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**The Socio-Cultural Issues of Parsi Community Reflected in
Rohinton Mistry's Select Novels: A Critical Study**

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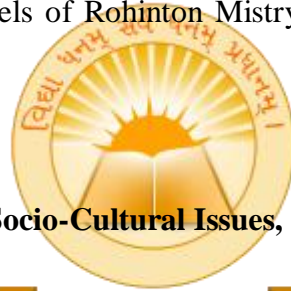
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Abstract

One of the most interesting aspects of the novel writing at the second half of the 20th century from the Indian point of view is the emergence of new talented novelists who have produced significant novels making a mark in the literary world. Among the modern Indian novelist, Rohinton Mistry has been a unique name in many ways. Rohinton Mistry is one of the most representative Parsi novelists who represents his community with microscopic details and precision. Parsi Community is in minority in India and yet have played a significant role in shaping the pre & post-industrialization, globalization and liberalization. Rohinton Mistry's novels deal with the struggles and achievements, strength and weaknesses, ups and downs of the Parsi Community in India. The present research aims to study the representation of the socio-cultural issues in select novels of Rohinton Mistry viz. *Such a long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*.



Key Words: Parsi Community, Socio-Cultural Issues, Globalization, India

Introduction:

Rohinton Mistry is a post-independent Indian English writer who has greatly contributed to the development of Indian English Fiction. He gained considerable popularity from readers and critics for portraying the socio-cultural aspects of Parsi community in the context of post-independent India. His understanding of sensibility and representation of Parsi culture and their attitude in the social, political and spiritual crisis has made him different and unique novelist other than his contemporaries.



A Brief History of the Parsis in India:

The Parsis are an ethno-religious miniaturized scale minority network in India. Despite the fact that they are minority in India, their commitment to the general public, financial aspects, business, science, governmental issues and writing has been significant. They are little, however joined religious network. In India, they live generally on the west shoreline of the subcontinent, particularly in Mumbai. The Parsis are the devotees of Prophet Zoroaster and their religion is known as Zoroastrianism. The first country of the Parsis, "Standards" or "Fars", an old Persian locale is found at present in Southern Iran. In seventh century, the Parsis left their country to shield their religion from being Islamized by the attacking Islamic Arabians. They looked for after opportunity to pursue their confidence, for that they came to India in the eighth century.

The historical backdrop of the Parsis is established in the pre-Islamic history of Persia. In the wake of the Arab triumph of Iran, Zoroastrianism "became steadily marginalized, and oppression and persecution of its followers became ever more acute." Seeking opportunity of love, a little gathering of Zoroastrians chosen to emigrate. In 936 A.D. the Parsis, named after the Persian area of Pars (or Fars), settled close Gujarat in North-West India. Much the same as the Pioneer fathers' voyage from a threatening England towards what they trusted would turn into a New Jerusalem, the Parsi relocation from Pars to Gujarat has been liable to mythologizing. They in the long run landed along the Gujarat at a place they named Sanjan, approximately 180 kms north of Bombay. There they thrived and came to be known as the Parsis, named after Fars, the locale from where they came to India. Specifically, their landing in Sanjan and the following exchanges with the nearby Hindu rajah Jadhav Rana have turned out to be one of the most broadly circled anecdotes about the network.

The Parsis were allowed the privilege to choose the shoreline of Gujarat gave they would not be problematic to society and be eager to culturally assimilate. The nearby rajah expected them receive Gujarati as their local tongue, to dress as indicated by nearby traditions, to get rid of weapons out and out and to rehearse their confidence as it were after



dusk to abstain from offering offense to the neighbourhood Hindu dominant part. As the Parsis conformed to the rajah's conditions, they were permitted to settle in Sanjan and since that time they have demonstrated faithful to their particular rulers.

The people group lost its advantaged position in the new Indian country state. They had not been content with the part of the arrangement and had not effectively bolstered 'Quit India,' for example the Home Rule development. Their "dedication and pledge to provincial goals were not especially versatile in postcolonial India." Many individuals from the network felt that a satisfactory situating inside Indian culture would turn out to be progressively troublesome and chosen to leave India for the universal diaspora. For the individuals who remained on, there remained the likelihood of affiliating themselves with the youthful country. 'Parsis had been in India a thousand years, they consider Indians,' one contention ran. On the other hand, there were likewise the individuals who experienced the Indian postcolonial reality and took shelter in a glorification of the Parsi accomplishments of the past just as to an uncritical sentimentality of everything British. This procedure of "social reversal" ends up obvious in Dinshawji's grievance about the change of road names in *Such A Long Journey*.

