Chapter Four

Balancing the Minority Experience and the Multicultural Perspectives: The Novels of Rohinton Mistry
Rohinton Mistry (b. 1952), an Indian novelist settled in Canada, is a formidable socio-political novelist. As a writer of Indian Diaspora, his fiction has much contributed to the areas of Indian English Literature, Indian Canadian Writing, Commonwealth Fiction and Cross-cultural Studies; and also provides an interesting study from multicultural angle. He left Bombay for Canada in 1975 after completing his graduation in Science with Mathematics in 1974. In Toronto Mistry took employment in the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. He worked there as a clerk and accountant from 1975 to 1985. Mistry secured his second Bachelor's degree in English Literature and Philosophy in 1982. He was second among the four siblings. He had one elder brother and one younger brother and sister. His younger brother Cyrus Mistry, a well-known playwright and short-story writer was, as Mistry himself says, the one who introduced him to the world of books. In 1983, he wrote his first story *One Sunday*. The reason behind the writing of this story was the Hart-House Literary Prize about which he was told by one of his friends. The story won the prize
and the following year he also won the same prize for his second story *Lend Me Your Light*. *Auspicious Occasion* was published in the *Canadian Fiction* and won contributor’s award in 1985. Because of so many awards received by Mistry, the publishers showed interest in publishing a collection of Mistry’s short stories. The anthology of his stories *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was published by Penguin Canada in 1987. Later on it was published under the title *Swimming Lessons and other stories from Firozsha Baag* in Britain and the USA. This book was shortlisted for the Canadian Governor General’s award. *Tales* is a collection of eleven interrelated short stories about the day-to-day lives of the Parsee residents of a decrepit apartment in Bombay: Firozsha Baag.

Diasporic studies, though part of the broad area of post-colonial studies, also falls into a still broader category of study, namely multiculturalism. As one explores and analyses different kinds of writings by the writers who live away from the lands of their origin, a series of questions flare up and a host of problems are to be negotiated. There are a few terms and concepts which demand attention. The differences in race, caste, language, gender, nationality, culture, colour and history play a key role in the formation of identity of those who belong to Diaspora. It has been defined through resistance, subversion and alterity. Power-relations have played a vital role in this “politics of recognition” and even critics like Homi Bhabha have talked about “hybridity” as one of its features. But with a writer like Rohinton Mistry it is necessary to raise questions regarding his attitudes to identity and community and also “reexamine the conjunction between diasporic studies and post-colonialism”, as Jasbir Jain puts it (Jain, 2003: 9).

Mistry’s novels do not deal with his second host country Canada and its people or culture though he might have had a lot of experiences as an immigrant South Asian of Indian ‘origin’. In fact, all his novels deal with his first country India, especially Bombay where Mistry ‘belongs’ to. The past, not the distant history of his race, but the recent lived past, has a better impact and imprint on his memory and psyche. He presents his narratives from the perspectives of the Parsee protagonists and this enables him to see the world which is frozen in the historical past from the Parsee point of view. Hence, Mistry demonstrates that diasporic writing is not necessarily a literature of resistance or the narration of assimilation. To quote Jain again,
Its concern becomes one of the representations: how the ‘self’ is represented, seen and remembered against the backdrop of the past (Jain, 2003: 9).

Parsees have gone through the fluctuations of fortune time and again regarding their sense of belonging to their ancestral ‘homeland’ India. Among other minorities living in India in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times, the Parsees have shared with them the covert threat, anxiety and insecurity, though they have been very adaptable to their adopted ‘home’. In Hutoxi Wadia’s coinage, they are “uneasily at home” (1996). This new approach itself needs to be addressed in the “politics of belonging” (Jain, 2003: 9). As discussed in the introductory chapter, the ideas of citizenship can be reformulated to include the Diaspora. In an egalitarian government like that of India, the constitutional equality is provided to all communities but socially and psychologically the minorities still have to face the stigma of secondary citizens. Looking to the post-colonial history of India, the domination of the majority community is a fact we cannot deny. Thus, the hegemony and power-relations have to be re-negotiated, by the minority community even within the country they are born and brought up in.

At some point the diasporic community should cease to be diasporic to become a part of the host nation and should be able to develop that sense of belonging. Language, lifestyle, shared concerns etc. can be accepted to enhance the sense of belonging but that of course, does not take care of the past which may be different, troubled and unchangeable. Communities often strive to keep the cultural identity of their own through “ethnic” practices, customs and rites related to birth, marriage and death. The diasporic community focuses on this aspect more as it struggles to retain its distinctive features, but it does need to find a place in the new community, to be absorbed and accepted for itself. Thus, their relationship to the new locations can be fairly problematic. Rohinton Mistry’s works should be studied in this context. To quote Jain once more–

Rohinton Mistry’s work raises a whole lot of other questions specifically related to the “homeland” and political memory. Neither nostalgia nor memory in itself can account for this rootedness and preoccupation with the homeland and the environment precincts of the city of birth. It is also not
merely the fact of being more at home or having a more intimate relationship with the space back there. It is, more than all these, a projection of the individual character, a gesture of expanding the memory to include both the specific and the universal (Jain, 2003: 11).

The diasporic Parsee writers of the origin of Indian subcontinent like Mistry, Sidhwa, Desai, Dhondy, Cowasjee among others are “twice removed” from India/Pakistan as they have settled abroad, and are writing from there. But not just that, as Nilufer Bharucha points out that they have to grapple with “multiple displacements” (Bharucha, 2003a: 15). Their ancestors had become diasporic when they had left Iran (Persia) for Indian western coast to evade the Arabian Islamic religious persecution and to seek refuge preserving their sacred fires. Even their stay in India was not devoid of ups and downs as they had to face the ire of the Islamic incursions into Gujarat and were accepted quite late during the rule of the tolerant Mughal emperor Akbar. Later, during the British Raj they were quite comfortable enjoying the favours of the colonialists and also the elite status as they tended to be quite westernized. They were provided spaces for agriculture, commerce and industry. And then again “moving back into ethnic enclosures” (Bharucha, 2003a: 15), they kept a very low profile during the horrific blood-shed of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. At first, one feels that the feeling of unease is quite out of place, as Parsees have attained good-will by working hard and contributing substantially to various walks of life in the post-colonial independent India. As Bharucha points out –

Yet, the fact remains that not just Parsees but other minorities also often experience an unease today in the supposedly secular spaces of India. This feeling of unease has realized itself in the move to the West, first to the UK, then to Canada and the USA and more recently to Australia and New Zealand (Bharucha, 2003a: 15).
Rohinton Mistry’s first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991) brought him national and international recognition. In Canada, the book won Governor General’s Award for Fiction in 1991 and the W.H. Smith Books in Canada First Novel Award in 1992. It also won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book in the same year. The novel was also short listed for the Booker Prize for Fiction (1991). The novel makes engrossing and refreshing reading with its first-hand and intimate presentation of a segment of Indian society by an insider that is not all too frequently portrayed in Indian fiction, namely, the Parsee community and its distinctive way of life. In the words of Ragini Ramchandran, “… its astonishing affinity with mainstream Indian life also proves to be an eye-opener” (Ramchandran, 1994: 24).

*Journey* is a socio-political novel which narrates the life-story of a middle-class Parsee protagonist Gustad Noble against the backdrop of the political events in India during the 70s. Gustad stays in the Parsee residential colony of Khodadad Building in Bombay with his wife Dilnawaz and three children; two sons Sohrab and Darius and daughter Roshan. Gustad’s ancestral family had a glorious and prosperous past. His grandfather, a furniture dealer had made a fortune and father, an esteemed and reputed bookseller, had allowed himself to be betrayed into bankruptcy by an alcoholic irresponsible brother, i.e. Gustad’s uncle. Though Gustad despairs being reduced to the ordinary middleclass lifestyle, he has still retained the taste for good living. It reflects in his nostalgic daydream of building a bookcase with the help of Sohrab to arrange his collection of books. He has also inherited the purity of conscience and uprightness of which the Parsees are very proud of. Anjana Desai rightly comments, “…his father’s goodness and compassion inform all of Gustad’s actions and relationships which constitute the novel” (Desai, 1994: 132). In his moments of despair and dejection he used to get solace from the glory of his past. Upset by the audacious letter of his shameless friend Bilimoria who had suddenly disappeared without informing his bosom friend Gustad, “Once again, the furniture from his childhood gathered comfortingly about him. The pieces stood like parentheses around his entire life, the sentinels of his sanity” (6).
To overcome his present petty circumstances with the meagre income as a bank clerk he looks forward to regain his family’s lost prosperity through his eldest son Sohrab’s admission in the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology. All his hopes are pinned on Sohrab who is academically brilliant and intelligent enough to achieve this rare distinction. But his pride and the dream of elevation and upliftment to a higher social class that seemed so close to be realized are shattered by Sohrab’s defiant refusal to get admitted in IIT. The joy of the dinner party to celebrate Sohrab’s admission in IIT along with his beloved daughter Roshan’s ninth birthday is marred by Sohrab’s ill-temper. It offends and embitters Gustad when Sohrab bursts out,

I’m sick and tired of IIT, IIT, IIT all the time. I’m not interested in it. I’m not a jolly good fellow about it, and I’m not going there…. (48).

Instead he wants to pursue an Arts programme with his friends. Gustad, broken-hearted, cannot hold his frustration before his wife Dilnavaz who herself bewildered, advises him to be patient. Agitated, he speaks about his parental duty to his son:

What have we been all these years if not patient? Is it how it will end? Sorrow, nothing but sorrow. Throwing away his future without reason. What have I not done for him, tell me? I even threw myself in front of a car. Kicked him aside, saved his life and got this to suffer all my life (slapping his hip). But that’s what a father is for. And if he cannot show respect at least, I can kick him again. Out of my house, out of my life! (52).

The usual clash resulting due to the generation gap between a middle-aged father and a teen-aged son is a thematic motif repeated by Mistry in his ensuing novels too. In spite of doing his duties at his best and the privilege of age, Gustad’s inability to exercise power over his son humiliates and disappoints him. His frustration is doubled by the thought as to what Sohrab would do after doing B.A., a non-professional qualification. The realization of the waste of Sohrab’s talents and the loss of opportunity and hope, especially in a country where minorities are not at ease is very painful for Gustad. The fear, anxiety and the insecurity the minorities feel from the fundamentalists and fanatics like the Shiv Sena in Bombay or the Hindu fundamentalists like Bajrarang Dal have got expression in these words of Gustad,
What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America—twice as good as the white man to get half as much. How could he make Sohrab understand this? (55).

Charu Chandra Mishra very significantly comments:

It is his only chance to carve out a space for himself and his family in a country where politics of regionalism has named them “the other” (Mishra, 2001: 162).

After the gaiety and humour of the birthday feast was spoiled by Sohrab’s sudden uncalled-for rebuff with the heavy weight of his upside-down dreams, Gustad cannot stand the presence of Sohrab and the tension between the two grows gradually culminating in Sohrab deserting the home. Time and again, Gustad reminiscences how dutiful and loving he had been as a father and how cruelly he is rejected by his ungrateful son;

Every year at exam time we fed him seven almonds at daybreak. With holes in my shoes I went to work, so we could buy almonds to sharpen his brain. At two hundred rupees a kilo. And all wasted. All gone in gutter-water (122).

Another blow of circumstances and a source of bitterness is the supposed ‘betrayal’ of Major Jimmy Bilimoria, a great friend of Gustad. He was staying as a tenant of the Khodadad building; and was very close to him. The Major had suddenly vanished one morning without saying a word of farewell to anybody, not even to his close friend Gustad, who comes to know later that Jimmy had joined RAW, a wing of Indian Secret Service. The abrupt disappearance of the Major who had been “more than just a neighbour” and “had been like a loving brother” (14) wounded Gustad very much. When Gustad had met with a serious accident and broken his hip-bone, Jimmy had provided all the help to him and his family till his recovery. He very often expresses his gratitude to Jimmy for taking him to the bone-setter immediately after the accident. If Jimmy did not take him to Madhiwala bone-setter then he would be a complete cripple. When his son Sohrab refuses to join IIT as he would not like to part with his friends, Gustad retorts with anguish and frustration:

Friends? Friends? Don’t talk to me of friends! If you have good reasons, I will listen. But don’t say friends! You must be blind if you cannot see my own
example and learn from it. …What happened to the great friend Jimmy Bilimoria? Our Major uncle? Where is he now, who used to come here all the time? Who I treated like my brother? Gone! Disappeared! Without saying a word to us. That’s friendship. Worthless and meaningless! (48-49).

The frown of the fortune has left him distraught. The troubles do not seem to come to an end. More anxieties and heartburns await him. After a long wait, Gustad receives a letter from Jimmy, requesting him to receive a package from the chorbazar. To the dismay of Gustad and his family the package turns out to be a huge sum of money; ten lacs to be deposited in a fictitious account for Major’s guerilla operation. Gustad and Dilnawaz are awestruck and do not know how to handle such an awkward situation and where to hide such a huge amount. The neighbours smell something fishy and Gustad feels annoyed and betrayed. Dilnawaz voices her aversion at his betrayal: “For him it is his job; he joined the secret service. Let him do his secreting and servicing himself, without making us starve to death… (120).

With the help of his colleague and friend Dinshawji, Gustad deposits the money in bank since he is unable to meet Gulam Mohammad from whom he got the package. What aggravates his worries is his dear Roshan’s suffering from acute diarrhoea. As things rush towards a climax, the arrest of Major Billimoria on charges of corruption is published in the paper. The heavens crash on his head, as it were; and amidst constant fear, uncertainty and restlessness he passed his days thinking that he might be charged as an accomplice any time. Meanwhile, Ghulam Mohammad calls Gustad in an authoritative tone to withdraw the whole amount in a month’s time gradually to save Jimmy’s life. To make things worse, Roshan’s illness persists; in fact, she relapses.

Troubles don’t end here; they keep on multiplying but Gustad keeps a brave face. Financial crisis crushes him and he is not able to make both ends meet. He had to sell his camera and his wife’s two gold bangles. It is at this time that his rose, vinca and subjo bushes, very dear to him, are hacked to the ground to his dismay. It was as if his hopes for betterment were hacked to death. It hurts him as he had tended those plants with so much of care and love. To add to this, Roshan’s dear big doll in bridal costume, which she received as the first prize in Annual School Raffle, is missing. It is at this critical juncture that Dinshawji is hospitalized after a sudden collapse in the
office. The great blow of misfortune comes with the death of Dinshawji who had risked his job and pension by helping Gustad in depositing and withdrawing Bilimoria’s money in the fake account. In the latest part of his life, he had transformed into a quiet and reserved man from a jovial entertainer. Basically good at heart, Gustad, as a compassionate well-wisher and a doting father, had prayed at Mount Mary for the lives and recovery of both Roshan and Dinshawji.

Despite the annoyance his dear ‘Billy Boy’ caused, Gustad decides to visit Major Bilimoria in Delhi who wants to explain exactly what happened. Bilimoria tells about Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister and the betrayal of his faith in her. It is a big fraud of 60 lakh rupees in which the PM is directly involved. Bilimoria was instructed by the PM to get the money from the SBI Director on an emergency basis and later to cover it up as somebody impersonating the PM’s voice on telephone. After that the Major was asked to write a confession which he did without a second thought trusting the PM. But as soon as the money was received, the PM’s office intercepted the money before it was used for the announced purpose. Knowing the trick, the Major kept ten lakh rupees aside for his friends. He was implicated and arrested on the charges of corruption and embezzlement. He was tortured cruelly till he returned the money. He died a dubious death during his imprisonment. Gustad could not stand the pitiable plight of his bosom friend in the prison. Jimmy is none other than the fictional counterpart of Sohrab Nagarwala, the then chief cashier of the Parliament Street branch of the State Bank of India in New Delhi. Anjana Desai rightly says, “However, these events and the sinister mystery surrounding them serve mainly as a narrative link and a story-telling device” (Desai, 1994: 131).

This and many such other events make this novel the “first fact based fiction” in the tradition of Indian English writing. Tarun Tejpal coins this phrase in his article in India Today (1991: 140) and that makes the character of Major Jimmy Bilimoria a ‘factional’ character.

This incident, as it involved a Parsee, jolted the image of the whole community. It was a big blow to the Parsees’ image as a very loyal, upright and dependable community. Mistry has taken the entire incident of this forgery as his major plot in the novel, only to defend his community representative vehemently against the corrupt and
unscrupulous government of Mrs. Gandhi. He clearly shows Major Bilimoria as a good person who is falsely implicated in this case, an innocent man victimized by the mean and crooked authorities of the government. Mistry does not forgive them for tarnishing the benign identity of the Parsees. The following account by a Parsee named Maja Daruwala reveals what the community felt about such a blot on their image at that time:

The Nagarwala incident, because it involved a Parsi, jolted the self-image of the community no less. Having long ago lost their literature to the vandalism of Alexander the accursed, and their dance, music, art, poetry and even their language to the process of adapting to a new home in India the Parsis have developed a particularized culture culled from a mixture of ancient myth and legend overlaid by a life-sustaining sense of recent achievement. Gratified to have earned an honorable place in the country of their adoption through their contribution to every field of endeavour and proud of having retained a strong ethical tradition the Parsis were deeply anguished by the ambivalent role Nagarwala had played in the sordid story (Daruwala, 1992: 29).

Gustad stands for the marginalized in the novel and challenges the hegemony of the State. The novel radically questions the basis of the ‘official version’ which polarizes the centre and the periphery (Narendrakumar, 2002: 78). It is a significant attempt at self-assertion, which is typical of all post-colonial literatures. Through Gustad, the sense of insecurity and apprehensions of the Parsee community is expressed. Bilimoria is a victim figure that is exploited by the ‘people at the very top’. Mistry attempts to depict the Parsee predicament in the corrupt Indian society in the post-independence era.

By fictionally rendering the infamous Nagarwala case, Mistry merges the personal with the political. The abuse of power and the corruption among the political elite reach out menacingly into the private lives of ordinary citizens. At another level, this part factual and part fictional rendering to the Nagarwala episode brings into sharp focus the ruthless nature of the state mechanism in operation drawing the image of the nation-state as a tormentor and illustrates how helpless the individuals become; caught as they are wittingly or unwittingly in the vortex of political cauldron. The dying man Bilimoria’s statement comes as a grim reminder of the colossal wastage of dreams that the people have inherited: “It is beyond the common man’s imagination,
the things being done by those in power” (280). K. Damodar Rao points at the conspicuous post-modern trait that the individual in such a dehumanizing context is converted into a dispensable commodity (Rao, 1994: 133).

The political events and upheavals certainly affect the smooth routine life of laymen. At many places, Mistry has put important judgmental statements in the mouths of the ordinary people. For example, what Dr. Paymaster thinks about the contemporary politics is reflected very well here:

Our beloved country is a patient with gangrene at an advanced stage. Dressing the wound or sprinkling rosewater over it to hide the stink of rotting tissue is useless. Fine words and promises will not cure the patient. The decaying part must be excised. You see, the municipal corruption is merely the bad smell, which will disappear as soon as the gangrenous government at the centre is removed (313).

Such characters become the mouthpieces of Mistry. Also the scathing attacks on Indira Gandhi and the Shiv Sena are the expressions of Mistry’s ire against their minority hunting politics. Even minor characters like Peerbhoy Paanwala and the pavement artist of the wall also become Mistry’s spokespersons.

Mistry’s tirade against Mrs. Indira Gandhi is conspicuous throughout. Mistry’s anti-Indira stance has been questioned by the critics as it seems that he views the political events of the time as a Parsi and not as a neutral intellectual. Maybe his annoyance with Nehru and Indira is not done due to his disapproval of some principle but because they had been unfair to Feroze Gandhi, a Parsee who had exposed the scandals of the Government:

His feud with his son-in-law, the thorn in his political side, was well-known. Nehru never forgave Feroze Gandhi for exposing scandals in the government; he no longer had any use for defenders of the downtrodden and champions of the poor, roles he had himself once played with great gusto and tremendous success. His one overwhelming obsession now was, how to ensure that his darling daughter Indira, the only one, he claimed, who loved him truly, who had even abandoned her worthless husband in order to be with her father – how to ensure that she would become Prime Minister after him” (11).
There are comments on the suspicious deaths of Feroze Gandhi and Lal Bahadur Shashtri (197) “…so that her father’s dynastic democratic dream could finally come true” (114). There are direct attacks on Indira Gandhi for her nationalization of banks:

Parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the banks (38).

To these remarks of Dinshawji, Gustad replies, “Nowhere in the world has nationalization worked. What can you say to idiots?” (38). There is not an iota of respect when Nehru and Indira are denounced very cruelly. “Believe me”, said Dinshawji,

She is a shrewd woman; these are vote-getting tactics. Showing the poor she is on their side. ‘Saali’ always up to some mischief. Remember when her pappy was Prime Minister and he made her President of Congress Party? At once she began encouraging the demands for a separate Maharashtra. How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused. And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens. Don’t forget, she started it all by supporting the racist buggers (38-39).

According to Mistry, She divided people on the basis of class, region and religion for her mean and petty political gains. The novel is set against the backdrop of a major political event of the war in the Indian subcontinent and the birth of Bangladesh. Here, it is important to note that Nehruvian lofty ideals of secularism, though put in the national constitution, were difficult to practise and “his dynastic democratic dream” could not carry forward his legacy. There were more and more internal conflicts and rebellions during the regime of Indira Gandhi. Her own policy of “divide and rule” boomeranged and there were demands of Free Kashmir, Khalistan in Punjab and conflicts of the Sinhalis and the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the vibrations of which affected India too. There is limitless bloodshed and the lives of the innocent people are still being sacrificed. There is no peace for the common people.

The theme of Journey revolves round history and politics of the India of the post-independent time of the 70s and 80s, and how it has affected the life of a common middle-class man like Gustad Noble who faces multiple problems, but “survives
without succumbing to any prolonged despair or bitterness”, and as Narendrakumar rightly says, “still in possession of his essential human dignity” (Narendrakumar, 2002: 85). Gustad is deeply saddened by the passing away of his two dear friends, Bilimoria and Dinshawji. Roshan’s recurring sickness depresses him. His angry dissatisfaction against his eldest son Sohrab has resulted in their estrangement which makes Gustad irritable. Also frustrating are the little annoyances happening in and around the lower middle class Parsee colony, i.e. the Khodadad Building. They are, for instance, the wall outside the building used as a public urinal, too much congestion and noise in the apartment, the hacking of his dear plants, the butchering of a cat and a mongoose by somebody to threaten him to do the Major’s job and the neighbours such as the quarrelsome “dogwallah idiot” Mr Rabadi who keeps a yapping Pomeranian and complains that Darius, Gustad’s second son chases and flirts with his fat daughter Yasmin. Irritated Gustad despairs, “I don’t understand this world anymore… What a world of wickedness it has become!” (142).

Things become better as Roshan’s condition improves and she resumes her school. The family routine returns to normal. But as Dilnawaz is much disturbed about the estranged relations of Sohrab and Gustad, everything is not yet perfectly normal. Sohrab visits his mother regularly in the absence of his father and Dilnawaz keeps him informed about the happenings. As the novel draws towards the end, Gustad becomes much more poised and composed, ripe enough to accept the unchangeable reality of life. Certain forces are beyond his reach and control. Dilnawaz, with the help of a lonely Parsee lady in the neighbourhood Miss Kutpitia’s black magic to exorcise evil spells and also with her necromantic concoctions, tries to work out a reconciliation of the father and the son. This sub-plot runs parallel to the main ‘factional’ plot of Gustad’s life affected by the dealings with Major Jimmy Bilimoria. Dilnawaz is very hopeful about the reunion of the father and the son and motivates Sohrab, “So much has happened since you left. Daddy has changed. It will be different now” (321).

M. L. Pandit comments on Gustad’s transformation:

Gradually, Gustad Noble modifies his dreams and dilutes his expectations. It is quite obvious that he is not in control of things. But this does not make him
turn into a defeatist. In the true oriental way, his triumph consists in the calm manner with which he faces each trial of his life. It lies in his acceptance of the harsh realities of the world to which he belongs. His grandest moment comes towards the end of the novel, when he forgives his erring son, and clasps him to his bosom in a noble gesture of acceptance of Sohrab’s decision to lead his own life (Pandit, 1998: 19).

Mistry contrives an optimistic ending with the help of the sub-plot. It is due to Dilhawaz, with the assistance of Miss Kutpitia, that everything would end well. Commenting on the design of the sub-plot M. Mani Meiti observes:

> It is ultimately her triumph that brings order in the midst of chaos. Gustad’s epic struggle against a hostile and indifferent world would not have had a profound meaning without the final reconciliation” (Meiti, 2005: 81).

