

Parsi Consciousness in Rohinton Mistry's Fiction

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Fiction does not create facts, fiction can come from facts,
it can grow out of facts. -Rohinton Mistry

Abstract

Rohinton Mistry is one of the most celebrated new wave fiction writers of Indian writing in English. Mistry is a well-known name for his heritage fiction and Parsi consciousness. As being a Parsi, Mistry seems to be more concerned with his community and its diminishing numbers like their symbol bird vultures. Parsi is one of the most educated communities all around the world and famous for their sense of charities yet with each passing year this one of the oldest religious communities is facing the threat of extinction; and this threat put each and every Parsi writers on their toes to preserve their culture through their writings, and the fiction of Rohinton Mistry is also no exception to this thought. Mistry tried his level best to put Parsi life as it is with their core consciousness and dilemmas on paper.

Keywords: Rohinton Mistry, Parsi, Consciousness, Identity, Culture, Heritage, Vulture

Parsis are on the verge of extinction like their loving vultures with each passing day, and this threatening situation is compelling the Parsi writers like Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy, Dina Mehta, Cyrus Mistry, Boman Desai, and Rohinton Mistry to reflect their community and their way of living for the world and let their books to open the closed door of their culture to the outsiders which is not allowed even in their Fire Temples. Bombay born eminent diasporic writer Rohinton Mistry is trying to paint a living testament of Parsi life through his intense but colourful fiction like *Tales from Firozshah Baag*, *Such a Long Journey*; *A Fine Balance*, *Family Matters*.

Rohinton Mistry born and brought up in the Bombay (now Mumbai) based deeply religious family and Parsi locality. His family belongs to the middle-class society like the majority of Indian families. His parents would not have many riches but still they manage to provide their children a good education. In his early days he wanted to become a folk singer like Bob Dylan; that failed very badly but that is music which caused his meeting with his wife

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Freny Elavia and later prime cause of his migration to Canada. Though they both are studying in the University of Bombay, their interest for music attracts them closer to each other. The enticing effect of music on Mistry made his degree suffer but Freny completed her degree a year before him and migrated to Canada, as Mistry remembers:

I was in a folk-singing act à la Bob Dylan; I gave performances and for a while even regarded it as a possible career. Because of that and other distractions, I took longer to complete my last year, so Freny graduated ahead of me. She had already decided to emigrate to Canada. It was difficult letting her go, but the understanding was that I should follow next year. She had some family there and I knew she'd be looked after properly. (Lambert)

In 1975, Mistry made up his mind to follow Freny to Canada. It was not an easy decision to make, but before the heart no argument prevails; Mistry and Freny were married in Canada soon after he joined her. After many unsuccessful attempts, Mistry got a clerical job in the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in Toronto that secured his family but he was sensing some sort of lacking in his life; that made him at University of Toronto, and by some chance Mistry started writing short stories. When Mistry start writing his fiction, the first picture that strike into his creative mind would be his own childhood and his very close-knitted small world among the Parsi community; as other Parsi writers Mistry also very sensitive about his religious hemisphere, and that shaped up his first short-story collection, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*; it is a collection of eleven connected short stories of residents of Firozsha Baag apartment in Bombay; all of them are Parsi and represent their consciousness and their dilemmas as well as their aspirations. Though Mistry starts writing in diaspora therefore, the sense of migration is reflected throughout his collection.

This success collection provides Mistry the real creative wings and that imagination resulted as Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* in 1991. Once again, his debut novel is set in Bombay during the freedom struggle of Bangladesh from Pakistan; the setting of the story is historical but Parsi consciousness is dominant throughout. The story of migration is always in the heart of Parsi pen, and for Mistry depiction of Parsi aspiration and ethos the more important; Mistry knows that there is nothing new in this cosmos, just details are different, he himself claims, "No matter where you go in the world, there is only one story: of youth, and loss, and yearning for redemption. So, we tell the same story, over and over. Just the details are different" (SLJ 228).

