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Socio-Cultural Aspects in the Select Works of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry, an Indian born writer has been prolific in portraying the Indian political, socio-cultural scenario of the free India from the British Rule. How the prominent political leaders have been struggling to settle things is openly discussed in all his works especially in his early novels. He is one of the significant and distinguished writers representing the ill fates of the Parsi community and his depictions become autobiographical as he himself is a Parsi. All his first three novels have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize and he has been haunted for his problematic depiction of characters – who resembled the real time famous political personages. Apart from this allegation, his portrayal of the social conditions of the free India skins out the turmoil that was available in abundance at all levels in administering the country. The socio-cultural aspects in his work give a lasting effect to a sharp reader.

Keywords: Hegemony, Exploitation, Suppression, Chaos, Inconsistency.

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry, born in 1952, is a Canadian writer originally from India. He has earned several prestigious awards, including the 2012 Neustadt International Literary Prize. All three of his books made the shortlist for booker prize. Mistry, being a Parsi, sets his works in that cultural grounds and prefers the Indian subcontinent as the background of his narration. He includes family-based themes portraying poverty, corruption found in abundance in the society and how people are divided due to various factors.

Tales from FirozshaBaag, his collection of short stories has 11 stories are in a Bombay apartment complex and include the frequently anthologized "Swimming Lessons." His maiden attempt as a novelist was Such a Long Journey (1991). The novel received a number of honours, such as the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Governor Generals Award and also was shortlisted for the Booker and Trillium Prizes. Moreover, the work was translated into several languages and also adapted into a film in 1998. However, in 2010, the book caused controversy at Mumbai University over its depiction of Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray and certain remarks about Maharashtrians. Though it was initially included as an optional text for BA (English) students in 2007–08, it was later removed from the syllabus by Vice-Chancellor Dr. Rajan Welukar under emergency provisions in the Maharashtra Universities Act.

Mistry's second novel, A Fine Balance (1995), received the Giller Prize and the Los Angeles Times

Book Prize, and was chosen for Oprah's Book Club in 2001. In 1996, it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the commonwealth writers prize.

His third story, *Family Matters* (2002), addresses the challenges of aging. He revisited this theme in 2006 with the short story *The Scream*, released as a standalone volume with illustrations to promote Canadian literacy worldwide. Mistry's manuscripts and papers are archived at York University's Clara Thomas Archives. In 2002, he cancelled his U.S. book tour for *Family Matters* after being singled out by airport security guards on multiple occasions.

Such a Long Journey

Such a Long Journey by Rohinton Mistry, a Canadian-Indian author, centers on Gustad Noble as he deals with personal turmoil and political intrigue in 1970s India. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of Indira Gandhi's corrupt regime and the India-Pakistan conflict. Critics lauded the book for its warmth and humor, and it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

Gustad Noble, a strong but sorrowful man, lives in Bombay with his wife Dilnavaz and their three children: Sohrab, who resists attending technical college despite being accepted; Darius, the middle child; and their young daughter Roshan. Their home in the Khodadad Building still bears black-out paper from the China war.

Gustad's old friend, Major Jimmy Bilimoria, has mysteriously vanished, leaving Gustad feeling betrayed. During Roshan's birthday celebration, their friend Dinshawji—an ailing jokester from work—joins the family. Tension rises when Sohrab refuses to attend IIT, prompting a bitter argument with Gustad, who disowns him in anger.

Gustad then receives a secretive letter from Jimmy, now working for intelligence services, asking for a favour. Out of loyalty and gratitude for past help, Gustad agrees. Meanwhile, Dilnavaz, hoping to heal the rift between Gustad and Sohrab, consults Miss Kutpitia and begins engaging in superstitious rituals. Roshan wins a doll at school, which catches the affection of Tehmul, a mentally challenged resident of their building.

Gustad meets Ghulam Mohammed, Jimmy's contact, who hands him a package containing one million rupees. Jimmy wants the money quietly deposited into a fake bank account. Though Dilnavaz

opposes it, Gustad proceeds, but mysterious threats and animal carcasses appear outside their home. He cautiously begins making small deposits with Dinshawji's assistance.