Hence, it is the sub-plot that integrates the disintegrating elements of the main plot. But this climax takes place amidst the tension and din outside the Khodadad Building due to the agitation against the demolition of the wall. The polluted stinking wall was converted into a holy wall with many gods and goddesses from all religions painted on it by the pavement artist as requested by Gustad. It is going to be razed by the municipal workers under the order of Malcolm Saldanha, Gustad’s Christian friend and municipal officer. The agitators consisting of people from all walks of life insisting to keep the wall intact are not heeded by the workers. This adds fuel to the fire and then begins the stone-pelting. Accidentally, Tehmul Lungraa is caught in it, and becomes the victim of a hard hit on his forehead. Poor retarded Tehmul who is sympathized and understood compassionately by none except Gustad is fatally injured and fell flat on the ground on the spot. This is the third death in the novel; and the last blow to Gustad. Amidst the commotion Gustad takes the body inside the room, covers it and prays twice with tears rolling down from his eyes. Gustad had not shed tears on the death of either of his friends, i.e. Dinshawji and Bilimoria. But now, his emotions know no bounds. He cries not only for Tehmul, but for all those whom he had not cried. It is a very touchy moment indeed. Tears begin to well in his closed eyes, run down his cheeks and he cannot stop it.

> “…the salt water of his eyes, as much for himself as for Tehmul. As much for Tehmul as for Jimmy. And for Dinshawji, for Pappa and Mamma for Grandpa and Grandma, all who had had to wait for so long…” (337).
And there, when he turns back, he sees Sohrab standing in the doorway motionlessly. He gazes at him for a while and then gets up and puts his arms around him, moving his blood-stained fingers in his head, hugs him tightly to his heart. There is no weight on his heart anymore. Forgiveness has enlightened it. The reunion of the father-son duo and the razing of the wall make good dramatic scenes. The entire episode of Tehmul’s death is also narrated very dramatically. Gustad carrying dead Tehmul on his arms “without a trace of his limp, without a fumble” and watched by Sohrab and others in fear and admiration behaves like a “tragic hero” (Mani, 2005: 58). Uma Parmeshwaran considers it as an important sub-plot, which she believes, is better constructed than the main plot (Parameshwaran, 1996: 23).

Mistry, with his peculiar Parsee humour and deep-seated compassion draws his characters, the inhabitants of the Khodadad Building as representatives of the cross-sections of the middle-class Parsees with all the idiosyncrasies and ethnocentricities of this fast depleting community. The central character of the novel Gustad Noble is a middle-class hero like anybody else, faces the odds of life but assumes the stance of a “classical tragic hero” as “he faces almost with placid serenity” (Meiti, 2005: 73). Even his modest hopes and dreams are thwarted by the Providence. It is very hard for him to accept the bitter reality that the circumstances are beyond his control and that he is helpless. Though life conspires to deny him his reasonable desires he emerges as a stoic and dignified gentleman.

What runs through all the plots is the underlying world-view of Mistry. It is expressed through one of his mouthpieces, the pavement artist. One of the most important themes Mistry wants to emphasize is religious tolerance on the basis that all religions are equal. The wall enclosing the Khodadad building gives a sense of security and protection to the inhabitants and stands symbolically at the same time isolating this Parsee ghetto from the outside world. Gustad liked the wall as the “sole provider of privacy, especially for Jimmy and Gustad when they did their ‘kustis’ at dawn. Over six feet high, the wall ran the length of the compound, sheltering them from non-Parsee eyes while they prayed with the glow spreading in the east”(32).
The wall is polluted by the passers-by who use it as a public urinal. Annoyed by the malodour it spreads, Gustad, in an insightful flash, invites the commercial pavement artist to use it as his canvas and adorn it with the murals of different gods and goddesses of India from all religions. Miraculously, the black wall has transformed into a shrine of races and religions. A stinking filthy disgrace has become a beautiful, fragrant place which makes everyone feel good (289). As Anjana Desai puts it,

It, thus, becomes a multi-religious shrine ... symbolizing the accommodative and assimilative spirit of the Parsis, not numerically strong enough for a militant assertion of identity (Desai, 1994: 134).

But they assert their identity in quite a benign way by revering the “others”’ faith privately as well as publicly; and at the same time keeping their ‘self’-respect intact. In the history of their Diaspora in India they have never been aggressive against any other faith. In fact, they have been tolerant not only of the Hindu majority but also of other minorities like the Christians and the Muslims. They are, at the same time, watchful enough to maintain the purity of their race by keeping to endogamy and also to resist proselytization with a strict “No, No”. Keeping a fine balance between assimilation and resistance, the Parsees have been successful in framing a positive identity, a face that respects the differences of the others including its own in the multicultural existential reality of the country. When, on Sundays, Gustad used to visit the Crawford Market with his Christian friend Malcom Saldanha, he would go with him to the church first. He attended the Mass, imitating his friend closely, dipping his fingers in the font of holy water, to fit in and not to give offence to anyone. “The first time Gustad was quite intrigued by the church and its rituals, so different from what went on in the fire temple. But he was on his guard, conditioned as he had been from childhood to resist the call of the other faiths. All religions were equal, he was taught; nevertheless, one had to remain true to one’s own because religions were not like garment styles that could be changed at whims or to follow fashion. His parents had been painstaking on this point, conversion and apostasy being as rife as it was rooted in the very history of the land. So Gustad quickly decided that while music was good and the glittering icons and sumptuous vestments were highly impressive, he preferred the sense of peaceful mystery and individual serenity that prevailed in the fire temple. “Sometimes, it made him wonder, though, if
Malcom was not making an amateurish, half-hearted attempt at proselytism” (24). Nilufer Bharucha voices similar opinion:

The wall both includes and excludes. It is protective as well as reductive. It protects the Parsee community from the ingress of the engulfing Indian world. However, it also makes this world isolationist (Bharucha, 2003a: 123).

But Gustad never turns a bigot like Yezad in Matters because of the compassion deep seated within his heart. He does visit Mount Mary and prays for Roshan and Dinshawji so faithfully and wholeheartedly that he actually waits for the miracle to happen. “Gustad had learned more about the Church, how it had a tradition of welcoming Parsis, Muslims, Hindus, regardless of caste or creed. Mother Mary helped everyone; she made no religious distinctions” (222). Any God or deity, for that matter, is secular. It is the worshipper who feels guilty as Gustad does but then transfers the other’s faith to his own:

Dabbling in religion was distasteful and irreverent, an affront to the other faith and his own. But Mount Mary was different – a feeling almost of pre-ordination about it. First the pavement artist, describing the miracle. Then suddenly meeting Malcolm today. And hearing the same thing. Like divine intervention. May be Dada Ormuzd is telling me something (222).

The wall is accommodative of all faiths, i.e. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Parsee and Buddhist. At first, it is the barrier to peep into the ‘other’, other’s faith. One’s ‘self’ is limited to one’s own faith and the world is looked at from that eye. This barrier needs to be removed. The act of the removal of the wall is also symbolic. The wall, which had stood so far exclusively for the Parsees, stands for all faiths when it is painted by the artist. The pictures of Gods and Goddesses of other faiths as well as various religious symbols make it all inclusive and accommodative. After the paintings, it stands for the secular country India. In a country like India, where the communal riots occur very often, secularism is a sham. That is why when the artist had begun painting the wall with different Gods, inspector Bamji compliments and congratulates Gustad for his brilliant idea. Encouraging the artist and also pointing at the fault-finding mentality of the orthodox Parsees in the typical language full of Parsee slang he says:
I don’t understand the madar chod mentality of our neighbours. Can you believe it? Some of them (I won’t say names) are grumbling – that why should all parjaat gods be on a Parsi Zarathostsi building’s wall. I’m telling you, sawdust in their brains ... (213). A good mixture like this is a perfect example for our secular country. That’s the way it should be. The ghail chodias will complain even if God Himself comes down. Something they will find wrong with Him. That he is not handsome enough, or not fair enough, or not tall enough (214).

David Williams also makes the same point:

A refuge from the Hindu majority, the concrete wall is a border which is nonetheless marked by the odour of a counter territoriality.... But the wall is neither as holy nor as ecumenical as it first appears, since its saintly face masks a more divisive purpose: to preserve the Parsi in his self-sameness and hierarchical privilege, and to protect him from the threat of difference, of otherness itself (Williams, 1995: 218-19).

The wall calls for myriad interpretations. There can be a philosophical interpretation also. All faiths merge into one; lead to one destination i.e. The God. After this blind/veil/curtain of religion colouring one’s eye falls, there is that shapeless and nameless existence of the God. What is left is ‘nothingness’ which is everything, the faith in the superpower. Another important point to be noticed is that faith has the power to transform anything into a thing of admiration and worship. The plain stone wall, without the murals, was earlier reduced down to a place for defecation and now it has suddenly become sacred after those pictures are painted. The thing of hatred can be turned into a thing to be loved. The message is that the plain wall, or any other thing or place or person for that matter, should be respected, not be polluted and looked down upon. A person without the various shades and colours of religion, region, culture, caste, gender etc. should be respected as a human being. The Indian democratic and secular Constitution has imparted equality to all religious faiths and communities proclaiming freedom of speech, expression and worship. “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” are the basic principles on which the edifice of the strongest Democracy has been constructed. But still the minds of the people are cast in a particular frame, thinking about ‘others’ with not the same respect as they have for their own. Such vanity and sham beget uneasiness and hostility, sometimes exploding
into the communal riots. Such pent-up dislike and hatred mar Gustad’s experiences of buying meat, chicken or beef at the Crawford Market:

Crawford Market was a place he despised at the best of times …unlike his father, who enjoyed this game Gustad felt intimidated by Crawford Market. Perhaps it was due to their different circumstances: his father always arriving and leaving by taxi; Gustad alone, with his meagre wallet and worn basket lined with newspaper to soak up meat juices that could start dripping in the bus, causing embarrassment or worse still, angry protests from vegetarian passengers. Throughout the trip he felt anxious and guilty -- felt that in his basket was something deadlier than a bomb. For was he not carrying the potential source of Hindu-Muslim riots? Riots which often started due to offences of the flesh, usually of porcine or bovine origins? (21).

Gustad was always welcome at his Christian friend Malcolm’s home. In those extremely lean days, when every anna, every paisa counted, Malcolm, the musician taught him to eat beef and mitigate the strain on his pocket-book. “Lucky for us”, Malcolm always said, “that we are minorities in a nation of Hindus. Let them eat pulses and grams and beans, spiced with their stinky asafoetida -- what they call ‘hing’. Let them fart their lives away. The modernized Hindus eat mutton or chicken, if they want to be more fashionable. But we will get our protein from their sacred cow” (23). As the members of the minority communities they might have one voice about their food-habits against the majority Hindus denigrating theirs but Gustad would not like to be disloyal to his Parsee ancestors who promised Jadav Rana to venerate the cow accepting it as one of the five conditions put forth by the King. Parsees, known for their honesty and integrity, have kept the promise for centuries. Gustad is well-aware of this loyalty and is proud of it. When Malcolm would try to domineer on Gustad even light-heartedly, it would not be tolerated by Gustad. Christianity came to India over nineteen hundred years ago, when Apostle Thomas landed on the Malabar Coast amongst the fishermen, said Malcolm. “Long before you Parsis came in the seventh century from Persia”, he teased, “running away from the Muslims.” “That may be, “rejoined Gustad,” but our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your son of God was even born; a thousand years before the Buddha; two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?” (24).
Such superior air is also felt in Dinshawji’s diatribe against the fundamentalist Marathas and the Shiv Sena people. His disgust for the typically Maharashtrian ‘dabbawallas’ is expressed in his narration of the rude behavior on their part while traveling in a local train:

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 Musolini. He and his “Maharashtra for Maharashtrians” nonsense. They won’t stop till they have complete Maratha Raj (73).

The dominating spirit of any one religion, of the majority or the minority, would not and should not be tolerated by the ‘others’ as it is nothing but a part of the homogenizing process violating the basic human rights. In another reference, when Gustad noticed and expressed his complaint that the Flora Fountain was drying up, Dinshawji, in the same offended tone, bemoans the loss of his familiar world in the changed street names of Bombay. Gustad tries to console him, “Why worry about it? I say; if it keeps the Marathas happy, give them a few roads to rename. Keep them occupied. What’s in a name?” Dinshawji sounds very serious when he replies,

No, Gustad, You are wrong. Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared; in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me! (74).

Dinshawji “protests the violence done to his own identity, meanwhile ignoring the violence of British name-giver to Maratha identity, much less the ‘originary violence’ of naming itself” (Williams, 1995: 227). This also reflects the assimilative liberal attitude of the Parsees and also how painful it is to dissociate from the colonial past, feel displaced in the present and the anxiety about the future when there will be no trace left of their existence. Dinshawji’s inability to connect to the present of the homogeneous Maratha domination is because of the leaning of the Parsees to the westernization during the British rule. They believe in siding with the rulers but
cannot connect with the Maratha ‘regime’ in the post-colonial democratic nation-state like India that boasts of the equal rights for all.

Not always the physical violence but the ideological and very often emotional violence is done to the ‘other’. The Parsees, obsessed with their privacy and purity, sometimes flaunt a superior air relegating the humane approach to the other communities. Ghulam Mohammad, the sole ‘other’ mourner for Major Bilimoria, a Muslim comrade whose life he had saved on the battlefield could not express his gratitude by praying in the Tower of Silence. He said, “Your Parsi priests don’t allow outsiders like me to go inside” (322). Hence, rightfully should the wall between the Parsee and non-Parsee come down at the end. Mistry has taken us, the readers, the others with Gustad up to the Tower of Silence where we are not allowed to go. The broken wall allows us to look in as much as it allows Gustad to see out. The removal of the wall blurs the boundaries of subject-object division and does away with borders. The breaking of the wall signifies an opening up to the ‘other’, paving the way for a genuine interactive encounter between various communities, majority as well as minorities. It is significant that this wall protects a Parsee Ghetto. There is only one Parsee, Dr Paymaster, to pray before the picture of Zarathrustra on the wall at the time of ‘morcha’. It is suggestive of this miniscule minority community dwindling with alarming rate and heading towards its extinction. As said earlier, the so-called secularism of the country has failed to give them a sense of security and ease, which they now try to seek beyond this wall in the realms of the global multiculturalism by becoming the cosmopolitan global citizens. Of course, their identity would undergo a change but they have to be prepared for that new construct through complex negotiations, as they have been negotiating their identity as a diaspora in India so far. Their ‘hybrid’ identity would undergo a further change in the given present scenario. Hence, the wall of Parsee identity has to be breached. This explains one of the reasons for the migration of the Parsee youths to the foreign shores in the latter half of the 20th century; let apart the educational and professional reasons. Bapsi Sidhwa’s Brat and Boman Desai’s Elephants, Asylum and Woman deal with this theme providing ample scope to negotiate the issue of the immigrant Parsee identity. In fact, Mistry, Sidhwa and Desai, all three of them, have had the first-hand experience of grappling with ‘their’ identity after this double displacement.
This breaking of the wall that divides, symbolizes Mistry’s broader and secular vision. Mistry has created the character of the pavement artist with the purpose of reinforcing secularism. He, the spokesperson of Mistry, represents not only the author and the creator, but also his community sometimes. Mistry’s concept of faith cannot be questioned. About faith he makes the artist speak thus philosophically,

“...Miracle, magic, mechanical trick, coincidence – does it matter what it is, as long as it helps? Why analyze the strength of the imagination, the power of suggestion, power of auto-suggestion, the potency of psychological pressures? Looking too closely is destructive, makes everything disintegrate. As it is, life is difficult enough. Why to simply make it tougher? After all, who is to say what makes a miracle and what makes a coincidence? (289).

This can be Gustad’s faith in Sohrab or Dilnawaz’s faith in Miss Kuptitia’s magico-religious rites to get her son back and improve her daughter’s health; or Gustad’s faith in his friends (though one apparently ‘betrayed’ but later proved to be a well-wisher and the other faithful) or Tehmul’s faith in Gustad or people’s faith in the Government betrayed by its corrupt and short-sighted ways and means. Does Tehmul die under the effect of the dark magic or is it accidental? Has Sohrab returned due to the efforts of Dilnavaz-Kuptitia duo? These things are inexplicable, but Mistry seems to answer our queries through the above quoted speech of the artist, whose character is designed by the author to communicate to the readers his own ideas about God, Man and Destiny. The artist seems to convey the message of the novelist that man must carry on whatever may come his way. But the artist himself began to have misgivings as the wall underwent its transformation. This project, the biggest one, made him restless-

Over the years, a precise cycle had entered the rhythm of his life, the cycle of arrival, creation and obliteration. Like sleeping, waking and excreting, the cycle sang in harmony with the blood in his veins and the breath in his lungs. He learned to disdain the overlong sojourn and the procrastinated departure, for they were the progenitors of the complacent routine, to be shunned at all costs. The journey – chanced, unplanned, solitary – was the thing to relish (184).

He felt uneasy and sad because his old way of life was being threatened. He yearned for permanence, for roots, for something he could call his own, something immutable.
Torn between staying and leaving, he was ill at ease, confused and discontented. Numerous deities assumed their preordained places on the wall and together, they awaited an uncertain future. Anita Myles characterizes such messages of Mistry and says:

Significantly enough, Mistry’s message is not that of a cynic or a pessimist; rather it is that of a meliorist, who believes that the individual must accept what destiny has in store for him (Myles, 1998: 88).

At many places in the novel, Mistry has explained the theme of the novel, as done here in the above speech of the artist, using the words like “overlong sojourn” and “the journey - chanced, unplanned, solitary.” Only once a literal journey takes place in the novel, i.e. Gustad’s journey by train to see his friend Billimoria. There too, Mistry conveys the metaphorical and metaphysical meaning of ‘journey’ by putting these words in Gustad’s mouth:

Would this long journey be worth it? Was any journey worth the trouble? … And what a long journey for Dinshawji too. But certainly worth it (259-260).

Reminiscing his own happy childhood and dependable past, Gustad feels that he has come a long way, struggling hard in his youth and poverty. “It had been such a long journey……” (242). Mistry has applied the motif of journey to convey multiple meanings. The title Such a Long Journey has been borrowed from T.S. Eliot’s poem “Journey of the Magi”, the lines from which form the second of the three epigraphs of the novel:

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey…

The title has a symbolic significance. Eliot narrates the journey of Magi, the three wise men, in fact the three Zoroastrian Kings, to the birthplace of Jesus Christ. It is not a mere physical journey, but a spiritual one, a quest of the soul, in which man has to undergo a lot of hardships and troubles. In the poem, one of the Magi gives an account of the difficult and painful sojourn they had to undertake but succeeded in ultimately reaching the destination after crossing all the barriers and obstacles coming their way. It was possible only because of their unshaken faith in the Supreme Being.
To undertake the journey is “absolutely essential to attain higher and nobler values in life” (Myles, 1998: 87). Referring to the central character Gustad’s life as ‘journey’ Myles writes:

Gustad’s journey of life is so close to the journey of Magi. Gustad was keenly desirous of the fulfillment of his dreams and aspirations. At every stage of his life’s journey, he met with unprecedented obstacles and the working of inexplicable forces. However, he is not the one to give in; he is like the wise men who very subtly pushed aside the hindrances of life, did not allow them to overpower him and went ahead with faith that the journey will surely end at a particular destination (Myles, 1998: 87).

This is true for any individual’s life. As Anjana Desai interprets,

The journey is the journey of the nation, of a city, of an ethnic minority, and of an individual man of his community – and the question it raises is the same one that baffles Eliot’s magi – was it for a birth or a death that they travailed? (Desai, 1994: 134)

Whether it is a physical journey from birth to death or a spiritual journey of a soul leading to its rebirth, what matters is the triumph of the ‘spirit’. As Gustad himself says, it was his strength of spirit which made the journey possible.

The three magi were the three Zoroastrian priests who attended the birth of Jesus Christ. This shows that Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion, older than the Christianity. Hence, it can also be called a journey of a particular faith, religion in the travails of time; from past to present and from present to future. There is traversing from hopelessness to hope; from loss to gain; from death to rebirth. The rest of the two quotations in the epigraph support this theme of struggle and potential enlightenment. Taken together in the sequential order as they are put, they foreshadow the theme of the novel with its optimistic ending. The first epigraph is taken from Firdausi’s “Shah-Nama”;

He assembled the aged priests and put questions to them concerning the kings who had once possessed the world. ‘How did they,’ he inquired, ‘hold the world in the beginning and why is it that it has been left to us in such a sorry state? And how was it that they were able to live free of care during the days of their heroic labours?
Compared to the happy past the present is the sorry state of affairs; then there is a struggle; a journey; resistance and there are hopes that things will turn better in future. This is expressed aptly in the extract from Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali*:

> And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart, and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders.

It clearly tells about the journey to the new country. The social and political degradation of the Parsees from their elite and privileged status in the post-colonial India and the insecurity they feel as a minority community in the newly developing fundamentalism of the 70s onwards has made them think of the new pastures, new identity and new reality. They are recognized as ‘Indians’ or ‘South Asians’ or ‘Browns’ from the developing or the Third World countries striving to create their identity in the multicultural texture of a developed country. It involves a lot of problems and complexities in framing their identity but there is a hope for the betterment, a new beginning, a rebirth of a new ‘self’. The novel is to be studied in this context if the Parsee community is to be closely perceived as is done by the novelist. Nilufer Bharucha comments:

> … the leitmotif of ‘journeying’, which is also central to most diasporic writing. The three epigraphs which preface the novel set the tone” (Bharucha, 2003a: 120).

The last line of third epigraph, “old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders” goes well with the ending of the novel. The wall has been pulled down; gone is the comfort-zone for Gustad. He could see the ‘world outside’ at a distance to the horizon. The ghettoization and the narrow limits of the fixed Parsee identity within the Khodadad Building are to be erased. Another symbolic act is Gustad’s tearing off the black papers covering on the ventilators and letting the light in. Bharucha says,

> At another level this could also signal the letting in of the wider Indian reality into the enclosed Parsi space. It could mean that the wall having gone and the
old tracks thus being lost, as the epigraph to the novel from Tagore’s *Gitanjali* had said, ‘a new country is revealed with its wonders’ (Bharucha, 2003a: 140).

As Mistry himself had once said, “Life itself is…a journey without destination. Sort of like a wall that goes on and on with ‘pictures’” (in an interview to Lakhani, 1993: 31-34). Mistry, here, merges both the metaphors of the “wall” and the “journey” into one. The journey does not end with death. It continues even after that. Similarly, after the wall is felled, the artist resumes his sojourn further for newer such creations. His desire for creativity has not died. Mistry hopes for the endless journey of art, religion, faith and people too. This reminds us of the smiling artist’s words when Gustad makes a deal with him and asks him if he would be able to draw enough to cover three hundred feet:

There is no difficulty. I can cover three hundred miles if necessary. Using assorted religions and their gods, saints and prophets: Hindu, Sikh, Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Jainist. Actually, Hinduism alone can provide enough. But I always like to mix them up, include a variety in my drawings. Makes me feel I am doing something to promote tolerance and understanding in the world (182).

Here, through the artist, Mistry underlines the mosaic quality of multiculturalism. The artist chooses to draw a picture of ‘Trimurti’ to begin with. He asks Gustad if it is all right. Gustad though admits positively, feels in the heart of his hearts that he would have preferred a portrait of Zarathustra to inaugurate the wall, but realized that the triad would have far-reaching influence in dissuading the urinators and defecators, majority of which would be the Hindus. Then the portraits pertaining to other faiths in minorities followed. The whole matter, though seems casual, very meaningfully suggests that in a country where one wants to send a message one must begin with the dominant majority community. One has to resort to a method of address that is comprehensible to them and appeals to their faith or culture. The artist’s plan is successful with immediate effect. Hardly any Parsee would come to defile the wall. Hence, a Zoroastrian portrait in the beginning would have not made any sense. Gustad had to accept painfully the truth that they are in the minority with little say in their host society.
The ghettoization of Parsee identity is finally rejected as the way to preserve one’s identity in a plural society. What Gustad does at this point is to recognize the other which implies coming to terms with oneself. For the briefest of moments Gustad felt the impending loss cut deeply, the loss of his community’s identity built on the past, through memory and time; the collapse of the wall would wreck the past and the future. But he has to accept it as the reality of the present and build up a new future, at least optimistic about it. The artist begins his journey once again, accompanied only by his satchel in which he has his box of crayons, the fancy oils and enamels abandoned. Again it has the symbolic significance. The pavement artist and Gustad are two selves of Mistry himself. The conversation between the two at the end has a deeper sarcastic meaning, though it sounds very casual. Mistry has crafted it skillfully. It goes like this:

“I am very grateful to you for providing me with the wall’s hospitality. Now it is time to go.”
“Go? But where? Have you made any plan?”
“Where does not matter, sir….In a world where roadside latrines become temples and shrines, and temples and shrines become dust and ruin, does it matter where?” (338).

