

Migration and Sense of Home and Homelessness in the Novels of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract:

Rohinton Mistry is an Indo Canadian novelist who was born in Mumbai but at present he resides in Canada. As he belongs to the Parsi community, his ancestors originally belonged to Iran who migrated from Iran to India at that time. The same is the reason as to why Rohinton Mistry feels a double sense of migration, as his ancestors migrated to India and he migrated from India to Canada. This took the form of diasporic concept or in other words identity crisis in his novels like A Fine Balance and Family Matters. In A Fine Balance, the story of Ishvar and Omprakash deals with their identity crisis as they are considered to be untouchable because of belonging to 'chamaar' caste. In order to break away from the shackles of untouchability, they both learn the art of a Muslim tailor. Other than this, in Family Matters the story of a family of Parsi origin has been portrayed by Mistry who faces a great deal of crisis at the domestic level. The story revolves around a character named Nariman, a widower, who faces the rudeness of his step son Coomy after being sick. Soon Roxana, his real daughter takes him to her house though she faces a lot of economic crisis because of this. This paper aims at analyzing the struggles of migration and family conflicts in Mistry's novels.

Key words: Rohinton Mistry, Parsi, Migration, Family Conflicts, Fine Balance, Family Matters, Nostalgic Feelings

Robert Frost's statement that poetry often begins in lovesickness or homesickness (Thompson 16) can be applied

to all creative art; we can certainly say this of Rohinton Mistry, as all his novels have their roots in India, Mumbai from where he hails. In his case his novels begin in homesickness. Rohinton Mistry was born in India, Mumbai in 1952. In 1975 he migrated to Canada, Ontario, Brampton. He practices Zoroastrianism and belongs to the Parsi community. Persia/Iran was conquered by Alexander the Great and later the Arabs causing destruction and havoc; they were forced to either convert to Islam or die. As a result in the seventh century a group of Parsis fled by sea to India and settled in Gujrat. Novy Kapadia observes in *Parsi Community and the Challenges of Modernity: A Reading of Rohinton Mistry's Fiction* that geographically India was close to Iran and has cultural and commercial ties as north Indians and Parsis at the root were Aryans; and the language of Avesta and Rig-veda has much similarity (13).

“Kisse-i-Sanjan” a Persian poem of 868 lines composed in 1600 A.D. by a Zoroastrian priest, Bahman Kaikobad of Navasare, narrates how Parsis settled in Gujrat, India as refugees faithfully adopted Gujrati as their primary language and kept on enjoying the rituals, religious practices and social customs, peacefully. In the 15th century due to Muslim attack they were forced to flee from Gujrat, most of them settled in Mumbai where they busied themselves in business and trade, and became the most urbanized community of the country.

This paper aims at analyzing the struggles of migration and family conflicts in Mistry's novels with special reference to *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* in the light of their social, cultural, political, economical, historical and religious aspects. Rohinton Mistry feels a double sense of migration, as his ancestors migrated to India and he migrated from India to Canada. This took the form of diasporic concept or in other words identity crisis in his novels like *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*. Living in an age of globalization, the people are connected to one another in one way or the other, despite their difference of religion, ideology and politics. It also applies to the

novels of Mistry. Though he writes in Canada, yet his novels deal with India and Indian people. Therefore he is known as a writer of Indian diaspora. His major works are *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1997) and *Family Matters* (2002). *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a collection of eleven short stories. This subsumes Parsi culture, tradition of their living, facts, values, fables and fiction. In his all works, there is a quest for better home and family. The apartment building of Firozsha Baag is divided into A, B and C Block. It is closely knit and lacks a sense of privacy. Though Parsis are generally regarded rich and living in grand buildings, yet in his novels, Parsi families live in small rooms opposite to each other. Though they grumble and quarrel with one another, yet as a whole they help, cooperate and love one another. Unlike *Tales in Such a Long Journey*, the Khodad building too is divided into three stories. The rooms are very tiny and lack sense of privacy. In *A Fine Balance* every character pines for getting a peaceful and happy home. In order to feel happy, and for the sake of mental peace, Dina Dalal leaves her brother's home and goes to live in her husband's tiny flat. The story of *Family Matters* story revolves around 79 years old Nariman Vakeel, suffering with Parkinson's disease. His state is like King Lear, he has a big home, but he has named it to his step son and daughter Jal and Coomey. He has purchased a small flat for his daughter Roxana. However, Nariman suffers in the company of Jal and Coomey because they don't have love for him, so he becomes a burden on them. In the company of Roxana he feels peaceful and happy because she loves and cares for him.

