## Chapter Five

## Coming to Terms with the Past : Rohinton Mistry

Being a postcolonial writer writing in English, Rohinton Mistry shows a keen interest in coming to terms with his Parsi community by contextualizing it in terms of socio-political history of India. In the fictional world of his writing, therefore, one comes across the representation of Indian reality seen from the double perspective of marginal Parsi/Indian characters. In that way, Mistry's writing obtains the form of the narration of a nation in interface with the Parsi worldview and culture. Side by side with this matter, Mistry's unique position as a diasporic writer engages him with the articulation of loss and displacement. As Vijay Mishra rightly points out that in the "... new diaspora ... novelists like Rushdie, Mistry and Vassanji ... are much more attuned to questions of race" (26), because of their sense of loss and their need for the retrieval of their past 'roots'. Likewise, Nilufer Bharucha also reiterates that "Mistry needs to be read not just as a postcolonial Indian writer, or as a South Asian Canadian writer, or as a Diasporic Indian writer, ..." but "as a Parsi writer too" (43-44).

The identity of the Parsis as a distinct ethno-religious minority in India was not reflected by the Parsi writers before 1980. There were sketchy writings of the Parsis here and there written either in the colonial period or after the independence of India. But this did not emphasize the condition of Parsis as a marginal/marginalized community in India. It is only in the recent novels written by Parsis that one finds a definite assertion of ethnic identity. It is in the novels and short stories of Bapsy Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai and Rohinton Mistry that the ethnic uniqueness of the Parsi community is focused upon. That is to say, the Parsi novel in English came into its own in the 1980s with the appearance of

Bapsi Sidhwa on the literary scene. Sidhwa's two famous novels *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) and *The Ice-Candy Man* (1990) describe in articulate terms distinctive Parsi identity. Farrukh Dhondy's short fiction *Poona Company* (1980) and the novel *Bombay Duck* (1990) assert the Parsi voice and at the same time exhibit increasing degree of the Parsi assimilation into the mainstream/immigrant ethos. Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* (1988) concerns itself with the facets of religion, ethnicity, history and consciousness of elite status among the Parsis. Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1990) becomes a vociferous assertion of the Parsi identity *vis-a-vis* the Hindu worldview. The Parsi voice in the past 1980s period has been raised by the major Parsi writers writing in English. Bharucha maintains that "... by understanding, accepting one's own ethnicity that assimilation into a wider social, national context becomes possible" and this fact is all too "... clearly seen in the development of fiction of Sidhwa and Mistry" (87).

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay, India in 1952. He graduated with a degree in Mathematics from the University of Bombay in 1974, and emigrated to Canada with his wife the following year, settling in Toronto, where he worked as a bank clerk, studying English and Philosophy part-time at the University of Toronto and completing his second degree in 1982. Mistry wrote his first short story, 'One Sunday' in 1983, winning First Prize in the Canadian Hart House Literary Contest. He also won an award the following year for his short story 'Auspicious Occasion'. In 1985 he received the Annual Contributors' Award from the *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, and afterwards, with the aid of a Canada Council grant, he left his job to become a full-time writer.

Mistry's early stories were published in a number of Canadian magazines, and his short-story collection, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, was first published in Canada in 1987 and later in the UK in 1992. So far, he has written three novels : *Such a Long Journey* (1991), the story of a Bombay bank clerk, a Parsi who unwittingly becomes involved in a fraud committed by the government. This novel won him the Commonwealth Writers Prize. His second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1996), is set during the State of Emergency in India in the 1970s, and his third novel *Family Matters* (2002), tells the story of an elderly Parsi widower living in Mumbai with his step children. *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* were both shortlisted in previous years for the Booker Prize for Fiction, and *Family Matters* was short listed for the 2002 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

Mistry's fiction is rooted in the streets of Bombay, the city he left behind for Canada at the age of twenty-three. It is a kind of 'imaginary homeland' which has led inevitably to comparisons with Rushdie, another Bombay born now based abroad. The differences between the two men, however, are as compelling as their similarities. For instance, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Mistry's *A Fine Balance* are set in Bombay during the administration of Indira Gandhi and the state of emergency. Where Rushdie's novel gravitates toward the Muslim middle classes, Mistry's seems more at home among the Parsi community and the poor. Rushdie's magic realism is Realism with a capital 'R' in *A Fine Balance* and echoes Stendhal's realism. Beyond such differences, however, both novels have a tendency to collapse the distinctions between public and private worlds. In short, both the novels are written by their authors' sharp wit and vision. Mistry's texts are, therefore, an essential diasporic discourse asserting ethno-religious difference. Bhabha has called such writing as the "social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective" (2).

*Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), Mistry's first collection of short stories, marked the arrival of a prodigious talent. The collection contains eleven interrelated short stories that brings together some of Mistry's earliest and finest writing. The tales detail the day to day lives of the residents of a decrepit apartment building in Bombay : Firozsha Baag. Mistry's affectionate, vivid sketches bring together the lives of several Parsi characters living in this apartment. In these stories, Mistry "... tries to preserve the memory of his native environment and to testify the specificity of his being a Parsi, both in India and in Canada..." (Albertazzi 277). In that sense, they reflect the characteristics of the Parsi community whose lives are significantly intertwined sharing a common Indian subculture, struggling to balance old-world Parsi values with changing times and circumstances. Mistry explores the relationships of this community – their cultural identity and the uniqueness of their community living – while also shedding light on the syncretic nature of the diasporic Parsi experience whether in Canada or in India. Consequently, one can certainly agree with Bharucha's view when she says that though Mistry's short stories can be called "nostalgia writing" yet there is little sentimentalisation in the texts, because these revolve around *Parsipanu*-Parsiness and are therefore full of ethno-religious details such as Behramroj, visit to *agiaries,* funeral rites, *navjots* and *kusti-weavings*.