The artist means that he would go anywhere in the country “To recapitulate, the road and so the journey, is through familiar territory where the socio-historical heterogeneity of the country is revealed” (Hariharan, 1996: 101). The dialogue very meaningfully recalls and reminds us of the refuge the Parsis have taken in this country for centuries. Gustad, with his stoic resilience and indefatigable human spirit, fights against all odds and emerges triumphant like his community. He prefers to stay back rooted in the same old Parsee colony but with the benefit of knowledge, maturity and understanding coming in and with a renewed hope for Sohrab representing the Parsee posterity. All this is suggested by the metaphor of the black paper which covered the ventilator of Gustad’s house as a measure of safety during the war-time. Despite Dihnavaz’s constant nagging Gustad does not remove it; but does so at the very end symbolically. In this symbolic act, Gustad finally recognizes the renewed space and time in a new and harmonious world; or it also means that Gustad has removed the frames of old codes to provide for new forms of communication. With the wall broken down and the black papers removed the light of the bright spirit of humanism is let in. All faiths and religions here merge into one. Now that the journey has not
ended but only begun; the artist, another self of Mistry, prefers to start afresh a new journey but with his satchel of crayons standing for a baggage of culture and faith. He leaves his oil paints behind despite being reminded by Gustad. He replies, “I have taken everything I need for my journey” (339). The oil-paints, mark of permanence, stand for the past and history which should be left behind. It is the truth for any community in diaspora. If one can leave the past voluntarily like the pavement artist and move ahead accepting his new identity, it is well and good; but if one has to leave it with heavy-hearted compulsion, the identity-crisis may bleak the future. Earlier, he himself had given up his coloured chalks and begun to paint in oils, giving way to the aesthetic temptation to construct a wall against time itself and also “yearning for permanence, for roots, for something he could call his own, something immutable” (184). But he learns the existential truth about life that nothing is eternal, not even art. New histories are being created and would be created but with the crayons which can be easily erased and forgotten. Wherever he goes, he would create his own world of art, a new identity with whatever aid he has got. Mala Pandurang comments on the ending of the novel:

In the end of the book is the beginning of the real journey, of a consciousness that the search is without end and entails countless such journeys” (Pandurang, 1996: 270).

A.K. Singh analyses correctly when he asserts that it is the country and the community that become the protagonists of the novel. The community as a protagonist is quite obvious, and the country assumes centrality in the narratives of the various characters because the security and prosperity of the community depend on the country’s fate. Characters like Gustad, Dinshawji, Bilimoria, Peerbhoy and the pavement artist are the vehicles of conveying ethnic, communal, and to the extent, national consciousness. There is a change in the consciousness of the characters which denotes a corresponding change in the consciousness of the community. Mistry has endeavoured to re-think and re-narrate about his community and country through the various narratives woven in the novel. In Singh’s words,

It would not be incongruous to state here that the novel as a crucible of narrativization attains a new meaning, intent and perspective by hierarchical displacement of its narrative by bringing the backdrop of the novel to the fore. The validity of such an act of ‘critical violence’ can be conceded, for the real
purport of a creative work can be deciphered by penetrating into narratives on the margins. This displacement and re-narrativization of his community, culture and country which do not allow its subscriber to break with even when the writer is at a considerable geographical distance from the country and community he is writing about (Singh, 1994: 201).

Finally, Mistry, the Canadian writer of Indian origin or the writer of the South Asian Diaspora in Canada or the Indo-Canadian writer or the Parsee émigré/expatriate writer of Indian English Literature, by whatever way we introduce him, reminds his western readers that the eastern identity has always accommodated the fact of ceaseless change.
A FINE BALANCE


Tales and Journey are more ethnocentric while dealing with the fads and foibles of the miniscule Parsee community in Bombay. Like many other post-colonial expatriate writers of Indian Diaspora, Mistry’s literary voyage continues to bring him to India and he returns to Bombay in his Balance too. As Rushdie and Naipaul do, Mistry prefers Bombay to any other city in India as it is imbibed into his being. The urbane Parsis are located in Bombay, a metro exuding post-modernity. And the time chosen is the 70s. In both Journey and Balance it is the post-Nehruvian political ‘order’ of India. From the backdrop of the Bangladesh war of 1971 in Journey, Mistry in Balance takes us a little further to 1975, the next important year in the history of the post-colonial India, the year of Emergency imposed by the then Indira Gandhi government. Journey portrays an authentic ‘factional’ picture of the criminalization of the politics, while Balance engages the readers with the rise of Indira Gandhi’s brand of politics that brought the Nehruvian value-based practices to an end. In fact, the change had already set in after the humiliating defeat of India in the Indo-China war in 1962. The Emergency span of 1975-77 saw the cessation of the basic fundamental rights of the citizens as prescribed and guaranteed by the Constitution of India. Such dreadful measures, which jeopardized the very pillars of the Indian Democracy, were taken under the pretext of protecting the country from the “threats from outside” as claimed by Mrs. Gandhi and her cohorts. From “outside” is meant Pakistan and the U.S.A. But actually the purpose was to save her staggering government from the strong attacks of the opposition and to crush it brutally and violently. Healthy opposition and criticism are part and parcel of healthy democracy. To suppress them means to endanger the very life and foundation of democracy. India had passed through the critical phase of the crumbling democracy for the first time since her decolonization in 1947. This era has tainted the history of the post-independent India.
Shahshi Tharoor looks at the novel as “a stark and moving portrait of life during Emergency” (Tharoor, 1996: 169) when the nation-state itself has become the oppressor instead of being the arbitrator for the democratic rights. Nation is a cultural construct while nation-state is a political construct having a huge apparatus consisting of judiciary, army, police etc. Benedict Anderson sees nation as an ‘imagined community’, a product of the collective imagination of people. The sense of nationality is the personal and cultural feeling of belonging to a nation making people love and die for nations, as well as hate and kill in their names. As a cultural concept, nation is a fluid construct, always in a state of conflict not identifiable or homogeneous and can be modified from within and without. Nation-State is always in a framework where centralized power operates. It should be the medium through which the concept of nation should be realized but in Balance Mistry shows that there is a disjunction between them during the critical phase of Emergency.

With the backdrop of this major political event of the post-colonial India, Mistry has made sincere effort to “embrace more of the social reality of India” (Gokhale: 1996) seeking a balance between the Nation, a social construct and the Nation-State, a political one. Not the cosmopolitan Bombay alone, but he also brings in a typical Indian village and its people and also a remote town located on the northern mountainous region. Ranging from the Parsees, the repertoire of his characters include the chamars, the tailors, the thakurs, the beggars, the students and a whole lot of people belonging to middle as well as lower middle and poor class of Indian social reality. Specifying this depressing reality Ramesh Mishra writes:

“….this portrait of India is an astonishing work of suffering, death and degradation. It is India with its timeless chain of caste-exploitation, male-chauvinism, linguistic strifes and communal disharmony….It is a nation torn by internal dissensions. Here, power-hungry politicians control the strings of administration like a puppeteer … (Mishra, 2001: 188-89).

Mistry, a creative writer has the poetic freedom to choose or to discard or set aside. He is not a historian or a historiographer who records the events as they happened. Even their records are incomplete. Theorists like Michael Foucault and Hayden White opine that history, when made up by the historian, is necessarily a political act and the empirical and objective narration of historical material should be discarded as ‘real’
life can never be truthfully represented (White, 1987: ix-x). The writer of the historical narrative, on the other hand, re-creates history; he re-constructs and re-narrates the story which is there in the facts of the record. As such, there are innumerable possibilities of creating such stories contained in the record; each different from the other.

In an interview with Veena Gokhale, Mistry talks about the role of memory in the creation of his socio-political novels:

I refer to those moments which, at the time of actual occurrence, may have seemed banal, but which, given the gift of remembrance, become moments of revelation. My novels are not ‘researched’ in the formal sense of the word. Newspapers, magazines, chats with visitors from India, chats with people on my infrequent visits to India -- these are the things I rely on. Having said that, I will add that all these would be worthless without the two main ingredients: memory and imagination (Gokhale, 1996: 3).

Even though Mistry seldom goes back to India literally, he does persist in taking literary journeys. Asked if this dependence on memory rather than reality causes problems in his fictional re-creation of India, Mistry explained:

Some people might say it’s arrogant of me not to live there and assume that I know everything from a visit every five or six years. But I’m confident that I do know. Its memory, its memory plus imagination, which creates a new memory. When I don’t have that, I will not write about it I have promised myself that (Smith, 1995: 1, 65).

Mistry has deftly blended the factual details from the history depending on the memory as discussed in the above quote with his creativity and imagination resulting in a work of genius. Mistry, the master story-teller, has skillfully inter-woven the fragments of history with the pieces of his own fictional narratives into a wonderful ‘quilt’ of ‘faction’ (fusion of fact and fiction), to use his own metaphor from the novel. *Tales* and *Journey* had already established Mistry as a significant literary figure in the arena of Indian Writing in English as well as among the Indo-Canadian Fiction Writers. *Balance* too, written in the line of *Journey* can be read as a post-modern text proving its potential by being nominated for the most coveted Booker Prize.
Set between its opening chapter “Prologue: 1975” and the concluding one “Epilogue: 1985”, the 752 pages of this epic novel deals with its four protagonists, two Parsees among them are Dina and Maneck and two tailors Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash. The trio, Maneck and the two tailors, happen to be together in the train and find out that their destination is the same. The ‘whole jing-bang trio’ (85) land on the doorstep of Dina Dalal, a pretty widow in her early forties, striving to maintain her independence as a dress-maker. The fates of these four characters, unlikely to get together otherwise, become inextricably entangled in the ‘city by the sea’, evidently Mumbai. The names of locales are not mentioned anywhere so as to suggest that it can be any such place in India. Apart from a metropolis the action takes place in an Indian village from where the tailors migrate and a hill station in the north where Maneck Kohlah belongs to.

When her tailoring profession is endangered by her weakening eyesight Dina Dalal tries her hand as an entrepreneurial middle person, hiring two slum-dwelling tailors Ishvar and Om with the sewing machines laid at the back room of her tiny flat. She also takes a paying guest, a student Maneck, who is the son of her old school friend Aban. Commenced thus the narrative moves back and forth in time to make the reader encounter the not very pleasant, at times the horrific stories of these four individuals, their past and the circumstances that bring them together under one roof. Aspiring for different pursuits, their fates make it inevitable to ‘sail under one flag’. They keep on striving painfully for better lives but get entwined in the unforeseen plights and predicaments.

The lives of the tailors’ forefathers who were actually ‘Chamars’ or ‘Mochis’ reflect the inhuman tyranny of the caste-system in the rural India where unimaginable atrocities are perpetrated on the lower castes by the upper-caste Jamindars and Thakurs. Oppressive caste-violence has driven Dukhi Mochi, the grandfather of Omprakash and father of Ishvar from their traditional occupation of working with leather to learn the skills of tailoring in the town. The decision of renouncing the ancestral profession of the caste in which one is born and opt for the respectable profession of tailors, a step higher in the caste-hierarchy, is an unusually bold decision. Dukhi Mochi has sought a way out of the suffocating caste-system by deciding not to conform to the practices of his community which are looked down
upon by the majority of the society. He becomes an eye-sore for the upper-caste people who have so far humiliated and insulted the members of his community. Mistry, here, shows that the dalits want to be out of their ascribed identity and their identities can be modified by such a very important decision of changing their occupation as the castes are identified by their occupations. Also the decision to migrate from the rural to urban areas and attempt to claim a modern identity suggests mobility that is not available in the caste system. Dukhi’s decision of moving out of the given hierarchical social structure has been very much resented by the upper castes of the village as it has challenged their domination. Mistry touches upon the question of identity and community. Continuity is required to maintain an identity and the assertion of identity is very often met with resistance. However, the depleting prospects of earning in the town take them to the metropolis only to be entangled hopelessly in the maze of its dark world. The migration from rural to the urban India and urbanization are the very important features of the post-modern conditions. Mistry has very realistically narrated the squalor and hardships of the slums, the ‘homes’ of the illiterate migrants and the paupers who form the part of the inevitable conditions of any post-modern metropolis. In the city, things are no different. Mistry juxtaposes the caste-oppressions in the village with the oppressions of the dark world of the criminals in the city where the tailors fall in the lower economic class. The deprivings conditions remain more or less the same. The imposition of Emergency, an abridgement of civil rights added to their woes. Maneck, too, comes from the hilly region to the city for higher education. In his background are also the pathetic story of Partition and the pangs of change.

The novel deals with the experiences of the ‘double displacement’ in the lives of its protagonists. The tailors face the emotional displacement of adopting a new professional identity struggling to secure a place in a new city and the physical displacement from their village to the city. Very often they express their desire to go back to their native village after earning some money, though their village is not a better place to stay. Once Om said to Ishvar, “We should just go back to our village; I’m fed up of living like this, crawling from one struggle to another” (383). Om and Ishvar have no support-system to turn to in time of crisis. They are subjected to oppression every time and there is nothing/nobody to fall back upon. In the village, at least, there is a certain kind of support from their community but in the urban set-up
of a metro city they are stranded. Against the rural communitarian social framework, the urban one is highly individualized. In the democratic framework of the nation-state, the citizenship should guarantee basic rights for its citizens; but that does not happen because the power structure of the nation-state lacks sensitivity towards the marginalized people. It is oppressive and corrupt. The police would recognize a rich man and not a beggar as a citizen. The idea of the nation excludes marginalized people. In Balance, there is an absence of civil society, though ironically the marginalized and the minorities are shown to support each other as they face similar oppressions. During the Emergency and riots in Bombay, there is this conspicuous absence of the support-system or a feeling of community or society as a whole.

For Maneck too, it is the same kind of double displacement trying to identify with the new land and locale and feeling alienated from his hometown at the same time. When asked how the college was he makes a wry face and says, “Hopeless. But I’ll have to finish it somehow, to please my parents. Then home I go on the first train” (341). Later on, when he gets a job in Dubai and leaves the country, it is a further displacement he grapples with. He recalls his stay abroad after he comes back to India first time, “Not one day has passed during his long exile that he did not think about his home and his parents. In Dubai, he had felt trapped” (714). Mistry himself has undergone this experience of double displacement as a Parsee in India and then as an immigrant of Indian origin in Canada struggling to balance himself between the identification with his new land and alienation from his old homelands. Migration, alienation, rootlessness, loneliness -- through these post-modern traits runs the humane and empathetic attitude of the author.

Dina’s life also has been full of struggle right from her childhood. She, very independent-minded even when she was a girl, tries to protect her freedom, though sadly momentary, from her autocratic brother Nusswan; and her flat from the rapacious landlord, both the symbols of patriarchal tyranny. Her rebellion is the story of any woman fighting a lone battle against her subjection. While throwing light on the lives of the marginalized, the novel captures the socio-political chaos and turmoil of the post-independent time of the Emergency period. The dreadful disappointments and subjugations lead to the irreparable damages to their selves. Savita Goel very precisely puts this point in the following words --
It reflects the reality of India – the predatory politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and bloodshed; also gives an insight into rural India; illustrates the injustice, the cruelty, and the horror of deprivation and portrays the trauma of India along communal, religious and linguistic lines (Goel, 1998: 54).

In both his novels *Journey* and *Balance* Mistry depicts a picture of the fallen world, a world in which all forms of corruption, knavery, hypocrisy, tyranny, ugliness and decay are rampant, and the protagonists fall prey to such disorder and anarchy. *Balance* revolves round mainly the Imperialist ideology. It also deals with the patriarchal hegemony as far as the women characters are concerned. Dina, though belonging to the privileged, enlightened, urbanized and anglicized Parsee minority, is marginalized as a woman. The low-caste women like Rupa and Radha face double marginalization as the women of the lower caste. During the rule of Mrs. Gandhi and especially the period of Emergency the functioning of the government revived the memories of the colonial India under the British rule. This “Nationalist Imperialism” was challenged by the people like Jayprakash Naryan, Morarji Desai etc. The effects of the colonialism do not end with just the transfer of political power or merely implementing the democratic set-up. “As a result, postcolonial societies continue to image themselves in the mirror of colonialism” (Bharucha, 1992). The democratic values of liberty, equality and fraternity should seep in at all the strata of the society too. Dr. Ambedkar wanted it not only at the political but at the social level too. Looking at the atrocities perpetrated at various levels to the socially marginalized people even after the decolonization, the dream of the rosy future that everything would be well with the world has been cruelly shattered. The conditions of the suppressed dalit class have hardly improved. In fact, their marginalization goes a layer deeper with what is called ‘Nationalist Imperialism’ or the subjugation than it was during the colonial rule.

Mistry gives an insight into rural India and exposes the atrocities committed on the untouchables. In the flashback, he throws light on the lives of Ishvar and his nephew Om. They belong to the Chamar caste of tanners and leather workers who ‘defile’ themselves by de-skinning the dead animals and then work up on the hides to produce the leather goods. The irony is that these leather goods like footwear and bags are
used by the upper-caste but the people who make them are the untouchables. The Chamars have spent their lives in the obedient compliance with the traditions of the caste-system and have survived with humiliation and forbearance as their constant companions. Buddhu’s wife refused to go to the field with the zamindar’s son, so they shaved off her head and walked her naked through the square. Dukhi’s wife was also sexually exploited and harassed. The upper-caste’s hypocrisy of the untouchability is exposed when they touch the ‘untouchables’ for their selfish and mean ends. Mistry underlines harshly on the double standards of the upper-caste by narrating such instances of tragic irony when a high-caste lustful man who would consider himself polluted even by the shadow of a low-caste, still covets and sleeps with a desirable low-caste woman.

They were suppressed to such an extent that they cannot even think of raising their voice or deviate from the set rigid norms. “And consternation was general throughout the village: someone had dared to break the timeless chain of caste, retribution was bound to be swift” (115). They were the helpless victims and their crimes were varied and imaginative. Mistry narrates the instances of such unimaginable barbaric atrocities on the ‘lower’ and the downtrodden:

For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death -- the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress, Dayaram reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord’s field, had been forced to eat the landlord’s excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of setting for the few sticks he could expect at the end of day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged (132).

The children of low-caste were denied the right to education. Dukhi’s sons, Ishvar and Narayan, were caned severely and mercilessly when they strayed in the class-room out of curiosity and ‘defiled the tools of learning and knowledge’. It is the forbidden world for a low-caste. Dukhi’s complaint to Pandit Lalluram, a Chitpavan Brahmin of the village is futile. Mistry never loses a chance to pull the upper-caste down:

Disputes of any sort..........fell within his jurisdiction. Thanks to his impeccable credentials, everyone always went away satisfied: the victim
obtained the illusion of justice; the wrongdoer was free to continue in his
trouble, received gifts of cloth, grains, fruit and sweets from both sides (136).

Dukhi, instead of justice, had got a lecture on the caste-hierarchy by that ‘Shit-Eating Brahmin’. His caste-mates joined him in denigrating and ridiculing Lalluram as the ‘Goo-Khavan Brahmin (139).

Long before Om was born, his grandfather Dukhi had decided to send his two sons, Narayan and Ishvar, still boys of ten and twelve, to be apprenticed as tailors. It was indeed a courageous and welcome step in the right direction to get emancipated from the closed barriers of his caste. He did not want his progeny to face such humiliation, suppression and exploitation they had been facing since generations. He had seen Bhola, Dosu, Gambhir, Dayaram, Sita, Dhiraj, Bhungi and others suffering at the hands of cruel zamindars. Even his own wife Rupa was victimized and raped by the zamindar’s gardener. But in choosing to deviate from the set path and thus revolting against the age-old caste-system was a ‘crime’. An ‘unforgivable sin’ he had committed in the eyes of the upper-caste. He feared for his family’s safety and his apprehensions were true. He and his family had to pay a very heavy price for this rebel, though not immediately. The grudge that the upper-castes were nurturing for Dukhi and his happy sons gave vent quite later when they got a chance to ‘teach them a lesson’.

The novel actually deals with the struggle for dignity and recognition for one and all. If one thinks on the line of Charles Taylor’s discourse on the politics of recognition based on Hegelian philosophy of justice and equality, no just society is possible without the individual’s recognition. The issue of the ‘other’ has been dealt with quite sensitively in the novel. It can be the caste other, class other, religion other or the gender other. There is this acute sense of otherness available in the state of crisis in the lives of the personae in the novel. When Dina’s husband dies, even a privileged urbanized community like the Parsees treats a woman like the ‘other’. Her brother Nusswan, who symbolizes the oppressive patriarchy, fails to recognize her as an individual and she feels the loss of her dignity which she always feels in his domineering presence. Independence and dignity are inter-related. Once she loses her economic independence, she loses her dignity. Similarly, the otherness of caste,
religion and class are largely the issues of self-respect. The issue of class is different from the issues of caste/religion/gender in a way that class is economically constructed, while the gender/religion is biologically created/inherited and caste is socially constructed. Mobility is possible in class, while it is difficult in socially constructed caste or religion and impossible in biologically constructed gender. One can move out from the lower to upper class or vice versa; but hardly in the case of caste and religion. Those who belong to lower castes are denied humanity and are treated as sub-humans even when move to middleclass. Even after crossing the economic barrier of class by getting higher education and professional position, the social stigma of caste is difficult to erase even after nearly seven decades of India’s independence.

Ishvar and Narayan got trained at the Asraf tailor’s shop in the nearby town and mastered the new vocation. The boys were very happy to find the change in their life after joining the Muzzafar Tailoring Company. They lived and learned with Asraf Chacha for years. In this ambitious book Mistry has focused on the cross-sections of Indian society. The boys depend on a Muslim, a minority community in India and later a Parsee, another minority.

Pradeep Trikha emphasizes this point by quoting Andrew Michael Robert,

> The diversity and plurality which has been noted as aspects of post-modern society have a particular value in so far as they promote an attention to the radical otherness of different cultures. There is thus a new, post-modern form of cross-fertilization taking place (Robert, 62 and Trikha, 2001: 215).

Ameena Kazi Ansari looks at the situation of the quartet’s staying together itself as incongruent to the text and their interaction unreal. Such a close communion and proximity of the people coming from the varied social strata is impossible to imagine, let alone to accept. It is here that the language becomes the unifying link and deregionalises the characters though they belong to different linguistic realms reflecting the country’s cultural pluralism. Ansari writes,

> Language and characterization go a long way in emphasizing the “ethnic pluralism” (Griffiths, Ashcroft and Tiffin, 1989: 215) of Indian life and are
reflective of the multiculturality of the nation in the text. In *A Fine Balance* language becomes a “neutral vehicle for communication between contesting language groups” (Ibid 284) as Mistry succeeds in adapting a colonial tongue to local needs. This adaptation is characteristic of the post-colonial enterprise in which the essence is conveyed in a “language that is not one’s own” (Raja Rao, 296; Ansari, 2003: 184).

In fact, Mistry wants to bring home the very important point about the interaction of the cross-sections of society. While facing the discrimination and fighting the hegemony of religion, caste, community or patriarchy, the marginalized as well as the minorities seek succor and support of each other. Dukhi looks forward to Ashraf Chacha for help and he does extend his assistance which a Hindu tailor would not have done. Dina gives refuge to the tailors in their critical time, though she was initially reluctant. They understand each other’s plights and trials as subjects of suffering. As a woman she has experienced the helplessness against patriarchy represented by her brother and that is why, after some initial resistance as a precaution of a lone widow lady, her heart melts and she treats the tailors with dignity and concern despite having an upper hand as their employer from a higher and literate class of society. The suppressed and the downtrodden willingly eschew using power even when they get a chance to do so. Narayan, a chamar turned successful tailor in his village, does allow a ‘bhungi’, who belongs to a caste lower than his, to enter his house. He treats him with respect and consideration even to the chagrin of his mother Roopa who humiliates him in vanity of now belonging to the upper-caste. He is insulted and refused entry in Narayan’s shop by her. After being converted to the upper-caste of tailors Narayan does not nurture any false pride or wield any authority. Again at the time of his marriage, he raises his voice against the dowry to the displeasure of his parents who are keen about it. By delineating so Mistry shows how a multicultural society like ours can move towards practically a better egalitarian and more secular one. Just the constitutional equality does not serve the purpose, but the concept of equality on the human ground should be ingrained in the minds and hearts of the people. It is a prime requisite for a ‘just’ multicultural society.

