

Revisiting the Home Turf: The Parsi Ambience in Rohinton Mistry's Novels

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry returns to his home turf in all his major works: Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1995), and Family Matters (2002). All his novels are sited in India during moments of intense political crisis. The overwhelming importance of these national problems notwithstanding, Mistry succeeds in representing the minutiae of Parsi life and culture. The Parsi community of Bombay demarcated by the Zoroastrian faith forms the fulcrum on which these novels gyrate. However, the extent to which Parsi life is foregrounded fluctuates from novel to novel. While Such a Long Journey undertakes to vindicate the Parsi, Rustom Suhrab Nagarwala and simultaneously present Parsi customs and conventions; in A Fine Balance there appears to be a relative lull in Mistry's concern with the Parsi people while Family Matters takes up the cause of the clan with renewed gusto. Mistry draws a connection between the Parsi world and the larger tapestry of the nation but as we move from his first novel to the third we see it getting more and more tenuous. It would appear as if the Parsi turf is just too rich to be ignored by Mistry's creative imagination and the novels may be read as a record of Parsi culture in view of the rapidly diminishing population.

Rohinton Mistry migrated to Canada in 1975 at the young age of twenty-five. Nevertheless he returns to his home turf in all his major works. His three novels: *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002) are all sited in India during moments of intense political crisis the ramifications of which send strong tremors through his fictional world. The events in *Such a Long Journey* are backgrounded against the Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971, *A Fine Balance* against the Internal Emergency of 1975-77 and the domestic drama in *Family Matters* is set against the Shiv Sena menace and the communal riots of the 1990's. The overwhelming importance of these national problems notwithstanding, Mistry succeeds in representing the minutiae of Parsi life and culture. In fact, the Parsi community of Bombay demarcated by the Zoroastrian faith forms the fulcrum on which these novels gyrate. However, the extent to which Parsi life is foregrounded fluctuates from novel to novel. While *Such a Long Journey* undertakes to vindicate the Parsi, Rustom Suhrab Nagarwala and simultaneously present Parsi customs and conventions; in *A Fine Balance* there appears to be a relative lull in Mistry's concern with the Parsi people while *Family Matters* takes up the cause of the clan with renewed gusto.

In his novels Mistry embodies Bombay from the Parsi margins. The

choice of Bombay as the locale for all his novels is not fortuitous but deliberate because more than seventy percent of all Parsis today live in Bombay <<http://huizen.daxis.nl/~henkt/zoroastrianism-belief.html>>. Mistry himself had grown up in Parsi Baag in Bombay and it materializes as Khodadad Building in *Such a Long Journey* and Pleasant Villa and Chateau Felicity in *Family Matters*. In fact Mistry's first collection of stories is entitled *Tales from Firozshah Baag* and it demonstrates how the Baag unifies the lives of all its Parsi inhabitants. Baag is a Gujarati word meaning "garden" but it is frequently used to refer to the complex of buildings which house Parsis and which are also known as "colonies" (Luhmann 250). The Parsi Baag is a distinctive feature of the Bombay cityscape, an apartment complex usually with a community courtyard that signals the cultural and religious affiliations of its inhabitants. That the city of Bombay, is of utmost significance to the Parsis can be construed from Inspector Masalawala's lament in *Family Matters* "To think that we Parsis were the one who built this beautiful city and made it prosper. And in a few more years, there won't be any of us left alive to tell the tale" (416). Hence, by opting for Bombay as his locale, Mistry is only presenting the Parsis in their natural habitat.

In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry appears very militant in his loyalty towards Parsis. He takes up cudgels on behalf of his community. "*It was not very often that a Parsi made the newspapers for a crime. The last sensation had been more than a decade ago, when a naval commander had shot and killed his wife's lover*" (207). The allusion is to the Parsi Naval Commander, Kawas Manekshaw Nanavati, who had shot dead his wife's paramour but is granted Presidential pardon. *Such a Long Journey* also takes up an added ignominy of the Parsis: the incarceration of Rustom Suhrab Nagarwala, an intelligence officer who had mimicked the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's voice to swindle money from the bank (Varma: 84).

Nagarwala is incarnated as Jimmy Bilimoria and the novel engages in vindicating his integrity. "*In the canteen, they debated Major Bilimoria's dubious confession.... Most of them refused to believe he could have imitated the Prime Minister's voice, there was something very fishy about the whole thing, they said*" (207). After the demise of Bilimoria, the RAW agent Ghulam Mohammad tells Gustad that whoever is responsible for the death of Bilimoria will have to pay. It could either be "the car manufacturer" whose plane might crash or his "*Mummy who has enemies from Punjab to Tamil Nadu*" (323). Rohinton Mistry attributes both Sanjay Gandhi's death in a plane crash and Mrs Gandhi's assassination at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards, as a consequence of the illegal confinement and homicide of Jimmy Bilimoria.