'Auspicious Occasion' is the first story of the collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and describes the characters of Rustomji and his wife Mehroo. Rustomji is a rather comic and farcical character who is full of abuses for his servants and other Indians. In fact, the degraded condition of the middle-class Parsis, after having enjoyed their hey-day in the British raj, often creates superiority complex in them and therefore Rustomji expresses the general Parsi view of most Indians being "uneducated, filthy, ignorant barbarians" (*Tales* 15). This attitude

points to the condition of general despair and alienation of Parsis from the dominant community.

Mehroo, on the other hand, is very sympathetic with her servant and feels pity and compassion towards her. According to Amin Malak, Mistry in this story "... creates a vibrant image of a community caught in a cycle of restrictive traditions, economic needs, racial and religious tensions, as well as inner psychological conflicts" (qtd. in Albertazzi 279). In other words, the story 'Auspicious Occasion' is engaged in the Parsi identity construction.

The second story, 'One Sunday', just like the first one, again takes up the confrontation between the Parsis and non-Parsi Indians; this time not the Hindus, but a Christian who is a servant in the house of Najamai. Francis inadvertently enters the unoccupied house and is later found by Najamai. Upon her scream, the Boyce boys Kersi and Percy arrive and start beating the destitute boy whose intention was only a petty thievery. After the beating, however, Kersi feels pity for the unfortunate boy and breaks his bat with which he beat him. The fridge-owner Najamai also feels contrition for her unkind act. The story shows how even the middle-class Parsis are perceived as superior to their fellow countrymen like Francis who are even more unfortunate and therefore more subaltern in relation to the Parsis. In the next story, 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag', this theme is further explored by Mistry wherein a non-Parsi Goan servant Jaquline is portrayed. The ayah is called Jaakalee by her bosses. The Parsis are well-known for changing their servants' names and the practice is generally to call every woman servant as 'Ganga'. This may be attributed to their colonial mind-set which they imbibed from the British rulers. This is the reason why Jaakalee says of Parsis : "[T]hey thought they were like British only, ruling India, side by side" (*Tales* 46). Jaakalee feels frustrated because her Bai and Seth have mangled her name so badly. In this story, moreover, Mistry portrays the

example of otherness felt by the Goan ayah. Her character achieves a degree of displacement when she is mistaken for a ghost. In her ability as a cook, however, she will find her solace : "Yes", she confesses in the closing lines printed in italics, "it is one thing I really enjoy, cooking my Goan curry" ... (56).

In his another story, 'The Collectors', however, Mistry shifts his focus from the so-called elite consciousness of the Parsis to the delineation of the socio-political reality of India. In a kind of forward-pointing narrative, Mistry speaks of Indira Gandhi's once-often-quoted slogan – "Garibi Hatao" – "Eradicate Poverty". This is, however, a sly reference only which is more fully treated in his emergency novel – *A Fine Balance*. The story also deals with the hobby of stamp-collecting in which Dr.Mody initiates the young man, Jehangir Bulsara. Jehangir's cryptic homosexual tendency is also portrayed quite sensitively. Another story, 'Condolence Visit', on the other hand, deals with the funeral rituals among the Parsis and shows how they dispose of their dead by throwing the dead bodies into the well where they are eaten up by the birds of prey. This particular description is often treated at length by Mistry in his all three novels. Bharucha points out that here Mistry is engaged in "...the question of superstition and blind dogma that has beset the Parsi Zoroastrian community" (87), in relation to the destiny of soul after death. Amin Malak also notes that in these stories, Mistry exposes "...gently, sensitively and truthfully a traditional community that still regards women as unclean, practices arranged marriage, and believes in magic, rituals and superstition" (qtd. in Albertazzi 279).

Mistry's next story 'Of White Hairs and Cricket' deals with the theme of father-son relationship and the construction of masculine identity. The father-son relationship is also given equal space in his novels – *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*. It is one pre-

occupation with which Mistry is often engaged in his textual narrative. 'Of White Hairs and Cricket' shows such a relationship between Kersi and his father wherein Kersi has to pick out the grey hairs from his father's head and has to forgo his Sunday cricket matches with his friends on Chowpatty beach. In other words, the story ends with the feeling of despair in Kersi's father due to the fact of how senility takes over and how the pride of youth is humbled by this fact.

In the next story, 'The Paying Guests', Mistry takes up the issue of loneliness and despair in the middle-class Parsi couple – Ardeshar and Khorshedbai. They are elderly man and woman and their only son has immigrated to Canada leaving the parents desperately lonely and hard-pressed for money. To enable their son to send abroad, they have saved money and lived frugally. Now they have become paying guests to an other Parsi couple. Finally, in the pain of her son's absence, Khorsedbai turns insane and begins behaving strangely and therefore she is served the court-notice to vacate the house. The final scene of the story strikes a deeply tragic chord : "[T]he paying guests went quietly : Khorsedbai first, by ambulance, everyone knew where; then Ardeshar, no one knew where, by taxi (*Tales* 139).

The collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* uses the device to carry over characters from one story to another that provides a common link between them. There are also other features that link the stories to one another-ethnic detailing, alienation from post-colonial India, immigration to the West – especially Canada, lonely men and women and identity crisis among the young. The last four stories are, however, even more inter-related than the others before them. 'Squatter', 'Lend me Your Light', and 'Swimming Lessons' are the three Canadian stories, set wholly or partially in Canada and which display to the maximum extent the 'periscopic Vision' of the diasporic writer foregrounded by Rushdie in *Imaginary*

*Homelands*. The fourth story of this group, 'Exercisers', though set in Bombay is linked to 'Swimming Lessons' through the concern with the erotic and sexual which are also evident in the earlier stories, 'The Ghost of Ferozsha Baag', and 'The Collectors'. In 'Exercisers', Mistry emphasizes the theme of marriage between two Parsis, and how Jehangir Bulsara's love-affair is thwarted by his parents in order to prevent the inter-religious marriage. The story also shows Jehangir's shift of interest from the homosexual tendency to heterosexual one and his fascination for the strong and brawny bodies of the exercisers.

