

Rohinton Mistry as a Postcolonial Novelist

Dr. Jagdish Batra

Rohinton Mistry, an Indian Parsi writer who settled in Canada some four decades ago, is a product of postcolonial times. Beginning with *Tales from Ferozsha Baag*, a collection of short stories, Mistry has written till date three major novels, viz., *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* besides a novella *Scream*. In all these fictional works, the community of Indian Parsis is mainly in focus.

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Postcolonialism, which started with the theorization of the struggles of the colonized people for freedom, has indeed come a long way. India was among those who fought this battle against the erstwhile British rulers. Gandhi, not only led the struggle in the first-ever successful non-violent experiment, but he also formulated ideas for a postcolonial society in India. His innate spirituality enabled him to see all as equal and therefore, the idea of subjugation whether by an alien power or by our own people of fellow subalterns was an anathema to him. He was equally emphatic about the native culture which was reflected in his espousal of village industry and the concept of Ram-rajya. It is a pity that he did not live long enough and moreover, those who claimed to be his heirs so smoothly overlooked his philosophy and indulged in the same kind of politics which the British practised so that the plight of the subalterns in our society today is easily subsumed by the wider postcolonial theory that rocks the world today.

Sometime later in Africa, Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor talked of the Black identity that had been suppressed by the colonizers. Franz Fanon theorized that constant negative portrayal of the native by the colonizer led the former to believe in the very lies that the latter propagated about them. The native even tries to mimic western cultural practices and don 'white mask' though he fails in the attempt, but all the same, it points to the cultural domination. It was left to the Arab scholar Edward Said to analyze the skewed Orientalist approach of the colonizer which revealed the imperialist agenda in the garb of documenting knowledge of the native land and its people. In the 1990's, the Indian academic Homi Bhabha, modified the concept of mimicry to incorporate hybridity in it. The mimicry, he said, by the native is not complete even though he tries colonizer's ways, logic etc., rather it is and deep down it is disobedience and mockery. This is hybridity. The hybridized native is between his adopted Englishness and original Indian-ness – a state of in-between-ness. It was left to Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak to raise the fundamental problem of inadequacy of representation of the subaltern because he was not heard, nor did he have the clout or power gained through English language. All representation of the third world is, at present, a Western discourse, she opined. So, the colonizer/colonized relationship got imposed on the majority/minority or the powerful/weak binaries operating in the postcolonial independent countries.

Along the line somewhere, the pre-colonial narrative also fitted in with the postcolonial globalized world where the diasporic community that is pitted in a cultural clash against the host country where it seeks habitation for a longer duration or forever. Bhabha felt that the migrant's double consciousness – of the land left behind and the one adopted now – or hybridity rejects single identity or purity, for it adapts culture to present-day conditions. Home to the Diasporic is forever lost; it is a mythic place of desire. Therefore, the diasporic narratives show nostalgia, exile, loss, rootlessness, in-between-ness etc. It tries to build 'imaginary homelands' as Salman Rushdie put it beautifully.

The identity of Parsis, who were one of the earliest races to be divested of their homeland and led on to establish a diaspora in India, too had to adjust to the new conditions. Theirs is one of the oldest civilizations on this earth. They have had a glorious past, much like and connected with

our own. The people of ancient Iran belonged to the Indo-European branch of the Aryans and their history goes as far back as 2000 B.C., when Zarathustra, the Prophet of ancient Iran is believed to have been born. Some of the heroes of this community whose names are sung with gusto by the Parsis even now are Cyrus the Great, King Khushrau I also called Nowshirwan-i-Adil, King Khushrau II who attacked Jerusalem in 614 AD and captured 50000 Christians and King Darius who introduced banking – a preserve of the Parsis even now. Mistry is not given to gloating over this past; only cursorily does he refer to it. Whereas in his novel *Family Matters*, Mistry makes Nariman Vakeel tell his grandson about the glory of the ancient Iran, in his story ‘Swimming Lessons’, the protagonist is asked to write stories about this glorious past by his parents, but Kersi, Mistry’s alter ego by all accounts, does not heed the advice.

The exodus of the Parsis to India started after the invasion of ancient Persia by the Arab Muslims. It continued from 785 to 1021 A.D. and they settled on the Gujarat coast under an agreement with the local ruler. The Parsis have faithfully kept their word in not hurting the local sentiments and their reputation as peaceful, industrious people contributing to the uplift of their adopted land is well established. Therefore, when the name of one of them – Nagarwala, to be precise, is implicated in a conspiracy hatched by powerful politicians, Mistry feels pained and tries to set the record straight in *Such a Long Journey*.