Rohinton Mistry in his novels and short stories proposed family as a unit. He articulates how feelings of personal gain and individualism hamper the filial relationship. Zoroastrians assume the whole world as a family, but the rise of modernity and increasing selfishness has distorted the traditional concept of combined family. However, when tradition is imperiled by

the forces of modernity, family bonds turn fragile. The contrasting pulls and pressures of modernity bring a sweeping change not over the Parsi community alone but also on the institution of family across communities, where focus shifts from general well being of the family to the question of privacy, individualism and self-fulfillment. Western education, sense of freedom and privacy has proved havoc to the Parsi community in India. Mistry artistically knits down how the advent of modernity in the garb of development had brought family relationships to a fragile breaking point. He explores the Parsi tradition, customs, rituals and religion on the scales of tradition and modernity.

The novel, *A Fine Balance* is set between a prologue (during the imposition of Internal Emergency by Indira Gandhi) and an 'epilogue': 1984 (during the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards). The novel begins with Dina Dalal Shroff thinking retrospectively about the sheltered, perfect family life she enjoyed. In those days her father was a doctor, who was totally dedicated to his profession. Unluckily, Dr. Shroff dies from a Cobra bite, leaving behind his wife, daughter Dina and son Nuswan to mourn the loss. Life takes a turn and a gradual deterioration starts.

After his father's death, Nuswan decides to take the reins in his own hands. He sells off his father's dispensary, cuts down on hired help in the house and lays down strict rules for Dina, making life miserable for her. Her life does not become easier with Nuswan's marriage to Ruby. After their mother's death, Nuswan decides Dina should discontinue schooling, as her performance is not up to the mark. Dina rebels, but is not able to revert the situation. She tries to find happiness outside the house. Her visits to free musical concerts bring her some solace and also help her meet Rustam Dalal, her future husband.

Dina's marriage with Rustam brings a lot of happiness into her life. She is contented with the meager means at their

disposal and does all that she can make a 'home' of the 'house'. Basking in the warmth of family life, they invited Nuswan's family to dinner on their wedding anniversary. On the fateful night of the wedding anniversary, Rustam dies in a ghastly accident. Dina, has no alternative but move in with her brother's family. For some time, Nuswan's positive shades of character take for granted and they live quite amicably. Things begin to take a bad turn when Nuswan once again starts inviting eligible bachelors for Dina to choose from after the period of one year of mourning is over. Unable to stand his high-handed behavior, Dina decides in favour of shifting back to Rustam's flat. For solace and help she turns to Rustam's relatives. Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle who give her the semblance of family they welcome her with open arms.

Dina engages herself with a company undertaking export orders for clothes with her childhood friend, Zenobia. She keeps a paying guest Maneck Kohlah and two tailors Ishvar and Omprakash Darji to help financially. Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, an uncle and nephew pair, hail from an unnamed 'village by a river' are learning tailoring from Ashraf, belong to the chamar caste.

Dina, Ishvar, Omprakash (tailors) and Maneck now work peacefully happily and are like a family unit. Maneck hails from an affluent family but the vast fortunes of his family fall a prey to the miseries of partition and the family's assets were considerably reduced. His father sends him to school/college in Bombay where he undergoes the trauma of ragging; he finally ends up as paying guest in his mother's old friend's house i.e. Dina where Ishvar and Omprakash are working as already stated.

Thus Mistry arranges a meeting point for the diverse stand created by him. The tailors after having searched in vain for suitable jobs for the six months they have been in the city are at last rewarded by jobs at Dina's. Maneck on the point of

taking decision whether or not to stay on to complete the course, finds Dina's house as a paying guest accommodation.

From this point, onwards the destinies of the four main characters in the text are woven together. They learn about each other's lives, learn to sell their differences and mix freely with each other's lives, not only sharing their food, but also their joys and sorrows-all the components are necessary for a family to co-exist. In the beginning there is a lot of mistrust on either side, but later all this changes and these four characters form a happy family unit. A family is a unit where love, harmony, caring, work and mutual respect is found. All these four characters find this fulfillment in Dina's house. However this does not last and as the novel proceeds all four characters are displaced.

Dina 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 flies away to Dubai having failed his exams, has also deserted her.

Mistry's theme of homelessness now finds a bitter and pathetic expression in the tragic end of these four. After a series of mishaps Dina is turned out of her flat and has to move back to her brother's home where she will live a wretched and miserable existence as an unpaid servant. Ishvar and Omprakash are reduced to beggars. Ishvar's legs have been amputated due to gangrene and Omprakash carries him on his shoulder to beg on the roads. Maneck returns from Dubai to find his father's Cola business reduced to failure. He goes to Mumbai to meet Dina, Ishvar and Omprakash but finds no one there in the flat. After much search and with great difficulty he finally sees both Ishvar and Omprakash coming towards him. They are in a dirty, broken down condition. He calls out in joy, rushes towards them but they ignore him. Maneck is aghast, in a state of shock. The happy family unit which he was hoping to find refuge in is broken; only sharp; painful glass pieces

remain. He is unable to cope with this loss and homelessness. He commits suicide.