'Squatter', the first story in the Canadian group, is narrated by the master story-teller of Firozsha Baag – Nariman Hansotia. It places the story in the oral tradition of the East – a tradition further exploited by Mistry in *Such a Long Journey*, which has Scheherazadic features of *The Arabian Nights*' narrative techniques. This mode has been used by other Indian post-colonial writers too – notably Rushdie, particularly in *The Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Like Rushdie, Mistry also uses tongue-in-cheek labels instead of names for seveal characters in 'Squatter'.

Hansotia's tale about Sarosh/sid, the protagonist of this story, begins within the frame of an another story of a legendary Parsi hero – the valourous Savukshaw who was a great cricketer and a great hunter. Setting the valour, dignity and self-esteem of the Parsi's glorious past, Hansotia turns to the present-day story of Sarosh who has immigrated to Canada. Here his name has been changed from Sarosh into Sid. Before leaving for Canada, Sarosh had promised his parents, relatives and friends that "if I do not become completely Canadian in exactly ten years ... then I will come back" (*Tales* 155-56). In Canada, however, he is unable to use the Western-style WC and each time he tries to seat to relieve himself, he fails. Rather comically, Mistry describes how he takes up the Indian squatting position by putting his feet

on the stall. At long last, the stipulated time of ten years is near its end and yet Sarosh miserably fails in the unheroic feat of squatting. On board the aircraft bound for Bombay, however, he is successful to sit in the western way, but now it is too late as the plane has already taken off. This is a rather tragi-comic story where Mistry portrays the picture of the immigrant's problem in a foreign country. Upon his arrival in India, however, Sarosh feels as lonely as he was in Canada. It indicates the immigrant's condition of being at home neither in the East nor in the West – as Rushdie's own characters are in his texts.

Talking to Hansotia at the sea-facing Marine Drive, Sarosh tells a significant thing about living in Canada :"... for some it was good and for some it was bad, but for me life in the land of milk and honey was just a pain in the posterior" (*Tales* 168). Hansotia, the narrator of the story, also tells his young listeners at Bombay : "The Multicultural Department" that takes care of foreigners in Canada "is a Canadian invention. It is supposed to ensure that ethnic cultures are able to flourish, so that Canadian society will consist of a mosaic of cultures – that's their favourite word, mosaic – instead of one uniform mix, like the American melting pot. If you ask me, mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense, and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner" (160).

The next Canadian story, 'Lend Me Your Light' begins with an epigraph taken from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* : "... your lights are all lit – then where do you go with your lamp ? My house is all dark and lonesome, – lend me your light " (*Tales* 173). This epigraph throws light on the post-colonial dilemma of an immigrant who is at home neither in his home country nor the adopted country, but nevertheless he makes a choice to leave his birth land for greener pasture. When he leaves the country where he is born, he feels a kind of guilt and compunction, but after living abroad, his attitude towards his home-land becomes ambivalent

and displaced. This dilemma becomes overtly expressed in the three-pronged dimensions of the story of Percy, Kersi and Jamshed in 'Lend Me Your Light'. Kersi and Jamshed are school friends who have now decided to settle abroad. Jamshed goes to America and Kersi chooses to go to Canada. Kersi's brother, Percy, however, decides to stay in India and work for the betterment of the lot of the villagers. He is almost a Gandhian character and significantly shares his light with his fellow countrymen, despite the fact that he has to undergo a lot of hardship, uncomfortability and rejection.

Jamshed, on the contrary, is an Americanized character and he often reviles Indians. Once he is settled in the US, he never looks back at his homeland again. He expresses his anger at India : "[A]bsolutely no future in this stupid place ... Bloody corruption, everywhere ..." (*Tales* 178). He also dissuades Percy from trying to change the things for the better in India, because it is absolutely useless. Percy does not listen to him and continues his work in India, however. Kersi has tacit agreement with the view of Jamshed, although he sometimes gravitates to the view of his brother. Amin Malak has called Jamshed as "the spoiled upperclass malcontent" (qtd. in Gorlier 15). Jamshed, therefore, dubs India as a "dismal place", where "[N]othing ever improves, just too much corruption" which he believes is "all part of the *ghati* mentality" (181). Kersi, however, wonders why Jamshed is so much full of "... disdain and discontentment even when he was no longer living under those conditions" (181).

Kersi's character is thus a complex matter because it is at once expressive of the old and the newer diasporic attitudes. To quote Claudio Gorlier, "[O]therness, displacement, in all their contradictions and ambiguities, reach the highest degree of complexity in 'Lend Me Your Light' " (14). Kersi is guilt-ridden when he decides to emigrate to Canada and identifies himself with the Greek prophet : "...I Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one

in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto..." (*Tales* 180). In the words of C.P. Ravichandra, Kersi "... can neither belong entirely to the primary space of his adulthood ... nor can he return to the primary space of his birth because he has left it as a choice" (86). In this way, the story 'Lend Me Your Light' deals with the human emotions of displacement and dread in view of the diasporic condition.

'Swimming Lessons', the last story of the collection, also deals with the problematic of immigration in Canada. Kersi is shown here as a diasporic writer writing his short stories not about Canada but mostly about Bombay. In this story, however, he portrays his experience of living in Canada and mails it to his Mother and Father back in India. Like the earlier stories, 'Squatter', and 'Lend Me Your Light', this is also self-reflexive and somewhat autobiographical in nature. The story proceeds on a double level : one records the narrator's challenging experience as a Parsi Indian immigrant to Canada; the other, printed in italics, conveys the response of Kersi's parents in Bombay. The name of the narrator, however, is not given but only referred to as "Son" while he calls his parents Mother and Father, capitalized. The different print thus clearly foregrounds the perspectives of the son and his parents. Commenting on his son's short story, 'Swimming Lessons', that deals with Canada, the narrator's Father remarks : "*[I]f he continues to write about such things he will become popular because I am sure they are interested in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint; the only danger is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference*" (*Tales* 248). This lively exchange between them points out the relation between reality and memory, space and time shift. In addition, the narrator's failure to learn swimming also includes the theme of other-

ness by suggesting the narrator's inability or refusal to thoroughly adapt to the Canadian society. At the end of the story, however, he succeeds in learning swimming and opens his eyes underwater. This brings in the 'periscopic' vision of a diasporic subject celebrated by Rushdie who says that the diasporic subject at once possesses double vision – of the East and the West.

