

## Indianness in the Novels of Rohinton Mistry with Reference to Culture & Tradition

Mrs. Priyambda Singh, Asst Prof (Humanities)  
Truba Group of Institutes, Bhopal (M.P)  
Mr. Vikas Jaoolkar, Head (English)  
Govt. Hamidia College, Bhopal (M.P)

### Abstract

Rohinton Mistry is an author belonging to Parsi community of Indian origin residing in Canada. He migrated to Canada in his early twenties as he wanted to become a Pop singer. He has confessed it even in various interviews that he migrated because it seems to be the fashion at his times. Youngsters of his generation used to migrate for better education, better career prospectus and other opportunities. Rohinton Mistry is one writer who basically deals with the themes of Immigration. Mistry is an author who is writing about a country namely India which he has seen and observed during his youth. Through his novels Mistry has beautifully expressed the pain and grief of immigrant writers who are born in India but staying away from their motherland. In all his works, Rohinton Mistry has not just written about India, but at the same time he has also revised and recalled the memories of his Parsi community also, as most of the characters of his novels are Parsi by religion. In all his novels the Parsi community is also shown as an outsider in Indian subcontinent.

**Key Words:** - Parsi, Migration, Diaspora,

### Introduction

As any other author of Diaspora Rohinton Mistry's writing reflects the Crisis of Self Identity and Aspects of Immigration. The following lines of an interview of Mistry show the pain of immigrant author.

*"Going to Canada, faced with the reality of Earning a living and realizing that although I had, up to that point in my life, Real books and listened to music that came From the west, there was a lot more Involved in living in the west. I felt very comfortable with the books and the music, but actually living in the west made that same music seem much less relevant in suddenly brought home to me very clearly the fact that I was imitating something that was not mine, that made no sense in terms Of my own life, my own reality." I was a stranger in that culture, Mistry exclaims. The galore of awards ( the common wealth writes prize for best book for "Such a Long Journey" in 1991, the Giller prize, the common wealth writers award, and the loss Angeles times book award for A Fine Balance and the Koriyama Pacific Rim book prize for fiction the Canadian authors associations Mosaic technologies inc. award for fiction, and the regional common wealth writers prize for best book for Family Matters) he has won in the years that followed did not alter his status as a second class citizen in the new land. The way you look, where you were born, these things are what will determine how you will be treated at certain airports," the celebrated Canadian author told audience at Toronto's international festival of authors"1*

**Mistry** is a writer with a deep insight in to human psyche, even all the political changes and up down is painted with all reality by **Mistry**. He is a great artist with pen and he has poured all his emotions on paper with all the reality in to it, be it the political affairs of India, or the religious issues. A conversation between a middle class Family in India about the corruption in the government from his third novel *Family Matters* shows **Mistry's** grip over Indian Political affairs:

*"Corruption is in the air we breathe, this nation specialized in turning honest people in to crooks right chief.*

*The answer, unfortunately is yes"*

*"The country has gone to the dogs and not well bred dogs either but pariahs".*

*"May be the BJP and Shiva Sena coalition will improve the things "said Jal" we should give them a chance Yezad laughed "If a poisonous snake was in front of you, would you give it a chance? These two parties encouraged the hindutva extremists to destroy the Babri mosque?"*

*"Yes, but that was \_"*

*"And what about all the hatred of minorities that Shiv Sena has spread for the last thirty years."*

*He paused to take a long swallow of his scotch and soda."2*

In his first novel *"Such long Journey"* **Mistry** has taken Gustad Noble a Parsi man as a protagonist, who is a

bank clerk; he was trapped in a government led conspiracy. With the same delicacy Mistry has portrayed the four desperate people who come to live together to fulfill their dreams in 1975 in his second novel *"A Fine Balance"*. **Mistry** has always been appreciated for his ability to paint all his characters with the colors of joy and sorrows. In his third novel *"Family Matters"* the plot centralizes on 79 years old Nariman Vakeel, who was a professor of English literature. In all his novels, Mistry has explored that side of India which is rarely seen anywhere in the literature.

