

## Major Themes in Rohinton Mistry's Novels

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Rohinton Mistry's works seeks to evolve a vision that involves both the community-centred existence of the Parsis and their involvement with the wider national framework. His novels are concerned with the experience of the Parsi in India. Mistry, re-narrates the history of his community and country as it has been in the post-Independence era.

This re-narration of history in a way depicts consciousness of anxieties and aspirations, perils and problems of existence of individual, communal and national issues. Mistry has, in this sense, successfully exploited some historical points of post- Independence era and endeavoured to re-think them and re-narrate about his community and country through the various narratives woven in the novel.

Politics form an important subtext to the main action of all three novels of Rohinton Mistry. This preoccupation moves increasingly closer to contemporary times as Mistry tackles first, in *Such a Long Journey*, the Bangladeshi war with Pakistan, second, Indira Gandhi's declaration of a State of Emergency which affects the livelihood of the tailors of *A Fine Balance* and finally, in *Family Matters*, the impact Hindu fundamentalist agitation and the post-Babri Masjid riots had on the life of the ordinary Indian.

Although aspects of national history, especially as it relates to the fate of the Parsi in pre- and post-Independence India, are of implicit relevance to an understanding of the characters of "One Sunday" in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, it is only with his first novel, *Such a Long*

*Journey* that Mistry foregrounds aspects of national politics and integrates them into the main plot of his narrative. With *A Fine Balance*, he reproduces his concerns about the imbrication of national politics and the fate of the individual. However, in *Family Matters*, because of the more intimate nature of his fictional terrain, state politics, though present, affect the main narrative only towards the end.

*Such a Long Journey* is set against the backdrop of the Bangladesh—Pakistan wars of the 1970s. In this novel, public events have direct repercussions on the life of the ordinary citizen. Since the wars are a narrative excuse for the exploration of both political ethics and the problems of individual ethical-moral responsibility, an explanatory note on the historical events is in order.

*Such a Long Journey* is the story of Gustad Noble who lives in Parsi compound with his wife and three children. A bank employee, he commands respect in the compound. He is greatly loved by Tehmul-Lungraa- the lame man who also lives in the compound. Dinshawji is Gustad's close friend, whom he meets every day. Gustad nurses a silent pain caused by the disappearance of his former close friend, Jimmy Bilimoria, which he sees as betrayal. Until one day, missive comes from Bilimoria asking him to transfer some money to a new account. Reluctantly Gustad obliges, after having unsuccessfully tried to return the money. Bilimoria is involved in a national plot with political ramifications. He is arrested and imprisoned and when Gustad visits him, he listens to the helpless narrative of the dying man and surmises that he himself has been used. As he copes with the problems on the home front-the growing pains of his adolescent sons, the frailty of his young daughter (which implies further demands on an already strained household budget)-he attempts to improve their living conditions by asking a pavement artist to paint the

wall of their compound. This wall becomes the focus of municipal attention and will be witness to the final movement of the novel. As a procession to demand better sewage facilities stops in front of what has become a wall of all religions, Tehmul dies. Sohrab reconciles with his father as the latter breaks down and cries in front of the corpse of the unwanted Tehmul for all the deaths he has stoically faced dry-eyed: his mother's, Bilimoria's and Dinshawji's.

Historically, the Parsis came to India after the Arab conquest of Iran and their point of entry was Gujarat. The Parsis were active in the world of business and politics. Dadabhai Naoroji and Madame Cama were prominent Parsis in India's freedom movement. According to T.M. Luhrmann, the Parsis were influential player during the British Raj. They viewed the issue of independence with mixed feelings since many of them identified with Western culture. There was regret for the passing of an old way of life (during the Raj) and they linked their changed social fortunes to the departure of the British. (The Good, 14) This theme is interspersed throughout the stories, from the pitiful figure of Najamai in "Swimming Lessons" to the ordinary heroism of the pathos-filled figure of Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey*.

The narratives of *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* grow simultaneously more intimate and more closely concerned with the inner life and complex experiences of the protagonists, while paradoxically, also more concerned with contemporary social and political contexts.

In Mistry's novels, we can easily find interconnectedness of various themes like theme of nationalism, alienation, oppression, human-relationship, fear and temptation. The homelessness of Ishvar and Om in the city makes them victims of the central government's plans for a city beautification-project endorsed by people of the middle class such as Nusswan Shroff and Mrs.

Gupta, the manager of Au Revoir Exports—people who have absolutely no idea of the misery of the absolute poor, the dispossessed and the disempowered. Unlike these two, Dina Dalal (whose fortunes begin to change with the death of her father) becomes martyr and servant to her brother's family, and is left to fend for herself. Dina's relationship with the two tailors is at first one of distrust and tyranny as she forces them to work long hours without knowing that they go without food. She forbids Maneck, a "nice Parsi boy" from socializing with them. But the barriers gradually disappear as they all get to know each other. The bond between the four becomes stronger after their horrific experiences at the construction plant. Dina Dalal allows the tailors to sleep on the terrace of her tiny flat. But this promise of happiness is soon to be destroyed.