Crag Tapping has pointed out that in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry "...is engaged in identity construction through the location of the present in the past" (qtd. in Bharucha 73). The seeing of the past as present is common to most diasporic writers who as Rushdie put it, tend to live in "imaginary homelands". In this sense, *The Tales from Firozsha Baag* marks a definite journey back to the beginning or "roots" of the Parsi community in both Bombay and Canada.

In his first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), Mistry extends his theme of returning back to his roots in Bombay and portrays the picture of India in the 1960s and early 70s. Here he depicts the picture of a middle-class Parsi family of Noble Gustad living in a Parsi apartment – Khodadad Building – which echoes the Firozsha Baag of his short stories. It explores the life of the protagonist Gustad Noble through the frame of Parsi ethos. The novel is set in 1971 during the time of the Indo-Pakistan war. The protagonist is not a conventional hero, because he is a bank clerk and a family man, a vulnerable figure whose world is still haunted by the war with China in 1962. The fate of Gustad's family is closely bound up with that of the subcontinent during the time of crisis is and turmoil. The clerk's daughter's illness and his son's refusal to join IIT are the events that one is encouraged to read symptomatically in the novel. Finally, the narrative revolves around the event when Gustad receives a parcel and a request to launder money for an old friend. This key event in the narrative has ramifications which are at once personal and political and shows how Mistry has adroitly combined public

with private world *a la* Rushdie's narrative in *Midnight's Children.*

Unlike Rushdie's magic realist mode in Midnight's Children, Mistry's narrative, however, is based on the real life character of Nagarwala who was involved in the Sixty-lakh-rupees scam that had rocked the Indira Gandhi government in 1971. Nagarwala claimed that he had received a phone call from the Prime Minister instructing him to hand over the amount in question to a messenger. This was, however, never accepted by the Prime Minister's office and therefore Nagarwala was charged with embezzlement and arrested. He died in rather mysterious circumstances before he could be brought to trial. It was also claimed by Nagarwala that the missing sum of money was used in the 1971 war between India and Pakistan resulting in the creation of Bangladesh. Keki Daruwala, however, asserts that "politically, Mistry is a novice..." simply because "... he has woven his plot ... from the implausible theory that the well known sixty lakh fraud perpetrated by Jimmy Billimoria [Mistry's fictional character] ... was in the aid of the Mukti Bahini" (86).

Mistry's approach in the narrative is to blend fact with fiction and therefore Daruwala's criticism is beside the point here. For instance, the authorized version of the history of the 1970s glorifies both Indira Gandhi and her father Jawaharlal Nehru. In contrast to this, Mistry has opted to demonize her by demolishing the myth of her pro-poor image. Mistry believes that this image was based on the timely usage and circulation of the popular slogan– "Garibi Harao !" [Remove Poverty !"]. In that sense, through the method of mixing personal history with that of "official" history, Mistry joins the consortium of writers like Rushdie, Ghosh, Sahgal and Tharoor, who have been masters in the art of subverting history. In their works, consequently, the official historiography has come to be seen increasingly as a form of invented narrative rather than a body of objective writing about the events that took place in

the past. Probing the extent of the instability of received history is very often the favourite job of both postmodern and postcolonial writers. In *Midnight's Children*, *Rich Like Us* and *The Great Indian Novel*, there is such a mixing of myth, fiction and history. Likewise, Mistry also subverts and questions the validity of "official" Indian history through the fictional narrative in *Such a Long Journey*.

The narrative of the novel, therefore, highlights the degree to which political and personal realities are intertwined. For instance, Gustad Noble's loss of innocence may be attributed to the influence of the political world which is a rotten and corrupting force on an individual. Furthermore, the quarrel between Gustad Noble and his son Sohrab assumes the ideological nature. The narrative begins with a happy news that Sohrab has secured an admission in the Indian Institute of Technology, but the problems arise when he refuses to join it. For a man like Gustad, who has devoted his life to the fulfilment of his son's ambition, such a disobedience of his son has a shocking effect. Their domestic feud is further intensified by the differences in their political views. Sohrab's ideas seem utterly incomprehensible to Gustad when he says that "our wonderful Prime Minister uses RAW like a private police force, to do all her dirty work", or when he refers to "the chemical election" which makes "a real mockery of democracy" (*Journey* 111). Gustad dismisses the whole thing as merely rubbish. He will not listen to his son when he talks about Sanjay Gandhi's fiasco with his Maruti Car. Gustad will not believe it until the actual state of things is revealed to him by Billimoria : how the Prime Minister trapped him and misappropriated money from the State Bank "... to finance her son's factory" or for "election fund" (329).

Like Indira Gandhi, her father Jawaharlal Nehru is also criticised for the country's

"humiliating defeat" (11) at the hands of the Chinese in 1962. The novel exposes Nehru's frustration, ill temper, political intrigues thriving under his nose and his "monomaniacal fixation" with "his darling daughter" (13). At the same time it is full of pungent satire on the state of corruption in India, as Dr. Paymaster says : "... our beloved country is a patient with gangrene at an advanced stage. Dressing the wound or sprinkling rose-water over it to hide the stink of rotting tissue is useless. Fine words and promises will not cure the patient. The decaying part must be excised" (*Journey* 369).

In relation to Mistry's anger against India, A.G. Khan observes that "since abusing/tarnishing India is a ... pastime for all Indians settled abroad; Mistry minces not a single opportunity to deride India (16). Moreover, he comments that Mistry's "... ire against Nehru, Indira is not because of some principle but because they had been unfair to Feroze Gandhi, a Parsi..." (17). This comment reveals one interesting thing, however, and it is the fact that in India a marginal/marginalized Parsi is often victimised or done wrong by the dominant and dominating majority and so it leaves no doubt after reading the story of Gustad Noble, Dinshawji and Tehmul Langra. Gustad is full of compassion for Tehmul who is a mentally retarded person. Likewise his relationship with Dinshawji is also generous and considerate and he sympathizes with Dinshawji's grievances against the rise of fascist Shiv Sena in Bombay which harasses the religious minorities every now and then. Dinshawji reviles the Shiv Sena's "the Maharashtra for Maharashtrians' nonsense" (*Journey* 87). In the same vein, when Dinshawji bemoans the loss of his familiar world in the changed street names of Bombay, Gustad asks a rhetoric question, "what's in a name?" But Dinshawji promptly retorts : "No, Gustad" "You are wrong. Names are so important..." "was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life.