Amidst this, Roshan falls sick and Sohrab leaves home. Gustad seeks help from Dr. Paymaster, whose clinic is near a notorious red-light area. As Roshan recovers, Dinshawji's health worsens. News of Jimmy's arrest appears in the papers. Gustad halts the deposits and confronts Ghulam, who demands the full amount be returned within 30 days. With time running out, Gustad collects the money. Just as Dinshawji hands over the final portion, he collapses. After returning the money, Gustad receives a heartfelt letter from Jimmy, urging him to visit in Delhi. Gustad continues to care for Dinshawji, providing food and light conversation.

Later, Malcolm, another friend, takes Gustad to a Catholic shrine, where he finds brief serenity. But on returning home, he learns of Dinshawji's death and stays with the body until the family arrives, attending both private and public memorials.

Gustad travels to Delhi to visit a hospitalized Jimmy, who offers a sincere apology. Gustad forgives him, feeling there is nothing left to hold against him. On his train ride back, Gustad hears on the radio that war has broken out with Pakistan.

As Indian forces advance and Bangladesh moves toward independence, Gustad learns from a newspaper article that Jimmy has died. Gustad alone attends the funeral. Meanwhile, protests erupt in Bombay over poor living conditions, led by Dr. Paymaster and Peerbhoy Paanwalla. Clashes occur near the Khodadad Building as the city attempts road expansion. During the unrest, Tehmul is struck by a brick and dies. His death ultimately reconciles Gustad and Sohrab. In a final gesture of renewal, Gustad removes the blackout paper from his windows, signaling the end of an era and the start of something new.

Rohinton Mistry's initial attempt in *Such a Long Journey* gives a varied visualization of post-independence India, centring predominantly on the Parsi community in the then Bombay (now Mumbai). The novel gives ample scope for the themes like identity crisis, marginalization based on religion and community, economic discrimination and offers first-hand information on the experiences of minority people amidst the chaos on national, political and social levels. It also takes space to discuss on the political inconsistency and the chang-

ing societal norms of the free India from the British rule.

The story is set in the background of Bombay in 1970s. That was the time of penetrating and fishy political issues inland on the one side and a considerable and awaited social upbringing on the other side. The people of the Parsi community too, like other Indians find it really hard to come in to pace with the sprouting political backdrop and the ever changing societal prerequisites.

The novel brings into light the subjugated state of the people of Parsi community, the challenges they face amidst themselves, how they too are trying to find their roots in the changing national background is given full potential throughout the narration. The novel also speaks about how people from the minority groups are treated in general and border issues play a dominant role in creating chaos in the political regime.

Rohinton Mistry also focuses on the disturbance prevailing and the unpredictable political scenario in India after independence. He also discusses how every move from the politicians affected the citizens tremendously especially the underdogs. The Parsis especially underwent a lot of humiliations and disrespect, and who are left to face the upshots of policy changes and societal transformations.

The novel takes a considerable space to delve deeply on the Parsi community's exceptional cultural blend, and uses it to reconnoitre themes of cross identity. It also talks about the agony in protecting and cherishing long-standing traditions and acclimatizing to the trending societal contexts in an all inclusive milieu. Through his intense character depictions and realistic settings, Mistry offers a genuine and acute delineation of Indian society. The novel could be taken as an uncompromising example of social realism, offering deep understanding into the political, cultural, and social encounters of the era.

A Fine Balance

Ishvar additionally his nephew Omprakash, who is also from the lower-caste Chamaar community, are traveling by train to a major city for tailoring work. During the journey, they meet a student named Maneck, and they soon discover that they are all headed to the same destination—Maneck is going to live in a room rented from Dina, the woman employing Ishvar and Omprakash. Their story unfolds during India's Emergency period, a time of national crisis declared by the Prime Min-

ister years after the country gained independence.