*"The author is a product of environment social, political, economic, and historical but he is also a Thinking individual, who has the power to shape his ideas and influence others. Based on this conclusion it is logical to believe that what a writer writes is equivalent to the impact that society has made up on his mind but still scope remains for his initiative. He notes in his works the social reality and presents his suggestions for betterment and all this is deftly and aesthetically woven in to the texture of his work."*<sup>3</sup>

Mistry has chose Bombay as a background for all his novels and short stories. Mistry's characters lives in the place. Which are dark and dusty, and their lives are also filled with tragedy and difficulties. At the same time Bombay is also portrayed as an interesting city and is being loved by his characters especially in *"Family Matters"* Mr. Kapoor the owner of Bombay sports emporium and Yezad's boss is crazy about Bombay, he is ready to do anything for his lovingly and dear city. Even during discussions with Yezad, Mr. Kapoor expresses the pain and grief of partition also.

*"Sometimes, when Mr. Kapoor spoke about 1947 and Partition, Yezad felt that Punjabi migrants of a certain age were like Indian authors writing about that period, whether in realist novels of corpse filled trains or in the magic realist mid night muddles. All repeating the same catalogue of horrors about slaughter and burning rape and mutilation."*<sup>4</sup>

**Mistry** has enjoyed appreciation and accolade from critics at home front as well as universally. He is always looked upon as an author who is having a great concern for his society and he is very keen to bring all the follies and shortcomings of the system before his readers. This writing style of Mistry gives him a figure of Iconic author.

*"Such a long Journey"* was written by **Rohinton Mistry** in 1991, it was the first fully fledged novel by Mistry as before this he has written a collection of short stories.

*"Such a long Journey" (1991) is the first novel written by Rohinton Mistry, a writer of Indian Diaspora, who settled in Canada. Though the novel was published sixteen years after Rohinton Mistry had settled in Toronto, it has no trace of Canada. Rather, it reveals the author's deep concern for the Parsi's in India in particular, and for the development of post colonial India in general."*<sup>5</sup>

**Rohinton Mistry** won Governor Generals Award for fiction in English in Canada in 1991 and the commonwealth prize in 1992. It was also short listed for the Booker's prize in 1991. Through the story of protagonist, Gustad Noble the writer projects the socio- political turmoil in the sixties and the early seventies in India. The setting of the novel is at khodadad building which is a Parsi residential complex in Bombay. Though imaginary, it is based on real experiences of life. The backdrop has been taken from Indo-Pakistani war that helps the reader to understand the socio cultural scenario of that time. Protagonist Gustad's remembrance of his childhood days when his father was a rich man and his present experiences are closely linked to the contemporary political crisis. The crisis in Gustad life is rendered as a part of the corrupt dynastic rule that hardly bothered about the well being of the common people.

*"A noted Post Independence Parsi writer in English Rohinton Mistry shares both ethnocentric and minority discourse features which characterize Parsi literature. Being a small minority group in India, the Parsi are constantly being threatened by the possibility of being devoured by the dominant Hindu culture in India, their sense of insecurity and urge for removing identity crisis are artistically presented by Rohinton Mistry."*<sup>6</sup>

This novel was published after a long time as almost sixteen years after **Mistry** had settled in Toronto, but even then this novel contains not even an iota of Canadian flavor. In fact, it reveals his deep concern for the Parsi's in India and for the development of postcolonial India in general. *"Such a long journey"* acts as a window to the Parsi world to its readers, it gives us an idea about their life style, their culture, traditions food habit and other day to day habits. This novel starts with the protagonist Gustad Noble doing his prayers. He is depicted as a religious person who has been performing holy religious rites. He was shown reciting his kusti prayer and in background the sparrows are chirping as it's the morning time. The first scene also covers the description of the surrounding areas of khodadad building where Gustad is staying with his family. The novel is all about a middle class Parsi man and his complexities of life. His relation with his friends and the problems which he had to face due to the involvement of his friend in government scam is the subplot of the novel.

