax in the pregnant period. They decide to vacate their room but Khorshedbai refuses to go outside. Thus, Mistry highlights the helplessness that arises out of poverty, ill experience in the past, the outlook of the society etc. Mistry's characters, Nariman Hansalia and Sarash in the eighth story 'Squatter' undergo heart-wrenching experience. The ninth story is based on the three characters such as Jamshed, Kersi and Percy. The first two characters immigrate to New York to fulfil their dreams. Percy has an idealistic approach of serving his people and sticking to his roots. In the tenth stories, Mistry updates 'The Collectors' and uses once again the character of Jehangir. In the last story, Mistry has not used the Indian native character and shows the two cultures and used the protagonist of *Family Matter*.

Through his exemplary short story collection of post-modern and postcolonial literature *The Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry portrays the Persian community, their comicality, satire, pathos, religiosity, honesty, ordinariness, their ritual and their Zoroastrian religion. He represents the character from the Parsi community and doesn't depict highly accomplished characters. In the first short story of *Tales from Firozsha Baag* 'The Auspicious Occasion', Mistry portrays the way of life, the customs and traditions of the Parsi community. Mehroo (the wife of Rustomji) came from an orthodox Parsi family. In the Parsi community, Behram Roje (Parsi New Year) is a very important day. It is equally important for Mehroo because she married Rustomji on that day. Rohinton Mistry observes:

"All important days on the Parsi calendar, had the appropriate prayers and ceremonies performed at the fire-temple, and even set aside a room with an iron-frame bed and an



iron stool for the women during their unclean time of the month" (3-4).<sup>3</sup>

On this day, Mehroo Novjote ceremony is performed at seven years old. In the Persian community, Novjote is a ceremony, by a Parsi priest introducing a child into Zoroastrianism. Novjote is known as the name of *sedreh pushy* (name of ceremony) in Iran.

The story 'Of White Hair and Cricket' is from Mistry's short story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. The protagonist, in 'Of White Hair and Cricket', is a Parsi boy of fourteen years old who lives with his parents, elder brother and maternal grandmother in an old flat in Firozsha Baag. He removes the white hair from his father's head and he always remains lost in his thought and imagination. And his father has lost his job because he does not seem young. In the short story, the hair is a symbol of insecurity for the Parsi community because the people of the Parsi community has no right after independence and cricket symbolizes untroubled past days during the British rule. It seems that the story is written in the style of stream of consciousness so it is not true but Mistry represents the middle-class Parsi community in this story.

'Squatter' is a short story in Mistry's short story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. In it, the narrator introduces Vira, Dolly and Sarosh, at the beginning of the story. The protagonist Sarosh immigrates to Canada and before migration, he makes a promise to his family that he will become his identity entirely as a Canadian within tenth year and changes his name from Sarosh to Sidi, but can not succeed. Rohinton Mistry says---

"This Sarosh began calling himself Sid after living in Toronto for a few months, but in our story he will be Sarosh and nothing but Sarosh, for that is his proper Parsi name."<sup>4</sup>

Also in his fiction, the Parsi community is not untouched to migration. Mistry's writing about Indian Parsi community, while he lives in Canada and description of the Parsi community and his concerns with preservation of the ethnic identity of the Parsi community are highlighted in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. In the words of V.L.V.N Narander Kumar:

"The Parsees are attempting to assert their ethnic identity in diverse ways. Parsee novel in English reflects this assertion of Parsi identity."<sup>5</sup>

*Such A Long Journey* is Mistry's debut novel published in 1991 which established him as a writer to look up to when the novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Governor General's Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best book. The novel was set in 1971 during the time of the India-Pakistan war. Its protagonist is no controversial hero, Gustad Noble; an ordinary bank clerk who has normal dreams of a common man for a happy present and future. The faith of Gustad's family is closely bound up with that of the subcontinent during a time of crisis and turmoil. The illness of the clerk's daughter and his son's refusal to go to college, are many events that we are encouraged to read symptomatically in this novel. He shows the struggle of the protagonist and his wife (Dilnavaz), three children in crises and turmoil of life when his youngest daughter (Rosan) falls ill and eldest son (Sourabh) refuses to join Indian Institute of Technology. Gustad wants the success of his son but Sourabh says:

"I am not sick and tired of IIT, IIT, IIT, all the time. I am not interested in it. I am not a jolly good fellow about it, and I am not going there----- The seed of Sohrab's trouble had germinated long ago, long before last night, when his parents discovered how easily thing came to their first-born, at home, in school at work or play. There seemed to be nothing Sohrab could not do, and do well. Whether it was arithmetic, or arts and

<sup>3</sup>Mistry, Rohinton. *Tale from Firozsha Baag*. London: Faber and Faber 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Kumar, V.L.V.N.Narendra. *Parsee Novel*. Delhi: Prestige Book, 2002.



crafts, or moral science, he bagged several prizes each year on prize Distribution Day ... before long, Gustad and Dilnavaz were convinced their son was very special.<sup>6</sup>

Then, he receives a letter which is sent by an old friend Major Billmoria to involve in the corruption of a large amount of money. Thus, Gustad's long journey starts too reflected on the personal and political aspects of his life. Rohinton Mistry uses the traditional food dishes including *dhansak with Kutchoomber, dhandar--paaty and pumkin---buryani*. Mistry attempts to show the stark realities of the Parsi community. Mistry gives importance to the social and political details of middle-class Parisian family.

"His thick, groomed moustache was just as black and velvety. Tall and broad Shouldered, Gustad was the envy and admiration of friends and relatives whenever health or sickness was being discussed. For a man swimming the tidewater of his fifth decade of life, they said, he looked so solid."<sup>7</sup>

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* is a tragic-comedy of four chief characters Dina Dalat, Maneck Kahlah, Ishwas and Om who belong to different places of India but their hardships are the same. The novel gives hideous details of the immoral and unlawful Emergency imposed by the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi in 1975. The novel is one of the most memorable portraits of Post-independence India ever written. Mistry introduces to Dina Dalal in the prologue as a widow of Rustom, who dies on their third marriage anniversary. Nussawan forces on Dina to give up her studies and marries a rich suitor. Dina defies her brother and marries her own choice man Rustom Dalal who faces untimely death. Then she lives as a widow. Rustom advises her:

"Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? . . . For you it is possible to live a full life, get married again, and have children. Or do you prefer to live for ever on my charity?"<sup>8</sup>

Dina Dalal and her brother Nesswan represent the Parsi community and the marginalized presence of Parsi people in the Indian society. The novel was written with their point of view. Vibhuti Wadhawan remarks:

"The Parsi by extension becomes a metaphor for the state of the marginal in the post-Independent India. As a shrinking community in Bombay, the novel becomes a running commentary on what it means to be a minority in modern India, with the definition of minority emblemized by the position of the Zoroastrian minority community."<sup>9</sup>

Dina comes in to contact with some people of the Parsi community. The business meeting of Dina is with a Parsi bachelor. After this meeting, they become intimate lovers. Mistry highlights Zoroastrian belief, way of living and marriage sanctity of the Parsi community.

"According to Zoroastrians, a true marriage is the sacred union of two souls, competing with each other in the ideal practice of self-abnegation. The marriage- ritual is also symbolic; fire which is present at the agreement- stage is taken as the witness to the union of the two souls."<sup>10</sup>

Mistry focuses on other Parsi people, their belief and culture of the Parsi community through Dina (as a widow). Dina is in touch with Zenobia, (her school friend) who has become successful as a hair stylist. Zenobia advises to visit the relatives and

<sup>8</sup>Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Wadhawan, Vibhuti. *Parsi Community and the Challenges of Modernity : A Reading of Rohinton Mistry's Fiction*. New Delhi : Prestige Books, 2014. Print.