Even while vindicating the integrity of the Parsis the novelist carefully crafts a Parsi ambience. Almost all the characters, central or peripheral, are Parsis. The protagonist Gustad Noble and his family reside in

Khodadad building, north of Bombay. All the named residents of this building are Parsis: Mr Rabadi, Inspector Bamji, Ms Kutpitia, Mr Cavasji, Tehmul Lungraa and the Pastakias. At the bank where Gustad Noble works, his colleagues Dinshaswji and Mr Madon are Parsis. The other Parsi characters in the novel are Dr Madhiwala Bonesetter, Peerbhoy Paanwala, Dr Paymaster, Dinshaswji's wife and nephew Alamai and Nusli and Major Bilimoria. The few non-Parsi characters in the novel are Malcolm Saldanha, Gustad's friend, Laurie Coutinho the bank employee and Ghulam Mohammed the RAW agent.

Such a Long Journey bestows a lot of attention on Parsi religious customs. The reader is virtually inundated with the minutiae of these mores. The novel commences with the "Parsi Saint George" (5), Gustad Noble offering prayers to Ahura Mazda. (1) The novel delineates Parsi traditions with all its particulars especially the kusti. (4). Snippets of Parsi prayers is strewn in the progression of the narrative. After Tehmul is killed, Gustad recites the "*Yatha Ahu Varyo, five times and Ashem Vahoo, three times*" (337).

A comprehensive narrative churns out the burial rites of Dinshawji, Gustad's friend and colleague. Although Jimmy is "*a second father to the children*", (14) it is Dinshawji's funeral that the author exploits to objectively elaborate on Parsi customs. References are made to "prayers at upper bungalee or at lower bungalee", "*suchkaar* and ablutions, sponging the corpse with *Gomez*" (245) the ride to the Doongerwadi (246) and the performance of the last rites (247). The ceremonies surrounding death are particularly important to the Parsis as the greatest pollution results from contact with carrion. Hence by detailing the rituals in a painstaking manner, Mistry supplements the overall Parsi tenor of the novel. It is interesting to note that having detailed the Zoroastrian death rites once the author refrains from elucidating the same rituals not only in the case of Jimmy Bilimoria and Tehmul Lungraa but also in his other two novels: *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*.

The novel through unequivocal statements constructs the Parsi race as exclusive. Feroze Gandhi, a Parsi is presented as the crusader who exposes "scandals in the government" and the "*defender of the downtrodden and champion of the poor*" (11). On the other hand, his father in law, Jawahalar Nehru is portrayed as a "*bitter and rancorous*" (11) man whose overwhelming obsession is to ensure the Prime Ministerial position for his daughter (11) and his Hindu wife Indira Gandhi is the woman who jeopardized the financial fortunes of the Parsis by nationalizing the banks, "*Saali always up to some mischief*" (38). Again, the Parsi, Jimmy Bilimoria is a person who has left the Parsi community of Bombay to participate in a larger national enterprise: the liberation of Bangladesh. Similarly the only medical option for the Nobles is either Ms Kutpitia's rites or Dr Paymaster's medicine. The Parsi doctor, Dr Madhiwalla Bonesetter is the only medical alternative for

Gustad's broken hips in a metropolitan city like Bombay (60).

Everything Parsi is depicted as a cut above the others. Gustad Noble's grandfather would fire him up with the exploits of Parsi wrestlers: Rustom Pahelwan and Jooraaver Jal (41). Gustad names his sons Sohrab and Rustom from the Persian epic *Shahnameh*. The Nobles are downbeat as they cannot afford "the fine creamy product of the Parsi dairy farm" (3) and Ms Kutpitia is envied for buying "*Parsi Dairy Farm milk and custom catered meals from the Ratan Tata Institute*" (85). Gustad takes his children to K. Rustom and Co for a "*slab of their famous Pistachio ice cream*" (56). He applies for a scholarship for his son only from Parsi organizations: Parsi Panchayat Fund, R. D. Sethana Trust, Tata Scholarship, Wadia Charities for Higher Education (81). The Nobles subscribe to the Parsi newspaper Jam-E Jamshed (83) and even little Roshan proposes that Caterers for her doll's wedding should be a Parsi one (166). Gustad Noble is an orthodox Parsi and instructs his children to be proud of their "heritage" (83). Though he is fascinated by the Church and its rituals he is vigilant as he has been conditioned from childhood to oppose other faiths (24). Certain other descriptions reinforce Gustad Noble's orthodoxy. He wears the Sudra, performs the kusti and goes to the fire temple.