Rubbed out, just like that? ... (88) Dinshawji also criticizes Mrs. Indira Gandhi for the corruption of Indian politics. He critiques the right wing parties of India for their attacks on the religious and ethnic minorities. While Tehmul Lungra, the physically handicapped and mentally slow man "... could be symbolic of the fragile, endangered, in-bred Parsi race itself" (Bharucha 125).

Doubtless, *Such a Long Journey* is entirely engaged in presenting an insider's account of the tradition bound Parsi community in Bombay. The very opening of the novel begins with Gustad offering "...his orisons to Ahura Mazda" while reciting his *Kusti* prayers. In the funeral rites of Dinshawji and Major Billimoria, Mistry gives a detailed description of Parsi customs of burying the dead. The dead body is taken to the Tower of Silence from where it is flung into the dead well. The vultures, which always hover over the well, dive into the well to devour the dead body completely. Here only the Parsis are allowed to witness this scene. When Gulam Mohammad, Major Billy's colleague and friend, desires to take part in the funeral ceremony he is not granted the permission to do so by a Parsi Dastoorji (priest). Mistry also brings to discussion a hot debate between the two groups of Parsis in relation to burying the dead. The liberal group is of the opinion that the dead body ought to be cremated to which the orthodox group vehemently opposes. According to Hutoxi Wadia, "... the personal lives of the Noble family are being torn apart by the conflict between "modernistic ideas" and "orthodox confusions"..." (217). Likewise, the issue of marriage between a Parsi and non-Parsi is also raised among the dissenting members. Once a Parsi marries into a non-Parsi culture, he/she loses all rights and comforts in a Parsi *baag* or colony. It is quite known that the Parsis believe in the purity of their blood which they link to the original Persian genealogy. Consequently they do not insist on marrying their progeny to a non-Parsi. In addition to

this, they marry very late or never marry at all. As a result, there is a steady low birth-rate and their number is declining sharply. In India today they remain the miniscule minority which is further being decreased by their emigration to the western countries.

*Such a Long Journey*, thus, offers the social articulation of difference from the perspective of minority Parsi community. The narrative of the novel gains its energy from the interplay between fact and fiction, politics and the individual. In short, in re-narrating the story of nation and its history, Mistry also concentrates on the micro-history of Parsi community. In his next novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), Mistry takes off with the narrative of the Emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi and frames it against the lives of its victims who are mostly marginalized characters along with the Parsi protagonist Dina Dalal.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry again turns to Bombay, but he also includes an Indian village and the location of a mountain state of Himachal Pradesh and thereby extends his critique of Indian reality. David Williams has rightly pointed out that "Mistry writes about Bombay *in absentia*, blurring the border between his residence in Canada and his imagined residence in India" (214). Here Mistry once again succeeds in interweaving the national history with the personal lives of the protagonists – Maneck Kohlah, Dina Dalal, Ishvar and Omprakash. If Maneck and Dina are the Parsi marginal characters, then Ishvar and Omprakash are the *Chamars* who, in the cruel caste-system in India, belong to the lowest social stratum. In the same way, there are also other marginal characters depicted by Mistry, but they are minor characters and do not serve any ideological purpose. Their function is only to further the progression of the plot, although Mistry does not fail to mention their plight as well. In short, *A Fine Balance* remains one of the most memorable portraits of post-independence India ever written.

Although the dominant setting of *A Fine Balance* is India's political milieu, "[W]hat galvanizes this novel", to quote John Ball's words, "is the way the intersection of political and the personal is given such compelling moral resonance" (qtd. in Mani 195). The narrative presents a story of the four protagonists from diverse circumstances and walks of life who find themselves thrown together in the same humble city apartment. It is the tale of their survival in the midst of grabbing landlords, corrupt bureaucrats, savage policemen and cynical governments. Like Rushdie, Mistry mixes the private lives of his characters with the public history. At the same time, he also attempts to provide a corrective for the factual lacunae of institutional history and uses his own brand of realism to attack and revise history which has so far shamelessly ignored the lives of the poor common man. For Mistry the abject condition of the common man in postcolonial India has not ameliorated and he has to face the same exploitation and injustice as he had to in the rule of the colonizer.

*A Fine Balance*, though set in the period of the Emergency in India in the 1970s, yet spans the momentous events of the country from the turbulent times of the partition in 1947, through the horrors of the Emergency in 1975, to the macabre aftermath of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Mistry manipulates the narrative in such a way that one is shuffled between various time zones that mark each major historical upheaval. He foregrounds crucial events in the country's chronicle by depicting the background of each protagonist. For instance, when Maneck Kohlah visits the mountains where his birth-place is situated, Mistry discribes it as though it were some kind of Eden. This paradise, too, however, is not immune from the wounds of history, because lurking behind this Eden is the shadow of that dark, colonial past that still continues to haunt the post-colonial present in the form of the bitter legacy of the partition. In relation to Maneck's birth here, Mistry comments : "...

but long before that eagerly awaited birth, there was another, gorier parturition, when two nations incarnated out of one. A foreigner drew a magic line on a map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood upon the earth" (*Balance* 248). The impact of this partition disrupts the Kohlah property, if not the family, because being neither Hindu nor Muslim, they are handly affected by the event, but the drawing of the border, however, ruins its property completely. According to Albertazzi, here "... Mistry tries to re-write the history of Indira Gandhi's darkest years from the viewpoint of those who experienced the terrors of Emergency", but at the same time he also "... denounces wrongs which have been overlooked or neglected in the official versions of History" (281).