When India wins freedom at the cost of Partition of the country that was followed by the nationwide communal riots, Ashraf’s wife Mumtaz suggests to leave India and go to Pakistan for a bright and secure future, but the people of the street convince them to
stay back. Narayan and Ishvar defended them from blood-thirsty workers of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and saved their lives. This is a very important point in the novel through which Mistry wants to convey a weighty message. By narrating the sentiments of care, concern and affection on the ground of humanity amidst the burning fires of hatred between the communities, i.e. the Hindus and Muslims, Mistry points at the true spirit of secularism which, very sadly, the country has not been able to develop fully even after six decades of independence. Both the communities had been staying peacefully helping each other so far as we see in the case of Dukhi and Ashraf. Even the neighbours of Ashraf protect him when the Hindu mob is ready to burn the only Muslim shop in the street and butcher the entire family. The two boys, Ishvar and Narayan pay the debt of the love and help received from their Chacha. They enact that theirs is a Hindu family and that the owner of the Krishna Tailoring Shop (sign-board changed overnight) Ashraf Chacha is their father. Indeed they have been living like one family and Ashraf chacha and Mumtaz Chachi were like their parents. Ramesh Mishra compliments Mistry for his progressive outlook (Mishra, 2001: 191-92). Such kind of fraternity and harmony as the sharp contrast to the horrific and heinous communal riots during the troubled times of the achievement of country’s independence is very suggestive and leaves a vital message of the desirable condition in the multicultural social reality of the country. It ought to be the most ideal approach from the host or the majority community to show the accommodative spirit to the other minority communities. Instead of showing their hegemonic power and making them feel anxious and insecure it becomes the unsaid human duty to make them feel comfortable and at home.

Ironically, the rigid hierarchy of the Hindu caste-system has divided the country itself from within. But when it is time to fight or exhibit their power against a minority like Muslims, then it is strange that suddenly they all become the Hindu ‘brothers’. Dukhi and his friends talk at such tense moments when they hear the confusing stories from the faraway towns and villages:

“The zamindars have treated us like animals”.
“Worse than animals”
“But what if it’s true? What if the Mussulman horde sweeps down up on our village, like the khakhi pants told us”? 
“They have never bothered us before. Why would they do it now? Why should we hurt them because some outsiders come with stories”? 

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"Yes, it’s strange that suddenly, we have all become Hindu brothers’.
“The Muslims have behaved more like our brothers than the bastard Brahmins and Thakurs” (150-151).

It is the politics at the centre that tatters the healthy multicultural fabric of the democratic nation-state like India. Even after more than sixty years of independence the political mileage is gained by the power-hungry politicians at the cost of peace and harmony that exist on the humanitarian ground. The same policy of “divide and rule” was adopted by the Britishers who supported the caste-hierarchy of India for their own political advantage.

As already mentioned earlier Mistry brings home the point that the communities on the margins come together at the time of crisis. It is unimaginable for an upper-caste Hindu or a Brahmin to behave in a friendly manner at a critical juncture as Dina and Maneck did to the tailors or the tailors to Ashraf Chacha and his family and vice versa. Is it so that through this Mistry wants to convey his despair for the impossibility of such humane and democratic attitude between the empowered and the marginalized? Or does he have the hope that the power at the center would be shared with those at the margins and gradually there would not be any demarcation as the centre and the margin? But who would like to lose or share power? It is a big question. The Constitution of the secular democracy like ours has this objective of ‘equality’ but during its practice and implementation, there is a swing again and equilibrium seems difficult. That explains the titular significance of A Fine Balance.

Ishvar and Narayan returned to their village to set up business. Narayan got married and Om was born. For years everything went peacefully. Then came general elections. Mistry gives morbid details of the malpractices, booth-capturing, exploitation, total failure of administration, tortures and suffering of the poor and the downtrodden. During the elections, Narayan wanted to assert his right to vote and did not comply with the Thakurs, who were the controlling agents of the elections in their village, had already been waiting for an excuse for long. Narayan and his companions were taught a lesson for resisting the Thakurs and an example was set for the consequences of such a revolt in future. Narayan and his supporters were hung naked by their ankles from the branches of the banayan tree and the Thakur’s men
urinated on the three inverted faces. Semi-conscious, the parched mouths were grateful for the moistures, licking the trickle with feeble urgency…. burning coals were held to the three men’s genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away (179).

Their bodies were displayed in the village square and their entire family was burnt alive leaving Om and Ishvar who were out of the village then. Mistry gives a heart-rending account of man’s barbaric inhumanity to man and also the unthinkable deprivation and inequalities faced by the underprivileged in India. It is shameful on the part of the privileged in the society that claims to be ‘cultured and civilized’. The lower-castes have been suffering such atrocities for years together but what pinches more is that it happens in the independent India, as shown by Mistry to be happening during the election time. What hurts is that such appalling injustice and the malpractices at the electoral booths still take place in the remote villages of India, the nation-state whose democracy is considered to be the largest and the most successful in the world. Its egalitarian constitution had been formed under the leadership of Dr. Ambedker and Gandhi who had devoted their lives to eradicate this evil of caste-system and untouchability. There has been no logical reason or rational ground for the unjust torments done to the underprivileged for centuries together but even now, in the post-modern age, there is still the scarcity of the milk of human kindness. Even today the newspapers report the accounts of how low-castes and untouchables in many villages of India are mercilessly maimed or killed for trying to ask for the avail of the constitutionally conferred rights. Narrating a news story on dalits in a village of South India, India Today (July 14, 2003: 34) states how posts of Panchayat presidents constitutionally reserved for dalits in many villages invariably lay vacant because they are scarred to contest the elections for fear of reprisal and harassment from the upper-castes. A dalit youth is quoted saying, “the upper-caste people, who have large land holdings, never like the dalits as Panchayat presidents. The dalits, for whom the posts are reserved, were scared to even contest elections.” Events of arson, lynching, maiming, raping, killlings and ostracism of the low-castes are not uncommon in many Indian villages. Narayan who pays a heavy price for not being obsequious once says, “Of course, for ordinary people nothing has changed” (174). To this, Dukhi responds:
“How can you say that? So much has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth. And look at your house, your – “Those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still teach us worse than animals.” “Those kinds of things take time to change.” “More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like.” “Son, those are dangerous things to want. You changed from chamar to tailor. Be satisfied with that” (174-175).

It is very much true in the caste-driven India. Colonizer or no colonizer, whoever rules, the caste-ridden mindsets of the upper-caste Indians have hardly changed even in the post-modern times.

Subsequently, Ishvar and Om go to meet Ashraf Chacha who advises them to go to Bombay with his recommendation letter to Nawaz, his friend, requesting him to settle the duo in the city. After the initial haughtiness, Nawaz helps them to get an employment with Dina Dalal. He also helps them to get a small shanty in one of the slums. They realize that life is far more difficult in the city as compared to that in their village. There is no end to their miseries and woes. The novel is skilfully structured with the multiple strands of its complex plot worked out in a tragic denouement. The tailors get along well with Ms. Dalal and work hard to meet the deadlines of the orders. Om, an enthusiastic and restless youth, feels that they are being underpaid. Ishvar explains to him: “Listen, my nephew, this is the way the world works. Some people are in the middle, some are on the borders. Patience is needed for dreams to grow and give fruits” (101). But, Om, more ambitious than his uncle, decides to spy on Dina, to know the address of the Au Revoir Export House so that they could get direct orders from the house and earn more money. He borrows a bicycle to follow Dina’s taxi, meets with an accident and returns without achieving anything. They go on adapting themselves to the circumstances and despite several difficulties they undergo, they do not leave the hope to realize their long cherished dream of settling down in Bombay.

Few days later, Maneck moves into Ms.Dalal’s flat and develops a friendship with Ishvar and Om. Initially, Dina’s behaviour towards the tailors is strict and rigid; but
that is purely from the professional point of view as she has to meet the deadlines of
the company. Their relations are marked by mutual suspicion. It may be so because on
her side, she has to wear the mask of roughness and toughness as she is a lady staying
alone. Maneck is friendly and sympathetic with them and very often takes their side.
He disapproves of her treatment to them, especially when she is class-conscious.
Mistry has rendered a realistic touch here as this is what usually happens when cross-
sections of society interact. She dislikes and discourages the growing intimacy
between Maneck and the tailors. Later, she becomes more accommodating and
approves their going together for tea and snacks at Vishram Café. Another occasion
when Dina softens due to Manek’s urging is when the tailor’s shack is bulldozed to
ground as part of the slum evacuation drive and they search in vain for an alternative
dwelling. Poor tailors suffer a great blow but Dina’s heart does not melt by sympathy.
She fears the illegal encroachment from the tailors if she allows them to stay in her
flat. She can sue them but the court system takes years to settle the case, years during
which the crooks are allowed to stay in the flat. Maneck is upset at Dina aunty’s
refusal to accommodate even the tailor’s trunk. The tailors receive another blow when
they are caught up by the police from the footpath where they were sleeping, to work
as construction workers as part of the city beautification project. When they do not
turn up for work for a number of days, Dina’s trust in them still dwindles further.
Maneck pacifies the agitated Dina and she, in spite of the suspicion and
inconvenience the prolonged absence of the tailors cause, starts missing them. During
this period Maneck tells her about the tale of suffering of the tailors as victims of the
caste-oppression and she thinks she is better off and her troubles are nothing
compared to them. Whenever the innocents are victimized, the kind-hearted and the
compassionate always doubt about the God’s ways to the world -- “... People keep
saying God is great, God is just, but I’m not sure” (418).

Dina offers them her verandah when, to her relief, the tailors return eventually but in a
state of shock. The tailors are very much thankful to her but Dina still feels guilty
about her attitude. “Now, Ishvar and Om were grateful to her for her kindness and
generosity. Deceit, hypocrisy, manipulation were more the fabrics of her garment, she
thought” (476). Dina undergoes a genuine and honest effort of introspection and feels
ashamed of the purity of her selfish intentions. She gradually shuns her inhibitions
and pretensions. Basically good and humane at heart, Dina thinks of their differences.
She feels the gap between her and them and tries to bridge it. She endeavours to cross the barriers of caste, culture, grooming and gender coming between her ‘self’ and the ‘others’ to create an amicable ambience. After sharing her home, she even shares her kitchen and food with them. Ishvar’s thankful gestures and words of simplicity, trust and friendship “stirred her familiar residue of guilt. There was still a gulf between them; she did not see them as they saw her” (492).

Mistry, very wisely, brings up the point of cross-cultural interaction and the issues which erupt in the natural course of such interaction. It should be dealt with generosity, kind and open heart and basically and most importantly the respect for each other and the will to protect the ‘self-respect’ of each other. Dina feels very light-hearted and happy after shedding her dislikes. “My bleakest hour, thought Dina, has now become the happiest” (492). Similar kind of happiness and satisfaction were felt by the tailors when they protected their mentor Ashraf tailor and his wife during the communal riots. They proved their loyalty to him and tried to repay the bit of the unpayable debt of assistance and refuge they had got from him. The irony was that the blood-thirsty killers on the other hand were also non-Muslims and their saviors also had the same religious difference with them. What Mistry wants to point out is that the tailors belonged to the disadvantaged and underprivileged class of the society and that is why their plight was no different from the other minorities like Parsees and Muslims who have made this country their ‘home’. They understand each other better when they are encountered with similar predicament of either a physical or ideological assault from the hegemonic religion, or culture or community or gender. Hence, Dina as a Parsee woman, the tailors as the low-caste and Ashraf and Nawaz as Muslim minorities are sailing in the same boat. Mistry is very hopeful about the fate of a multicultural nation-state like India by showing such “cross-fertilization of cultures” taking place. Should this hope be extended for the congenial relations between those at the centre and those who are at the margin or at the periphery? Here, it should be noted that Dina though belonging to the ‘privileged’ minority class and community, could not go for higher education because of her jealous and sadistic brother Nusswan, a representative of the patriarchy. Dina would have become more independent, had she been imparted with healthier grooming and blooming of her potentials. Hence, she too falls on the margin.
Mistry looks at the Indian society where the common man has to face indignities in his day-to-day existence, where getting two square meals a day and room for shelter is a difficult task, especially in the urban life of a metropolis. If such is the situation of the society in general, one can well imagine the plight of those existing on the periphery. Mistry traces the story of the lives of these people, their search for dignity and survival in a hostile environment. Each of these protagonists, a victim of his/her social conditioning, aspires to improve and change his/her lot and finds him/herself stuck in the quagmire of the circumstances. Pratibha Nagpal rightly observes the same:

Their need keeps them together and step-by-step they learn to understand and appreciate the aspirations and compulsions of the other. They learn to help each other, hesitantly at first and with more confidence later till each one of them is able to overcome the personal and circumstantial barriers amongst them in order to forge a meaningful relationship. Perhaps this is Mistry’s way of suggesting a path of dignity for those who exist on the periphery – the path of collective togetherness that can fulfill individual aspirations, partially if not fully, in the milieu the novel is set (Nagpal, 2004: 47).

Mistry being a diasporic Parsee writer is sensitive to the conditions of those who do not belong to the mainstream and understands that the marginalized people have to struggle twice as hard for what would come with lesser effort to those belonging to the mainstream because such people do not have the comfort of collective strength with them. Also because they are unable to fully comprehend and appreciate the socio-cultural context of the situation in which they are placed, these people constantly experience fear, alienation, rejection and insecurity. Central to the meaning of the novel are certain questions that are essential to the understanding of the novel. The questions of power-structure, class and caste-hierarchy, the hegemony of self-serving individuals in a corrupt system and man’s inhumanity to man are some of the unanswered issues of Mistry’s India that he chooses to depict in order to mould the narrative in such a manner that the reader shuffles between various historically significant moments in India’s history and the story of the four protagonists who try to find their place, identity and meaning in this scenario (Nagpal, 2004: 48).

It is the time when the nation-state becomes the monolith, a huge power-structure that is oppressive to gender, class, caste, religion etc. Instead of guaranteeing the rights to
the people, the nation-state becomes the apparatus of terror, when Avinash, a brilliant young student leader is killed ruthlessly. The oppressed subjects are the riff-raff, the ‘faceless mass’ existing in the margins. Among the oppressors is also the underworld. Ishvar and Om do not want to be sucked into it but they are helpless. Violence is faced as everyday experience. Modern metropolis is a mass of people who struggle to survive. The struggle itself is a collective expression. Somewhere the idea of nation does register this; and the common people have the feeling that they are part of it. During the freedom struggle this kind of collective feeling and expression of nationhood was mobilized in a certain direction and goal, absent in the post-colonial nation-state. The ‘faceless mass’ is the part of this huge crowd, generally directionless, sans any kind of fervour of a community or a feeling of coherence and belonging. But a crowd can be a community if it has a certain value-system.

Mistry shows how it is possible through the experiences of his four protagonists. Coming from various social and cultural backgrounds the foursome are suspicious and apprehensive of each other. The possibility of any sort of ‘meaningful dialogue’ between them appears remote. Still having the hang-over of the traumatic past, each individual lives in a state of isolation in spite of sharing a common roof and the bonds of suffering. It is with the passage of time and the initiation of a Parsee youth Maneck that the initial distrust starts wearing off and the mutual suspicion starts giving way to a deeper understanding of the ‘others’ situation without the prejudice of caste, class, religion and gender. Herein lays the very significant thematic point of view of the author. It is about the human values and a feeling of camaraderie and togetherness which strengthen their sense of belonging to a multicultural community. Multiculturalism is an ideology about this core value-system which makes the survival possible and a plural society viable through practising a kind of dialogue or mutual interaction as is witnessed among these four protagonists. It is very important that they do not become violent or brutalize, despite their sufferings and dire misfortunes. They get their anchoring from the sense of self and self-respect reflecting the core value-system that they adhere to. Though they have lost so much; and the tailors and Dina, reduced to nothing at the end, they still retain this value-system and their sensitivity to humanity remains intact.
The support is sought from the likes to survive. There is a rooted sense of self which analyses and understands the relation between the self and community. In the absence of the community, one does find the transient support and security through a sense of belonging to a wider human community and through a kind of dialogical negotiation as Taylor has proposed for the praxis of multiculturalism. Rawls had suggested in *A Theory of Justice* that human beings seek certain basic primary goods which include self-respect. Self and self-respect, using Taylor’s arguments, are constituted in and through the community. When the self is atomized it will not be able to enter into confident relations with others as cultural belonging is absolutely essential, not merely for the constitution of the self, but to make strong evaluations and basic judgements. Maneck’s character is highly atomized; while Ishvar and Om do not get individuated to that extent. Maneck can neither establish rapport with his parents nor with his friend Avinash; neither can he keep in touch with his relations in Bombay when he studies there nor with Dina and the tailors after he immigrates to Dubai. Too much of individuation and despair drive him to suicide, while on the other hand, Ishvar and Om and Dina could survive without undergoing the process of dehumanization, drawing their inner strength from the sense of self and self-respect, balancing hope and despair. They transcend their individual identity based on their community and survive just by staying together and out of good faith on each other. Though their alienation is deep and gets accentuated during the menacing state of Emergency, they enter into a dialogue and sharing with each other.

When the minorities, dalits or women are not able to articulate their aspirations for better lives, they live in a state of oppression and subjugation. In the novel, various structures of power ranging from the nation-state to patriarchy are shown to be oppressive. It is against such denial of justice that characters like Dina, Dukhi, Narayan, Om and Avinash rebel. Such assertions are seen as a threat to the hegemony of power structures and hence suppressed and their voices silenced. There is no way of articulating such damaged selves or expressing such fractured identities except through the ‘dialogical’ interaction. Multiculturalism involves a dialogical process and should be seen as a process of interaction between individuals in everyday world. It makes more sense as a means of negotiating everyday world than as an official political policy. Mistry shows the tailors as the tellers of tales like the stories in ‘Mahabharata’, the endless store of stories, used as a metaphor in the novel (471,
Mistry suggests that dialogue is possible with this kind of engagement. Valerian Roderigues, in his essay, interrogates whether there is a case for multiculturalism. He answers positively and promotes dialogism as its central approach:

Multiculturalism is an invitation to dialogue. Given our largely culture and community bound social existence; our knowledge and understanding remain necessarily limited. Such a limitation can be transcended only by getting into an active dialogue with other communities and identities. In the process of this dialogue other communities may arise, including those who bear multiple and overladen identities (Roderigues, 2002: 126).

Receiving care and compassion from Dina, the tailors also show a change in their conduct and attitude. So far Ishvar’s respectful and dignified attitude to Dina was touched with professional relationship. But then Dina’s little acts of kindness overwhelm him and gradually he opens up with more bits of their terrible past to her. One marks a significant change in Om, who has always been independent, pugnacious, and at times rebellious. His wild spirits were very often constrained by his wise and patient uncle Ishvar. The tailors were displaced twice by the blows from the Emergency and that has tamed and softened him. They are filled with gratitude when Dina also shares with them her past misfortunes. The readers are deeply moved at the very end of the tragic denouement of the novel when Dina, dependent on her brother, continues this practice of sharing food in the same vessels that they use with the emaciated and crippled tailors, who have been turned into beggars then. It is, indeed, a very pitiable end, especially after the disappointment and suicide of Maneck. But the only saving grace is this ultimate humane gesture from Dina. It speaks volumes of humanity, the most powerful spirit which can cross any obstacle that comes its way. The concluding pages, though very bleak, confirm the author’s faith in life.

Softly brought up with care and protection in a doctor’s family, Dina Dalal, her maiden surname Shroff, had developed a refined taste for life. Her father died when she was just a young school-girl. She was moved to the ‘protection’ of her authoritative elder brother. Her mother’s mental ill-health gave him the full scope and power to run the Shroff household in an autocratic way. He ill-treats her, quarrels with her, does not allow her to visit her friends, makes her do the household chores and
even to polish his shoes. He tries various ways and means to curb her individuality and crush whatever is fine and bright in her. After Mrs. Shroff’s death, despite her keen desire to pursue her education she is not even allowed to matriculate. As a result, Dina became defiant and stubborn. She decided not to marry the man of his choice and she let go the economic well-being and social security that a marriage to one of Nusswan’s friends would have offered her. Her sense of independence, which is very often mocked at and bullied by Nusswan, prevents her from being cowed down by his dominance. Dina marries Rustom Dalal, the man of her choice and whom she loves despite his belonging to ordinary middle class. She had met him at a music concert and used to see him frequently at such events. Despite being manipulative, Nusswan has realized, with a sense of humiliation, that he was unsuccessful in taming her rebellious spirit. Nusswan renders permission of marriage half-heartedly. But unfortunately, Dina’s conjugal happiness does not last long. Within three years of her marriage, Rustom is killed in an accident. As per the social norms she is once again under the ‘care’ of her brother, but now as a young widow.

For a few months, everything goes smoothly but she very soon feels that she is considered a burden on Nusswan’s family. Nusswan is a hypocrite who shows to the society that he is a dutiful brother taking care of his little widowed sister despite her causing him the embarrassment in many respects. He is a successful businessman in the making and now belongs to the neo-rich class manifesting all its sham and vanity. Dina had not handed over the small flat of her husband to the landlord. She once again becomes assertive and shifts to her flat. She is a symbol of a ‘new woman’ who refuses to be docile and submissive. The stereotype feminine roles are not acceptable to her. Even on that fateful night when the accident occurred and her husband died, she behaved in a very dignified manner and handled everything gracefully, “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” (57). She, a strong-minded lady of an iron will, does not break down and resolves to resurrect and restructure her identity. She decides to be financially independent and with the help of her school friend Zenobia she gets a contractual assignment to supply readymade garments to an export house. She hires the services of two tailors, Ishvar and Om, due to her failing eyesight, and also a college student Maneck as a paying guest to supplement her income. Her brother as usual, looks down upon her ‘working like a slave just for a pittance.”
Goel aptly states that her quest for selfhood and her emergence as a strong, progressive and an independent woman forms the quintessence of the novel (Goel, 1998: 58).

The quartet slips into a happy camaraderie after some initial hitches. The four stay together as a family and the time they spend together with little joys of life is unforgettable. The sharing of a home means the sharing of meals and kitchenware. They begin to converse about the society and politics and through ‘dialogue’ begin to derive solace and strength from each other. The shared experience of partaking meals together despite their differences of caste, class and gender provides each of the four protagonists a sense of community and security. It assumes symbolic significance in the novel and becomes a sense of harmony to each of them. Another central and significant factor that brings together the four protagonists in bonds of human love is the making of the quilt by them and the image of the patchwork that becomes vital to the conscience of the four protagonists and the meaning of the novel. Life offers very little to them. This happy phase of their lives is short-lived. Ratna Sheita Mani rightly sees it as a lonely struggle for identity and survival. Social circumstances bring them together and in time they forge a bond of understanding as they struggle to survive (Mani, 2001: 200).

The characters themselves do not see their struggle for survival as linked to the existing political scenario. For Dina, the much talked about Emergency is “government problems -- games played by people in power. It does not affect ordinary people like us” (92). For the common man it is nothing but “one more government tamasha” (6). Very soon they are proved wrong as even their modest dreams are thwarted by the ill-effects of Emergency. The tailors who visit their village for bride-search for Om are victimized by their old high-caste enemy, the Thakur and are mutilated and crippled under the pretext of the free vasectomy (nbsandhi) program of the government during Emergency. Even after fifty years of Independence and decolonization, the conditions of the suppressed dalits have hardly changed. The heart-rending, inhuman and barbaric oppression perpetuated on the families of the dalits by the upper-castes thakurs is accentuated by the political situation of the country. The helpless become more helpless and their plight is even worse than the subjects of the colonial India. Even if the ‘voiceless’ could voice their protest, it falls
on the deaf ears of the privileged. Death or life as good as death is the only ‘reward’ for those who articulate a voice of resistance. And if, by chance, the voice is heeded; then the ‘fine balance’ of the society is tilted. Hence, the voice stifled and equilibrium resumed. The day they make up their mind to become rebels, the balance of the society would be topsy-turvyed. The issue calls for interrogation and analysis. The ‘balance’ of the title suggests that any living society has to maintain a fine balance between despair and hope, injustice and justice and oppression and freedom. When the balance tilts towards injustice, despair and oppression, the society begins to disintegrate. The novel is about the very survival of Indian society as an integrated whole committed to the ideals of democracy, equality and freedom.