Nidhi Gupta, in “*Major themes in Rohinton Mistry’s Novels*” perceives that:

Indira Gandhi’s declaration of a State of Emergency affects adversely the livelihood of the tailors in *A Fine Balance* and finally, in *Family Matters*, the impact Hindu fundamentalist agitation and the post-Babri Masjid riots destroy communal harmony in the life of the ordinary Indian. (1)

Unlike *A Fine Balance*, his third novel, *Family Matters* deals with a regular family and its matters. The whole story of the novel moves around the characters Nariman Vakeel, Yaswin, Lucy, his step daughter Coomy and step son Jal, Roxana and her husband Yezad and their children Jehangir and Murad. Every character imagines his/her own home, love and emotion. The older generation sticks to the tradition. They want that their son and daughter must marry in Parsi community. The character Nariman is an example and submission of his will to the higher good. In this novel Mistry admits that “No happiness is more lasting than the happiness that you get from fulfilling your parents’ wishes (*Family Matters* 13).

Yezad living in his pleasant villa always looks for Jehangir palace near the Hugh road in which he was born, lived and had to leave. Mr. Kapur who is a merchant always pines to adopt Mumbai as his own beloved town.

The novel opens with Nariman and his step daughter Coomy and son Jal living in Chateau Felicity. Nariman Vakeel, a 79 year old Parsi widower, suffering from Parkinson’s disease, lives in a large apartment, which was once elegant and now is in a dilapidated condition. He lives with his two middle-aged, unmarried step-children, Coomey and Jal Contractor. His own daughter, Roxana, lives with her husband, Yezad Chinoy and two sons, Murad and Jehangir in a small flat in Pleasant villa. Nariman has to depend on his step-children for the smooth functioning of his life. He loves to go out for his evening walks

despite the several health problems he has. He refuses to be cowed down by Coomey's constant naggings and Jal's magnified fears regarding dangers of walking on the streets of Bombay.

Nariman's happiness has been ruined by bowing down to familial pressures. He had fallen in love with a Christian girl, Lucy Braganza and wanted to marry her. But his father an orthodox Parsi, refused to give in to his son's desires and stubbornly stood his ground. He was forced to marry Yasmin Contractor, a widow, with two children Coomy and Jal. Nariman at that moment does not have courage to oppose his parents' wish and forever repents that act of compliance. Lucy persistently tries to convince him otherwise, but he weakly gives in to the advice of his parents' friends. Mistry writes in *Family Matters* that "No happiness is more lasting than the happiness that you get from fulfilling your parents' wishes" (13).

Abiding by such advice, he had married Yasmin, but had never been able to forget Lucy, which has been the main reason for his marital discord. Coomy and Jal resented Nariman for not keeping their mother happy. They retain their name of Contractor, and Nariman does not object to it. The only happy memories all of them have are of Roxana's birth. Jal and Coomy are very devoted to their sister in her childhood. They look after her and take her everywhere with them. After their mother's tragic death, they shoulder the responsibility of bringing her up. On growing up, she decides to get married and opts to set up home elsewhere with her husband. Coomy and Jal feel betrayed. Nariman has to put up with Coomy's bossing over things. The only time he is happy is when Roxana visits him with her family.

Mistry paints a very happy picture of Roxana's family life in pleasant villa. An example of homesickness is seen when Yezad's employer 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 Hidutva agenda of Shiv Sena apologists.

Yezad applies for visa to go to Canada and is excitedly hopeful of getting it. He sees Canada as an utopian society and feels trapped in some way. But he fails to go to Canada. However, Coomy's death brings about the badly needed turn around in the lives of these people. Jal prepares a plan that is finally put into operation. Yezad's flat is sold and they all move to Chateau Felicity. The interest from the money kept in bank deposits enables them to live comfortably. While leaving the pleasant villa Nariman and Jehanir become very sad. After one year, Nariman passes away due to Parkinson's disease due to negligence of the nurses.

Thus after much struggle, family pressure and frustration the family of Nariman comes together in Chateau felicity. The homelessness and loneliness of Nariman ends and they all live together though the conflicts continue as both Roxana's children fall in love with young people from other communities and Yezad becomes an orthodox Parsi. We fear that caste/religion which was responsible for all the conflict and tension in Nariman's family may not repeat itself.

Thus we find a lucid expression of Mistry's theme of migration, home and homelessness in his novels.

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