<sup>10</sup>Mistry, Rohinton. *Such a Long Journey*. London: Faber and Faber, 1991.

<sup>6</sup>Mistry, Rohinton. *Such a Long Journey*. London: Faber and Faber, 1991.

<sup>7</sup>Mistry, Rohinton. *Such a Long Journey*. London: Faber and Faber, 1991.





friends. This attempt is proved futile for people who are retaliated with her:

“Madam, you have no consideration? What have we done to you that you want to bring misfortune within our four walls?”<sup>11</sup>

Dina courageously takes a decision to live an independent life away from his authoritarian brother and earns a living as a tailor. She provides shelter to three more needy people- Maneck, Om and Ishwar. Maneck is a young student who lives on a hill with his parents and they send him far away from the hill for higher technical studies. The character of Maneck and his father, Farockh embodies another important aspect of Zoroastrianism and the Parsi community as a feeling of brotherhood for all human beings. Narendra Kumar asserts:

“The true Zoroastrian way of life consist in spreading happiness around. A Parsee should regard himself as part and parcel of nature, and as such, fulfil his obligation towards all creation. A true Parsee lives not for himself but for his family, society, and the country as a whole. Brotherhood of man is thus a cardinal doctrine of Zoroaster’s message.”<sup>12</sup>

Mistry's third novel *Family Matters* opens with the protagonist named Nariman Vakeel. The portrait of the Parsi community in Bombay/Mumbai and their residence is the centre point of the novel and is set in the 1990s. The focus is again on the Parsi culture, religion, rituals and costumes in Bombay. The novel set during the 1990s, Parsi middle-class family with its examination and the difficulty is the acreage of Mistry’s interest. Mistry returns to Mumbai, portrayals the Indian Parsi middle-class family and three generations of the life of seventy-nine year old Niraman Vakeel. In the beginning, Nariman focuses on the issue of family life, ethnic identity and nostalgia. About the novel, in the words of the interviewer John Bemrose-

“As far as I can tell, the novel started with the old man,” the author says, referring to the ailing Nariman, the central character in *Family Matters*, whose care puts such a burden on his Bombay family. “The very first story I wrote for *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was told in an old man’s, voice. I think I must have enjoyed doing that, and wanted to do it again.”<sup>13</sup>

Nariman Vakeel is a widower, with disease of Parkinson and holds central stage. Nariman Vakeel lives with his step-children Coomy and Jal within his flat in Parsi Baag of Chateau Felicity. Coomy and Jalare are middle aged step children of Nariman. Mistry shows such an unusual family in his novel, where unmarried adult children continue to stay with their parents and also take the responsibility of their aged. Their step-sister Roxana was married to Yazad, and settled in her own house with her husband. The situation of Roxana’s life totally changed the appearance of her father Nariman Vakeel. The step children, Coomy and Jal, of Nariman Vakeel try to dispose of once his health worsens and serves him as a nurse. In the present suffering situation, Nariman Vakeel generously forgives his step children.

“Poor children, thought Nariman, it was difficult for them to disguise their eagerness. And he couldn’t blame them. The blame lay with the ones thirty-six years ago, the marriage arrangers, the wilful manufacturers of misery.”<sup>14</sup>

The seventy-ninth birthday of Nariman is celebrated with Roxana and her husband and two sons, Murad and Jahangir. However, in the evening, Nariman troubles Coomy who starts talking about the past, accuses Nariman for all suffering. Roxana’s sons question their parents on their return and readers know about the inter-religious marriage of Parsi community.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> V.L.V.N: Narendra Kumar, Parsee Novel, New Delhi prestige Books 2002 P.20.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with John Bemrose. 1989.

[www.artworld.com/booksfilm/news/Rohinton-mistry](http://www.artworld.com/booksfilm/news/Rohinton-mistry).

<sup>14</sup> Mistry, Rohinton. *Family Matters*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002.