*In Such a Long Journey, the Parsi world gradually moves out of its self imposed isolation and interacts at the highest levels of finance and politics with the post colonial Indian world. 7*

“*A Fine Balance*”, is the second book by **Rohinton Mistry**, which is set in Mumbai between 1947 and 1977 during the era of emergency period, this book basically revolves around the four characters from different backgrounds Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji his nephew Omprakash Darji and the young student Maneck Kohlah. Mistry has expressed the views about the changes in the Indian society from about the date of independence in 1947 to the period of emergency. **Mistry** emerged with the criticism of Prime Minister of India during that time Mrs. Indira Gandhi, however the interesting fact is Gandhi is never referred by her name anywhere in the novel. The characters from various backgrounds are knitted together in different situation. The story mainly is all about four characters which includes Dina Dalal who was from a wealthy family. Her father was a doctor and she lost him when she was twelve years of age. Her mother was not capable of taking care for her, so now she was the responsibility of her brother Nusswan, the condition of Dina become abject when she was in her brother’s custody as she was asked forcefully to do all the household work which includes cooking, cleaning, washing and every small and big job related to his family or family members. Even she used to get good scolding and hitting at times from her brother, which gave birth to the rebellious attitude of Dina and then finally one fine day she left her house and got married to Rustom Dalal whom she met at a concert hall. Dina and Rustom were really happy to get each other and everything in their life was going smooth until one unfortunate day of their third wedding anniversary when Rustom Dalal met an accident and died. And now Dina had to again struggle for her living, she became a tailor under the Rustom’s surrogate parents as she does not wants to go back to her brother Nusswan. After working for around twenty years and doing complicated stitching and embroidery she started losing her eyesight, and now it was almost impossible for her to do the tailor work. She then met a lady Mrs. Gupta from a company called Au Revoir exports, who would buy readymade dresses for her company. Since Dina was jobless because of her poor eyesight so Mrs. Gupta offered her the proposal to get the dresses stitched and supply to her. Dina decided to hire tailor so that she can guide them and get her work done.

*Dina’s rebellion against the tyranny of her autocratic brother and traditionally accepted norms of her orthodox Parsi community reflects the change from old to the new ways of thinking in Bombay and India. The detailed account of the Parsi rites and rituals, and family relationships is a world of authentic ethnic revelations that one normally expects from a social historian or anthropologist. But Mistry provides these elements as the sauce to his main dish of India under Indira’s Emergency in A Fine Balance.8*

Dina then hired Ishvar and Omprakash to work for her. Ishvar and Omprakash family is part of a schedule caste (chamar caste) that is in to cured leather and was considered untouchable from the ages. Ishvar’s father always wanted his sons Ishvar and Narayan to do something else and so he started sending them to a Muslim tailor in a nearby village and hence they picked up it as a profession. Later on Narayan started his own tailor shop in the village itself, which was strongly disliked by the villagers including Thakur Dharamsi. Although Narayan has changed his profession and was not doing the usual work which was done by her other caste mates but still there was a pain and suffering deep in his heart which is reflected through the following lines, where he is opening his heart in front of his father Dukhi

*“How can you say that? So much has changed your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth. And look at your house, your’- ‘those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals’ ‘Those kinds of things take time to change’ ‘more than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, workshop in the temple, walk where I like.....*

*‘Son, those are dangerous things to want. You changed from chamar to tailor. Be satisfied with that: Narayan shook his head. ‘That was your victory’ 9*

Narayan is not happy with this only, now he even wants to cast his vote but for the same act he has paid the price of life of his family as well as his own life, as his whole family is burnt alive by Thakur and his men. Later on Ishvar along with his brother’s son Omprakash moved to Mumbai in search of the work. So Dina decided to hire them for the sewing work. At the same time Dina was also planning to have a paying guest, to generate more income for her rent. So she decides to have Maneck as her paying guest, since he was known to her as he was her friend’s Son. Maneck is another important character of the novel that is born and brought up at Kashmir but his Family wants to send him to a better place for his higher education. There are several instances in the novels where it has been shown that Maneck’s parents have high expectations from him and due to this his attachment from his family starts deteriorating. Even one incident during his school days upsets him a lot when he came to his home during school break he was asked to take care of his store for two days in his parents absence as they had to attend a wedding, since he was not liking the arrangement of the shop so he starts

implementing his ideas to change the look by changing the display of the store, he was very excited to know about his parents reaction on the same. But when they came back his Fathers reaction shocked him as his father was very angry over this change.