Rohinton Mistry accentuates the Parsi flavour of the novel by providing even the ingredients of the food the Nobles consume. All the gastronomic details in the novel are of Parsi food "*kutchoombar of onion, coriander and hot green chillies to go with the dhansak*" (18). At Roshan's birthday party the guests are served "*vegetable stew made of carrot, peas, potatoes and yam liberally spiced with coriander, cumin, ginger, garlic, turmeric and whole green chillies. And there was rice with cloves and cinnamon sticks*" (45). The Parisian, a Parsi restaurant is credited with serving the best fish curry and rice in the city (56).

The novel, however does not hesitate to point out the loopholes in the Parsi culture: Non-Parsis are not given access to the Tower of Silence (322). The non-Parsi, Ghulam Mohammad is a good friend of Jimmy's and he even makes all the arrangements for his friend's funeral yet he is not allowed to enter the Tower of Silence only because he is a non- Parsi.

The heavy Parsi ambience is mitigated slightly only once in the novel. In spite of his very strict Parsi rearing when Gustad is confronted by a recalcitrant Sohrab and an ailing Roshan he gladly accompanies Malcolm to Mary Mount Church (222). Gustad even conforms to all the customs of the church as advocated by Malcolm for the sake of his kids. Gustad even perceives truth in the Biblical story of Cain and Abel . "Fairy tales, I used to think. But from the distance of years, how true. My own father's case. His drunken gambling brother who destroyed him as surely as crushing his skull. And Jimmy, another kind of Cain. Killed trust, love, respect, everything (178).

Rohinton Mistry's first novel thus offers an introduction to Parsi life and

culture. However, his second novel *A Fine Balance* though of epic proportions, does not devote much space for the Parsi community. In this novel the non- Parsi characters outnumber their Parsi counterparts. There are only four Parsi families: the Shroffs, the Dalals, the Kohlahs and Zenobia while majority of the characters are non- Parsis.

In *A Fine Balance*, the Parsi community is depicted as a very close knit and supportive community. It is the Parsis who support Dina in all the ill-fated moments of her life. First, in the form of Darab Uncle and Shirin Aunt who help her to be independent after the death of Rustom. “*I have an extra Singer you can take*” (54). Shirin Aunt also instructs Dina in embroidery, with the caution that needlework pays well but it's a great strain on the eyes (56). Later it is Dina's Parsi schoolmate, Zenobia who not only introduces her to Mrs Gupta the export manager of a textile company who provides her with stitching assignments but also helps find her a Parsi tenant Maneck Kohlah to supplement her income.

In *A Fine Balance* the Parsis come through as a community with positive and progressive views. Dr Shroff is very liberal in his outlook “*My children are free to do whatever they please*” (16). He is only too happy to learn that his only daughter Dina “*wants to be a doctor*” (16) and his son “*business-import and export*” (16).. Nusswan underscores the empowered outlook of the Parsi community. “*Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little Sati and leap into your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him*” (52). When Dina tries to break free from the shackles of her brother's home following Rustom's death the Parsi community supports her (58).

Unlike in *Such a Long Journey* Parsi customs and traditions are backgrounded against the larger national issues in *A Fine Balance*. Parsi customs are not delineated in an elaborate manner but are referred to in passing. “The wedding took place in the morning. At Dina's request, it was a quiet ceremony in the same fire temple where her parents' prayers were performed on each death anniversary” (37). Rustom's death is also treated in a mundane and routine manner, in stark contrast to the explicit detailing of the funeral procedures involved in Dinshawji's burial. “After the funeral and four days of prayer, Dina prepared to return to her flat” (47). Rustom's first death anniversary is a normal day except that Nusswan and the kids take the day off to attend prayers at the fire temple

Dina Dalal is proud of her Parsi lineage. After she catches Om and Maneck fooling around with her sanitary napkins she bellows: “*From Omprakash I cannot expect better. But you from a good Parsi family.*” (288) Dina forbids Maneck from going out for dinner with Om who is a non –Parsi. However, when Dina requires two tailors, she never insists on Parsis and hires Om and Ishwar without any knowledge of their social background. Later, when the tailors are thrown out of their dwellings,

she even provides them shelter in her small flat. She is even eager to accommodate Om's wife in her house. This is diametrically contrary to her earlier argument when she had ordered Om to keep away from Maneck because "*There is a difference, and you cannot pretend there isn't- their community, their background*" (293).