The issue of identity, therefore, tops the agenda of the Parsi community. This identity based on cultural and religious distinction is delineated but what makes Mistry’s fiction truly post-colonial in treatment is the centering of the peripheral lower-middle section of the Parsis. The conspicuous presence of the Parsis in all areas of life can be marked even though their number is around fifty thousand only in our country. And yet, apart from the rich and the famous, there is the middle-class Parsi whose clout earned during the Raj days has gone down enormously leading to equalization of sorts with the millions in the country but with a more acute sense of loss. Dinshawji’s nostalgic comment, “Those were the days, yaar. Parsis were the kings” (SALJ 87) is symptomatic of the sense of loss. Nilufer Bharucha aptly remarks: “In decolonized India, the exalted position enjoyed by the Parsis during the Raj has been eroded and increasing dominance by the majority Hindu community has marginalized them. Parsis today are trying to reorient themselves to this new much reduced role” (42).

As a postcolonial writer, Mistry’s sympathies lie with Gustad and Yezad. They are the ones who have to support their families with limited income. Gustad has to sell off his camera to get treatment for his daughter; his son’s birthday is celebrated quite frugally with one guest, viz., Dinshawji. Yezad’s wife keeps monthly income apportioned in different envelopes so that she does not exceed the monthly budget allocation for different expenditures. His son considers it his duty to support his father and starts accepting petty bribe from class-mates in return for okaying their homework as monitor of the class. His other son walks home from school to save the bus money.

The decolonized societies were also rendered economically weak, so we have the focus not on the Tatas and the Wadias, the likes of whom are to be found as islands of prosperity in any society, but on the common Parsi who is beset with the problems similar to the ones which ordinary Indian middle-class citizen faces in day-to-day life. Through the life histories of characters like Gustad Noble, Dina Dalal and Yezad, Mistry establishes a hitherto unknown identity of the common Parsi. He takes pains to attract the attention of his erstwhile compatriots as also of the world at large towards these Parsis subsisting at the margins and dreaming of making it big in foreign countries like Canada, if not in India.

The issue of identity assumes another important dimension. The decolonized and ravaged societies do not find strength in piles of gold but in the number of their people. Mistry is aware of the dwindling number of Parsis the world over. The total population of the Parsis in India has gone down from one lac in 1961 to 75000 in 1987 census (Haldar 102) and is estimated to be around

60000 at present. In *Family Matters*, Dr. Fitter and Mr. Masalawala have a lively discussion on the issue of depleting numbers with the latter holding the opinion that in fifty years, there would be no Parsis left, and the former responding with a comic flair that their remains would be christened after the dinosaurs: “You (Jal) will be named Jalosaurus,” said Dr. Fitter. “I will be Shapurjisaurus. If they find my father’s bones, we will have a Pestonjisaurus with a pugree on his head. And our inspector here, who loves his Scotch, will be the powerful Whiskysaurus, a magnum of Blue Label tucked under his arm.” (FM 412) There is no other reason as powerful as the injunction against inter-race marriage that is responsible for it. Mistry points to the need to review this stand through his powerful portrayal of the unsuccessful love affair between Prof. Nariman and his Christian beloved Lucy leading to the tragic death of the latter. Mistry’s credentials in presenting the real picture cannot be questioned, for he is himself a member of this community. It is not an outsider who is representing the small community inhabiting the locality called Ferozsha Baag; it is the child Rohinton re-living his life in India.

