



Thematic framework of Rohinton Mistry's Fiction

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INTRODUCTION :

Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi by birth is easily one of the eminent names in post-colonialist Indian fiction in English. Born in Bombay, he migrated to Canada at the age of twenty three. Mistry's, birth and upbringing in Bombay make him an eminently suitable writer for witnessing the last lighter sparks of the existence of the Parsis, a fast dwindling minuscule community, as well as for documenting minuscule community, as well as for documenting the criminalization of the city of his birth in the last three decades of the 20th Century.

Rohinton Mistry's literary odyssey started in 1983 by writing short stories. In 1987 Penguin Canada published *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry's first novel *Such A Long Journey*, which revolves around a Parsi family in Bombay appeared in 1991. *A Fine Balance* came out in 1995 and the latest in the list, *Family Matters*, came out only in 2002. Mistry does not acknowledge influences on his writings but betrays a strange family likeness with the grandees in European literature Hugo, Tolstoy and above all the Victorian novelists such as Dickens and Hardy.

The most important thing to keep in mind about Rohinton Mistry is that he is a Parsi. The Parsis came to India as fugitives in the eight century, seeking freedom to practise their faith to retain their ethnic and religious identity, they had to compromise a lot. When the British imperialist rule began, the Parsis

in general became westernized and unlike other Indians, were able to identify with British and closely associated with the British ruling class. This did estrange them from other Indians, and they ended up being a neglected minority in India after its Independence in 1947.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag* Mistry confronts his readers with a ghetto-like Parsi world, where the post-colonial Indian reality is firmly shut out and where the residents display what Bharucha calls a 'seige mentality', Zoroastrian religion, Parsi idiosyncrasies, Parsi life are authentically recreated.

Mistry's first novel *Such A Long Journey* also relates to Bombay and the Parsi community. The leitmotif of 'Journeying' is set in motion right in the beginning with the three epigraphs, *Firdausi's Shahnama*, T.S. Eliot's

Journey of the Magi and Tagore's Gitanjali. Set in Bombay against the backdrop of Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and the emergence of Bangladesh, it is the story of a Bank official, Gustad Noble and the peculiar way in which the conflict in the Indian sub- continent affects him and his family. The chief beauty of this novel is its absolute Indianness. It is steeped in the atmosphere of Bombay, particularly of the exclusive Parsi community in and around the Khodabad Building.

A Fine Balance has an epic sweep, the time is 1975. The place is an 'Unnamed city by the sea' i.e. Bombay. Here too the chief protagonist is a Parsi widow. Others hailing from far off North or Central India, Maneck Kohlah and the two untouchables Ishwar and his nephew Om Prakash, are caught into the vortex of Bombay and all the social and political hurly burly is seen as if from a Parsi view point.

His latest novel Family Matters took Mistry back to Bombay and the Parsi family. It is the most touching and compassionate of Mistry's works. Set in contemporary Bombay, it is a very moving 'domestic novel. At the centre of the book in Nariman Vakeel, an old retired English Professor, a Parsi with Parkinson's disease. The lives of the residents of Chateau Felicity (Nariman's former residence) and Pleasant Villa (Where he is forced to move by his scheming step daughter) recall the world

of Firozsha Baag.

The city of Bombay (Much like Magudi in R.K. Narayan) is all the time present in Rohinton Mistry's fiction. In novel after novel, the footpaths, the slums, the teeming offices, the tenements, the Parsi enclaves are all created and then re-created just as they continue to form and re-form in reality. It is Bombay not so much recreated, as actually created from newspaper reports, visits to the city and visiting friends and relatives from Bombay. Mistry deals with multiple issues which rock the life of the Indians. As such the city of Bombay emerges in Mistry's books as a microcosm of modern India- a mini India floodlighting in particular the travails of the minuscule Parsi community residing in some stray pockets of the megalopolis. Though Mistry has been living in Toronto in Canada since 1975, his fiction focuses on the Parsi identity. It also reveals how Parsis are learning to cope with the reality of post-colonial India. In his first book Tales from Firozsha Baag, he presents his readers with a ghetto-like Parsi world, where the post-colonial Indian reality is family shut out and where the residents display 'a siege mentality'. In this insular world, the protagonist's lives revolve around the Parsi housing complex of Firozsha Baag, the Zoroastrian religion, the Fire-temple, the Parsi priest, the Parsi calendar, Parsi cuisine. This discourse also highlights Parsi idiosyncrasies and superstitions.