Ishvar, who believes in the tradition of with marrying young, persuades his nephew, Om that despite their difficult material circumstances, he ought to marry a girl from their village. This return to the village marks the onset of their sorrows. Om's youthful challenge of the supremacy of the oppressive Thakur, who had murdered his whole family leads to his castration by the politicians. Ishvar, who had earlier been sterilized along with his nephew under the central government's Family Planning Programme, loses his legs to gangrene. Both Om and Ishvar make their way back to the city where Dina has lost the battle against the landlord and finally allowed herself to be evicted from her flat. Dina's resignation is the effect of a misapprehension on her part. She believes that the tailors, who are actually caught up in the caste turmoil in their village, have deserted her. She also believes that Maneck, who files away to Dubai, having failed his exams, has also deserted her. She allows Nusswan's family to take over her destiny and convert her into an unpaid family servant. When Maneck returns to Bombay eight years later, the

city is in the throes of a new form of madness—the killing of Sikhs in the wake of the Prime Minister’s assassination. Even though this proof of human madness saddens him, it does not shatter him as much as discovering the fate of Dina and the tailors does. It is, for him, the final proof of the chaos of the world. He had earlier described God thus:

I prefer to think that God is a giant quilt maker. With an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt has grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the squares and diamonds and triangle don’t fit so well together anymore, and it’s all become meaningless. So He has abandoned it. (418)

Theme of Communitarianism along with the politics in Mistry’s novel is a fine documentation of the human dimensions of the Emergency. Mistry could have made the tailors inhabitants of the city who suffer from such torture. But bringing in people from the village allows him to document new areas of the varied sub - continental social reality-poverty prejudice and caste oppression in the villages, inter-communal harmony or its obverse and the terrible predicament of honest hard-working villagers who become a mass of statistics in the city. The two tailors, who represent common humanity as they endure the consequences of all the political measures decided in the higher echelons of power, are Om and Ishvar Darji, Chamaars-turned-tailors from the countryside. Once in the city, Om and Ishvar can only join the masses looking for jobs and shelter. When they initially have to sleep under the awning of the shop of Ashraf Chacha’s suspicious friend, Nawaz, they think it is but a temporary measure. Soon, they find out that this temporary measure will last for three months, for jobs are not easy to come by. Their next stop is the slum quarter where they encounter for the first time the horrendous experience of the poor city migrant. A poor shack is sublet to them by an agent manipulating state lands, where illegal shacks are erected and rented out to the desperate. This is hardly any comfort but it

ensures a roof over the head. At the *jhopadpattys*, Om and Ishvar have to interact with a curious group of people. It is here that they experience water shortage, the dire poverty of those even worse off than them, like the Monkey-man who cannot leave his animals alone for fear they will devour each other out of hunger, and the poor battered woman with five children to feed.

As the foursome break up, each to their own fate, the sway of national politics takes over. Om, Ishvar and Dina have to earn their livelihood within the very structures of societal oppression they had set out to challenge. When Maneck comes back from Dubai, he returns at the peak of anti-Sikh riots in the madness following Indira Gandhi's assassination. The driver who transports him is one who has had to disguise himself to hide his Sikh identity. The madness of communal riots has surface again and again in post-Independence India. Beyond the causes of riots, the politics of rioting demands a reassessment of the politics of identity within multicultural, secular India.

The political theme of *Family Matters* is expressed through the figures of Yezad and his employer – the idealistic Mr. Kapur – and their lives. Mr. Kapur has dreams of reforming the city, making it safer for the ordinary citizen. From the time of his first appearance, he talks of contesting the Municipal elections in order to deal with lawlessness, and acting as a buffer against the fundamentalist Hindutva agenda of Shiv Sena apologists.

Mistry's critique of Indian communal politics in this novel is rarely about the public domain. Unlike *Such a Long Journey* where political figures and events occur prominently in the public sphere, *Family Matters* shows the events at the level of the local and the familial. Communal politics and disturbances affect the common man (in this case, Yezad) though he is in no way involved in sectarian strife, or even local politics. Mistry shows how fundamentalism and

skewed political thinking have altered the very social structure in such a way that even the common man – dissociated from politics – is scared and affected.

Beyond the concern with the right-wing politics of the Hindu majority, *Family Matters* also deals with larger issues of religious zealotry, bigotry and fundamentalism within all communities. The Parsi community is not spared criticism – Nariman Vakeel’s parents and their cohort of friends who are zealously religious and exclusivist Parsis, and the final transformation of liberal Yezad into a fundamentalist religious bigot.

It is the perfect canvas to explore the politics of the individual in relation to the community. In Mistry’s earlier fiction, characters like Sohrab in *Such a Long Journey* and Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance* emerge as strongly individualistic people who struggle to carve a personal, individual space for themselves within the family whole. In the case of Sohrab, his rebellion is against his father’s dreams for his future, to which he is eventually reconciled as he realizes the older man only wishes his well-being. In the case of Dina dalal, her rebellion is both that of a disempowered woman and a sister against a wealthy and manipulative brother.