It must also be noted that, Mistry’s subjects are not confined to Parsis only. His innate humanity compels him to extend the scope of postcolonial concern for the deprived and the downtrodden to his other compatriots also. In this, he challenges the master narrative of history. History, for Mistry is the history of the quotidian, as a critic points out with regard to his novel *A Fine Balance*: “Mistry, among his contemporaries, stands out as the master of the quotidian in view of his amazing grasp over little details and seemingly trivial incidents. He uses them to create a solid, recognizable India from the mid-40s to the mid-80s...” (Belliappa 210) The sufferings of the families of Om and Ishvar, for example, belonging to the Dalit community, are portrayed with genuine commiseration. How Ishvar’s father is burnt along with other family members for daring to cast his ballot during elections and thus affronting the village politico Dharamsi. In Bombay, Om and Ishvar have to pass nights on pavements and days in a forced labour camp of the dreaded Emergency regime under the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Mistry was critical of the way the Indira Gandhi government sought to malign Mr. Nagarwala, a Parsi officer working with the RAW, who was made a scapegoat in the infamous episode. He felt it was an effort to silence the voice of the marginal by an imperial centre and in believing this he was not alone. State is seen as replicating the oppressive imperialist structures even though those wielding power have changed. Mistry has castigated the political leadership in his *A Fine Balance* for their macabre acts like the promulgation of Emergency as also in his *Family Matters* for the Shiv Sena’s parochial sons-of-the-soil policy. How such ill-advised steps of the politicians affected the man in the street, has been graphically illustrated in his novels. This type of political bungling hurts the sensitivities of the genteel Parsi population and they cherish dreams of settling abroad as Yezad does.

The postcolonial times have seen the rise of the hitherto suppressed people but the political class which inherited the right to rule hardly changed its imperialist modus operandi. It replicated the institution of a colonial centre in the newly liberated societies. To neutralize the threat of radical agency, the centre of power dispensed freebies/subsidies rather than educating and making the suppressed classes which effectively functioned as opium of the masses, as Marx would put it. This approach was adopted wherever the potential of vote was observed by the rulers holding reins of power in a democratic country. Where a community lacked the vote-power as was the case of the ordinary Parsis, they were simply neglected. True, the Parsi community has a number of rich mascots as also those who have reached the top rungs of administrative or professional careers, but Mistry’s concern is the lower middle class of the Parsis, who do not have any political clout as can be seen from the fall of the boundary wall in *Such a Long Journey* or the divesting of dwellings of Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance*.

Mistry is concerned about the present plight of the Parsis. He builds the Parsi identity based on race and religion. Identity is the major marker in day-to-day life as also in the long-term philosophy of life. Therefore, the opening scene in *Such a Long Journey* begins with the chief character Gustad Noble offering morning prayers to the tying and untying of *kusti*. *The Tales from*

Ferozsha Baag has snapshots of the life in a Parsi enclave – a version of life captured through the eyes of a teenager and therefore fitting in with the nostalgic view of the writer. In *Family Matters*, the procedure for normal fire worship at an *agiary* is mentioned in detail. Again, the celebration of the *Behram roje*, the Parsi New Year is the theme of the story ‘One Sunday’ in *Tales from the Ferozsha Baag*. While *A Fine Balance* carries brief description of Dina’s wedding, the detailed narration of death rituals occurs almost in each one of these works.

Concerned as he is about the image of his community, Mistry draws the picture of ideal Parsi characters. Most of his leading characters are fighters and strugglers against the imperial centre. If it is Billimoria in *Such a Long Journey* who suffers because of an unscrupulous Prime Minister, in *A Fine Balance*, Om and Ishvar are pitted against the local chieftain and in *Family Matters*, it is Mr. Kapoor with his ideal of a cosmopolitan man fit to lend grace to the city of Bombay. Mistry’s Parsi characters with their Parsi lifestyle, food, rituals, mannerism etc. establish the Parsi identity firmly. Gustad Noble, true to his name, transcends the self and remains unshaken in the face of countless vicissitudes of life – a son turning hostile, an ailing daughter, the pin-pricks of the neighbours and the unsavoury and overmuch risky adventure foisted upon him by his one-time friend Major Bilimoria. In the end, he is seen tearing the black paper off the windowpanes in a symbolic move to let into his home the light from ‘outside’. There is no need for fear hereafter, as he is confident of the indestructibility of his distinct identity even in the midst of this sea of multitudes. There is another sensitive youth Percy in *Tales from Ferozsha Baag*. He is moved by the plight of poor village dwellers in India. So, he devotes his life to serving the poor. Focus on the subaltern is a prominent characteristic of postcolonial literature.

Similarly, Dina Dalal of *A Fine Balance* is a picture of a Parsi woman. She is rendered a widow at an early age and her snobbish brother tries to lord over her. But she chooses to lead an independent life and braves the odds as a courageous woman till she enters a dead alley. Rebuffed by her own brother, she finds security in her Hindu employees – Om and Ishvar. They had to go to village to get a bride for Om but as ill luck would have it, on the way they were accosted by Dharamsi, a shrewd politico from their own village who had unleashed havoc on their family. He was now in charge of a family planning camp, a euphemism for the forcible vasectomy camps of the emergency days. Om offended him by spitting in his face and the former, like a typical colonial master that he was, only took vengeance on him and bobbitized Om, putting to rest forever his dreams of fathering a child. We see the duo as beggars towards the end of the novel. Their plight betokens the battered bruised and brutalized nations brought to this state by the colonial masters before they had to grant independence in the face of long, drawn-out nationalist movements. But they do struggle even if they do not win, they put up a brave fight all along.