Bereft of her tailors and without the rent that Maneck used to pay her, Dina’s life turns to worse. She is totally left alone when Maneck leaves the country for a job in Gulf. For her it is difficult to hold any longer on her fragile independence as she is given a legal notice by the landlord to evacuate the flat. So, Dina is forced to go back to Nusswan’s home only to be an unpaid domestic help that she never liked. In a way, it is the far interlinked impact of Emergency on her life. Maneck is also indirectly affected by Emergency as he loses his friend and student leader Avinash, a promising youth who is brutally tormented and murdered in prison. There is no cause required to imprison a person during Emergency. One can be arrested under MISA -- Maintenance of Internal Security Act. People settle their personal scores and Emergency gave a full play to such things. A bold and confident upcoming leader is nipped from the bud. Though it was claimed by Mrs. Gandhi in one of her public speeches that Emergency was for the ‘benefit’ of the common people, it was just an eye-wash. Ironically, it is the common man who suffers the most under the Emergency. Nawaz, a tailor, is arrested by the police under the excuse of smuggling gold from the gulf. In fact, the poor tailor has only asked the influential customer for his payment. Isvar and Om are taken aback. The answer from the stall-owner makes them understand what Emergency is: “With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy. There’s even a new law called MISA to simplify the whole procedure” (299).
The hospitals follow standing orders to put down the cause of any death under Emergency as “accidental” (657). As such, Ashraf Chacha’s death at the market square by severe beatings at the hands of the police is described as accidental. There are countless deaths in the police custody. The novel is actually Mistry’s sharp indictment of the internal Emergency; when every atrocity known to have committed during the Emergency occurs to his characters and the novel becomes the unsparing portrait of that shameful period, a blot on Indian democracy. With the curtailing of the fundamental rights of the people, everything becomes topsy-turvy. Even the press is censored. Valmik, the proof-reader and lawyer is inspired by his favorite poet Yeats when he describes Emergency period as the time when “… things fall apart, centre not holding, anarchy loosed upon the world” (693).

Under the City Beautification Scheme, the government deployed officers in the name of safety inspectors to demolish the hutment colonies. The poor people are tricked into believing that there would be improvement in their houses and as soon as they came out, the bulldozers went in and the illegal shacks were removed making the occupants homeless. “Gareebee Hatao” -- the famous slogan given by Mrs. Gandhi was actually implemented as “Gareeb ko Hatao”. A new strategy was formulated for beggary problem and the pavement-dwellers were forced into bonded laborers. The most brutal aspect of Emergency was that anyone, young or old, married or unmarried, was compelled to undergo family planning operation. Ration cards were issued to only those who had a family planning certificate and poor people had no choice but to forego manhood if they wanted food. Ishvar and Om, too, became the victims of Emergency. Under the sterilization drive, the tailors are forcibly taken to the camp. Om is first vasectomized and then called again at the instruction of Dharamsi Thakur, only to be castrated under the pretext of “a free operation to save his life” (656). It is not only pathetic but inhuman and unfit of a doctor as Om, a bachelor, would be deprived of his dream of marriage which is about to take place. His uncle Ishvar’s requests to the authorities to spare Om fall on deaf ears. As per the rules of Emergency, every officer is supposed to ‘encourage’ people to get sterilized to complete his quota. Showing callous indifference, the Family Planning authorities are only concerned with “targets to be achieved within the budget” (652). Pressurized under the threat that “they would be reported to higher authorities for lack of cooperation, promotions would be denied, salaries frozen” (652), the doctors perform
operations with partially sterile instruments. The result is that many like Ishvar develop gangrene. Ishvar has to get both his legs amputated. Mistry also describes the story of a poor old man, who underwent a vasectomy, had his groin filled up with pus leading to his death. He went for this operation in order to get cash bonus and gifts, by which he wanted to contribute to his granddaughter’s dowry, a shameful aspect of Indian society. Ishvar and Om were crippled and reduced to penury as part of the revenge of Dharamsi Thakur, the murderer of the entire family in the past. The Family Planning program was thus misused to eliminate one’s enemies.

Elections are also master-minded and manipulated by the people like sergeant Kesar and Thakur Dharamsi. Poor people were denied their rights to vote or the votes were ‘purchased’ by bribing gifts or sometimes the entire booth was hijacked and votes were forged. A voice raised against such malpractices results in the tragedy like that of Naryan and his family. The police find ‘nothing’ to support charges of arson and murder. So, no FIR can be registered. In fact, the police are also at the mercy of the criminals like Thakur Dharamsi. Mistry hardly loses an opportunity to dig a hole in the hypocrisy and corruption eating up the democratic system and generates a guffaw when he tells about a candidate losing the elections in spite of distributing 5000 shirts and dhotis to the voters as these were not of a standard quality. The speeches made during the parliamentary elections contain nothing but all kinds of hollow promises and the campaigning antics provide ample entertainment to the common people who have learnt by experience the selfishness and the crookedness of these petty politicians. Sudha Pandya also notices Mistry’s tongue-in-cheek humour when she writes:

Mistry relishes puncturing the official egotistic ‘Mera Bharat Mahan’ version of the country, by narrating stories of lives devastated by the inequalities and injustices prevalent in society. Even the characteristic humour interspersed in his novels cannot sometimes help them from reading like bleak commentaries. The political system is presented as completely rotten, politicians made to look like demons (Pandya, 2001: 184).

Mistry’s tongue-in-cheek and jocular undertone is evident in the chapter “Day at the Circus, Night in the Slum.” Mistry takes a serious note of the gap between the passing and the application of laws. It is a matter of grave concern when the relevant laws and
even the Constitution were amended and modified to suit the purpose of the people at the centre. Mr. Valmik, Dina’s legal adviser and the mouthpiece of Mistry laments, “What are we to say, madam, what are we to think about the state of this nation? When the highest court in the land turns the Prime Minister’s guilt into innocence…” (689).

Avinash, the dynamic student leader who befriends Maneck, is another victim of Emergency regime that has influenced even the campus life. New student groups, which actually are campus goons, arise. Two professors are detained under MISA; the writers and the editors of the campus newspapers are roughed up; teachers are pressurized to prove their patriotism at the flag-hoisting ceremony, so “they obediently signed statements saying they were behind the Prime Minster, her declaration of Emergency, and her goal of fighting the anti-democratic forces threatening the country from within” (304). Maneck who desires Avinash’s friendship intensely resents having to share his attention with numerous student activities on democratic principles. Emergency strikes a blow in the mysterious disappearance of Avinash; once again it becomes a pretext to settle the personal scores and eliminate the enemies. This was something that Maneck half-feared and half-suspected but he did not have the moral courage and strength to do anything to find out his whereabouts. Months later, he reads in the newspapers about Avinash’s death declared as a suicide on the railway tracks from where the body was found. The reports said that from the ripped off nails and the burns on the body it was suspected that he was a victim of police brutality in custody, usual during the Emergency. This has a devastating impact on Maneck as the happenings only confirm his rueful thinking of life that “everything ends badly”. It was very frustrating to know from the reports about the suicides of Avinash’s three sisters who wished to spare their parents the shame of three unmarried daughters due to their inability to offer dowries for them. It is another shame on the Indian society and a telling comment on its evils.

Maneck has developed the negative bent of mind and a suicidal tendency because deep down in his heart lies his deep disappointment with life. He is least hopeful about the things ending happily. The people who are dear to him are treated unkindly by life and end up as sufferers, whether they are his parents or the tailors or Dina aunty or his friend Avinash and his family. He finds the stark reality of life very
depressing, dejecting and beyond the control of a human being. Basically, he is a very sensitive and loving boy who enjoys being in the lap of Mother Nature back home in the northern mountainous region. The peace, purity and the pristine beauty of the place is marred by the forces of ‘development’ and it affects his life too as Maneck becomes gradually alienated from his father whose business of indigenous soft drink is being doomed by the advent of the multinationals. His father’s increasing sense of loss of the old and the traditional and his inability to adapt to the new takes its toll on the filial relationship. Even after coming to Bombay he tastes more of the bitterness of life. The sufferings of the tailors give Maneck a wider perspective of life and human suffering. He also understands the price Dina aunty has to pay to retain her sense of independence. The travails of Om, Ishvar and Dina aunty make Maneck feel that his own problems of the estrangement from his father and his ragging by the senior students at the hostel are trivial in comparison. As noted earlier, Maneck is free from pretensions and prejudices of class and caste in the society. So, very often he is seen requesting Dina to shed such inhibitions and erase the lines she has drawn for herself.

Not all the upheavals that occur in the lives of Mistry’s characters occur as part of life’s struggle. There are mostly outer forces; political or modernist forces; for instance, in the case of Mr. Kohlah. The emergence of competition spells disaster for his cold drinks business and erodes its monopoly. As far as the main plot is concerned, most of the upheavals take place due to the imposition of the Internal Emergency. Another point conspicuous about the content of the novel is the wide range of its characters belonging to different communities and classes and it is these common people, from the cross-sections of society, who are shown by Mistry to suffer and struggle, not the elites. Sudha Pandya writes about the optimistic side of the novel that all of these people belonging to different communities come together in their struggle for survival. All barriers break in the face of crisis. Their lives are tossed in the vortex of events; they are subdued and yet emerge heroic in their struggle and perseverance. This is what one tends to remember about them, as much as their misfortunes (Pandya, 2001: 186).

So is the message in the Journey. Gustad has an indefatigable spirit and zeal for life. But in Balance there are exceptions like Kohlah, the senior and the junior. Mr. Farokh Kohlah could not accept change which was for worse. He remained cheerless and
upset. Depressed by the way the lives of his own, Avinash, Dina aunty and the tailors are disintegrated, Maneck commits suicide. He loses the fight of life and gives up. Robert Ross rightly comments on Maneck that the one member of the foursome best equipped to succeed economically should kill himself, is heavy with irony (Ross, 1999: 243-44). In contrast, the less fortunate survive by achieving what Valmik, the lawyer later calls --“a fine balance between hope and despair.” Maneck himself is not affected by Emergency directly but affected indirectly like Dina aunty. As against the severe sufferers and losers of life there are the upper-caste people, as mentioned earlier, untouched by it. In fact, they are fascinated by the Emergency as it is like a magic wand capable of curing all diseases and decay. People like Nusswan and Mrs.Gupta support the measures taken to ‘discipline’ Indians. For the capitalists and the industrialists it was a kind of license to exploit and squeeze their labourers (221-222, 204-206).

Apart from the three major narrative strands of the stories of Dina, Maneck and the tailors, there are also three sub-narrative strands of the stories of the Beggarmaster, Rajaram the hair-collector and the Monkey-man. Mistry, the master story-teller shuffles between the past and the present without losing the grip of the narrative. These strands intersect and like the quilt of Dina Dalal, Mistry intersects the saga of his characters artistically. The critics compare Mistry to Charles Dickens. K. Ratna Sheila Mani observes that the rich cast of memorable minor characters has earned Mistry the appellative of ‘Dickensian’ in the art of characterization (Mani, 2001: 204).

Apart from the four protagonists, Mistry has portrayed a host of minor characters from the cross-sections of society very realistically, effectively and with utmost sensitivity. The list is long enough –Mr. Farokh Kohlah, his wife Aban and their family friends; Thakur Dharamsi and other upper-caste members like the Brahmin Lalluram; Dukhi, Rupa, Narayan, Radha, Om’s sisters and other members of the Chamar caste; Ashraf Chacha and Mumtaz Chachi; Ibrahim, the rent-collector and the landlord’s goons; Nawaz and Jeevan- the tailors; Rajaram, the hair-collector alias Bal-Baba; the Monkey man; Shanker, the beggar; the Beggarmaster and his gang of beggars; Vasantrao Valmik, the proof-reader and the lawyer; Mrs Gupta the garment-exporter; Nusswan and his wife Ruby; Zenobia and the brief sketches of many others like Dr.and Mrs. Shroff, Bapsy aunty, Shirin aunty and Darab uncle, Zarir and
Xerxes, Shanti of the slums, the cook at the Vishram Café etc. As he does usually, Mistry creates his spokespersons in his novels from among the minor characters. Vasantrao Valmik, the proof-reader and the lawyer voices Mistry’s views and concerns. Mistry has the knack and special purpose to create such extraordinary characters out of very ordinary people. He has done so in his Journey by drawing the character-sketches of Dr. Paymaster, Peerbhoy Paanwala and the pavement artist. Mistry so very deftly mingles them with the narrative that they never seem to be out of place. While dealing with the legalities about the rental flat of her husband after receiving the threat from the landlord, Dina meets Mr. Valmik in the court premises. Despite his brief stint Mr. Valmik emerges as one of the well-rounded supporting characters. Without any overt authorial comments the philosophical import of life is put forth through Mr. Valmik, “our lives are but a sequence of accidents-- a clanking chain of chance events. A string of choices, casual and deliberate, which add up to that one big calamity called life” (691). More comes in the form of “thanks to some inexplicable universal guiding force, it is always the worthless things we lose – slough off, like a moulting snake. Losing and losing again, is the very basis of the life process, till we are left with the bare essence of the human existence” (693).

Another piece of practical wisdom of life is again put in the mouth of Mr. Valmik when during a train journey he happens to meet Maneck, “What can anyone do in such circumstances? Accept it and go on. Please always remember the secret of survival is to embrace change, and to adapt. To quote: “All things fall and are built again, and those that build them again are gay” (282). W B Yeats is the favorite poet of Mr. Valmik who very often cites him to counsel people as he does Dina and Maneck, “You cannot draw lines and compartments … you have to maintain a fine balance between hope – hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost” (282, 690). In the end it is all a question of balance. This explains the novel’s titular significance. In a sense, all the four protagonists are lonely and struggling for identity and survival, struggling to maintain a fine balance in their lives. Novy Kapadia explains this further,

The trials, the tribulations, the shared jokes, intimacies, eating the same food and a sense of adventure enables Maneck realize that life is often “a fine balance” between happiness and despair. The author implies that at various
levels of existence, there is a see-saw struggle between hope and despair (Kapadia, 1998: 129).

At many points in the novel Mistry has tried to explain what he means by a fine balance. Everybody is struggling to balance the scales of life. The words of Ibrahim, the rent-collector, “This was life? Or a cruel joke? He no longer believed that the scales would ever balance fairly” (433). The Monkey-man’s tricks and techniques of keeping the balance of the pole equates with the equilibrium of life. Pradeep Trikha interprets this by explaining that life in India for a poor man, as Mistry suggests, is not less than a tight-rope walking – it is an act of balancing and juggling (Trikha, 2001: 220). Mistry describes the practical details of the entire act of balancing the pole by the Monkey-man with the help of the two children. It does not only require the physical knack of balancing but also the skill of synchronization and most importantly concentration. For either kind of equilibrium, these traits are essential.

‘Balance’ is used as a leitmotif in the novel and Mistry explores and explicates it through various characters and themes. The Beggarmaster says that he feels good after watching the burning pyre of Shanker. He has a feeling of “completeness, calmness, a perfect balance between life and death” (618). Like the motif of journey in Journey, the motif of balance also has many symbolic connotations and interpretations here. Mistry has shown his characters as silent sufferers not speaking or voicing against the set dominant system, whether it is the caste-hierarchy or patriarchy or the religious or political hegemony. If there is a rebellious voice, then that ‘balance’ is lost and the voice is crushed and lost as it happens in the case of Dukhi, Dina, Narayan and Avinash. As Thakur Dahramsi said when he gave the orders to kill the entire family of Dukhi as he thought Dukhi was more to blame than his son Narayan. “His arrogance went against everything we hold sacred .What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society’s timeless balance” (180). If one lets the hegemonic system work without revolt, the balance, peace and harmony are maintained. Dina and the tailors could survive because they learned to be submissive. Nilufer Bharucha analyses it in a little more detail:

It is this fine balance which if the person concerned learns to master, helps them to lead a relatively peaceful, happy life; if they fail, it tips them over into
the abyss….There is also a fine balance in the life of nations and the Indian nation had lost that fine balance during the Emergency. India however had hauled itself out of that dark abyss and Indian democracy had compelled Mrs. Gandhi to call for fresh elections in which she and her party had been thrown out of office. The fine balance had been restored – no matter how temporarily (Bharucha, 2003a: 166).

In fact, the voices from the opposition were brutally suppressed during the dark period of Emergency. Inversion is a kind of balance. One of the novel’s recurring sayings is, “with the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night” (362). Guilt and innocence, justice and injustice, victims and oppressors: the lines of exchange across these binary divisions are well explored in the novel. The genuine balance is maintained in that Democracy which considers and respects the voices from ‘others’. The ironical ‘balance’ kept by being the mute sufferer is not intended here. It is also about keeping the balance between the modernization, urbanization, industrialization on one hand and the positive, pure beauty of Nature on the other. In other words, it is Man’s balanced relationship with Nature. It is mandatory for Man to keep the ecological balance of Nature in tact if he wants to survive. The assault of industrialization on the untrodden areas, the migration from rural to urban areas in search of occupation disturbs the balance between the two. It is tilted to the wave of modernization and the result is killing of trees, farms and forests as regretted by Mr. Farokh Kohlah; and the overcrowding of population in the urban areas giving way to a hell of other problems as witnessed by Om and Ishwar in the city. Nature is paying a very heavy cost for such callous development. Ultimately, it is the Man who ends up paying heavily.

The Kohlahs residing in a village at a hill-side share a harmonious and a quiet, content relationship with Nature but it was disrupted by the government’s plan to connect the hill town to the cities. “They who never dreamt of leaving the mountain were shocked to find the mountain leaving them” (Mishra, 2003: 56). Charu Chandra Mishra has elucidated how the ecological balance is thrown off by the “self–styled messiahas for the development of the nation.” Earlier the cruel decision of the Partition of the nation had taken away his family fortune but this time the so-called modernization would deprive him of his family name and his sense of identity, as his thriving business of the local cola, Kaycay, almost a household name, was invaded by the advent of the
multinational cola company. Mistry personifies Nature as responding to the sensitive protagonist’s feeling of deep anguish and reacting sharply against the technological invasion. Like a living entity, “then the seasons revolted. The rains which used to make things grow and ripen descended torrentially on the denuded hills, causing mudslides and avalanches. Snow, which had provided an ample blanket for the hills, turned skimpy” (264). Mishra observes,

Farokh felt a perverse satisfaction at Nature’s rebellion. It was a vindication of sorts: he was not alone in being appalled by the hideous rape of the environment. But the seasonal disorder continued year after year only to break him deep down inside. Taking a walk in the hills, the long solitary rambles which were the greatest pleasures to invigorate him, now seemed like a death-watch…….The menace of modernization causes ecological imbalance and consequently, an existential dilemma for Farokh. While the people’s comments about the disillusioned protagonist, “Mr.Kohlah’s screw is getting little loose. He speaks to trees and rocks and pats them like they were his dogs,” bring out his mental state; it also impresses upon us his desperate search for his old place in the lap of nature (Mishra, 2003: 57).

Farokh looks for his lost identity in the restoration of the past and also through his post-death wish to get assimilated completely in the form of ashes with his dearest trees, rocks and hills daring to violate the sanction of his Parsee religion that prescribes the disposal of dead body to the vultures. Even this practice is also believed to be eco-friendly that saves Nature’s five basic elements. The insensitive and materialistic modern generation has no consideration for such traditional and old-fashioned people and their sentiments. “By his resistance to modernization and change, Farokh loses both – his son and his own place – in the scheme of a transmogrified homeland” (Mishra, 2003: 58). Mistry has very sensitively presented Man-Nature relationship, though he is not against the modernization and technological development. He seems to suggest that Nature’s “mindless execution without proper introspection and planning would adversely affect Nature, thereby creating ecological and existential crisis” (Mishra, 2003: 59).

Mistry not only talks about maintaining a fine balance between Man and Nature but also hints at a balance which needs to be maintained about the Parsee community. He suggestively selects the Kohlahs, the Parsee family undergoing the struggle for survival. He seems to be very realistic in choosing only a few Parsee characters as the
fraction of the whole gamut of his characters from the cross-sections of society in the novel. This may be only to suggest the minority existence of the community in the Indian society. Though he does not overtly talk about their fear of extinction and the anxiety of identity and survival, there is an oblique innuendo in the death of Rustom after a very short issueless married life. Both the Kohlahs – the father and the only son also die. The parents of Rustom and Dina are no more. As against these many deaths there are only two births, Xerxes and Zarir, the two sons of Nusswan. Dina’s Shirin aunty and Darab uncle is a childless couple. The Parsees need to maintain the balance between the ratio of their births and deaths, if they want to survive. At the same time, they need to keep their identity intact by keeping the balance between their community’s assimilation and resistance to the dominant Hindu host culture. It is becoming increasingly hybridized in the changing face of time. Mistry, as an immigrant Canadian writer, has received the first-hand experience of this crisis and hence handles such kind of issues with care and sensitivity positioning himself on the periphery in either country. He is on the thin borderlines of the present and at the same time keeping a fine balance between the past, recent and remote, and the future.

Another prominent motif among others is that of a quilt standing for the multicultural texture of Indian populace. Nila Shah states that

Mistry’s metaphysical unfinished quilt is the central message of the story. Unlike Rushdie’s metaphor of perforated sheet in Midnight’s Children or that of the Persian rug in Mougham’s Of Human Bondage, the unfinished quilt does not historicize or philosophize but it stands as an eyewitness of collective human efforts (Shah, 1998: 119).

After the dresses are stitched, Dina collects the left-over pieces for making a quilt which she mostly does in the evenings. Every day, there is some addition of patches to the quilt which expands gradually; each piece having the connection to that day’s happenings. It becomes the symbol of time. The patch-work for making the quilt involves collective needle-work. Each of the four protagonists returns to this work after his/her day’s hard struggle to join together the assorted pieces – each piece symbolizing the difference as well as the collective harmony among them, the very essential spirit of multiculturalism. Every patch is the reminder of some incident, individual or common to all of them, reflecting the testing times or the moments of
happiness in their lives. The intricate pattern of the quilt, woven together patch by patch, acquires metaphorical significance in the novel. It seems that by connecting themselves to the patching, the protagonists are trying to merge together their past, present and future, the distinctions of caste, creed and gender to create harmony and symmetry in their existence. They have to transcend their differences to find a balance between their reality and a larger vision of unity. As the quilt-making progresses, each one moves from individualism to camaraderie; with the quilt’s different strands indicating diversity in the Indian reality and the human effort to bring together this diversity in a harmonizing whole resulting into a beautiful work of art.

Deborah Weagel states that the quilt contains three portraits: “a self-portrait of Dina, her desire for independence and the control she assumes in her life and in the lives of others; also a portrait of the nation India which also attains independence; and a group portrait of a student boarder and two tailors who become a part of Dina’s life” (Weagel, 2007: 212). Mistry seems to be very sensitive to the feminine nature of Dina and presents her as a strong woman who by insisting on her independence, even if it means working hard to make ends meet, becomes a subject rather than an object. She has the power to be a landlady, hire two tailors; she makes the rules as she is their employer. The men live and work in her home, and it is their duty to respect her wishes and follow her laws. This metaphor can be taken a step further in that both Dina and the quilt can be associated with India in its state of independence. Mistry writes about Dina: “Independence came at a high price: a debt with a payment schedule of hurt and regret. But the other option - under Nusswan’s thumb - was inconceivable…. On looking back, Dina was convinced she was better off on her own” (462-463). As Dina struggles to deal with her own independence, India also deals with its own self-rule since its independence in 1947. Despite “stories of misery, caste-violence, government callousness, official arrogance, police brutality” (227), there is still the sentiment that India is better off on its own. And there is little hope of change. This type of life is still preferable to living under British rule, just as Dina’s independence, despite the challenges, is preferable to living with Nusswan. Dina, like India, is willing to accept the responsibility attached to freedom and to work hard to bring dreams to fruition. However, for both Dina and India, some of the ideals and hopes are not realized despite an effort to connect and sew together the isolated fragments of society. Dina’s quilt, made from scraps, tells the story of her life.
as it is juxtaposed with the lives of Maneck, Ishvar and Om. It is, in a sense, her album and her diary, and the pieces of fabric are a record of her interactions with these three men. Thus, the quilt here is the past, present and future of the interconnected lives of Dina and the three men and through that also about the fragments of Indian socio-political history. Bharucha aptly calls the quilt a:

mnemonic device that enables Dina, her tailors and Maneck to recall their lives together. Each remnant salvaged from the fabric used to make up the Au Revoir orders, has its own particular memory attached to it. Each diverse square, triangle and polygon when sewn together makes a connection with the other pieces to provide a new meaning of its own – “Just keep connecting patiently, Dinabai – that’s the secret, ji-hahn, it all seems meaningless bits and rags, till you piece it together” (494) (Bharucha, 2003a: 160-61).

The lives of Dina, Maneck, Om and Ishvar had got a new meaning and happiness by staying together, connected to each other, caring for and sharing with each other. The new chemistry that emerged from their togetherness had brought unprecedented happiness and satisfaction to them. It is the outcome of the positive dialogical interaction among the cross-sections of the society. Mistry has illustrated how social implementation of multiculturalism is viable without its being politically legislated. The social, rather than the political malleability is of vital importance. Such connection is possible only on the ground of humanity. Ishvar’s advice to Dina to keep connecting patiently is the secret of peace and happiness in life. The understanding of other’s problems and troubles and helping them gives immense pleasure to Dina as well as Maneck. Ishvar and Om are needy, but they do not lose their dignity and self-respect. Ishvar’s humility and Maneck’s concern, Dina’s sympathy and Om’s boyish pranks, all together create selfless camaraderie based on giving and receiving. They realize how they supplement each other. They feel that one’s existence without the other was incomplete and meaningless like the “meaningless bits and rags, till you piece it together.” The same is true with nations and countries. The quilt stands for the Indian multiculturalism. It lends the message of “unity in diversity” for the nation’s peaceful and meaningful life. The pluralities of Indian populace need one underlying connection, a unity to stand together. People ought to stay connected on the ground of humanity, respecting the differences of the ‘other’ and maintaining the self-respect at the same time. The Indians, or for that matter, the citizens of any multicultural nation-state, or the cosmopolitan citizens of a
global village in this age of globalization can stay in a blissful harmony despite their being multi-lingual, multi-ethic, multi-religious or multi-cultural.