Dina Dalal comes from a Parsi family in Bombay. She is a widow and after her husband's death, she has put up in a rented flat and does tailoring. It is here that Maneck, Om and Ishvar arrive and join with her. Maneck is a student, but due to ragging problems in his hostel, he has shifted to Dina's place. Om and Ishvar, on the other hand, have come to seek both job and accommodation here. Before their arrival at Dina's home, they have left behind them a life of humiliation and harrassment in their village. In the village Chamaars like Dukhi and Narayan became the victims of caste-system and were oppressed by the high-caste communities. To escape from such a nightmare, both Om and Ishvar seek asylum in the house of Ashraf Chacha, a Muslim, who does not believe in discrimination. But Ashraf and his wife Mumtaz are also marginalized by the dominating people and during the communal riots they are forced to vacate their house and go away elsewhere. By bringing together such marginal characters from minorities, Mistry seems to suggest that in the post-colonial India it is they who have been ill-treated by the dominant communities. During the time of relative peace, they become the targets of hatred campaigns of the extreme fundamentalist ideo-

logues. At Dina Dalal's home, however, Om and Ishvar find temporary solace. From Chamaars, they become Darjis – [tailors] – and they want their identity recognised as tailors only so that they may not have to receive the worst treatment as they did in the village.

Bhatnagar, however, takes issue with Mistry's representation of chamaar characters and accuses Mistry of robbing them of their agency as individuals. She points out that Mistry has ignored the Dalit Panther movement that was started almost at the same time as the Shiv Sena in Bombay. At that time there had been fierce rioting between the two rival groups and the memories of such clashes were still fresh in people's minds. Then "... why does Mistry choose to silence these voices of dissent within his text in order to articulate other voices that define and limit the *Chamars* as passive objects and as victims rather than as agents of action?" (Bhatnagar 103). Bharucha also affirms this view and asks : "[H]ow much justice has [Mistry] done to all those silenced constituencies he has chosen to represent?" (166). For Bharucha these marginalised chamaars look like "... cardboard figures – an urban, westernised Indian's construct of the Dalit classes" (167). Mistry's interaction, however, is to speak for these subalterns whose voices have been ruthlessly suppressed. As Guy Lawson has put it rightly, "Mistry and Dickens are interested in those to whom history happens, those with little control over their circumstances" (qtd. in Bharucha 144).

Despite such criticism of Mistry's characters, one cannot overlook the fact that he has focussed on the impact of the Emergency on ordinary people. At first Dina does not believe in the view that the Emergency is a horrible influence. She says that it is only "[G]overnment problems – games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us" (*Balance* 92). She realizes that she is wrong when it literally affects tailors whose lives are dis-

placed and therefore she loses her partners. For others, the emergency is nothing but "... one more government tamasha..." (6). For upper-class people like Mrs. Gupta the declaration of "... the internal Emergency had incarcerated most of the parliamentary opposition, along with thousands of trade unionists, students, and social workers" and therefore it is a good news for her (89). Dina Dalal however, is anxious that "[I]f there were riots, the tailors might not be able to come" (91). Mistry thus represents most realistically the impact of the Emergency by making a fusion between the private and the public spheres. For instance, Om and Ishvar manage to find a shack in the *jhopadpatti*. Their daily life here is picturised with a Dickensian eye for detail. Though Ishvar and Om are not able to intellectually comprehend the factors that lead to the imposition of the Emergency, they do feel its repercussions purely at a personal level when their hut is bulldozed as a part of the city beautification programme. Maneck and Avinash respond to the Emergency at length in their intellectual discussion with each other. It is seen in the manner in which the student's unions are split and in the submissive support of the college teachers for the declaration of the Emergency. Rendered homeless, Ishvar and Om end up as pavement dwellers, but even here, there is no solace for them. They are taken away to a nearby irrigation project site where they are forced to work as manual labourers and offered only a semblance of shelter with a little food. They are also taken, along with other poor people, to a political rally where the Prime Minister talks about the benefits of the Emergency. For the poor, however, it is no better than like "a day in the circus."

To further intensify the horrors of the Emergency, Mistry describes how Ishvar and Om are later forcibly taken to a Family Planning Clinic for sterilisation. Instead of this, Om is castrated by the manipulation of his village enemy. Ishvar loses his legs by the infection and thus they return to Bombay as beggars. Avinash is mysteriously killed in a police custody and

his three sisters commit suicide. When Maneck returns from Dubai, he learns about the death of his father, of Avinish and his sisters' and the fate of Om and Ishvar. In utter despair, he throws himself before the train and commits suicide.

Avoiding a linear line of presentation, the narrative of *A Fine Balance* moves between the past of these four characters. Mistry describes the sense of loss experienced by them. The same sense of loss is also experienced by Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey* where Gustad aptly feels : "[A]lways begins after the loss is complete, the remembering" (249). Dina Dalal also undergoes the traumatic experience of memories of losses – losing Om and Ishvar as her companions and colleagues; the loss of Maneck, the loss of her parents, the loss of her husband and so on. Consequently, she turns to the job of designing a quilt which is expressive of the workings of her memories of loss. This may be compared to Rushdie's Rani Harappa's quilt-making act linked with the crimes of her husband's in *Shame*. In Mistry, thus one can see that this sense of loss erupts through all his fictional discourse. Mistry's position as a diasporic Indian writer may be responsible for depicting such a sense of loss which he himself feels by being away from both his homeland and the Parsi ethos of Bombay. Like their author's loss and displacement, Om, Ishvar, Maneck and Dina Dalal also feel the same human emotions. Ameena Kazi Ansari rightly points out that in *A Fine Balance* "... sense of displacement is a recurrent reality in the lives of ... protagonists" (181). This does not mean that there is no hope left for them. As Valmik the lawyer says to Dina : "[T]here is always hope - hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost" (*Balance* 690). He further says to her that "... he has also lost much in life and ... that is the central theme of my life-story–loss. But isn't it the same with all life stories ? Loss is essential. Loss is part and parcel of that necessary calamity called life" (693).