In the case of Parsi the details that matters the most is Parsi milieu; Mistry's magnum opus *A Fine Balance* proved it once again, set in "an unidentified city" in India, symbolically Bombay; it started with the most chaotic time of Indira Gandhi's regime, the declaration of the State of Internal Emergency in 1975 and ends with the assassination of Indira Gandhi as well as of the Parsi protagonist in 1984 during the mayhem of Emergency. Mistry's third novel *Family Matters* published in 2002; and as usual, Mistry revived the Parsi version of King Lear; the narration is set in Mistry's Mumbai with the domestic Parsi King Nariman's tragic tale in domestic Parsi fibre and usual middle-class life and challenges in India. In all four books Mistry

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seems to be more concerned about the dying Parsi cultural heritage, that is the question of their existence, as Mistry unlocks his consciousness toward his diminishing numbers through inspector Masalavala in *Family Matters*, he articulated the whole story of his vanishing community, Mistry narrates, “To think that we Parsis were the ones who built this beautiful city and made it prosper. And in a few more years, there won’t be any of us left to tell the tale.” “Well, we are dying out, and Bombay is dying as well.” (FM 416)

The problem is deeply rooted into their migratory history and diasporic spirit; Parsi, one of the oldest monotheism communities of the world, is facing the threat of extinction from the world. Once known for its riches and flourishing culture of Persia (now Iran) is once again facing the existential question after the centuries; it was the time when last Parsi king Yezadgird Shehriar was defeated by Islamic forces as narrated by the *Qissa-i Sanjan*, that was the time when these barbaric Arab invaders acquired full control over Persia, they compelled Parsis to leave their homeland or convert to Islam, as a hobson’s choice the another extraordinary journey of exile took place in the history of mankind after Jews from Jerusalem, Parsis had to migrate from their homeland with their faith in Prophet Zoroaster and his teachings. Like Jews, Parsis also came to India in search of a safe shelter between the 8th and 10th century AD; though it was a long time ago but the whole story is deeply rooted into the consciousness of Rohinton Mistry and his fellow Parsi writers that never allowed them to settle down. IOM Glossary on Migration is also expressing the sense of loss in its definition of migration, it says:

Migrants or descendants of migrants whose identity and sense of belonging, either real or symbolic, have been shaped by their migration experience and background. They maintain links with their homelands, and to each other, based on a shared sense of history, identity, or mutual experiences in the destination country. (IOM Glossary on Migration, 2019: 49)

In Indian context, Parsis got comfortably assimilated to the society and came to a mutual understanding with the host civilization, and got indigenized with time. Now, Gujarat is their homeland and Bombay is their second home like Jews; despite the fact their forced exile is still haunting them, and not letting them settle that is why Parsis are still living as a diasporic creature. McKittrick aptly observes, “Homeland, therefore, is theorized as simultaneously material and metaphoric in order to bring into focus how diaspora spaces are produced through violence” (McKittrick 156).

Forced eviction from their motherland is still a matter of graver concern for Parsi community; it is never an easy task to come over such a violent history; the permanent removal of the community against their will from the homes creates a chronic wound that never allow them to settle down similarly Parsi are wandering with their portable roots. As V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar claims, “The Parsees prefer the West since it offers unlimited scope for growth and prosperity. Dislocation is part of the Parsee psyche” (Kumar 14).

Mistry is also part of this psyche. His fictions are trying to express this highly metaphoric understanding of his migratory experience. Jamshed and Kersi, two characters from *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, are highly motivated to migrate from India for their better future

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because for most of the Parsi migration is the only way out to this land of chaos and being migrated to “the land of milk and honey” (TFB 168); but the experience of each individual is different as Peter Morey observes:

Jamshed cannot wait to leave India, a country he views disdainfully as mired in dirt, poverty and corruption and, thus a lost cause. Later, when they are both ensconced in North America, Jamshed sends Kersi a letter describing the incommensurable horrors of a recent two-week visit he had made to Bombay. (Morey 57)