Unlike Ishvar and Om, Dina experiences struggles that are gender-based, rather than class-based. Free from the constraints of the caste system, Dina is still forced to contend with the social expectations and limitations assigned to her because of her gender. Despite their different backgrounds and positions in the same society, they share a hope that if they step outside the traditional constraints and institutions, they will succeed and prosper. They have acted daringly and seized the newfound opportunities in the era of Globalization. The details of the story of each protagonist are different from the other but its theme is the same; i.e. discrimination and injustice. Because Globalization’s purpose is not to right the wrongs of social discrimination and injustice, its offer of new opportunities does not overcome existing socialized and institutionalized denials. Their tragic ends send an ominous message about Globalization’s inattention to hardship, misery and injustice that undermine the potential inherent in community and its social capital. Globalization, after all, is concerned with the advance of financial capital, not the advance of humanity. The impact of Globalization in India has been witnessed by Maneck, first in his hometown and then in Mumbai after his eight years’ absence from India. He returns to find Dina’s dilapidated apartment building converted to swanky housing and the modest neighbourhood café turned onto a trendy lunchtime favourite of the city’s young business people. Previous residents and customers like Dina, Ishvar and Om have been forced further to the margins in order to make room for a centre that might not accommodate more people but demands more space (Jubas, 2007: 178-198). Maneck’s impressions on his return to Mumbai after eight years have an autobiographical echo of the expatriate Mistry’s visits to Mumbai.

Later, when Dina has no choice but to return to her brother, her old furniture is sold out by Nusswan and she is left with just her quilt to cling on to the past memories. When she lies under the quilt at night, each piece helps her remember the year in which the two tailors and Maneck were the part of her life like the ‘bits and rags’ in Dina’s quilt. The sub-stories of Mistry are also separate but when ‘connected’ by the master story-teller, it becomes a creation of art. He collects the fragments of history as well as fiction and connecting the two creates the fantastic piece of ‘faction’.
However, the fragments are associated not only with the lives and interactions of these four people, but with various segments of the Indian society as well. And these are the fragments that make up the nation, such as the people of different social strata—elite, middle, low, beggars; the women, and the people of upper and lower castes and the people of various faiths and cultures. Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om, for example, can be aligned with some of these pieces of Indian life. Their own personal lives, their families, their experiences, and their interactions with others in some way connect to specific categories. Thus, Mistry, through the quilt and its history of these four people, provides a portrait of India in fragments. The connection of the pieces through Dina’s stitches also reveals a desire to integrate people despite their differences.

The Emergency affected the tailor’s lives the most. They share the tales of their misfortunes with the waiter and the cook of the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel which they frequented almost regularly. Every time they come, they have one or the other story to tell. Mistry slips into the self-appraisal of his narrative technique of ‘stories within the stories’. Not only of the tailors, but he narrates the chronicles of each character in the novel and wonders philosophically about the infinite stories all the people in the world have to tell; and the endless ‘oral quilt’ it would weave. The cook tells, “You fellows are amazing… Everything happens to you only. Each time you come here, you have a new adventure-story to entertain us.” Om replies, “it’s not us, it’s this city… A story factory, that’s what it is, a spinning mill.” Mistry puts a very significant comment in the cook’s mouth, “Call it what you will, if all our customers were like you, we would be able to produce a modern ‘Mahabharata’ -- the Vishram edition” (470-471). There are certain tragic, romantic stories with suspenseful unresolved endings like the Beggarmaster’s and Shankar’s to be kept secret and cannot be included in the cook’s ‘Mahabharata’ (564). Mistry is very logical and realistic in his imagination when he suggests the infiniteness of such individual as well as historical collective stories from the time immemorial.

It is just the small fragment from ‘God’s giant quilt’ that he weaves in his magnum opus. Once when Dina is busy making the quilt, Maneck remarks,
“Too many different colours and designs”, he said…. “It’s going to be very difficult to match them properly.”
“….But that’s where taste and skill come in. What to select. What to leave out - and which goes next to which.” replies Dina (338).

And, indeed each piece of different colour and design in the quilt has a story to tell having connection to Dina’s life. To carry on with the metaphorical parallelism between Dina’s quilt and India, the diversities of India have connections to India’s life-history. As Dina states, the skill and taste is what matters in creating the integrated harmonious whole. When the tailor’s slum is razed and they are refused accommodation by Dina, they remain absent for a long time as they were forced to work on a construction site. Without them, Maneck helps Dina to finish the dresses but Dina’s work halts and both of them are disturbed. When the stack of remnants shrink, Dina resorts to all those rejected pieces of chiffons to stitch the quilt. When the chiffons too run out the quilt ceases to grow. It is connected to Dina’s life. From her past, it has extended to her present and because she still lives her life, there would be more pieces of future turning into past. So, Mistry keeps her quilt incomplete. The sundry bits of the cloths stand for the bits of the stories from the lives of the protagonists. Dina offers her verandah to the tailors and all are happy again. Now the quilt breathes life again. When she sat with the quilt that night, Maneck remarks, “These new pieces are completely different in style from the old ones” (494). They are meaningful because the quilt-maker has shed her inhibitions, defenses and pretensions. Very soon she even shares her kitchen and food with them. And as Ishvar begins to trust her with bits of their past, more pieces are joined to the growing story of the tailors. “…..And the chiffon ….it made Om lose his temper…..our house was destroyed by the government, the day we started on this cloth” (598). Finally, Ishvar philosophically concludes:

Calling one piece sad is meaningless. See, it is connected to a happy piece….That’s the rule to remember, the whole quilt is much more important than any single square…..Before you can name that (uncompleted) corner, our future must become past……If one could only reverse it, turn the past into future and catch it in wing, on its journey across the always shifting line of the present …..Time is without length or breadth. The question is what happened during its passing. And what happened in our lives have been joined together…Like these patches (599-600).
When Dina, back at her brother’s house recollects the events and experiences hidden in those dexterously knit patches, is frightened to think aloud of the past and decides to lock it inside the cupboard. Maneck’s remarks about the quilt are very weighty comments on behalf of the author. He once says,

> God is a giant quilt maker, with an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt is grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the squares and diamonds and triangles don’t fit well together anymore, it’s all become meaningless. So He has abandoned it” (418).

The world of the God is very big, confusing and patternless. Even God cannot give it a definite shape and meaning. As God Himself has lost control over it, it has become much more chaotic. God’s quilt has a large variety of people of different cultures and ethos of the whole globe. Maneck has said earlier that it is difficult to match them properly. It is growing out of control and even for the omnipotent God this infinite quilt has become difficult to manage and God has quit the giant quilt. Hence, there are discord and disharmony among His own diverse creations! But Dina says the skill of the Creator lies right there to create the mosaic quilt of multiculturalism having infinite stories to narrate. “New pieces are completely different in style.” It means the new stories of harmony, free from discord and prejudices, are woven together and a piece here and there about disharmony and unhappiness are not to be given undue weightage as Ishvar preaches to look at the positive and happy side of it. The whole quilt is much more important than any single square. Despite the sundry pieces connected to the stories of happiness and sadness galore, the overall bright and multicoloured look of the mosaic quilt resembles the vivacity of the multicultural and multiethnic societies and peoples of the globe.

Parallel to God’s quilt, Mistry’s quilt of his story contains multiple types of people, a wide range of variety of his characters. It is very significant that Mistry, and Dina too, leave this quilt of stories ‘unfinished’. The quilt represents the novel. Mistry and Dina, both are quilt-makers like the Almighty God, the creator. Mistry makes Dina decide that there was nothing further to add (563). Her creative project, with the gap in the corner, is finished with the future left open. Dina’s quest for independence is not completed yet. She is still in her middle age and the tailors too are alive though handicapped. Though little, but there are still the possibility and hope of ‘something’
to happen in their remaining life. Mistry wants to hint at the open-endedness of the novel. The stories may continue, though there are almost no chances to happen something better as nothing can be worse than what has happened to them. Maneck said that the quilt did not have to end when the corner was filled in. “you could keep adding, Aunty, let it grow bigger”. To this, Dina says, “Here you go again talking foolishly, what would I do with a monster quilt like that? Don’t confuse me with your quilt-maker God” (600). B.Indira rightly comments,

The quilt-making God, as expected, abandons all of them. Ishvar, Om and Dina who successfully strike a balance both within and without go on to live while Maneck reduces himself to a “fallen corncob across the tracks.” As Ishvar Darji puts it, “stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters. (471) and this is the story of all of us (Indira, 1998: 114).

Their dreams are shattered, the fabric is tattered, their hopes are drowned, and the colors of the quilt are grayed with dirt. Yet despite the unjust and unfair treatment of life, the quilt continues to play a role, to support a legless body and to provide comfort even in the midst of poverty and despair. Thus, the quilt retains its function even in its ragged and threadbare state. Extending the metaphor to the common people and not just the protagonists, according to Deborah Weagel, Mistry provides a more general message:

He teaches that in life too, people are all given fabric pieces. They are born in a certain century, in a particular country, and in a specific family or situation, and their challenge is to take these various remnants and “make the best of what they have” (275). They can cut fabrics pieces, arrange them, sew them together with whatever skill they possess, and result is a life. They have the power to reshape and challenge their circumstances to some degree, just as Dina had certain control over the outcome of her quilt. Moreover, as people go about the process of cutting, piecing together and sewing the fragments of their existence, they should constantly be aware of the delicate line between hope and despair, and strive to maintain a fine balance (Weagel, 2007: 226).

The ending reminds us of the epigraph with which the novel begins. It is from Honore’e de Balzac’s Le Pera Goriot:

Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft arm chair, you will say to yourself: perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your
own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured this tragedy is not fiction. All is true.

It may be true but it is not the complete truth or reality which Mistry presents. It is half or partial truth, leaving gaps. All the four protagonists suffer. Surviving the struggle is not victory for Dina and the tailors. Though Maneck dies, the death is a “grotesque parody” of the reported death sequence of his friend Anivash, and the suicidal death with which the novel begins; it is different from him as Avinash’s death is made to be shown like a suicide. In fact, there is a vast difference as Maneck dies of frustration and depression without resisting or striking back, while Avinash dies a death of a fighter, a martyr, raising his voice for justice. It is very much like the deaths of Dukhi, Narayan and their family. May be that has upset Maneck and compelled him to think of the futility of such resistance. Vinita Bhatnagar puts forth the following questions after reading the novel:

The overall scenario is grim. If a fine balance must be maintained between hope and despair, the end of the novel forfeits that balance. Why do events move towards this inevitable conclusion and what does the text not say in order to say what it does? (Bhatnagar, 1998: 102).

In fact, Maneck, as a migrant is Mistry’s foil. Unlike Mistry, he is not able to keep in touch with his country’s happenings and people. So, when he comes back to India, he cannot reconnect easily. It may have taken his frustration to more depth, apart from his being gradually aware of the grim nature of the events that had happened in his absence. Shashi Tharoor gives the importance to the migrant’s continual engagement with India, despite his geographical distance from it. He insists that the Indian migrants have to belong, care and be involved, even as they appear to escape from their responsibility to do anything about the political changes taking place within India (Tharoor, 1997: 33-34). Caroline Herbert highlights the opposition between the “nation-bound”, committed citizen like Avinash and the privileged cosmopolitan whose “irresponsible detachment” informs perceptions of cosmopolitanism as “dishonorably post-national” (Herbert, 2008: 11-28). In doing so, she draws upon R. Radhakrishnan’s theorization of immigrant and diasporic identities, which emphasizes the importance of continued engagement with the homeland despite the geographical distance from it (Radhakrishnan, 1996: xiii, 209-12).
Radhakrishnan claims that the politics of proximity has to negotiate dialectically and critically with the politics of distance explaining that a diasporan citizen is supposed to do the “double duty”, with accountability at both the nations, and represent one’s native country as truthfully as one can to the host nation. Mistry attempts to negotiate the tension between the positions of dishonorable post-nationalism and the accountable “double duty”. Mistry’s representations of immigrants like Maneck against Avinash and also Kersi and Jamshed against Percy in his short story *Lend Me Your Light* reveal the anxiety over his own position as an immigrant writer. Much of his work seems to be involved in the desire to avoid becoming “dishonorably post-national”. At the same time, Mistry emphasizes the difficulty of enacting a diasporic “double duty”. While Radhakrishnan offers “double duty” as an ideal of political engagement, the duality of the term – the very doubleness of the duty to be performed – suggests that the immigrant’s enactment of his “accountability” is potentially always already compromised. Mistry’s representation of the immigrant figures like Maneck and Kersi is haunted by this potentially compromised political engagement. However, the eventual deaths of both Maneck and Avinash further imply that the author is reluctant to endorse either position unequivocally, but considers each as having problematic consequences. The juxtaposition of Maneck and Avinash has significant implications for Mistry’s anxious negotiation of his own immigrant identity, situating it between a “dishonorably post-national” position and an engagement with a diasporic “double duty”. In doing so, Mistry interrogates through his various representations of the immigrant within his fiction expressing the anxiety of his own immigrant position.

In the end, of course, “everything ends badly”. For every demonstration of force and domination there is always a resistance. That resistance was not less heroic in the period of Emergency or in questioning the caste hierarchy than during the course of the freedom struggle. The heroism of Dukhi and Narayan and also that of the dynamic student leader Avinash is not documented or publicized but it did exist. All three died the martyr’s deaths revolting against the injustice. Mistry has purposely shown that such resistance is short-lived and is suppressed forcibly. Their voices are silenced in Mistry’s narrative. The murder of the whole of Narayan’s family by the Thakurs and the sudden mysterious disappearance of Avinash and his murder due to the police
atrocities go with the logic of Mistry’s narrative that “everything ends badly”. The euphoria of the students like Avinash who believe in radical reforms dies down very soon. Their fervent hope guided by Gandhi and Jayprakash Narayan that “the changes would invigorate all of society, transform it from a corrupt, moribund creature into a healthy organism” is a mirage. We find the same hope turning into despair in the words of Narayan that even after twenty years of independence nothing changes. “Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability. Yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than the animals” (174). Though many critics have stated that Dina and the tailors have retained the balance and survived the struggle; in fact, they have lost that fine equilibrium, a sense of justice and their individuality by silencing their inner voices. Bhatnagar interrogates:

Avinash seems to have been introduced only to reaffirm this philosophy (that everything ends badly.) But the perceptive reader is left with an uneasy feeling. If resistance is at all possible then why don’t the central characters make it more heroic? (Bhatnagar, 1998: 107).

Yes, it is a very important question as to why the resistance is not made heroic and fruitful. The reason may be that Mistry wants to present the social reality. To show an individual fighting against the set social norms or system and winning by bringing ‘change’ would be unrealistic. Mistry’s characters are not able to change the power balance or the power structure of the society which has made their marginalization and silencing possible. They try to raise a voice but they are silenced forever. Ironically, those who learn to maintain the balance between the exploiter and the exploited survive and more importantly not without a compromise and a feeling of injustice. Dina, the rebellious little sister of Nusswan, succumbs to her fate. Ishvar and Om return to their native place only to be humiliated and mutilated. Even the defiant act of Om spitting on the Thakur is punished by castration. The vision and experience of the people like Avinash can bring change. Bhatnagar comments:

By removing him from the scene of action before he can seriously alter the chain of events by influencing Maneck and changing his philosophy, Mistry attempts to prevent any disruption of the narrative flow of his novel. When Avinash reappears, he is dead and no longer disruptive of the narrative logic. He has become yet another victim and the suicide of his three sisters further adds to the pathos. The stage is set for everything to end badly and any voice
that could have questioned this statement has been necessarily silenced (Bhatnagar, 1998: 108).

The picture that Mistry presents of the post-colonial nation-state India is a gloomy one with its major populace living below the poverty line, being exploited by an unjust system and riddled with the problems of caste and gender inequalities. The common man looks for justice, equality and a dignified existence, the achievement of which appears near impossible in the novel. In spite of focusing on the element of suffering, pain and degradation of the common man in contemporary India, Mistry sees a ray of hope in the otherwise dismal situation. By situating together the four protagonists, each of whom exists on the periphery, Mistry indicates the possibility of an answer to the problem that riddles the Indian social and political reality. The middle-class mass of the country is generally passive and non-reactionary to how the historical and political realities of India are manipulated by a handful of callous, ruthless and self-serving people. There is no protest from even the Indian intelligentsia against the erosion of democratic values. In this context, the coming together of Om, Ishvar, Dina and Maneck is highly significant. If all those who have so far existed in the margins come together so that the great human spirit is not extinguished, a way out of this bleak scenario will be found. It is their involvement and participation in the mainstream that will harbinger a positive and bright future for India. By rising above the narrow and limiting considerations and forging bonds of human togetherness these four protagonists reaffirm the great human spirit to be imbibed by not only any one country but the whole world.

The novel significantly ends in 1984; the year of Indira Gandhi’s assassination following the riots in Bombay. The extinguished hope for a better social and political scenario is rekindled in a decade or two after the 70s and 80s, when the events in the novel happen. In the early 90s, the socio-political face of the country changes. There has been an increasing ability to become agents rather than mere victims. The former Prime Minister V.P. Singh could afford to lose power due to his support given to the Mandal Commission favoring the rights to the Dalits. The formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party and its domination in the U.P. state shows that the lower castes are becoming assertive in the mainstream of our political life. After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the Indian democracy has proved to be stronger. The resistance to the
illogical and insensitive policies of the government is possible and success, even if partial, can be achieved. All over the country, there are individuals and groups working for social change and fighting to make the present system more just, humane and sensitive. They do so by various ways and means -- by publishing booklets, newspapers spreading awareness on the importance of the survival of the girl-child by “save the girl-child” campaign, organizing agitation for the affected people by Narmada Dam Project, working against slum demolitions, promoting literacy, Chipko Movement for saving the trees and forests to maintain the ecological balance or resisting the destruction of mosques in secular India. So, Bhatnagar is very much right when she says that Mistry has deliberately overlooked some of the facts that constitute Indian reality. Even Dodiya articulates his support for the same point. Maybe Mistry has a partial and not complete hope in such harbingers of change and justice because even after the constitution of the just policies in the legislature, it is very difficult to change the minds of the people. The differences of castes and class and gender and religion and colour are not outside but inside the minds of the people. The social stigma still remains to further nurture the jealousy and competitiveness to induce leg-pulling and victimization. Mistry de-emphasizes such articulate individuals, their rebellious spirit and their concerns in order to write the novel in a particular way, may be to give vent to the despair that lurks at the back of his mind. But of course, he still clings to hope and hence leaves that quilt unfinished, leaving up to the readers to complete it.

As said earlier, the quilt being the symbol of time, Mistry hopes his marginalized and subalterns weave and construct their own fate. He hints that to construct their future is still in their hands. He has merely represented on their behalf, only articulated their silences. To quote Bharucha,

Does this, in Spivak’s words make Mistry a member of ‘certain varieties of Indian elite (who) are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the other? Foucault suggests that even if there is ‘bourgeois elitist’ (Ranjit Guha) mediation and ‘representation’ in articulating the voice of the subalterns to the readers, in the ultimate analysis, ‘to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history, and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value’ (Power /Knowledge 49-50) and is also of vital importance (Bharucha, 2003a: 144-45).
However, O.P Joneja does not agree with this because Mistry’s portrayal of India is focused on a bleak and grim view of reality during a national political crisis. He asserts:

Mistry, I would like to argue, has fallen prey to what Anthony Appiah has called the “Naipaul Fallacy”: that is, “his propensity to read Third World countries by locating them in the matrix of European Culture.” By locating India in this matrix, Mistry has produced a “Fine Imbalance” for the Western reader in this novel. He has therefore abused the privilege of the exotopic vision (Joneja, 2002).

Joneja argues that as an exile or ‘emegre’, Mistry is entitled to the epistemological privilege of ‘exotopy’: the stance from outside the nation through which the exile can see what those ‘insiders’ cannot. Though the vision is full of creative possibilities, Mistry has failed to use it for the benefit of his country. He has tilted the balance in favor of the western reader who likes to see a dark picture of India. So, there are no strong characters in the novel, though the state of Emergency was fought by thousands and therefore it had to be withdrawn in a short span of time. It is not that Mistry did not have information about his country and her people. He collected it from the magazines, newspapers and also by talking to people. But he wanted to impart just the partial construct. His views as an ‘insider’ are empirical while as a migrant in a multicultural Canada his attitude changes as an ‘outsider’, though he does try to keep the equilibrium by playing both the roles of insider/outsider judiciously. Similarly, he does justice in the authentic narration of the Dalit Chamar caste though he does not have any first-hand experience of it. He is an ‘insider’ in his own Parsee community but an ‘outsider’ in any other. He has moved away from the ethnocentric discourse of his first two books, Tales and Journey. Bharucha criticizes the portrayal of the low-caste characters, beggars and others are like lifeless “card-board figures” constructed by an urbane and westernized Indian. But Misrty’s efforts to portray the galaxy of his various characters are indeed commendable. Compared to them his Parsee characters are quite realistic. To Bharucha, the effect of the verisimilitude of the narrative has not been heightened to the level of perfection and satisfaction:

While the newspaper mode of research is amply evident in the text, memory and imagination have not always sufficiently salvaged it. This is a great pity
for the wider canvas on which Mistry has worked in this book and the importance of ‘remembering’ in a nation’s life could have made *A Fine Balance* a very significant text -- not just in Mistry’s oeuvre but also in the newly emerging canon of Indian Literature in English (Bharucha, 2003a: 167).

Though, *Balance* has received a mixed response from the critics Mistry has to be appreciated for trying to accommodate a wider Indian reality and thus expanding the scope of his narrative. Despite the stark life it presents, the novel reveals an underlying moral purpose, a positive commitment to justice and humanitarian concerns.
FAMILY MATTERS

*Family Matters* (2002) is Mistry’s eagerly anticipated third novel following the success of his highly acclaimed *A Fine Balance* (1995) which won several major literary awards internationally. This novel also has received accolades from the critics. It is a renewed and bold attempt to secure a distinct space for the Parsee Zoroastrians within the dominant Indian cultural space. As such, there is no protagonist in the novel; for the focus of the narrative shifts among several characters: Nariman, Yezad, Jehangir and Roxana. In fact, it is this Parsee family and through it the geriatric community that it represents, is the protagonist. A. K. Singh has aptly commented on the central role of the Parsee community in the novels of Mistry. He writes:

Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated immense ability in responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community, and also to the country. He narrates his community through the different narratives of his characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that will affect their community as well as themselves. Their fate is bound up with the fate of their community. By centralising their community in their narratives they centralize and preserve and protect themselves and thus use it as a psychological crutch (Singh, 1996: 29).

In addition to the post-colonial concerns of narrating the country and community, Mistry feels an exigent need to write about his community which is on the verge of extinction. He wants to leave a record of it for the benefit of posterity. Bharucha quotes Mistry’s words in an interview: “…when the Parsees have disappeared from the phase of the Earth, his writings will preserve a record of how they lived, to some extent (Bharucha, 1995: 59). In *Matters*, Mistry’s atavistic urge takes a violent turn and forcefully avows the predicament of his community in the wake of the Ayodhya issue. In it, Mistry introduces a bed-ridden, retired Parsee English professor, Nariman Vakeel, and makes him symptomatic of the feeble condition of his community.

Nariman Vakeel is a 79 year old widower and an ailing patriarch of a small family consisting of his two middle-aged step-children Coomy and Jal and his real daughter
Roxana, her husband Yezad and two sons Murad and Jehangir. Coomy’s bitterness about her stepfather brings a discordant note in the otherwise happy family. The formative childhood years of Coomy and Jal have been wrought up in unhappiness resultant of the conflict between their mother Yasmin and stepfather Nariman due to his pre-marital affair with a Christain lady Lucy Braganza. Coomy holds her father responsible for neglecting his family and submitting to the emotional importunities of the distraught Lucy. Though the whole family dotes upon the new-born Roxana and brings her up affectionately, Coomy, especially cannot forgive her father. Her unhappy mother had died an accidental death along with mentally deranged Lucy while jostling with her and falling from the top of the terrace. At a later stage, she nurtures jealousy also for the sweet-tempered Roxana who has been gifted a tiny flat in marriage by Nariman.