A Fine Balance moves away from the rigid Parsi fold of *Such a Long Journey*. The reader is not repeatedly reminded of the cultural space that the characters inhabit. There is no highlighting of Parsi customs. Here the characters inhabit a more liberal and tolerant space. Dr Shroff gives up his lucrative career in the city to nurse the sick in the "*Godforsaken villages*" (16). Farokh Sodawala, a rural character, opts for cremation rather than the Parsi custom of being exposed to the vultures in the Tower of Silence (585). The Parsi religious priest Dustoor Framji is made fun of for his idiosyncratic conduct of physically harassing the women folk who come to the fire temple. This is all in tune with the unconventional presentation of the Parsis in the novel. Even the protagonist Dina Dalal becomes more accommodating of the others as the narrative progresses. Initially after Dina offers the tailors water she is careful to rinse "*the glass and put it in a separate place. From now on it would be the tailor's glass*" (76). Later, when she serves tea, she makes sure that their cups are different from hers. "*Pink ones for the tailors Red for myself*" (85). However, at the end of the novel, we see Dina serving food to Om and Ishwar, now beggars, in Nusswan's plate without any second thoughts. "*She filled water glasses for them and while they drank, dished out masoor in plates from Ruby's everyday set on the sideboards*" (613) and after they leave she washes "*the two plates returning them to the sideboards for Nusswan and Ruby to dine off at night*" (614) thereby dismantling all class and caste boundaries.

Just as the first two Mistrin fictions are sited in moments of intense national turmoil, in *Family Matters* Mistry presents the Bombay of the 1990s, its cosmopolitan character contaminated by the Shiv Sena politics. As a novel about the Parsis, it takes off from where *Such a Long Journey* leaves. Most of the characters are Parsis with the exception of Mr and Mrs Kapur (Yezad's employer), Husain (Yezad's colleague), Vasantrao Valmik, Mr Mazobashi (Immigration Officer). The novel focuses on a major concern of the Parsis: purity of the clan. Nariman Vakeel is forced to end his liaison with Lucy only because she does not belong to the Zoroastrian faith. Nariman's father echoes this: "*... she might be a wonderful person, as gracious and charming as the Queen of England, but she was still unsuitable for his son because she was not a Zoroastrian, case closed*" (132). This leads to Nariman's rejection of the faith and desertion of even the perfunctory observations (444).

Just as in *Such a Long Journey*, here too, Rohinton Mistry crafts a Parsi ambience sympathetically. The novel draws attention to the Navjote which is the Parsi custom of initiation (28). Parsi festivals like Pateti and

Navroze along with birthdays are the only occasions when the Yezad family uses the expensive Basmati rice (94). Jal is considered “safe” because he attends the Parsi, Bharda New High School, but Coomy goes to a Catholic school and her parents are worried that “*there was so little Zoroastrian influence to countervail it*” (388). The only medical alternative available to Jal and Coomy is the Parsi, Dr Fitter or the Parsi General Hospital. After his fall Nariman Vakeel is first taken to Dr Fitter and then to the Parsi General where he is treated by a Parsi doctor. When Jehangir wants to change his name his father is quick to the defense of the Parsi community “*You are a Parsi so you have a Persian name*” which echoes Gustad’s command to his children in *Such a Long Journey* “*You should be proud of your heritage*” (83). The novel presents Nariman Vakeel tutoring his grandson’s Jehangir and Murad about some of the important beliefs of the Parsis. Parsis never domesticate cats because they consider them unlucky, never kill spiders and only eat the female chicken (162).

The novel also deliberates on the slow and steady decline of the community. Dr Fitter a veteran Parsi is worried that “*Demographics show we will be extinct in fifty years*” (51) and feels that the Parsi Panchayat should take appropriate action as the “*Parsis seem to be the only people in India who follow the family planning message. Rest of the country is breeding like rabbits*” (413). Dr Fitter also considers the Parsi men of the day to be pathetically incompetent. He claims that Jal is a worthless fellow unable to oversee his own father (51), and Edul Munshi is trampled to death only because of his silly handyman hobby. “*If only he had done his duty as a Parsi, had half a dozen children, he would have had no time to fool around with tools*” (415).