This is nowhere more clearly than in the very first story *Auspicious Occasion* in this collection. This near-total alienation from post-colonial India has pushed more and more Parsi into a Western Diaspora.

Mistry's first novel, *Such A Long Journey* (1991) returns to Bombay and the Parsi world. The Khodabad building, an apartment house, where Gustad Noble lives along with his Parsi neighbours, is a world in itself. Certain customs and rituals related to the microscopic community are graphically described as is clear from the account of the ceremonies related to the last rites, the Tower of Silence.

A Fine Balance the most ambitious of Mistry's works begins with the year of the declaration of the Emergency and ends with Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assassination. Between those two cataclysmic political events are the stories of Dina, her tailors, her lodger and their motley friends and acquaintances. Dina is quite clearly the head of this family, thus offering resistance to norms of patriarchy.

Family Matters is to quote Bharucha, Mistry's "most compassionate book to-date". Here he has viewed the life of a middle class Parsi family in Bombay in the 1990's. Not that Mistry loses sight of the major social and political events and their impact on the lives of people. They are as usual deftly woven into the texture of the novel as

we come across in R.K. Narayan's comedies of sadness. But while in Narayan's world politics are almost always in a remote background and do not affect everyday life in a consistent way, here on the contrary private problems mix with socio-political and religious conflicts so deeply that it is almost impossible to separate them.

Tales from Firozsha Baag though it makes an immensely interesting reading is a rather 'superficial' book throwing light on the day-to-day mundane life of some Parsis living in a ghetto-like colony in post-Bombay. In *Such A Long Journey* however Gustad Noble is a moral man, whose life is governed by *humata*, *hukhta* and *hvarshata*, Both the manifestations of the Zoroastrian worldview overt and covert-are rendered in the narrative. Overtly, Gustad's quest for order and security in a corrupt society is a heroic but futile exercise. Covertly, the conflict rages in his mind between fear, doubt, and uncertainty and hope. Thus the evolution of Gustad's consciousness becomes the chief thematic purpose of the narrative. Gustad's eventual survival is the victory of Good over the forces of Evil and Darkness.

A Fine Balance is a bold attempt at projecting non-traditional Parsi woman in the person of Dina Dalal. Not only does she refuse to have her brother involved in the selection of her mate, she also marries a man who is poor when

Rustam Dalal dies, she insists on existing alone. A smart little girl (who) knows how to get what she wants, she has the power to be a landlady, hires two tailors, and be in control It is she who calls the shots.

Dina's return at the end to the traditional fold is a vindication of the age-old Parsi ethos which preaches and glorifies family ties. Dina's journey in this book from being a pampered daughter, to a dependent window, to an independent entrepreneur, back to being a dependent in her brother's home *prima facie* takes her nowhere but she does emerge as the example of a non-traditional woman.

Family Matters has a pan-universal ring which clearly transcends narrow religious, communal or even national boundaries. You don't have to be a Parsi or Indian to identify with Misty's characters and the dilemmas they face. Taking what is mundane and familiar and turning it into something humanly important is the singular accomplishment of this exceptionally gifted writer.

Rohinton Mistry's novels are not strictly speaking novels of characters. They are 'novels of community'. They provide a window to the world of a small Parsi community that isolated and often beleaguered, people who live on the margins and peripheries of their chosen location. As such Mistry's characters do not often evolve and remain static,

'trapped' in their milieu and ethno-religious concerns their actions and reactions are mostly predictable. In that they are what Forster calls 'flat' and not 'round' characters.

In Family Matters the canvas has shrunk considerably. The plot revolves around the last lag of the life of Nariman Vakeel, a 79 Year old retired professor of English living with his step children Coomy and Jal, and later shifted to his daughter Roxana. The major characters in Rohinton Mistry's novels are 'trapped' and 'tethered' to the author's concept or vision of a member of the Parsi diaspora of Bombay. It is in the delineation of the minor characters that his talent comes into full play these characters are really common-reader friendly.