The ageing Nariman has been rendered infirm by the Parkinson’s disease and Osteoporosis. When his illness is compounded by a fractured ankle, the bad-tempered Coomy plots to turn his round-the-clock care over to Roxana and dumps Nariman in her congested apartment “Pleasant Villa” without prior notice. Though “Chateau Felicity”, Nariman’s ancestral home, already given to his step-children in inheritance, is a once elegant, spacious seven room house having more than enough space for three people, Coomy and Jal have no space in their heart to nurse their sick septuagenarian father. Coomy takes disadvantage of Nariman’s helpless condition and contrives to kick him out of his own house almost permanently and deprives him of his own pension too. Jal is a half-hearted accomplice to this scheme. There is a poetic justice done to Coomy when she becomes a prey to her own craftiness and dies an accidental death when a beam from a self-broken plastered ceiling falls on her. The burden of the new responsibility of looking after his senile father-in-law on Yezad, who is already besieged by financial worries, turns him irritable and non-co-operative. He otherwise gets along very well with his father-in-law but he is helpless as he earns just enough as a manager in Bombay Sporting Emporium to support his family of four. The uninvited financial crunch pushes him into a desperate scheme of deception involving his eccentric but kind-hearted employer Vikram Kapur to persuade him for giving him rise in position as well as salary. This sets in motion a series of events and also some chance-events; with a revelation of the family’s love-torn past brought by the flashback technique. Mistry plunges into the immobile Nariman’s stream of
consciousness and digs out his love-torn past which often results into the midnight delirium of the old man, evoking sympathy of his family. Mistry has adopted to separate the past from the present by choosing to narrate Nariman’s past in the italicized script.

After his first novel *Journey*, the focus is once again on the Parsee community with its ethnic features, what we call, ‘Parseeness’ or ‘Parseepanu’ in Gujarati. It is a typical Parsee family, actually the Vakils, the Contractors and the Chenoys combined, that Mistry talks about, and hence the focus is much more concentrated compared to *Balance*. Bharucha compliments,

….and the canvas has shrunk considerably but this is not a reductive book. It is a book which is very ‘big’ in compassion -- it is indeed Mistry’s most compassionate book to date (Bharucha, 2003a: 168).

Mistry touches many issues concerning the Parsees today. The community being strictly endogamous is one such issue and the most important one for their survival. The rigidity of the Orthodox Parsees like Nariman’s father in disallowing Nariman to marry a non-Parsi girl has not made his son’s life miserable but also has far repercussions on his progeny too. Coomy nurtures bitterness for Nariman throughout her life. The history starts repeating when Yezad, once a jolly-good liberal person, has become a bigot and very stringent about religion. He frets and fumes about Murad’s friendship with a Maharashtrian girl Anjali. He makes it clear to him that his relationship with the non-Parsee girl is totally inadmissible. He shouts in anger and continues to harangue his sons, “You can have any friends you like, any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage, the rules are different” (469). Mistry has deliberately brought into the novel the love experiences of both the grandfather and grandson with non-Parsee girls to reiterate that the Parsees can never change their convictions whatever be the whims and fancies of the individual (Duresh, 2006: 94).

When Lucy’s persistent efforts to meet Nariman after his marriage failed due to Nariman’s poor response, she accepted a job of an ayah at the Arjanis in the same building just to be closer to Nariman. The Arjanis had hired Lucy as an ayah in an act
of vengeance. Years back, Mr. Arjani had been sued by Nariman’s father for a libel and this was the reprisal. It was a religious controversy that had fuelled the feud. A priest had performed a ‘navjote’ ceremony for the son of a Parsee mother and a non-Parsee father, an absolute taboo for the conservatives. Nariman’s father, famous for his letters to the editor of “Jam-e-Jamshed”, wrote one condemning the priest, the ‘dustoor’ who performed the ceremony. Mr. Arjani, a Reformist, wrote a scathing letter against him and the dogma. A war began with the weapons of the vitriolic letters against each other. Nariman’s father sues Mr. Arjani for the defamation of his character. Mr Arjani was offered the chance to withdraw his statements and apologize but he refused. A group of Reformists financed the defence but they lost. Mistry deliberately shows the Orthodox Victory over the Reformists as the dogma has a strong hold on the community over the centuries and the fanaticism for the so-called ‘purity’ has been affecting the survival of the race, though it is one of the many factors. The purity of the race can still be questioned when the community allows to perform ‘Navjote’ for the children of a Parsee father and a non-Parsee mother and disallows for those of a Parsee mother and a non-Parsee father. This social and religious taboo is nothing but a sham based on the quasi-values and gender-discrimination.

Mistry also focuses on the other aspects affecting survival of the Parsees. The demographers estimate around less than one lac Parsees in the world and the number is dwindling fast. At this rate, they would be extinct by the end of this century. The ageing Nariman represents this geriatric community as the younger people are less than the older ones. There are too few young and able members to take care of the old and the disabled. There is also the fact that in the Parsee community, thanks to the economic pressures (high property prices in Bombay, where most Parsees live) and general societal norms (which are common with other communities in India), unmarried adult children continue to live with their parents. Those who get married generally opt to move away and lead independent lives. Hence the burden of caring for ageing, ill and often cantankerous parents falls on the unmarried offspring. This often results in feelings of resentment toward the married siblings who, it appears, to have shrugged off their responsibilities towards the ageing parents. This is clearly evident in Matters, where Coomy resents her half-sister Roxana for having ‘escaped’
parent-care duties and goes at inordinate lengths to force her sister into taking care of Nariman, who has fallen down and broken his ankle.

Mistry mirrors the stark reality of the Parsees’ existence in future in all of his novels. In *Journey*, Gustad’s friend Dinshawji and his wife is a childless couple. Major Bilimoria and Miss Kuptitia are single. In *Balance*, Dina’s marriage is short-lived and she does not remarry. Her Shirin aunty and Darab uncle is an issueless couple. In *Matters*, Nariman married late and had only one daughter. Jal and Coomy and also Yezad’s three elder sisters are unmarried. Jal’s prospects of marrying the pianist Daisy, a Parsee lady are shown to be very dim. Villey Contractor is also a spinster. Keeping single, marrying late or outside the community and having no or maximum two children are the reasons for the Parsee’s imminent doom. They are indeed “slow breeders” (Unisa et al, 2008). They will be no more very soon. This has caused serious anxiety among them and the Parsee Panchayat has announced certain incentives to facilitate early marriages and also help the couples to settle down in a metro like Bombay where the third fourth of the community is concentrated.

Mistry has returned to Bombay in this novel too and this time it is the post-Babri Masjid Bombay of the mid 90s. Its middle-class life of a Parsee family is viewed by Mistry from the Canadian vantage point. Bharucha rightly points out that the old ‘bete-noir’, the Shiv Sena, is still around and its religious chauvinism has been augmented by the pan-India fanatic Hindutva of the BJP (Bharucha, 2003a: 168). It is surprising that Mistry has not taken serious note of the 1993 bomb blasts that rocked Bombay. Also missing is any indication of the suspected involvement of the Islamic fundamentalists, in nexus with the underworld, in the Bombay blasts. It must have anguished Mistry whose dear city was writhing in pain in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid by the militant Hindu mobs in Ayodhya in northern India, the other corner of the country, miles away from Bombay and the callous state government was a mute witness. One could surmise that the reason of such passing reference to this important event is that the novel revolves round the personal matters of a family. But the political reality does affect the personal lives of the ordinary people as Mistry always shows in his novels. It is allowed to intrude in a major way into the text in the manner in which it impacts the professional life of one of the central characters -- Yezad Chinoy (Bharucha, 2003a: 169). It is through Yezad that
the reader comes in contact with his office attendant, Hussain, the victim of the post-Babri Bombay riots in which his family was burnt alive and Mr. Kapur, his boss, a victim of the 1947 Hindu-Muslim riots resultant of the Partition of the country.

Mistry has squarely brought out minority community’s grievances and remonstrations with the ‘secular’ multicultural image of the Indian polity. The demolition of the Babri Mosque was a major cataclysmic event aimed at hurting the secular polity of India. The role of the government agencies in perpetration of atrocities against the innocent civilians of the minorities has been questioned. An aged Parsee couple has been burnt down in their bedroom by the rioting mobs, under the ‘impression’ that Muslims were hiding there. Mistry unobtrusively points out that danger exists not only for the Muslim community but also for the Parsees. The people helping the rioters were none other than the guardians of law, the Bombay police, itself behaving like the gangsters. Mistry highlights how the apparatus of the post-colonial nation-state itself becomes oppressive and perpetuates what is called ‘National Imperialism’. While narrating his woeful tale, Hussain becomes an authentic voice of not only the minority Muslim community but also of the author’s own Parsee community:

In Muslim mohallas they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning, neighbours came to throw water. And the police? Firing bullets like target practice. These guardians of law were murdering everybody! And my poor wife and children…I couldn’t even recognise them … (148).

Mr. Kapur, his benevolent employer, responds: “More than three years have passed, and still no justice. Shiv Sena polluted the police. And now Shiv Sena has become the government” (149). Mistry’s diatribe against Shiv Sena at several places in this novel becomes understandable in the wake of Shiv Sena’s alleged partisan role in post-Babri demolition riots in Bombay. He is one of those who experience the resultant feeling of insecurity and fear; Parsees among the other ethnic minorities of India and most of them concentrated in Bombay. An undercurrent of tension between the Parsee minority community and the Hindu majority community may be taken cognizance of. However, this tension is not volatile enough to manifest itself into a violent confrontation causing the irreparable damage to the multicultural texture of the life of Bombay, as it happened in the case of Muslim minority. ‘Hindutva Forces’ on the Indian cultural and political scenario have pushed the Parsee Zoroastrians to retreat to
the ethnic enclosures. Nevertheless, the infectious right wing politics of Shiv Sena and the BJP haunts them in both their personal and public lives. Edward Said believes that the advanced cultures have rarely “offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism and ethnocentrisms for dealing with ‘other cultures’ (Said, 1979: 204).

The scathingly abusive attack on the Shiv Sena and the BJP combine is not simply part of Nariman’s birthday-party gossip but it is through this conversation that Mistry derides the whims and caprices of the party leadership and also exposes its double standards vis-à-vis the propagation of Indian culture and at the same time organising a charity show of the pop music concert of Michael Jackson in Bombay. It is also shown to raise funds through the ill-legal business of ‘Matka’. In another incident the politicians-criminals-police nexus is exposed by Gautam, a non- Parsee journalist. He mentions Shiv Sena in his article offending the party. Some of the ‘goondas’ hired by the party catch him outside his office and blacken his face with shoe-polish. Mr. Rangrajan, a non- Parsee technician in the Parsee hospital says that some Shiv Sainiks had infiltrated the GPO, subjecting innocent letters and postcards to incineration if the address reads ‘Bombay’ instead of ‘Mumbai’. Any person moving under suspicious circumstances in a Parsee locality may be construed as a Shiv Sainik. Such is the fear and anxiety of the minorities in Bombay. All throughout the novel, Mistry does not let go the opportunity to cast aspersions on the old ‘bete-noir’, the Shiv Sena. Mr. Kapur’s murder by the ‘Sainiks’ is the last straw in the series of events involving Shiv Sena. It is a climactic moment of the sub-plot that has an evident impact on the storyline of the main plot. The novelist has succeeded in lending a political background to the otherwise personal life-story of a Parsee family and also showing how the political happenings affect the lives of the ordinary people. The ethnic minorities in India are wary of the current ethno-religious politics pursued by the dominant majority community group. These minorities affirm their ethnic identities by retreating to their ethnocentric enclosures. Within the hegemonic Hindu cultural order the assertion of ethnic identity and self-imposed ghettoization has an appeasing effect on the Parsee mind beset by doubts and uncertainties.

Mr. Kapur is killed by the Shiv Sena’s fanatics as he refused to change the name of his shop “Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium” to “Mumbai Sporting Goods Emporium”. Like Dinshawji in Journey, Mr. Kapur also could not adapt to the change
in names of the locales of Bombay as the colonial ones were absorbed into his being, his blood. Mr. Kapur is an acute lover of Bombay and maybe it is more endearing to him than any native dweller. He appreciates the spirit of Bombay before Yezad,

So, there was no choice for us... We had to run. And we came here. But Bombay treated us well. My father started over, with zero, and became prosperous. Only city in the world where this is possible (145).

Tragically and ironically, in sharp contrast to his words is what happens to him. He is treated very badly by ‘Mumbai’ and is held for a ransom to change his beloved city’s name by the Shiv Sainiks who murder him. He had explained to Yezad as to what kind of love he had for Bombay. Whatever he says is true for all and sundry whose ancestors have arrived and settled down in Bombay; all kinds of people, i.e. the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Parsees, the Christians, the Jains, the Buddhists and the people from the other states of the country have become part and parcel of Bombay’s life. Because of his background, Mr. Kapur felt, his love for Bombay was special and far exceeding what any born-and-bred Bombayite could feel. Yezad thought his proprietor’s passion for Bombay verged on the fanatical when he hears him saying the following:

It’s the difference between being born into a religion and converting to it. The convert takes nothing for granted. He chooses, thus his commitment is superior. What I feel for Bombay you will never know. It’s like the pure love for a beautiful woman, gratitude for her existence, and devotion to her living presence. If Bombay were a creature of flesh and blood, with my blood type, Rh negative -- and very often I think she is -- then I would give her a transfusion down to my last drop, to save her life (145-146).

He did not know that his words would come true in near future and he would die a martyr’s death for his beloved city. Through Mr. Kapur’s devotion Mistry wants to suggest that the patriotic fervour of the migrants is unquestionably more than the natives because they owe a lot to the place of their settlement. Same is true of the immigrant/expatriate settlers in any country. The Parsee Diaspora in India is no exception. Their patriotism and loyalty to the nation are undoubted. Bombay is the icon of the Indian Multiculturalism. Mistry throws light on this very vital feature of the cosmopolitanism of Bombay through the characters of Lucy, Hussain, Yezad,
Vilas Rane and Mr. Kapur; each one belonging to different culture and faith, forms the part of the mosaic of Indian multiculturalism. All kinds of people live peacefully unless the fanatics like the Shiv Sainks are instigated to disturb the harmony and accord for their political mileage. The multicultural texture of a cosmopolitan city like Bombay is tattered just for petty political gains, and it results in doing a lot of harm to the psyche of the society leaving the scars of painful memories from the histories of such cities or communities or religions or castes or creeds or races. As against such nightmarish memories the happy reminiscences are something to be cherished as Mr. Kapur does:

You see how we two are sitting here, sharing? That’s how people have lived in Bombay. That’s why Bombay has survived floods, disease, plague, water shortage, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures. In her heart there is a room for everyone who wants to make a home here (152).

But to Yezad this sounds unrealistic euphemism as the hard-core reality is that majority of the migrants live in a very inhuman living conditions in the slums or in a ‘homeless’ condition. But Mr. Kapur continues to express his extremely idealistic views about Bombay:

You see, Yezad, Bombay endures because it gives and it receives. Within this warp and waft is woven the special texture of its social fabric, the spirit of tolerance, acceptance, generosity. Anywhere else in the world, in those so-called civilized places like England and America, such terrible conditions would lead to revolution (152).

And thereon Mr. Kapur announces in his over-enthusiastic exasperation that they would celebrate all the festivals in his shop: Diwali, Christmas, Id, Parsee-Navroze, Baisakhi, Buddha-Jayanti, Ganesh-Chathurthi, everything. It is going to be a mini-Bombay or mini-India so to say. His shop becomes an icon of Indian multicultural spirit respecting all cultures. Ironically, this concord has been brutally shattered by the fundamentalists. Behind the exaggerated sentiments of Mr. Kapur, lies dormant the bitter reality of regionalism at work by the separatist forces like Shiv Sena, VHP and RSS or even various organisations of the Islam. Mr. Kapur becomes a victim of the ire of the Shiv Sena though he is ready to pay any amount for not changing ‘Bombay’ into ‘Mumbai’. Tragically, he had to pay with his life.
Mr. Kapur does not believe in coercion. He loves his Bombay, a beautiful young lady for her tolerant and all-encompassing spirit. Mistry shows Mr. Kapur and Yezad talking very often on Bombay, his own beloved city. When Yezad argues against the remarks of Mr. Kapur, it is nobody but Mistry himself, his own other self. Their debate reflects the conflict in Mistry’s own mind. Hence, Mr. Kapur and Yezad both are Mistry’s spokesmen, his two selves. When Mr. Kapur says that Bombay is much more than a city, a religion, Yezad laughs as if he has given promotion to the city. Mr. Kapur replies that the young Bombay in those photographs that he adored is now ageing. “And if she can accept her wrinkles with poise and dignity, so must I. For there is beauty too in such acceptance. This is going to be my holistic approach.” (350). Ridiculing in his mind Mr. Kapur’s approach as ‘hole-in-the-head’ approach he asks as to what he would do about Bombay’s problems like her slums, her broken sewers, her corrupt criminal politicians etc. When Mr. Kapur calls them blemishes, Yezad does not agree. He calls them “a cancerous tumour”. “When a person has cancer in his body, one should bloody well fight it” (350). Here, Yezad resonates Dr. Paymaster’s speech in Journey when he calls corruption as the gangrened part of the country. It has to be cut and removed otherwise it may prove poisonous for the body. “Not in the holistic approach,” Mr. Kapur says. “Hating the cancer, attacking it with aggressive methods is futile. Holistically, you have to convince your tumour, with love and kindness, to change its malign nature to a benign one.” Yezad somewhat viciously asks, “And if the cancer won’t listen? She will die, won’t she?” (350). Mr. Kapur has no answer to this question. Mistry takes the problems of the country very seriously and he thinks they are like deadly diseases killing the country slowly but surely if not tackled urgently. Mr. Kapur’s idealism against Yezad’s bitter realism seems vulnerable and Mistry, who is on the side of Mr. Kapur, knows the futility of it. Through the murder of Mr. Kapur, he wants to convey that such idealism cannot last long and survive the harsh realities of life. Mr. Kapur is not as cynical as Yezad. He still trusts the humanitarian, secular and multicultural spirit of the city when he comes back to his metaphor of religion for Bombay. It is, as it were, Mistry explains:

Well, it’s like Hinduism; I think…Hinduism has an all-accepting nature, agreed? I’m not talking about the fundamentalist, mosque-destroying fanatics, but the real Hinduism that has nurtured this country for thousands of years, welcoming all creeds and beliefs and dogmas and theologies, making them
feel at home. The same way Bombay makes room for everyone. Migrants, businessmen, perverts, politicians, holy men, gamblers, beggars, wherever they come from, whatever caste or class, the city welcomes them and turns them into Bombayites. So who am I to say these people belong here and those don’t? Janta Party Okay, Shiv Sena not Okay? Secular good, communal bad, BJP unacceptable, congress lesser of evils? ... No, it’s not up to us. Bombay opens her arms to everyone. What we think of as decay is really her maturity, and her constancy to her essential complex nature. How dare I dispute her zeitgeist? If this is Bombay’s Age of Chaos, how can I demand a golden Age of Harmony? How can there be rule of law and democracy if this is the hour of million mutinies? (351).

Yezad patiently tolerates the wild and wielding banter of Mr. Kapur’s analogies just because he is his employer. But Mistry has successfully targeted the separatist forces marring the humanitarian and harmonious spirit of multiculturalism and also that of cosmopolitanism prevailing in the city, in accordance with the spirit of the whole country. Mr. Kapur represents the healthy spirit of democracy. His killing by the Shiv Sainiks symbolises the fundamentalists’ killing the spirit of democracy.

Mr. Kapur’s idea of displaying a mannequin of Santa Claus playing cricket with the shop’s equipments during the Christmas time also goes with this spirit. Coaxing a crying little girl, frightened by Hussain’s approach, Mr. Kapur makes a very important statement to that Jain family, “Myself, I am Hindu. But no harm in a bit of Christmas fun. And modern Santa Claus is secular, anyway” (357). Back home, Yezad’s sons also believe in Santa Claus and Yezad is happy that Murad clandestinely puts his gift for Jehangir, his younger brother in a sock hung by Roxana. Murad had saved on his bus fare by walking down to and from the school. Yezad feels proud of his son’s grooming into a caring person. At the same time we do catch up with the noble sentiments attached to the multicultural people of India. The adherence to a Christian custom in a Parsee family and the sales-promotion displays of the myriad avatars of the Santa in the other shops of the street like Mr. Kapur’s suggest that secularism has crept in the hearts of the Bombayites.

Mistry brings another reference to the secular tolerance in a Parsee household when Jal uncle shows his nephews a stack of holy pictures he found in one of the cupboards: Sai Baba, Virgin Mary, a Crucifixion, Haji Malang, several Zarathustras, Lady of Fatima, Buddha etc. They have been there for years together; the ancestral
possessions. Mistry underlines and emphasizes by this incident the tolerant spirit of the Parsees and reverence for all religions and their symbols. Despite Nariman’s father being an Orthodox, not accepting a non-Parsee girl for his son, these pictures were preserved. It indicates the divisions among the Parsees: the Reformists or the Liberals and the Bigots or the Orthodox. Ironically, Yezad, once a liberal, turns into a bigot and decides to dispose off those holy pictures into the sea thinking that it would be in keeping with the Zoroastrian tradition of respect for all religions. Had he really respected them he would have kept and taken care of them in his own house. But he has borrowed the idea from the Orthodox group that all the non-Zarathusti images must go. In a Zarathusti home, they interfere with the vibrations of Avesta prayers. His reason is totally clouded when he talks so illogically:

It’s no wonder there is so much quarrel and fighting in this house. Once the pictures are gone, my prayers will be more efficacious. Understanding will come to Murad (478).

Mistry does not defend Parsees blindly. In fact, he wants to show the burning sores of his own community and faith or may be he just exposes the bigotry and hypocrisy that unfailingly exist in any religion. Mistry’s optimism seems receding as the liberal-turned-bigot Yezad stands for the attitude of his community. The respect for all other religions exists just in principle and not in practice. It is evident from the paradoxical behavioural patterns of Nariman’s father and Yezad too. The question arises as to what little Jehangir and young Murad would learn from their Daddy. Right now, they do not accept Yezad’s fanaticism but there is no surety that like Yezad they too might not turn into the bigots as they grow up with the problems of life. Both the boys, representing the new generation, question their father and Mistry has hopes in them that the future of his community is not so dim with the Parsees’ idiosyncrasies as “slow breeders” and their obsession with purity. Murad laughs at his father’s notion of purity saying that perhaps the League of Orthodox Parsees could invent a Purity Detector, along the lines of the airport metal detector, which would go beep-beep-beep when an impure person walked through. This irritates Yezad:

“You think the question of purity, the life and death of our community, is a joking matter?”
“I think bigotry is certainly to be laughed at.”...
“He’s using religion like a weapon. Do you know the obsession with purity is creating lunatics in our community?”
“I’m never going to accept these crazy ideas” (473).

Jehangir also feels the same when Yezad wraps the holy pictures into a packet and touches it to his forehead before tossing it into the sea of Chowpatty, into the “protecting arms” of Avan Yazat for “safe keeping”. This pseudo-respect disturbs Jehangir. He does understand the hypocrisy of his father but he does not confront him or cross him like Murad. He thinks about the change in his father when he narrates it in the epilogue:

We sat in silence, Daddy with his secret burdens and me with my countless questions about him locked in my head. I wanted to tell him I still loved him, but couldn’t understand the new person he had become, I much preferred the father who made jokes, who could be funny and sarcastic, who could be angry one minute and laughing the next, as loving as he was head-strong, and able to stand up without clutching at religiousness for support…….There was much I wanted to ask and tell my father, all the things that filled my head whenever I was alone. But with him beside me, they remained frozen on my tongue (478-479).

There are many questions apart from what the young Jehangir’s mind could think of. Yezad might have respect for other faiths but it falls short for keeping those pictures at his home. He is just a little better than those Shiv Sainiks or rioters who become fatally violent. The bigotry of Nariman’s father Merzban or of Yezad also becomes violent to the extent when they do not allow inter-faith marriages of their sons making their lives miserable and thus stealing away their happiness. The act of throwing the holy pictures of other faiths is also symbolic as discarding others’ faiths means discarding one’s own faith. Only the names of the faiths change; the essence of any faith is the same. There are various names of the God Almighty; maybe millions and various paths of worshipping Him lead to the same destination. So, name or no name; it does not make any difference. The sea in which the pictures are immersed is the sea of anonymity where all names and identities are lost. It is a recurring theme in Mistry’ novels as we are reminded of the wall in Journey. The boundary wall of the Parsee residential colony was the place shown by Gustad to the pavement artist who painted the pictures from different religions. The place for defecation becomes a sacred place of worship. There is a feeble objection from some Parsees from the colony not to paint the pictures of other faiths on the wall of a Parsee colony. But it subsides as the
majority approves. As discussed earlier, the breaking up of this wall is also symbolic like the sea of anonymity. Of course, the situations and the messages they leave in both the cases are quite different. Gustad is not a fanatic like Yezad. He is open minded enough to go to the Church with his Christian friend Malcom to pray for his ailing friend and daughter. Mistry’s sarcasm can even be hinted at a nation-state having an egalitarian constitution but still homogenous in practice. Despite the democratic set-up, each community or faith is not ready to recognise the ‘other’ as equal to one’s own. Not only that but it also transfers the same hegemonic homogeneity within its own institute too, allowing little space and respect for the individual differences and choices, for instance, in the cases of Nariman, Murad or Feroza in Sidhwa’s *Brat* where the writer shows the debate between the older and younger generations.