Ishvar and his brother Narayan had left their village to apprentice under Ashraf, a Muslim tailor. However, when Narayan opposed the local caste authority, Thakur Dharamsi, during an election, Thakur retaliated violently, murdering Narayan and his family. Ishvar and Omprakash survived and were left to rebuild their lives alone.

Maneck comes from a more affluent family, though his father's soda business struggles in the face of industrial growth. Sent to study a new trade, Maneck finds it difficult to relate to his college peers, with the exception of a chess-playing friend, Avinash.

Dina, born into a well-off family, married Rustom and had a happy life until his sudden death in a cycling accident. Financially strained, Dina now depends on renting her room to Maneck and the income from dresses sewn by Ishvar and Omprakash to avoid moving back in with her authoritarian brother, Nusswan. In her spare time, she sews a quilt from leftover fabric scraps.

Ishvar and Omprakash face many challenges in the city. Their hut is demolished in a slum-clearing operation led by police officer Kesar. Later, they are forcibly taken to labor on an irrigation project. They eventually escape with help from Beggar master, a local figure who protects beggars but exploits them by taking a portion of their earnings and sometimes maiming children to increase their begging potential.

When they return, Dina lets them stay on her verandah. Although her landlord's agent threatens eviction for running a business at home, Beggar master intervenes to protect her. Over time, the four begin sharing meals and form a close-knit household. Ishvar and Omprakash hope to find a bride for Omprakash, while Maneck plans to extend his studies and continue boarding with Dina.

However, when Ishvar and Omprakash go back to their village to arrange Omprakash's marriage, they are apprehended during a sterilization by the government campaign. Both are forcibly sterilized, and Omprakash is later castrated at the order of Thakur Dharamsi. Ishvar contracts an infection that leads to the amputation of both legs. Around the same time, Maneck is denied continuation at college, and Dina is evicted after Beggar master's death removes her protection.

Eight years later, Maneck returns from working in

Dubai, coinciding with riots following the assassination of the Prime Minister by her Sikh bodyguards. He learns through a newspaper that his friend Avinash likely died in police custody. Maneck visits Dina at her brother's home, just before Ishvar and Omprakash arrive, but he leaves before seeing them.

Outside, Maneck sees the two men begging but believes they do not recognize him. Feeling hopeless, he jumps in front of a train to end his life. In truth, Ishvar and Omprakash did recognize Maneck but assumed he was ignoring them. They later share a quiet meal with Dina, who has been secretly supporting them. Towards the end of the novel, all of them come back to the streets where they started, to start from the life of a pauper. Dina, comes to live with Nusswan and helps his wife in cleaning dishes and some small household tasks. They live a contented life.

A Fine Balance is a mixture of the delicate symmetry between different socio-cultural components in India, with a resilient focus on caste, class, and the aftermath of political unrest on both individuals and society as a whole. The novel exposes how embedded social systems are, like the caste supremacy and hegemony continue to have people's lives despite the legal obliteration of such discrimination.

The narration draws a detailed portrayal of India's inelastic social structure, where a person's caste and economic status heavily stimulates their life probabilities, the way they are treated by others, and the eminence of life they live. Characters such as Ishvar and Omprakash, who come from the lower-caste Chamaar group, undergo continuous predisposition and destitution. Even the so-called decent characters like Dina, who tries to come up in the social ladder, often reveal their own classist attitudes, reinvesting the age-old practices and recalls how widespread these social divisions are.

A Fine Balance is written in the background of the politically chaotic India of the 1970 and when Emergency rule was advocated. Mistry tries to investigate how authoritarian politicians exploited the officials and citizens in their favour; how this resulted in the added sufferings on the part of the poor, downtrodden and the marginalized are portrayed in his narration. Characters like Ishvar, Omprakash, and Dina are depicted as directly experiencing the damaging effects of government oppression and misrule.

Mistry accentuate show the customs of caste, class, and politics are strongly connected to one another, each emphasizing the other. The caste system sets the building ground for inequality at various levels, and this is added to by economic burdens and insecure political environments that add fuel to the struggles of those already in a pathetic plight.