"...Grandpa had wanted to marry Lucy, but couldn't because she was not a Parsi. So he married uncle and aunty's ... He asked if there was a law against marrying someone who wasn't a Parsi. His father said yes, the law of bigotry..."<sup>15</sup>

Mistry's latest work of fiction is a novel with a short story, *The Scream* and sets in a Bombay apartment and is narrated by a man of a great age living in India in the same house with several generations of his family.

In the words of Ambika and Rajeshwari in the political turmoil that offset the Parsi Indian in Mistry's novel, there are many themes such as from politics to Parsi community life and economic inequality to the national event such as war rigorously examine the impact of historical forces and social events on small lives. They cover the Parsi community, their importance and their place in India. They also reveal that Parsis proved themselves as an example of the rich society of India. The next point is shown from the novel, *Such a Long Journey*, the trials and tribulations of the middle-class Parsi family in the year 1971 and not only this novel but also *A Fine Balance* which shows the middle class and the anonymous, faceless working class. In these novels, Rohinton Mistry portrays the miseries of the down-trodden people and awakens the people about many common problems of great political, religious, economic and literary activities in day to day life. He also unsupported the political unrest and gives better solutions to those social inequalities and evils through his works.

Matthew rightly observes about ethnic conflict and the fate of Parsis in India in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Mistry details the present condition of the Parsis and their loss of social, economic and political significance in the post-independence period. He highlights their characters, dress, food habits, religious ceremonies and their socio-economic life. He shows his concern about tracing the reason for Parsi's withdrawal from the

mainstream Indian social, economic and political life as a response to the hostile attitude of the outside society in Bombay. Mistry discusses in his many stories the humiliation and violence suffered by the Parsis in Maharashtra as a result of the communal organization of political parties. Thus, Mistry narrates the untold story of Parsi suffering and ethnic violence which demand answers from the results of the land.

Pardhi has opinions about the aspects of social issues in Rohinton Mistry's fiction and says that Mistry uses Parsi culture, Parsi name, Parsi characters and Parsi language in his fiction. Pardhi analyses Mistry's *A Fine Balance* that the Hindu-Muslim conflict is taking unimaginable proportions. Above all, the researcher finds out that Mistry's implications are undoubtedly captivating and ethnically momentous. The political concerns that have changed the life-style of many and are very close to the mind and spirit of the people are his main thematic concerns and his fictions are closely connected to the social and political milieu. Mistry brings forth the issues that are extremely relevant in the day to day life of the common man and he feels a part of it. Thus, Mistry's fiction is a perfect blend of love, intrigues, begrudges, politics, friendship and lewdness. His fictions closely examine the social, political and economic problems of people, arising out of emergency, exploitation, social evils and wars.

## CONCLUSION

After analysing the data (secondary and primary) of the fiction of Rohinton Mistry, we find out that Rohinton Mistry is one of the most eminent Parsi authors in English literature. He presents his views on Parsi community and Parsi suffering for their identity in India through the Parsi culture, Parsi character, Parsi dress, Parsi rules, customs and ceremony, Parsi language etc to give the glimpse of Parsi (as a minority) in India. In his fiction *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, he uses the locations in Bombay. Every story tells the diverse aspects of Parsi community. Thus, his fiction *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters* depict the real picture and conditions of Parsi community.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid



Rohinton Mistry's fictions are full of the depiction of the Parsi community, Indian politics, minority and many aspects of India such as war, identity, cast system, etc. After immigration to Canada, he returns to India for the theme and all his works are full of Indianess which have shown the real picture of post-independence India. Most of the themes such as rituals, religious, communitarian, identities, human relations, the middle class friendship, etc are in his fiction. Thus, on the basis of thorough examination of Mistry's works, we find that Mistry's humanism stands for essential human goodness despite individual differences, equal human rights, functionality of religion and end to socio-political exploitation of vulnerable sections of society.

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