The Socio-Cultural Aspects of Parsi Community in His Select Novels:

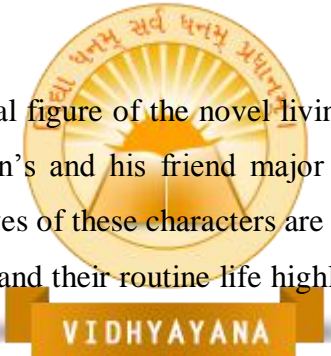
Most of the Parsi writers, whatever be the genre of their writings, have tried to present Parsi culture and traditions and customs in their writings. Bapsi Sidhwa, Firdaus Kanga, Ardashir Vakil, Keki Daruwala, Dina Mehta are some of the prominent writers who have given expression to the Parsi culture in their works. Rohinton Mistry is no exception to this band of writers. He tries to show the uniqueness of Parsi community by focusing on their way of living and their cultural heritage. All the three novels- *Such A Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* –are crowded with Parsi characters. Mistry's characters respect the Parsi community whose identity has been historically problematized. It is a progressive community with a glorious past and a dismal future. By giving authentic portrayals of the Parsis, the novelist accustoms the readers to the Parsi way of life, their religious customs, prayers and funeral rites. Another important point is that as a chronicler of Parsi community



Mistry is keenly aware of his community's predicament. In the recent years a large number of young Parsis have migrated to the West in search of better prospects. Mistry is one of them. All the works of Mistry foreground the heterogeneity of identity within the Parsi community and the dynamic nature of Parsi community itself.

Such a Long Journey is the first novel written by Mistry. It was published in 1991. The novel is closely linked with the social and political background in India and Mistry is well aware with the Indian politics though he left India thirty years before but his knowledge of Indian politics is immense. He presents his community through his characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the socio-political changes affect their lives. The Parsis are isolated and leading their life with full of anxieties in the vast sprawling forest of Indian culture but it has accepted the land and contributed to its development in its own way. The concern for Parsi community reflects prominently in the novel.

Gustad Noble is the central figure of the novel living at Khodadad Building with his wife, Dilnavaz and three children's and his friend major Jimmy Bilimoria and Dinshawji lives in the same building. The lives of these characters are disturbed by the political decision taken by the people in the power and their routine life highly troubled into the political crisis of India.



The novel depicts the tale of Gustad Noble, a lower middle-class Parsi who's struggling to make two ends meet and keep his family. Gustad is a hard-working bank clerk living in Parsi Colony with his wife Dilnavaz and three children. The family started falling apart when eldest son of Noble family, Sohrab refused to join in the reputed IIT when he had got admission. There are many prolonged interactions among Gustad and his family members or Gaustad and other Parsi of the colony or with his close friend and colleague Dinshawji. Some of these interactions were wry and outright blunt about the contemporary local Maharashtrians and their ways of life. The character Dinshawji is surely unhappy with the locals in general and dabbawala in particular. He burst out his anger with a rude dabbawala in the following blatant way:



What to do with such low-class people? No manners, no sense, nothing. And you know who is responsible for this attitude — that bastard Shiv Sena leader who worships Hitler and Mussolini. He and his 'Maharashtra for Maharashtrians' nonsense. They won't stop till they have complete Maratha Raj...Wait till the Marathas take over, then we will have real Gandoo Raj.(72)

The quest of identity is represented in the novel through a saner and clearer way by the character of Gustad who started receiving money secretly from an old friend that enabled him to go on a long journey. As it happens in the theme of 'quest' the journey of the protagonist character Gustad leads to his personal and political transformation enables author to represent new meaning in the life of Gustad. The novel documents in breadth and width the life journey of Gustad along with the upheavals and turmoil that overtook the Indian political system during the reign of Indira Gandhi. Thus, the novel is representative of socio-cultural aspects of Parsi community and at the same time it brings forward the individual traits and flavour of its own.

It represents the journey of struggle which is usually lead by male characters, most protagonists of the novels are male. The few women character that appear in the novel such as Gustad's wife and daughter Dilnavaz Noble and Roshan Noble, Khodabad Building Residents Miss Kutpitia and Mrs.Pastakia that are represented as the counterfoil to the male characters or their supplements. Even the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is referred in the novel but she is not dealt with the depth and vigour that she stood in real life of Indian politics.

A Fine Balance is the second novel written by Rohinton Mistry. The novel deals with a tale of the turbulent 1970s in India when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of internal emergency and suspended India's constitution. The novel is primarily about man's brutal behaviour with man and the human spirit. Mistry's portrayal of bravery, self-sacrifice,



kindness and hope in the time of misery are really amazing. The novel is set against Indian background.

The novel emphasizes the value of maintaining a fine balance in our lives by right choice. We need to work continuously to keep the life in balanced form. All the characters in the novel face many problems in the journey of their life. For them life is not at all easy going. Some hurdles are sent by nature while others are created by themselves. They have to struggle a lot. Some of them are able to maintain the balance while others are not so they keep on blaming their fate. The man is helpless before the fate.

The novel blends political history with the personal life of the individuals. Dina Dalal is a middle-class woman living in the urban world. She is a forty years old widow. She is struggling hard to live the independent life. Second, there is another world symbolized by ManeckKohlah, a sensitive Parsi boy. He feels like life is a burden. The last, the novel focuses another sight into rural India provided by IshvarDarji and his nephew Omprakash who struggles to exist in this world.