In Tales from Firozsha Baag Mistry succeeds in creating the illusion of pulsating life of Middle class Parsi residents of a ghetto-like apartment in post-colonial Bombay. Similarly the Khodabad Bulding in Such A Long Journey is representative of a cross-section of middle class Parsi expressing all the angularities of a dwindling community Dinshawji Malcolm, physician Dr. Paymaster, Peerbhoy paanwala, Mr. Madan, the office peon Bhimsen, Miss kutpitia and so on. Again in Fine Balance, we come across the proof reader Valmik, the rent collector Rajaram transformed from a barbar/ hair-collector to a Family Planning-Motivator and then to a murderer and

finally the highly venerated Bal Baba. In this novel Mistry also presents a kaleidoscopic image of modern India.

Rohinton Mistry's female characters again like those of Charles Dickens leave much to be desired. His is by and large a male dominated world. With the glorious exception of Dina Dalal of *A Fine Balance* his women maintain a comparatively low profile. In *Such A Long Journey* Gustad's humanism embraces not only Dinshawji but even the physically and mentally challenged Tehmul and the pavement artist. Yet what about his wife, Dilnavaz? She is the perfect foil to Gyustad soft and pretty, whereas he is big and muscular. As a couple they exhibit the typical features of male aggressiveness and female passivity. Again the child Roshan is doll-like creature, sickly and fragile. She is in direct contract to the some Sohrab and Darius. The female characters do not journey at all. They remain stationary while the world around them moves and changes. This is largely true of Mistry's others books as well. "I am a traditional writer," says Rohinton Mistry. Yet Mistry is already experimenting with literary modes like the use of narrators-Nariman Hansotia in 'Squatter' and Jacqueline Jaakaleen in the *Ghost from Firozsha Baag* and above all *Swimming Lessons*. The last story in the collection, *Swimming Lessons*, is exceptional for here we get a glimpse of Firozsha Baag from the 'outside' i.e.

Canada. It is a self-reflexive story not only in the sense of being somewhat auto biographical but also in the context of the process of creative writing itself, which gives it an auto-logical orientation. This story serves a sort of self-reflexive post-script to the collection, highlighting Mistry's own conception of the art of story writing.

Such a long Journey is in line with the realistic tradition in which the narrative is pushed forward in arithmetical progression and is chronological rather than spatial in the development of the plot. The novel is set during the months leading to the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 over the 'liberation' of Bangladesh. The plot, which involves a series of coincidences culminating in Gustad's meeting with Billimoria in the person hospital, is used as a narrative link to interconnect the various episodes in the life of Gustad Nobel.

A Fine Balance is Mistry's most politically charged novel. It maintains a fine balance' among the multitude of characters and the various strands of the complete plot which wafts the enchanted reader across vast seas of experience, from the ecstasy to the Indian Independence in 1947, to its traumatic Emergency under Indira Gandhi's Congress rule in 1975. Here is India, going beyond the narrow Parsi circle into the much vaster caste-hidden Hindu society. Between its opening chapter 'Prologue-1975' and the concluding one

'Epilogue 1995' its 614 pages reveal social as well as historical developments of a country. The chapters deliberately do not identify the locales of action and are titled 'City by the Sea' and Mountains' rather than Bombay/Mumbai or Himachal Pradesh. The novel progresses through a series of seemingly separate stories. Coincidence and overlapping Stores help to create an intricate plot. It is mainly the ordinary, commonplace and run-off- the mill events of life that get portrayed in the novel At times, the novel moves into the naturalistic mode in its frank depiction of certain bodily functions with Mistry's liberally using scatological imagery. A brilliant example of a prototypical realistic novel. The range of Mistry's humour is quite wide- from farce to broad even scatological humour to irony of all brands-character, situation and verbal, to satire. Rohinton Mistry's masterly handling of English or Hinglish. It is a fine specimen of Indian English. In Tales from Firozsha Baag, Kersi uses a language which is at once sophisticated and scholarly. Nariman on the other hand belongs to the proverbial class of oral story tellers.

Mistry bends normal English so as to highlight the individual peculiarities of a particular character. In the Ghosts of Firozsha Baag where the narrator is a Goan ayah Mistry makes her speak in a lingo which is a spicy mix of Indian

English, Gujarati and Hindu.

The core of Mistry's fiction is the Parsi community, but the frame is India, with all its multiplicity. The two do not easily mix, but Mistry ensures that at least in his fiction, they do. He provides a window to the world of a small Parsi community that is isolated, flawed and often beleaguered, but always resilient and unfailingly human. Mistry seems more at home among the Parsi community and the poor. Mistry's writing is characteristically grounded in firm and needs no infusion of magic realism to vivify the real. The real, through his eyes, is magical.

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