However, it is only in *Family Matters* that the question of the private space of individual identity is fully explored through the many instances of conflict between individual desires and duties towards the family or community. The foremost of these is the tragic story of Nariman Vakeel. He is forcefully separated from his Christian girlfriend by his parents and their well-wishers and forced to bend to the general demand of the community. This is presented as a submission of his will to the higher good: “No happiness is more lasting than the happiness that you get from fulfilling your parents’ wisher”. (FM, 13) But Nariman accepts the separation from Lucy out of weariness and a sense of the futility of the unequal struggle: “They had been ground

down by their families, exhausted by the strain of it”. (13) Nariman’s parents see education as the cause of sorrow: “Modern ideas have filled Nari’s head. He never learned to preserve that fine balance between tradition and modernness”. (15) This theme of coercion exercised by the family is repeated in a different context with Jal, Nariman’s stepson.

Nostalgia is a recurrent theme in Mistry’s fiction. This nostalgia is generally for a past way of life, forever lost to the main characters. It is occasionally manifest in the idealization of religious rituals which are seen as a way to preserve the past and prevent the disintegration of the family and the community. It also takes the form of reminiscing about childhood which is seen as a more stable and reassuring world than the present. These reminiscences, presented in the stories of various characters in both the short stories and the novels, are linked to the changed circumstances of the Parsi community following Independence. This politico-cultural nostalgia helps to create a sense of loss about the changed circumstances of the characters in both domestic and public spheres.

All of Mistry’s texts play with the boundaries of the private and the public. Most of Mistry’s main protagonists, such as Gustad and Yezad, inhabit the two realms simultaneously, while testing the boundaries of both. The public world is the world of the ordinary citizen, consisting of friends, acquaintances and the professional space of work where these adult relationships are forged. As the earlier we have indicated, the themes of politics, history and community are integral to the life of Mistry’s characters. The private world is the space of the home and the family, inhabited mostly by women and children.

Age is a central theme in Mistry’s fiction and relationships between and across generations is a major concern whenever Mistry discusses the private realm of the family and the



household. The private world is where the family gathers. In Mistry's fiction, it consists of the world of the old and the young. Women dominate the private realm with their nurturing attention and the hard labour through which the stability of the family is ensured.

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.

We can very well see the theme of alienation, fear and temptation in the story of Dina's struggles against the social conditions of her existence could easily have existed independent of the long incursion into the life of the tailors. As such they would have existed, within the absurdist frame of an illogical universe, as ever-enduring puppets. It is through these people and events that the novel tackles the immediate consequences of the "City Beautification", "*Garibi Hatao*" and "Family Planning" schemes. Their tragic-comic fates are apt illustrations of the absurdity of human existence, where human will have no power over the illogical course of events. Both Om and Ishvar are presented as fully rounded human characters. Om is impulsive, easily irritated and always has to be called back to practical reality by his uncle. Early in the story, when they learn of the massacre of the family, Om dreams of 'Dalit' revenge. He has to be persuaded of the impracticality of this scheme by Ishvar.

Mistry recognizes the significance of religion and ritual in the construction of human identity. He, therefore, use religion, ritual and the responses to these as a central theme in his

fiction. In fact, rituals and religious beliefs become the markers of ethnic, racial and communitarian identities; they highlight difference. Mistry's fiction can be read within this framework as the predicament of an individual as he/she seeks to cope with the contradictions of the past and the present, community and self, family and community. Each of these 'contexts' of individual contradictions and dilemmas is an emotionally-charged event in his work.

Mistry's novels are a marvelous showcase of relationships, and this can be observed under the theme of human-relationship.

Mistry reveals the fragility of human relationships in "The Collectors". He suggests that relationships are extremely tenuous and that the trust that cements these is easily broken or damaged. A misunderstanding and a degree of paranoia (which all his characters seem to possess/suffer from) can cause the breakdown of relationships and even lead to oppression.

In *A Fine Balance* we can see the middle class and the anonymous, faceless working class meet sympathize with each other, and learn to overcome their prejudices and forge bonds of friendship, affection and humanity. In an interview, Mistry stated that this novel started with an image – a woman at a sewing machine- and was later expanded to include the tailors, to bring in the horror of caste exploitation and violence of rural India, and the figure of Maneck Kohlah from Kashmir. All of these characters, together with Dina Dalal- the fiery-tempered, intelligent, fiercely independent and prematurely aged young woman- constitute a small world of recreated family of the novel.

Thematically, Mistry's fiction has moved from the family in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* to the wider Parsi community in *Such a Long Journey* to the national tapestry in *A Fine Balance*. *Family Matters* moves back to the theme of the family and uses narrative strategies



first used in *A Fine Balance* to intensify the plot, the human interest and the sense that the characters are firmly embedded in their present.

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