The craving for emigration and migration is essential part of the consciousness of Parsi community, and that is why most of the Parsi writers are diaspora like Mistry; though they settled down in the foreign soil but still writing about their homeland as their tales of nostalgia, and their first hand experiences make their narrations real and impressive as Devendra Kumar Maurya describes Mistry in his article “Diaspora and hybridity in the fiction of Rohinton Mistry”:

Being a Parsi immigrant Rohinton Mistry has gone through a number of immigrant experiences both in homeland and in the host country thus the source of his characters and their marginality in the post-colonial space is based on first-hand experience and true to its nature. (Maurya 19)

Somewhere, it is true that most of Indians desire to migrate to some western countries for their American Dreams, and as being an Indian Mistry realises this common aspiration of his community, as Mistry observes, “The immigration story used to have two parts: dream and reality. But over the years the dream - of prosperity, house, car, CD player, computer, clean air, snow, lakes, mountains, abundance” (FM 248).

Being a diaspora Mistry knows all the blurring boundaries between the reality and dream that is why he shares the Canadian dream of Parsi community with American aspiration in his fiction through characters, at times, as Yezad’s dream of his immigration in *Family Matters* and Gustad’s dream for his elder son Sohrab in *Such a Long Journey*. Mistry also describes the intensity of the dream, when Gustad’s son dropped his IIT admission and refused to his father’s dream to send his son to USA, Gustad desperately feels:

What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It is going to be like the black people in America – twice as good as the white man to get half as much. How could he make Sohrab understand this? How to make him realize what he was doing to his father, who had made success of his son’s life the purpose of his own? Sohrab had snatched away that purpose, like a crutch from a cripple. (SLJ 55)

Mistry always provides space to such a common diasporic zeal for immigration of Parsi protagonists in all his stories; to dream for a better future is always present in the consciousness of every one, and as an Indian family persona Mistry never failed to describe a common Indian man’s deeper longing of migration for a brighter future for their family in his narrations, as in his *Family Matters* Yezad describes:

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His dream for an end to this apeman commute had led him to apply for immigration to Canada. He wanted clean cities, clean air, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone, where people stood in line at bus stops and said please, after you, thank you. Not just the land of milk and honey, also the land of deodorant and toiletry. (FM 137)

The observation of such intense migratory feeling is the key impression of Mistry's writings; even though Mistry is not denying that migration in most of the contexts can be associated with greater vulnerability of affected people and communities, particularly if it is forced like Parsi and Jews. This sense of loss and pain can never be amended, and Parsi knows this better because their forced and brutal migration create the vacuum that not seems to be fill in even after the centuries; Mistry describes this pain of losing home and consider that one the biggest mistakes of one's life to decide to emigrate, as his protagonist Nariman describe: Immigration is a recurring theme in Mistry's fiction from his short stories to the latest novel Family Matters where Yezad narrates to his two sons his unsuccessful experiences with bureaucracy in his young adolescent days as he attempted to go to the West. Thus, expectations about the inevitability of migration are very strong. But he can neither feel his brother's nationalist commitment nor Jamshed's alienation. His migration is a pre-ordained trajectory that he undertakes, not out of enthusiasm but because it has to be. "Emigration is an enormous mistake. The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills" (FM 254).

When narrating the place in which the Parsi sub-culture lives, Mistry introduces the reader with an image of an arid place, a place with blocks, which led me to envision the compound as a sort-of prison, with cell blocks and an iron gate where the watchman stood (730). The fact that Mistry integrates words from his native language within the English text further illustrates the need of a postcolonial writer to subtly resist the expected approval to the language of the master (Shakespeare's Caliban example) in order to be beatified into the realm of Canadian literature. This shows the pain which is still aching somewhere in the heart of Mistry as a part of Parsi community, that never allows him to settle peacefully neither in India nor in Canada; that is why to some extent Mistry compares himself with Tiresias, Mistry claims: "I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come to Toronto".

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