Even though there are a lot of setbacks in the social background under which the novel is narrated, including a turbulent political upheaval the characters are portrayed in a way that they are patient and strong in personality trying to accommodate themselves to the changing social perspectives of the nation during the 1970s. Characters such as Dina and Narayan exemplify courage and persistence as they encounter the many hurdles in all levels that came in their path. Although the story closes on a mournful note, it also encourages the strength of the human spirit and indicates at the possibility for ultimate social renovation.

Family Matters

The novel, *Family Matters*, was written in 2002 by Rohinton Mistry. Unlike the other two novels, this third novel gives a contemporary depiction of the hardships encountered by a Parsi family in Mumbai, India. Beside a personal family narrative, the novel gives importance to the broader hardships that the Parsi community came across—a Zoroastrian religious group that transferred to India from present-day Iran around the 10th century. Mistry, himself a Parsi, faced travel issues during his book tour in the U.S. due to steering by the TSA.

The plot of the narrative centres on Nariman Vakeel, a retired professor, going to be an Octogenarian who is in his 79th birthday, resides with Jal and Coomy, his step children in the Chateau Felicity apartment complex. His wife, Yasmin, was no more, while his biological daughter, Roxana, resides alongside her spouse, Yezad and their two boys, Murad and Jehangir.

As Coomy is getting ready for a birthday celebration for Nariman, she becomes progressively anxious about his health—particularly his symptoms of early-stage Parkinson's disease. Against her wishes, Nariman persists on continuing his nightly walks, during one of which he happens to meet a minor fall. Though he comes back with only minor injuries, Coomy warns him to stop these outings due to the dangers involved—but he declines, resolute to maintain his independence.

In Family Matters the elements of culture and society generally have a lasting impact on individuals as well as in the family set up. A family being a miniature of the society reflects the society in setting value system, personal beliefs and norms and procedures for personal as well as social behaviour. It also decides family planning, strategies in parenting the children in the current scenario and keeps pace with the upcoming changes in adopting traditions, lifestyles, education, religion, social classes, and societal attitudes, without losing the original roots; all of these affect how families function, collaborate and interact.

The traditional Socio-cultural elements determine family arrangements, such as nuclear, extended, or blended families and it decides the Parenting Styles too. Cultural values and beliefs shape parenting practices, influencing discipline, expectations, and the overall family atmosphere. These Societal expectations again design the gender roles within families and can affect power dynamics and decision-making processes.

Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping family values and influences practices like marriage, childbirth, and child-rearing. The socioeconomic status of a family can influence its values and priorities, with different classes having distinct approaches to family matters. Despite the educational level within a family, religious teaching can shape attitudes toward family planning, healthcare, and the education of children. Many a time financial constraints can significantly affect family planning choices, particularly in communities with limited resources.

India, cultural values related to respect for older generations influence how elderly family members are treated and supported. Strong family ties and support systems are often closely linked to cultural values and practices. Families navigating different cultures may encounter challenges in maintaining familial bonds and adjusting to new social norms.

Tales From Firozsha Baag

Rohinton Mistry's short story "Tales from Firozsha Baag" is a collection fixed in an Indian residential building in Bombay, India, which gives the picture of the people who lived there. The stories, many of which have been published separately in different forms, aim to provide a glimpse of India to those unfamiliar with the country. However, the collection is less cohesive than Rohinton Mistry's later work, *A Fine Balance*. Without final chap-

ter, the novels seem loosely connected, with occasional references to characters and events that appear throughout. The last chapter, however, ties the stories together by revealing that they are written by a former resident of Firozsha Baag who has moved to Canada and compiled these tales from childhood memories. This reflects Mistry's own experience, as he emigrated from Bombay to Toronto in 1975. The conclusion binds the chapters, making it a book that can be read in any order, yet still provides a satisfying sense of closure due to the final connection.