After the completion of his schooling, Maneck was sent to attend the college at Mumbai; he was interested in studying refrigeration and air conditioning. After reaching Mumbai he has to look for accommodation as he was an outsider and he does not have any relatives or friends there he has to stay at the student hostel. But the condition of the hostel was pathetic as the very first night had an encounter with cockroaches and vermin's. And then his neighbor, Avinash who stays in the adjacent room helped him by giving pesticide spray. And now they two were become friends they started spending time together, Avinash was a chess player and so Maneck also started developing a liking for chess. At the same time Avinash was also interested in politics and so he was the President of the student union in his college, he was the only person who was making him comfortable with the hostel environment and making his mind to stay at hostel. Even Avinash is smart enough to judge that Maneck is uncomfortable with the environment so he tells him.

*"I think that our sights, smell, taste, touch, are all calibrated for the enjoyment of a perfect world. But since the world is imperfect, we must put blinders on the senses. The world of the hosted is more than just imperfect. It's a gigantic deformity". 10*

The novel "Family Matters" is all about Nariman's life and the people around him subjection to increasing decay in physical health and stinging insults (revolving around his cost of medicine, lack of space and privacy, the daily routine of bedpans and urinals, sponge baths and bedsores) from his stepdaughter.

Very soon, the focus shifts to Roxana's household. With Nariman's inclusion, however, deterioration and decay creep into it. As Yezad comes to centre stage for the following part of the book, the author explores the problems faced by an average middle class family. Financial problems lure him and Jahangir towards greed and money.

The subplot of the book, where Yezad is involved in scheming and planning to dethrone his employer acts as the turning point in the main story. At the last youngest of all characters, Jahangir, becomes the narrator, and he describes the metamorphosis that religion, age, death, and wealth bring to his family.

"Family Matters" is one of the finest piece of work by Mistry. The protagonist of the novel Nariman Vakeel has various shades in his character. Right from his adulthood he was shown as a very loving person. He was madly in love with a non Parsi girl Lucy. Nariman was a professor of English literature and in his real life he was living the love stories of the subject which he was teaching. But in India it is commonly practiced that the children have to marry according to the wish of their parents. So the same was the tragedy with Nariman, he was independent, earning well he was not grown up enough to take the most important decision of his life that was marriage. Initially he was in no mood to accept the proposal but at lost he had to surrender in front of his parents.

*"Congratulations, Marzi Said Mr.Kotwal to his father."*

*"After eleven years of battle you win!"*

*'Better late than never', said Mr. Burdy but fortune always favors the bold. Remember the fruits of patience are sweet and all's well that ends well."*11

The above quoted lines are taken from novel "Family Matters" in this conversation a forty two year old man was forced to get marry by his parents and their friend. Although it was decision difficult to take for him because Lucy was his dream girl and he could not even think of marrying somebody else.

*"He thought about the eleven years he and Lucy had struggled to create a world for themselves. A colon she used to call it a cocoon was what they needed she said in to which they could, retreat and after their families had forgotten their existence they would emerge like two gustening butterflies and fly away together....."12*

Lucy was his true love; his heart was filled of feelings and emotions for Lucy. But his parents were not ready to listen to him; they were not ready to accept a non Parsi girl for their son. Although Nariman was in an age where he was completely mature enough to take this decision of his life, he could have gone with his heart but no at last he listened to his parents this shows that he was an obedient son who cannot hurt his parents. But somewhere he himself knew that he is not happy with it, even in his last day of life he feels that he had not done justice to lucy as she was crazy for him. Still Nariman feels that Lucy haunted him. His extreme pain and grief is expressed in the following few lines where he expresses his unhappiness towards his children who wants to control him.

*'In my youth, my parents controlled me and destroyed those years. Thanks to them, I married your mother and wrecked my middle years. Now you want to torment my old age. 'I won't allow it.'*13

### **Future Outcome**

Rohinton Mistry holds a special place amongst the major Indian English novelists. So the present paper is an

effort to study Indianness in the novels of Rohinton Mistry as well as to focus light on the issues discussed by him in his novels. Also the paper attempted to analyze his ideas, technique and vision of life through the thorough study of his novels. The Researcher has tried to showcase the themes taken by Mistry in his novels as well as the use and exploration of Indian culture and tradition by him which sets the perfect ambiance and subtheme for his novels.

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