Just as in *A Fine Balance* in *Family Matters* too we see the Parsi community coming out to help their ilk. when Yasmin Vakeel and Lucy Braganza had fallen from the terrace Superintendent Masalavala feels “*No sense washing Parsi linen in public*” (397) and takes necessary steps to end the matter. Once again, he rescues the community following the death of Edul Munshi and Coomy Contractor. “*If we don’t look after our people in times of trouble, who will?*” (412). He is assisted by Dr Fitter who examines the bodies and annuls the need for postmortems (398). Similarly, even the Parsi neighbourhood decides to help the clan by keeping the police away as that would delay the funeral which is undesirable within Zoroastrian rites (397).

While Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey* is a staunch Parsi, his counterpart in *Family Matters*: Yezad Chenoy, is initially an agnostic for whom attendance at the fire temple on Navroze and Khordad Sal is sufficient and loban smoke simply a tactic to flush out mosquitoes (25). A reason for Yezad’s lack of Zoroastrian faith may be attributed to the fact that he grows up in Jehangir Mansion which is not a Parsi Baag (227). Yezad sarcastically remarks that Jal and Coomy are lucky only because of

Coomy's frequent visits to the fire temple. "*I might have some influence too if I went more often*" (185). Nevertheless, he does not oblige. However when Mr Kapur backtracks and decides not to contest the elections, Yezad feels that the fire temple is his only "sanctuary in this meaningless world" (359). However, the last straw is when Mrs Kapur suspects his integrity and sacks him. Yezad inadvertently makes his way to the Wadiaji fire temple. After this, there is no turning back for Yezad. The spiritual progression had commenced (486).

Yezad's transformation into a spiritual Parsi becomes more pronounced during the renovation of Chateau Felicity. He develops a new routine for himself. "*After Wadiaji fire temple in the morning.... Then it was Aslaji agiary, where he spent at least an hour before the fire. He prayed with the Avesta open in his hands, though many sections had now been committed to memory*" (452). He even starts taking his kusti prayers very seriously. As part of his transformation, Yezad believes that the house must be purged of all the non-Zarathusti icons as they may interfere with the vibrations of the Avesta prayers (491). He joins the League of Orthodox Parsis and the Association for Zarathustrian Education (467).he even starts taking his children to the fire temple although "*There is no particular occasion*" (436).

Once the family relocates to Chateau Felicity, they become more conscious of their Parsi identity. Yezad is adamant that the new refrigerator should be a Godrej, a Parsi product (452). For Murad's birthday, sweets are ordered from the Parsi dairy farm (487). Roxana cooks *ravo* a Parsi dish for breakfast (487). Sweets are delivered only to Parsi families: Inspector Masalawala's and Dr Fitter's (488).

The novel ends with Nariman Vakeel's grandson Murad kissing a non-Parsi girl--Anjali. Rohinton Mistry chooses not to dwell on this issue. Instead, he describes the prayer meet on Murad's birthday wherein Yezad places his hands on Murad's head and prays. Thus the novel ends on a note of reconciliation. The reader is led to believe that another Nariman Vakeel and Lucy like romance will not arise.

Family Matters champions the Zoroastrian faith and the Parsi community. The elaborate discussion towards the finish on the techniques that can be adopted to prevent the termination of the Parsi race suggests that the problem is grim and the author advocates appropriate action. When Dr Fitter meets Jehangir he perceives "[t]he new generation, ready to rule the world" (489). In Jehangir there appears a ray of hope for the Parsi community.

The task of fashioning a Parsi milieu which started in *Such a Long Journey* comes full circle in *Family Matters* wherein Yezad states although his best friend is a Maharastrian, but when it comes to vital relationships only a Parsi can be acceptable because "we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet, and mixed marriages will destroy that" (482). Rohinton Mistry's fiction is charted out within the cultural space of the Parsi community. He draws a connection between the Parsi world and

the larger tapestry of the nation and but as we move from his first novel to the third we see it getting more and more tenuous. It would appear as if the Parsi turf is just too rich to be ignored by Mistry's creative imagination and the novels may be read as a record of Parsi culture in view of the rapidly diminishing population.

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Feel the Word-Fill the World

To live Think a while
 Passions like forest-fires rage
 Leave only ashes
 Green Earth drilled of wealth
 As our children suck soft drink
 Made our Earth empty
 Water drifts our lives
 As ships sail smooth on high seas
 Water surrounds life
 Seas are big dump yards
 Chocking all life with poison
 Suffer sons of Land
 Tigers fading fast
 As Himalayas melt fast
 Act with passion needs
 We plucked our Nature
 Like kids pluck the wings of flies
 Oh! Don't play with death
 Heart beats remind truth
 As sunrise reminds darkness
 Please maintain Balance