The final section of *A Fine Balance*, "Epilogue : 1984", concludes the story of such a loss in terms of historical context when Maneck visits Delhi and his dialogue with a taxi-driver discloses the facts about the anti-Sikh riots. These riots started when the Prime Minister was killled three days before by her Sikh body-guards. In revenge of this, Sikhs are killed and burned everywhere in the city. The taxi-driver says : "[F]or three days they have been burning Sikh shops and homes, chopping up Sikh boys and men. And the police are just running about here and there, pretending to protect the neighbourhoods" (*Balance* 708-709). The taxi-driver heaps all the blame on Mrs. Indira Gandhi, however. He remarks : "[S]he created a monster ... and the monster swallowed her. Now it swallows innocents..." (711). Finally he sums up the point of view of Mistry himself when he says : [T]he real murderers will never be punished. For votes and power they play with human lives. Today it is Sikhs. Last year it was Muslims; before that, Harijans. One day, your *Sudra* and *Kusti* might not be enough to protect you" (712).

In his third novel, *Family Matters* (2002), as in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry yet again attempts to depict the truth of real life honestly. In Mistry's view the only real tragedy, however, seems to be the everyday life of middle-class. This has very skilfully been put by Mr. Kapur when he speaks to Yezad about the significance of the story of loss : "... no matter where you go in the world, there is only one important story : of youth, and loss, and yearning for redemption. So we tell the same story, over and over. Just the details are different." (*Family* 221). If *A Fine Balance* deals with the story of loss in terms of the poor and underdogs of society, then *Family Matters* portrays a picture of middle-class Parsi family and its saga of loss and betrayal. Mr. Kapur shows Yezad some pictures of bygone era of Bombay and points out how everything has been changed and that what was meaningful and colourful once upon a

time in the city has been lost forever. Yezad aptly responds to this and comments: "... in these pictures you've shown me my loss" (220).

*Family Matters* is yet again based in Bombay and more specifically in the Parsi middle-class ethos. Where Mistry's first two novels were set in the 1970s and were essentially historical novels, *Family Matters*, however, depicts contemporary Bombay and is set in the 1990s.

Nariman Vakeel is the protagonist around whom the whole narrative revalves. He is a retired professor of English and suffering from Parkinson's disease. His illness places renewed strains on his family relations, however. A widower with skeletons in his closet, Nariman's memories of the past give exposure to the earlier moments in the city's and thereby the nation's history and articulate the narrative of the novel that moves across the three generations of Vakeel family. Like his preceding works, in *Family Matters* too, one has the familiar slippage between public and private worlds. Likewise, the lives of the residents of 'Chateau Felicity' (Nariman's former residence) and 'Pleasant Villa' (where he is forced to move by his scheming step-daughter) recall the world of Firozsha Baag in the collection of the short-stories. Where the earlier novels tended towards a decisive closure, here, as the epilogue of the novel significantly suggests, the novel remains open-ended.

It is customary with Mistry to pit the marginal/marginalized characters against the background of dominant and dominating right wing political parties. In *Family Matters*, therefore, Mistry once more undertakes to revile the fascist Shiv Sena. This time he describes the post-Babri Masjid riots in Bombay and how the religious and ethnic minorities like Parsis, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs are threatened by the rise of extreme Hindu nationalist forces. Mistry expresses such socio-religious conflicts in Mumbai, not overtly, but rather covertly. For instance, the troubles in Roxana's house are paralleled in the city of Mumbai ruled by the

Shiv Sena who oppress Muslims and insist on preserving India from western festivities and morals. In other words, they function as a kind of cultural and thought police and if their demand is refused, then they come to grapple with this by the measures of force and violence. A substantial part of this narrative unfolds at Mr. Kapur's shop – The Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium. Yezad's boss Mr. Kapur, who is a Sikh and hails from Punjab, decides to contest the Municipal Corporation's forthcoming election to save his adopted, but beloved city. Being a liberal, he insists on celebrating all the faiths in his shop. The Shiv Sainiks, however, oppose to his liberal humanist approach and force him to remove the wrong name-plate upon his shop. In a tussle with them, Mr. Kapur is killed, however. Husain, a peon in Mr. Kapur's shop also becomes a victim of the post-Ayodhya riots in Mumbai. In these fierce riots his wife and three children are brutally burnt to death. Husain mourns it thus :

[...] in those riots the police were behaving like gangsters. In Muslim mohallas they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning, neighbours came out to throw water. And the police ? Firing bullets like target practice. Those guardians of law were murdering everybody ! And my poor wife and children [...] I couldn't even recognize them. [...] (*Family* 148)

Bharucha appreciates Mistry's boldness to say the 'truth' about this fact, but she criticizes Mistry's silence on the other side of the issue. She comments that the part of this narrative "... is missing ... on the suspicion of the involvement of Islamic fundamentalists, in nexus with the Underworld, in the Bombay blasts" which blew up the Bombay Stock Exchange and other buildings (169). Mistry gives, according to her view, only cursory reference to these blasts and describes it as a part of the Matka gambling in Mumbai. Whatever the case may be, there is no denying to the fact that common people are victimised by the dirty power

politics of the top-notch people who often seek alliance with the Mafia forces. And this is aptly exhibited in the narrative of *Family Matters*, where, as Albertazzi has rightly indicated, "... private problems mix with socio-political and religious conflicts so deeply that it is almost impossible to separate them" (285). Like Albertazzi, Anita Myles also observes that in *Family Matters*, "... Mistry's ascerbity against political mafiosi obviously results in his compassionate benignity for the suffering of common man, a helpless victim who has always to pay a heavy price for the power-ridden groups" (136).

Apart from delineating such socio-political and religious conflicts, Mistry also portrays the inner psychological conflict in relation to the immigration to Canada. Through the character of Yezad, he provides his view on an immigrant's dream. Having experienced marginalization and witnessing Mr. Kapur and Husain's tragic fates and tired by his own financial crisis, Yezad is eager to emigrate to Canada, for there he can get "clean cities, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone" (*Family* 131). He works hard for four weeks on writing an impressive application for the purpose of immigration. His dream of immigrating to Canada, however, has been thwarted by unfair interview practices at the Canadian High Commission. Mistry shows that Yezad's wish to settle down in a foreign country has two parts : dream and reality. It is, however, the reality component that compels Yezad to abandon his desire to leave India. His father-in-law, Nariman Vakeel, appreciates Yezad's decision and remarks that "... emigration is an enormous mistake. The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills" (246). Unlike Rushdie, who celebrates an immigrant's dream to cross border and migrate to an alien land, Mistry possesses a negative attitude towards the question of immigration as amply shown by the case of Yezad. In his narrative discouse, therefore, Mistry often looks back at his lost homeland with nostalgia and still yearns for his

Parsi roots in Bombay.