Essentializing and homogenizing has always been suspect in the eyes of the postcolonial writers and thinkers. It was with regard to the Western colonialists that the people living in colonies were poorly defined. Their identity, and indeed their history were determined by the colonial master with a view to gaining control over them. The different identity markers based upon various parameters were sought to be glossed over and they were stereotyped in an effort to make knowledge of the subject easy. Postcolonialism, quite naturally, would look for removing this imbalance. The total emphasis now is on differences and particularities.

In presenting a scheming Yezad with the noble Gustad, Mistry situates his Parsi characters in the liminal space and refrains from viewing the world as totally black or white. In the *Tales*, we do meet a number of characters who evoke aversion -- like Rustomji or Khorshedbai. Yezad, in *Family Matters*, is not such a one who could take his place with the sublime figures talked about in the preceding paragraphs. He has yielded to the temptation and taken the devil’s path. And though he realizes his mistake after it is too late, poetic justice lands him in a limbo where even constant praying does not bring peace of mind, either to him or to his near and dear ones. The reaction from his son is not totally unwarranted when he fails to find the father that Yezad used to be. In

comparison, the Hindu businessman Mr. Kapoor, Yezad's employer, appears to be an ideal character. He is a true cosmopolitan figure and in picking him Mistry too has transcended his restricted choice of characters, for goodness knows no such bounds.

During the period of colonization, a number of societies in the world lost their cultural moorings – their language, their lifestyle, their religions etc. It happened in several African nations where the colonizers so dominated the natives that the latter forgot many constituents of their own culture. The post-colonial Mozambique or Guinea speak not their native tongues but Portuguese and French respectively. Creole developed in several constituents of the West Indies. During the British rule in India, the western influence cast its shadow on the Parsis, who, as businessmen, felt obliged to befriend the rulers by mimicking their lifestyle. The proximity also spilled over to the political field. Some prominent Parsi merchants helped British rulers but the British merely used them. Apart from the British, there were also the French and the Portuguese, ruling the coastal areas. The Parsi entrepreneurs often acted as mediators between different parties. This also helped the Parsis in securing government jobs. The Christian missionaries were greatly facilitated in their work by the ruling class at that time. With the rise of the national sentiment in India, the Hindus preferred not to send their children to educational institutions run by the missionaries but the Parsis did not have any such scruples with the result that their children became more proficient in English than others. There were occasions for social interaction also. The British and the Parsis enjoyed games like cricket and golf in 'Only Whites' gymkhanas. The continued proximity of the Parsis to the Englishmen impacted the daily lifestyle of the Parsis. While the Parsis mimicked the Europeans to the extent that they alienated the other communities in India, ambivalence was reflected in a section of them like Dadabhai Nauroji, Kamagatamaru et al who fought alongside the nationalists for the freedom of the country. It also created a chasm between the Parsis and other communities in India which continues till now despite significant contribution made to the freedom struggle as also to the current nation building by a number of Parsis.

The Parsis in colonial India imbibed the English language and lifestyle due to their proximity to the rulers. Mistry takes note of the western impact to complete the identity portrayal of the Parsis. "Whether it is the surfeit of English rhymes and song-lines in *Such a Long Journey*, the birthday celebrations in *pucca* English style in *Family Matters*; the handling of love-sick Lucy by a married Professor or the way of addressing his father-in-law as 'chief' by Yezad in *Family Matters*, English culture seems to have permeated the Parsi lifestyle to a great extent" (Batra 119). Alcohol consumption by women and young boys at home is not frowned upon, which is contrary to the norms practised in traditional Indian families. Thus, on the occasion of Roshan's birthday, Dilnavaz takes a few sips from her son Darius' beer glass (SALJ 46). The elderly lady Tehmina is hooked on to her evening scotch and soda and the Boyce family keeps its weekly supply of beef in Najamai's refrigerator (TFFB 26).