The stories themselves are diverse in content and style. They vary from first-person to third-person narratives, from omniscient narrators to endearing storytellers, preventing the reader from becoming weary of the portrayal of hardships in a distant land. While some readers may miss an overarching plot, those seeking a quick, enjoyable read—such as during a winter evening in Ontario, where Mistry now resides—will not be disappointed. This first novel by Mistry showcases his trademark descriptive prose and explores themes similar to those in *A Fine Balance*. The ending emphasizes the unrelenting passage of time, which leaves behind countless memories and a lingering hope, but no true resolution or closure. However, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* presents this message with a gentler tone, ensuring that readers are not left without hope for a better future.

Tales from Firozsha Baag showcases a wide range of stories with distinct tones and themes. Socio-cultural aspect is evident in each and every story. "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag" offers the perspective of a lower-class character, while "Squatter" adds humour to the collection. "Of White Hairs and Cricket" didn't leave a lasting impression, lacking sufficient entertainment value for me to recall its details. On the other hand, "The Paying Guests" subtly or overtly builds a sense of looming horror, culminating in a surprising, if somewhat unsatisfactory, ending. All of these stories, and more, unfold within the pages of *Firozsha Baag*, growing richer as memories of them linger, much like the characters and their author, who have learned from their experiences.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Rohinton Mistry explores the socio-cultural aspect of Parsi community's intricacies in India, using the residents of a Mumbai apartment building as the focal point. The stories explore issues of ethnicity, identity, tradition, and the challenges of being a minority group

in postcolonial India.

The stories centre on the Parsi community, emphasizing their unique customs, traditions, and religious practices, which often contrast with the dominant culture. Mistry examines the internal struggles and insecurities of Parsi characters as they attempt to preserve their cultural heritage while feeling increasingly alienated in a rapidly evolving society. The People of the Parsi community possess a unique quality which they esteem higher than their lives, which is generally referred to as “we-consciousness.” It is also given space, validating the strong social connections that keep the community unified.

The Parsi community is portrayed as a minority group facing difficulties in postcolonial India, emphasizing the social and economic inequalities they endure. The stories highlight the on-going challenges that Parsi characters face in maintaining their position in a society that has undergone profound changes, particularly after the end of colonialism. Mistry explores the complexities of being part of a minority group, tackling issues of power, prejudice, and the constant need to navigate a dominant culture.

The tightly knit nature of the Parsi community is evident in these stories, where familial connections and mutual support play a crucial role. The dynamics within families, such as the roles of different generations and the struggles of adapting to new social norms, are explored. While the residents of FirozshaBaag are presented as somewhat isolated within their community, they are also linked to a larger Parsi network that stretches beyond the building.

The stories often depict a conflict between traditional Parsi values and the modernizing forces of postcolonial India. Parsi characters grapple with the challenge of preserving their traditional way of life while embracing new ideologies and ways of living. Mistry illustrates this tension through characters who find themselves torn between their cultural heritage and the pressures of adapting to a changing world.

In summary, *Tales from FirozshaBaag* offers a nuanced exploration of Parsi life in postcolonial India, delving into the complexities of ethnicity, identity, and the struggles of belonging to a minority community in a swiftly changing society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, socio-cultural aspects are central to Rohinton Mistry’s books, where he intricately portrays the lives of marginalized communities in our nation. In Mistry’s *Long Journey* explores the complexities in identity of Parsi, the impact of political upheaval, and the challenges of preserving cultural heritage amidst social and economic changes. It reflects in his other works such as *A Fine Balance* that delves into caste, class, and political unrest, examining how deeply ingrained social structures continue to affect individuals, even in a modern context. *Family Matters* portrays the struggles of a Parsi family grappling with aging, illness, and generational conflicts, while also reflecting broader issues of identity and belonging. *Story from Firozsh Baag* presents a diverse range to tales that explore the Parsi community’s ethnic and cultural obstacles, highlighting themes of tradition versus modernity. Collectively, Mistry’s writings provide a deep insight into the socio cultural fabric of postcolonial India, revealing the resilience of communities navigating change.

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