Though Mistry depicts social strife in the Bombay of mid-1990s, his focus in *Family Matters* remains on the picture of Parsi protagonist Nariman whose guilt-ridden past is narrated in flash-back technique with italics. Nariman is a patriarchal figure who is presented in the novel through Jehangir's eyes. Jehangir is Yezad and Roxana's younger son and a grandson of Nariman. Murad is the elder son of the Yezad couple. Through these characters Mistry enacts the domestic strife of the Vakeel family vis-a-vis the social strife of contemporary India. Through this family Mistry tries to describe the petty family politics and its petty quarrels. In the past Nariman was in love with a Goan Christian Lucy Braganza and he had to undergo a lot of struggle with his first wife. At the end of this struggle, however, both Lucy and Nariman's first wife commit suicide. Nariman's parents then insist on his marrying a Parsi widow with two children – Jal and Coomy. Here Mistry has articulated the theme of conflict in terms of inter-religious marriage and shows that like most other orthodox people in India, the Parsis are also very keen in the marriage within their own fold. In a kind of re-writing of history in the family, however, which is the main irony of the history, Nariman's grandson Murad also falls in love with a Marathi girl and becomes a cause of concern for his father Yezad. At first a liberal fellow, Yezad gradually gravitates towards becoming an orthodox and zealot Zoroastrian. He starts going to Parsi *agiary* and begins worshipping the fire there. He stops reading other secular books and reads only Parsi religious scriptures and histories. In this way the enclosures of his own Parsi community and religion take precedence over the life of Yezad. When young Jehangir asks him why a Parsi cannot marry a non-Parsi and what law prevents this, Yezad curtly says "... the law of bigotry" (*Family* 40). What is thus initially believed by Yezad ironically boomrangs on him only when he himself turns a religious bigot

and opposes to Murad's love-affair with a *ghatti* girl. In contrast to the opening of the Parsi psyche at the end of *Such a Long Journey*, *Family Matters* reverts back to the more confined and therefore more secure Parsi roots. The reason for this may be attributed to the atrophy syndrome of Parsi community in the strife-torn ethos of Bombay which has been assaulting on their identity as Parsis here. Elesewhere in Canada, the author Mistry himself finds the problems of racism and xenophobia and it might be enough reason for him to return to his Parsi community and therefore he centralizes his community in his fictional discourse.

In the words of a reviewer, *Family Matters,* "[At] its best .... possesses the communal intimacy of an R. K. Narayan story combined with the humour and wry affection of V.S.Naipaul's classic, *A House for Mr.Biswas*" (Kakutani 77). In other words, whereas his preceding novels focus on the much wider canvas of nation's history, *Family Matters* confines its narrative to the much narrower canvas of domestic family feud. Bharucha points out that "...the central motif of *Family Matters* is the jigsaw puzzle that the boy [Jehangir] tries to fit together, much like he tries to puzzle out the quarrels and power politics that rock his family..."(169). At the end, however, the narrative of the novel ends in a rather optimistic note by suggesting that as long as there are people like Mr.Kapur and little Jehangir, among others, there is still some hope for this ever-changing world.

Like the collection of his short-stories, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry's novels also express his ambivalent feelings and attitudes towards his Parsi community. His works, therefore, exhibit the consciousness of his community as though it were a protagonist which hurtles human protagonists back into the background. Dr.A.K.Singh has rightly noted that Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* "... deals with the Parsi community and its identity..." (qtd. in

Dodiya 5). *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* also focalize on the search for Parsi identity and juxtapose it with the larger issues of history and culture. In depicting such issues, Mistry employs the simple mode of realism. Sometimes he makes use of the stream of consciousness technique which he does in *Family Matters* when old Nariman re-members his past life with Lucy. Overall, however, he relies much more on simple story with living and interesting characters.

Apart from narrating a well-knit story, Mistry has a penchant for creating nicely-etched characters. His Parsi characters like Kersi, Gustad, Dina Dalal and Yezad, among others, are realistically portrayed and they sound every inch representative Parsis. They are full of anger, bitterness, but at the same time they also give out their sincerity and sweetness of warm feelings and fine sentiments. They adhere to their Zoroastrian faith very tenaciously, but they are also full of generosity and charity. Bharucha, on the other hand, maintains that Mistry's "... protagonists display all the ethno-religious details of *navjotes*, *behram roj* celebrations, *agiary*-goings, *Kusti*-weavings, etc., but none of the positive thinking that kept this tiny community going through 1,300 odd years in an Indian sub-continental space..." (118). Perhaps the reason for this negative attitude may be attributed to the fact that during these 1,300 odd years, they have remained tolerant and passive to the other faiths, but now they no longer want to be assimilated fully to them and therefore in the context of globalization vis-a-vis religious revival, they also want to assert their distinctive Parsi voice which gets articulated in their seeming negativity.

To sum up, therefore, one may venture to say that Mistry's fiction attempts to re-invent the Parsi community in interface with the history of Indian sub-continent by re-possessing their own history and thereby retrieving their distinctive Parsi identity. At the same time it

also combines this issue with the factors of migration and memory; with the fact of being an exile in one's own land and problematising the notion of 'home'. In the final analysis, therefore, Mistry's writing attempts to capture the cultural moment in the life of his Parsi community. In Qurratulain Hyder, also, one becomes familiar with the history of the nation, but whereas Mistry focuses on his Parsi ethos more specifically, Hyder attempts to bring in focus the loss of syncretic culture between the Hindus and Muslims in her fictional discourse which has been discussed in the last chapter.

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