The four main characters of different backgrounds are in search of identity. They want to prove their self-identity in the society. The protagonist Dina Dalal has lost her parents when she was very young. She was taken care by her brother who wants to protect her as a bird in a cage. Dina believes in freedom and she also loves humour. She does not feel comfortable with her brother. She is forced to marry a rich gentleman but she prefers to marry a compounder namely RustomDalal. Before they tie the knot, Dina loses her husband in an accident. All her hopes are broken and she again had to be depended on her brother. Thus, Dina's identity fades away in the society as an independent woman. There can be seen the theme of novel in the following lines that appeared in the novel: "...you cannot draw lines and compartments, and refuse to budge beyond them... You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair... In the end, it's all a question of balance." (231)

Dina fights for her freedom and individuality but she faces the continuous failures and threats by society. She also lost her flat and had to work as servant in her brother's house. Some feminist critics have argued that the author has done injustice to Dina Dalal by showing her coming back to her brother's house. It shows that it is difficult for a woman to live



independently without any sort of male-protection. Even she could live safely for some years under the protection of Beggarmaster. But the political situations like National Emergency disturbed Dina Dalal and also other characters in the novel. That is the reason why she loses her freedom.

After Mrs. Shoroff's death, she was not even allowed to study till matriculation in spite of her desire. Her brother, Nusswan, insists that she should marry a man of his choice but she proclaims her individuality. She marries Rustom Dalal, whom she loves very much. Dina is the kind of "new woman" who denies to be submissive. She does not accept the stereotypical feminine role given to her. Even on that cruel night, when her husband dies, she behaves in a very dignified manner. "No wailing, no beating the chest or tearing the hair like you might expect from a woman who had suffered such a shock, such a loss." (46)

Family Matters (2002) is the third novel by Rohinton Mistry. The novel has the city of Mumbai as the background and the theme of the novel is the city life i.e. urbanization. Mumbai was the city where Mistry was born and spent his early childhood, hence, there are many autobiographical shades and many nostalgic descriptions in the novel. The novel chiefly depicts the life-story of an Indian middle-class Parsi family facing dire economic crisis. By using the trope of one family – a Parsi family, Mistry attempts to represent a vast account of the predicaments that the India's Parsis who go through many ups and downs before and after their mass migration to various parts of India. The novel also dealt with the life situation of Persian-descended Zoroastrians and the ever-spreading corruption in Indian government body and communalism. The author uses simple language for narrating the struggles and dilemmas that the Parsi community that undergoes all the mayhem. Mistry uses a lot of dialogues and conversation to further his argument. Some of the major action of the novel takes place in Chateau Felicity, an ancestral home where a 79-year-old, Parsi named Nariman lives with his unconcerned family. Nariman used to be the centre of the family but now he's a widower who suffers from Parkinson.

The first half of the novel begins with an accident of Nariman resulting to his getting bed-ridden for his entire life. Once the patriarch of the family, Nariman now suffers



humiliation on a day to day basis. This results into a constant weakening in his physical and psychological health and the deteriorating care of his two stepchildren especially Coomy. She could never accept Nariman as his father in spite of his genuine efforts to be a father. The helpless man is entirely at their mercy of his ruthless step-daughter Coomy and her family. Coomy's family considers the burden of Nariman to be quite uncomfortable to carry and there is no emotional bonding them with him. Thus, there can be seen the theme of human predicament and interpersonal relation among the family members.

The second half of the novel deals with the post-marriage life of Roxana and Yezad and their struggle to manage the financial conditions of their family which got worsened due to the entry of Nariman's bedridden services that Roxana was obliged to undertake. Through the struggle of the Roxana and Yezad the author exposes the reader to the dilemmas of Parsi community in India and Indian society in general.

The theme of perpetual human struggle is represented in the novel by the character of Nariman. When Nariman accidentally broke his ankle, Coomy, his ill-mannered step-daughter become even more resentful. She conspires to turn Nariman's round-the-clock care over to Roxana. Roxana was Nariman's real daughter who was concerned about his father even after her marriage to Yezad, a middle-class Parsi who barely manages to meet his ends. It here that the problems start. Roxana lives a happy life her husband Yezad and her two sons Murad and Jehangir in a small house at Pleasant Villa. She started taking care of Nariman as ardently as she could. However, the inclusion bad-ridden Nariman in an already crowded house-hold soon becomes obviously painful, both physically and psychologically for Roxana's family. The more the sickness of Nariman increases the more financial debts get deeper. The already stressed household of Roxana's family turned out to be unmanageable. The growing economic concerns led Yezad into a financial scam in collaboration with Vikram Kapur his frustrating boss at Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium.

Thus, the novel depicts the tale of a representative blended family that struggles to cope with the failing health of their ageing patriarch. Throughout the novel, the father keeps



on living in getting nostalgic. He lives in the past overwhelmed with disheartened affection and disturbing social parameters.

It has been observed that Mistry's novels fairly represent all the aspects of Parsi Community; however, his works do not portray the women characters aptly. As it is a well-established fact that women play a very vital roles in rise and fall of any community, caste or religion. In this matter, Mistry fails to give justice to women characters while discussing socio-cultural aspects of Parsi community.

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