It is here that in a mirror-image of Bhabha's concept of ambivalent mimicry, the Parsis are seen interacting with their Hindu compatriots. The Parsis' equation with other Indians, as portrayed in Mistry's fiction, appears problematized. The Parsis consider themselves a cut above the 'ghatis' (stereotypical term used for the subalterns among 'others' by a Parsi character in *Family Matters*). The writer "transforms the discourse of power and hegemony from the selective organization of postcolonial nationhood, such as exposed in *A Fine Balance*, to the circumscribed and private world of the family group. As a consequence he depicts the dark side of the nostalgic return to tradition and cultural (or religious) heritage" (Monti 18). It may not be seen as colonial hangover because class distinctions are a common feature in other countries too. So, the Parsis continue to view themselves as educated, cultured and advanced professionals, different from 'other' Indians.

It is not only the message but the medium also that partakes of the postcolonial mindset of the author. The use of language is an example, in which numerous Gujarati and Hindi words find place. Words denoting food, dress, race, even abuse are used with abandon as the following list

would show: *dhansak, bhaiya, choti, choola-vaati, arre, goover-ni-gaan* etc. There are also Hindi expressions like ‘chaalo, time for drinks’ (SALJ 58), ‘Theek hai, theek hai’ (SALJ 59) and verbatim representation of use of English phrases by semi-literate people, as for example, ‘woman trouble’ (36) in *Such a Long Journey*. In fact, Mistry has nativized English in a big way in this novel. Look at the sentences like ‘In every gully-gootchy, *yaar*, in the dark, or under the stairs, what, what went on’ (99)! We also find Indianism, as for example, the phrase ‘What to do?’ used very often by Ishvar in *A Fine Balance*. None of Mistry’s fictional works lags behind in this respect.

It may be pointed out here that when *Such a Long Journey* appeared in Canada and the readers there went through it, they felt difficulty in following Hindi/Gujarati words and usages and there was demand for a glossary of such words explaining meanings as an addendum to the novel, but Mistry did not oblige them. Probably, he felt it would be compromising the dignity of the erstwhile colonized to use ‘pure’ English of the colonizer. So, these words not only have an aesthetic role to play in the text, but also indicate the writer’s right to freedom in using English the way he deems fit. Through this gesture, Mistry seems to approve of the postcolonial view that the Indianized English language is not the colonizer’s language but one of the several ‘englishes’ used in these times to subvert the privileging of the colonial discourse, as Bill Ashcroft et al would say¹. It would be wrong to assume that Mistry’s use of English is meant to create a comic effect; it is to assert the identity of the postcolonial subject and to fine-tune the postcolonial mode of resistance whereby the hegemony of the master narratives of the West has been challenged.

To conclude, it can be stated that Rohinton Mistry’s representation of the Parsi race in the contemporary context, reflects his postcolonial leanings. The issue of identity has been taken up by a member of the race which has experienced dislocation and exile over a long period in history. Mistry’s call upon his co-religionists to shed some of their taboos like refraining from inter-race matrimonial alliances and to let in fresh air of other culture is a forward-looking step that deals a blow to the purist view of identity. As the developing genre of critical race studies shows, no race in the world can claim to be absolutely free from mixing up with the blood/DNA of other races.

Mistry stresses the need for the Parsis to transcend the ghetto mentality and to open up to the wider Indian social influence in his novel *Such a Long Journey* through the symbolic act of Gustad when he tears off the black paper pasted on the window panes of his house. However, he wishes to locate the meeting ground between the two communities in the current socio-economic reality rather than in the past cultural complex. He does not talk of the cultural links which existed even during pre-historic times between the two ancient civilizations of Persia and India, both of which have the common Aryan life-blood. There are many common points in the Parsi and Vedic rituals based upon the common Aryan lineage. Even now at the time of Parsi weddings, Sanskrit verses are recited. The harmony can be achieved through a fair understanding and relationship built on common ground in culture and not on socio-economic imperatives because the integration is largely an emotional affair. Further, history is witness to the fact that no minority has ever lost its distinct identity on this land by interacting with the mainstream Indian culture. From that standpoint, Mistry is barking up the wrong tree.

Notes

¹. ‘By appropriating the imperial language, its discursive forms and its modes of representation, post-colonial societies are able, as things stand, to intervene more readily in the dominant discourse, to interpolate their own cultural realities, or use that dominant language to describe those realities to a wide audience of readers’ (Ashcroft et al 20).

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