At many points, Mistry suggests through the narrative that the value-based education should be imparted at school level itself to make the children good citizens as Ms. Alvarez, Jehangir’s teacher was insistent about (210). Along with it, the secular spirit should also be inculcated in all types of schools, may they be Christian missionary, Muslim ‘madrasa’ or Jain or Hindu ones or any other for that matter. Mistry proudly talks about St. Xavier’s, Bombay, where Jehangir and Murad study; and it is his own Alma Mater too. When Jehangir is included in the team of a cricket match between the Catholics and the non-Catholics, Mistry recalls the assembly address of father D’Silva. St. Xavier’s did not approve of such divisions in the student body, not even for cricket:

> Remember boys, in this great school of ours, we strive to follow the advice of the Father of our Nation. We must not think of ourselves as Catholic or non-Catholic, for we are all children of this gracious and loving Alma Mater who makes no distinction of caste and creed (208).

Mahatma Gandhiji was very upset about the Bombay Pentangular Tournament in which teams of Hindus, Muslims, Parsees and Europeans, plus a fifth one called the Rest, played for the championship. He said that in work and in play, we, the children of Mother India, must be as one family in order to free her from the chains in which she was enslaved (208). He grieved and fasted; and convinced the captains of the need for the team-spirit and unity, even in diversity. Under his guidance the Pentangular was
abolished and there was no more cricket based on religious or ethnic divisions. Following the advice of the Mahatma, as Father D’Silva had said, the school was always on its guard against the slightest whiff of communalism and especially so after the Babri Mosque riots (209). Though there was nothing like deliberate sectarianism about their game, the boys just innocently named the teams to organize the groups. But still they were careful not to disturb the secular corridor where Father D’Silva was always on the prowl.

But outside the school it is not easy to maintain this secular spirit always. It is the look-out of the society consisting of the responsible individuals, parents and families. When Yezad’s memory is triggered by Mr. Kapur’s photographs of old Mumbai of the beginning of the 20th Century, he reminisces about his childhood and tells a lot to Mr. Kapur about his home “Jehangir Mansion” in the picture. On being asked whether it was a Parsi Baag, Yezad said that there lived on the ground floor a Muslim family of a boy named Shahrukh who used to play cricket with them. He recalls,

You know how boys fight. And if sometimes there was an argument – whether someone was l.b.w., for example – when Sharukh disagreed, we used to say to him, go to Pakistan if you don’t like it. And we teased him about his circumcision, calling him an ABC, you know, Adha Boolla Catayla (219-20).

The bullying and the derogatory nicknaming of the minorities alienate them from the mainstream society. What is noteworthy here is that even the Parsee minority when ghettoized in a colony like ‘Jehangir Mansion’ dominates over the other minority, the Muslims, lesser in number than them here in this case. Yezad was full of remorse for such teasing later and just felt like finding Sharukh out to tell him that he was sorry. He was more upset because the family had left the colony later for Pakistan, where they had relatives. All the boys felt guilty afterwards. The point is that the children may be innocently indulging in regionalism or any kind of non-secularism but it nurtures unhealthy mindset and wrong attitude during the formative years of their life. After growing up into adults then, such people harm the secular texture of the country. Ironically, Yezad himself turns into an extremist later.

The nicknames used offensively for the marginal ‘other’ by the domineering people hint at their disadvantaged position and hurt their sense of dignity. When Yezad and
his family wait at the bus-stop late night while returning from Nariman’s birthday dinner, Roxana is eveteased by two drunkards. When the angry Yezad retorts, they insult him saying “Don’t tingle-tangle with us, bavaji! We are Shiv Sena people, we are invincible!” (42). When Roxana advises Murad to ignore such people, Yezad is very disturbed and feels that some things cannot be ignored as it raises the question of their security in the society they live in. Yezad laments, “…May be Jal is right, Bombay is an uncivilized Jungle now”. To this remark Jehangir suggests that he should try again for Canada. To this, Yezad replies with a pang,

No, they don’t need a sporting goods salesman. You try, when you’re older. Study useful things – Computer, MBA and they will welcome you. Not useless things like me, history and literature and philosophy (43).

Yezad echoes Mistry. He himself did not have any professional qualifications when he immigrated to Canada. He worked in a bank for a few years and then after taking a degree in literature and philosophy he adopted writing as a full time profession. Though Bombay is the beloved city of Mistry and he does miss it after immigrating to Canada; he has some grave dissatisfaction about it. Mistry has even made Gustad express similar anxiety and insecurity in Journey when Sohrab rejects his admissions in IIT. He fears that there would not be any bright future for the minorities in this country. Through Yezad, he very often expresses it. Apart from the domineering Shiv Sena that spreads hatred for the minorities there are certain other concerns about which Mistry speaks though Yezad;

His dream for an end to this apeman commute (Bombay’s local suburban trains) had led him to apply for immigration to Canada. He wanted clean cities, clean air, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone, where people stood in line at bus stops and said please, after you, thank you. Not just the land of milk and honey, also the land of deodorant and toiletry (131).

Those who have migrated would justify their decision and people like Yezad who could not make it for some or the other reason would also justify their stay in the native land thinking that the grapes are sour. He

assuaged his disappointment by keeping track of problems in the land of excess and superfluity, as he now called it: unemployment, violent crime,
homelessness, language laws of Quebec. Not much difference between there and here, he would think; we have beggars in Bombay, they have people freezing to death on Toronto streets; instead of high and low-caste fighting, racism and police shooting; separatists in Kashmir, separatists in Quebec – Why migrate from the frying pan into the fire? (132).

The anxiety about their identity-crisis as the minorities would still be there; in fact, they would be more marginalized as Parsees. Here, in Bombay, and also in India they have earned their reputation and good-will after their centuries-long stay and they have at least gained the recognition as the Zoroastrian Parsees. Abroad, hardly anyone has heard or known about such community. All immigrants are just known under one nomenclature of the hyphenated identity, i.e. the South-Asians or the people of the Indian origin. Despite Yezad seeking consolation like this, there were many times he wished his application had been successful. The added responsibility of his bed-ridden father-in-law causing him financial worries could have been avoided and Jal and Coomy would have been forced to look after him. He still regrets sometimes,

If ten years ago he could have looked into the future, he would never have given up on his Canadian dream. He would have tried again and again, that racist immigration officer could not have blocked his way forever. And they would all be living happily right now in Toronto, breathing the pure Rocky Mountain air instead of the noxious fumes of this dying city, rotting with pollution and garbage and corruption” (275).

Once when Yezad narrates his Canadian tale to his family he just recalls how he had thrashed that ‘bastard’ immigration officer who was so rude to him while rejecting his application (132). It is, as it were, Mistry snapping back to the Canadian authorities:

You sir, are a rude and ignorant man, a disgrace to your office and country. You have sat here abusing us, abusing Indians and India, one of the many countries your government drains of its brainpower, the brainpower that is responsible for your growth and prosperity. Instead of having the grace to thank us, you spewed your prejudices and your bigoted ideas. You, whose people suffered racism and xenophobia in Canada, where they were Canadian citizens, put in camps like prisoners of war – you sir, might be expected, more than anyone else to understand and embody the more enlightened Canadian ideals of multiculturalism. But if you are anything to go by then Canada is a gigantic hoax (245).
In fact, it was an expression of Yezad’s frustration. He had worked very hard on the
drafting of the letter of application, a paean to Canada and munificence of Canada’s
multicultural policy, the beauty of its wisdom. The mosaic vision of the Canadian
dream was far superior to the crude image of the melting pot of America. “The
generosity of the Canadian dream makes room for everyone, for a multitude of
languages and cultures and peoples. In Canada’s willingness to define and redefine
itself continually, on the basis of inclusion, lies its greatness, its promise, its hope”
(241).

It is ironic that India has equal or even better and wiser policy of multiculturalism and
a democratic constitution based on secular values but it is the lure of the riches of the
foreign lands that makes one praise that country and accept it as one’s own. The
struggle, poverty or less materialistic comforts dampen one’s patriotic spirit. But after
all, the home is home where one is born and bred. The realisation of the loss of home
dawns upon the immigrant after reaching the green pastures of the foreign shores.
Nariman echoes Mistry’s longing for home:

I am glad you did not (emigrate), because I think emigration is an enormous
mistake. The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a
hole that never fills (246).

His father-in-law’s words bring a lump to his throat, reminding him of Mr. Kapur’s
photographs of ‘Jehangir Mansion’ and Hughes Road -- his lost home. That feeling of
grief and emptiness returns and there is a strange calm. The Parsees have made India
their home for nearly a millennium. Their contribution to all walks of the country’s
progress is a thing the community is proud of. The novel centralizes the Parsee
community and at the same time remains conscious of individual, national and
transnational issues.

The Parsees are the enlightened, westernized elite enjoying the privileged status in the
society and certainly cannot be among the marginalised or disadvantaged class of the
society. They have been living peacefully so far without involving in any strife or
creating any trouble, striking a fine balance between assimilation into and resistance
to the hegemonic Hindu culture and religion. They acquire the marginal status only
because they are a miniscule minority demographically. Though ‘all-accommodative’ Hindus have imparted them with enough space to be comfortable they still are “uneasily at home”, to use Hutoxi Wadia’s term. They feel insecure due to the fundamentalist forces of Hinduism active at times, i.e. Shiv Sena, Bajrang dal, VHP, RSS or the BJP with its agenda of Hindutva. This may be one of the reasons, apart from that of fulfilling the dollar-dream like many other Indians, to immigrate to the land of promise, the El Dorado. But then it would mean to leave Bombay, as good as their second home, for the same uncertain future again. For the ordinary people like Yezad the golden old days are now dead past; the feeling of loss and despair in the present and the future is a thing of worry not promising something worthwhile. Yezad, time and again, regrets his thwarted Canada dream:

How time passed and changed things. For himself too, the years were slipping away – nothing but the interminable tedium of one pointless day after another.......was this all his life was ever going to be? Forty three and what had he accomplished? Couldn’t even get to bloody Canada for a fresh start ..... and the children growing up so fast – what did he have to offer them? Nothing (206).

Yezad, in his forties, is a middle-aged father worrying about his children’s future when he himself has not achieved that financial stability to support the family. One is reminded of the similar worry Gustad feels for Sohrab when he rejects his admission in IIT. Gustad is anxious about the future of minorities in India with the politics of the extremists and language chauvinism. (Journey, 55) Gustad, too, yearns for the past which was better and at least hopeful. He wants to regain what is lost, “And now I wish I was back at the beginning, without knowledge of the end. At the beginning, at least, there was hope. Now there is nothing. Nothing but sorrow” (Journey, 55). Mistry’s own yearning for the past and the memory of the loss get reflected in his protagonists too. The reality is that the promise of the new land too may be deceptive. This can be very well elucidated with Anjali Gera Roy and Meena J Pillai’s reference to the concept of the “migrant sublime” which can be perceived very much akin to the post-modern sublime. In Edmond Burke’s terms the sublime is “whatever fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger” (Roy and Pillai, 2007: 13). So, the constitutive elements of the sublime are obscurity, vastness, magnificence and the resulting astonishment. Both of these sublimes, migrant as well as the post-modern,
are the negative ones linked to the subjective histories of dispossession and colonization. The migrant sublime too is linked to uncertainty and to what is unspeakable.

One can sense in Mistry’s writing the presence of this ‘migrant sublime’. His writing is thoroughly seeped by the double vision acquired partially by his Canadian experience and mostly from his particular Indian identity. Though a westernized Indian, his position in Canada is that of a stranger in that culture, struggling to establish his identity and through himself, the community’s identity that it has acquired so far in their acquired homeland India. That is why Mistry has preferred to write about his past, based on his memory of India and especially Bombay, the city where he has spent two and a half decades of his early life. For Mistry, maybe, the time is not ripe enough to write about his immigrant experiences in Canada as many expatriate writers do. This situation has brought on him the sharp awareness of his outsider status and he has exploited the advantages of this double vision to its fullest extent. For all of his books he has received the awards galore. But that has not altered his status as a second class citizen in the new world. Even in India where he spent the first twenty three years of his life, he had never been a complete insider. In all his fiction, he views Bombay, his birthplace, with all its positivities and negativities he had experienced from what may be called a marginal space. The Parsees mostly live ghettoised in a particular area or colonies in Bombay. The Parsee-Baag, where Mistry grew up, features in his novels with the fictional names of Firozshaa Baag or Khodadad Building or Jehangir Mansion or Pleasant villa or Chateau Felicity. It is a distinctive feature of his Bombay novels. Like a wall in Journey, it is both at a time, unifying and isolating; protecting as well as imprisoning.

The Parsees, who came from Persia to escape the Arabian religious persecution and who were westernized during the British colonization, have been able to earn good reputation for their community by their uprightness, diligence and many other good qualities; and also by contributing to the various fields of the society and thereby to the country. Yet, they have not been comfortable with their insider status so far. Roy and Pillai write:
Twice displaced, an Indian migrant in Canada who belongs to an ethnic group that migrated to India in the thirteenth century AD, Mistry is the natural heir to the borderland, the margin, the periphery who complicates the contemporary narrative of migration (Roy and Pillai, 2007: 14).

As discussed earlier, the reasons for the recent phase of migration are different from the earlier ones, the problematic of the phenomenon of migration calls for a discourse; though the later phase; the present one, is much more complicated and novel.

For Mistry, the Parsi Gujarati writer in Canada, and his Parsi community embody the contemporary and older discourses of migration respectively. The Parsi experience that Mistry documents so authentically and vividly in his fiction, locates Parsis as outsiders on the Indian subcontinent, even though they might have lived peacefully with other Indian ethnicities for centuries. On the other hand, Mistry, the cosmopolitan outsider is appropriated in the metropolitan discourse of migrancy and hybridity as the in-between subject (Roy and Pillai, 2007: 14-15).

Unlike the Muslims in India, Parsees negotiated with the dominant majority of the Hindus in a grateful and obsequious tone resisting the assimilation only to a certain extent. They have been successful in preserving their age-old ethos. That is why, unlike Muslims, they are known as the “benign other” (Roy and Pillai, 2007: 22). In narrating the Parsee ethnicity Mistry transcends the stereotype of the amusingly eccentric and harmless ‘bawaji’ and represents the community with the unprecedented depth of compassion and details. By delineating the daily routine life of ordinary Parsee individuals Mistry unravels the unique Parsee identity formed collectively by their typical food, attire, religious rites and rituals, customs, home, etiquette and conduct.

In Journey, Mistry has narrated in detail the funerals of Gustad’s friends, Dinshawji and Major Billimora, their death-rites and prayer-sessions at the fire temple. There is also narrated in Mistryesque tongue-in-cheek humour the dichotomy going on between the Reformist and the Orthodox lobbies about the ‘ghoulish’ system of the disposal of the remains of the dead body by the vultures at the Tower of Silence. In Matters, there is a reference to ‘Navjote’, the ceremonious induction of a child into the Parsee faith. There is also the description of Yezad’s frequent visits to the fire-temple called ‘Agiyari’, “an oasis in the harsh desert the metro-city had become”
Stressed out by his unfavourable circumstances Yezad seeks solace in the prayers and the tranquillity of the fire temple. He then forms a habit of getting this comforting peace and quietude almost daily. Mistry imparts vivid description of the method of worshipping in the “Atash Behram” the holy fire in the sanctum. He talks about the ‘afargaan’, the pedestal and the offering of the sandalwood to the fire by the ‘dustoorji’, also of the untying and tying of the ‘Kusti’ and the ceremony for changing ‘geh’ by the ‘dustoorji’ as per the Parsee calendar. There are passing references to the celebrations of ‘Navroze’ and ‘Khordad Sal’, though not detailed descriptions. There is no surprise that Mistry has not even talked about the birth or the marriage ceremonies of his geriatric community to impart an innuendo to the imminent death of the community. Of course, a number of times he tickles the taste-buds of the readers by writing temptingly about the sumptuous Parsee delicacies like ‘Dhansak’, ‘Dhandar Patiyo’ etc. It is important to note that ethnicity has always been a strong component in Indian writing in English right from the first generation of the writers. Raja Rao, R K Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand portrayed the ethos of their own regions and people. The reflection of the Parsee ethos in literature is a recent phenomenon. The problematic position as a diasporic writer that characterises Mistry also does so for a few more such writers like Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa, Farookh Dhondy, Saros Cawasjee and Reshard Gool. The reason behind all this Parsee-ness may lie in the fear and anxiety about their existence in future.

Mistry has expressed that anxiety more vocally in Matters compared to his other novels. In an amusing tone, Mistry comes down through Dr. Fitter on the deterioration of the good character-building qualities in today’s Parsee men. Upbraiding Jal for being incompetent to look after his father and not able to make simple decision about taking him to the hospital for an x-ray, Dr. Fitter says-

Is it any wonder they predict nothing but doom and gloom for the community? Demographics show we’ll be extinct in fifty years. May be it’s the best thing. What’s the use of having spineless weaklings walking around, Parsi in name only (51).

Yezad, too, is aware of the death-knell for the community. When he saw the sandalwood-seller at the fire-temple training his son in the business, he thinks whether his community would last till the next generation:
Would there be a business when the boy became a man, wondered Yezad, the way the Parsis were dwindling in Bombay, and the way people like himself treated the faith? (329)

Despite being aware about this uncertainty, Yezad later becomes very obstinate about the endogamous system among the Parsees in the case of Murad, his son. Strict adherence to endogamy is one of the many reasons of their decline. Like the Reformist and Orthodox controversy discussed at length in Journey; in Matters too, Mistry brings in the discussion of the reasons and solutions the Parsees’ imminent extinction in his characteristic jocular vein. Dr. Fitter discusses it with inspector Masalawala at length during their leisure and expresses the urgency of the need to do something about the dying race (400-404). Inspector Masalawala laments, “When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser” (403). Apart from the Orthodox and the Reformists’ argument, “the more crucial point is our dwindling birth rate, our men and women marrying non-Parsees and the heavy migration to the West” (400). Based on these reasons the discourse takes turn to the suggestions of the Parsee Panchayat in sorting out some problems about marriage and breeding and help out the new couples. Even at the end of the discussion inspector Masalawala sighs in disappointment, but with a sense of pride for his people and their beloved city Bombay:

“To think that we Parsis were the ones 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.”

“Well, we are dying out and Bombay is dying as well,” said Dr. Fitter, “When the spirit departs it isn’t long before the body decays and disintegrates” (403).

Masalawala and Dr. Fitter echo Mistry’s heartache. Despite the rot that had set in Bombay, now ageing, he loves her, as Mr. Kapur and Yezad do. The Parsees are like the soul to that city, or vice versa, the city their soul-mate. Without them the city would also die, devoid of its spirit. Bombay and the Parsees would wither without each other. After immigrating to Canada, Mistry, though quite westernized, being born and bred in a metro like Bombay, feels alienated with the acute pain and intense realisation of the loss of culture. In an interview with Nermeen Shaikh of Asia Source, he articulates his sense of non-belongingness to the ‘foreign’ land:
Going to Canada faced with the reality of earning a living and realizing that although I had, up to that point in my life, read books and listened to music that came from the West, there was a lot more involved in living in the West. I felt very comfortable with the books and the music, but actually ‘living’ in the West made that same music seem much less relevant. It suddenly brought home to me very clearly the fact that I was imitating something that was not mine, that made no sense in terms of my own life, my own reality (Roy and Pillai, 2007: 14).

When one culture is exposed to the other dominant culture it tends to lose its originality to certain extent; resulting into intermixing and hybridity as it happened centuries ago with the Parsees’ interaction to the Gujarati Indian culture. With the second phase of immigration though for different reasons and voluntary ones, the Parsees are faced with the dilemma whether they should strike a compromise in order to survive. The same question of the purity of their race arises in inter-faith marriages or relenting to exogamy. The same old dichotomy between the liberals and the bigots would creep in and the Parsees are at a loss, at an impasse. The following conversation between Yezad, a liberal-turned-bigot and his son Murad belittles the ray of hope for the community and the cause of Mistry’s grave concern:

“I’m warning you, in this there can be no compromise, the rules, the laws of our religion are absolute, this Maharashtrian cannot be your girlfriend”.
“It’s just prejudice,” says Murad.
“Nothing of the sort. My best friend was a Maharashtrian, Vilas Rane, the letter writer. Remember, he used to give me picture books for you when you were little? You can have any friends you like, any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage, the rules are different”.
“Why?”
“Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet and mixed marriages will destroy that.”
“You think you’re superior?”
“Iinferior or superior is not the question. Purity is a virtue worth preserving” (469).

The history repeats, as the same was the issue of conflict between Nariman and his father Marzban, an orthodox. In Balance, there is similar kind of differences between Maneck and his father Farokh Kohlah who resisted change brought by modernity and Maneck insisted to adapt to the change for betterment. But the loss of the old and the past for Farokh, as well as for Yezad is unbearable and unacceptable. The outcome is unease, discomfort and maladjustment. The estrangement between Gustad and his son
Soharb in *Journey* is, of course, due to a different issue of education. It is a contrasting situation, it is Gustad, the older generation, is ready to part with the tradition and explore the new land for more opportunities. The son is here adamant not to go for brighter prospects. Gustad resents as Sohrab has marred his own future prospects by going for the ordinary degree of B.A and letting go the promising one of IIT. At the back of his mind, there is lurking the insecurity resultant of the threat to the minorities by the intolerant forces like Shiv Sena. Such professional qualification would open the door for Sohrab to the West. Money and security are what they look for in the West but not without any cost. Mistry’s own experience in the West, as stated in the quote earlier, is a compromise on many issues, i.e. purity of culture, identity, problems of migration etc.

The Shiv Sena, too, is on no different mission in their own country, campaigning fanatically for the purity of their culture resisting the assaults of other cultures including the West and the impact of colonization. Ironically, the tendency of the Shiv Sainiks to bigotry does not go with their name which is derived from the founder of the Maratha kingdom, Chhatrapati Shivaji who respected the beliefs of all communities, and protected their places of worship. In a time of religious savagery, Shivaji practised true religious tolerance (432). Mistry never misses a single chance to attack the Shiv Sena and its politics. In fact, no political party is of any good as per him. He comes down heavily on the Shiv Sena with a scathing sarcasm inducing boisterous laughter in the following piece of conversation at he time of the birthday dinner of Nariman; a purely Mistryesque style and humour:

“Corruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks. Right, chief?”
“The answer, unfortunately, is yes.”
“The country has gone to the dogs. And not well-bred dogs either, but pariahs.”
“May be the BJP and Shiv Sena coalition will improve things,” said Jal. “We should give them a chance.”
Yezad laughed. “If a poisonous snake was in front of you, would you give it a chance? Those two parties encouraged Hindutva extremists to destroy the Babri Mosque”
“Yes, but that was —
“And what about all the hatred of minorities that Shiv Sena has spread for the last thirty years.” He paused to take a long swallow of his scotch and soda.
“Daddy, did you know, Shiv Sena is going to have a Michael Jackson concert.” said Murad.
“That’s right.” said Jal. “I saw in the newspaper. And Shiv Sena will pocket millions – they’ve obtained a tax-free status by classifying it as a cultural event of national significance.”
“Well,” said Yezad. “Michael Jackson’s crotch-clutching and his shiny codpiece must be vital to the nation. I’m surprised the Senapati doesn’t find him anti-anything, not even anti-good taste. Otherwise, the crackpot accuses people left and right of being anti-this or anti-that. South Indians are anti-Bombay, Valentine’s Day is anti-Hindustan, film stars born before 1947 in the Pakistan part of Punjab are traitors to the country.”
“I suppose,” said Nariman. “if the Senapati gets gas after eating karela, the gourd will be declared an anti-Indian vegetable.”
“Let’s hope his langoti doesn’t give him a grain rash,” said Jal. “or all underwear might be banned” (30-31).

Shiv Sena’s hypocrisy and double-standards are also exposed once again when the centres of the Matka-gambling are raided all over Bombay and closed down, to be restarted sometime later. The money goes in the treasury of Shiv Sena. It is just the apparent motive of the party to conserve moral values of the society but the hidden agendum is to fund the party’s activities. Yezad’s money in Matka was lost in one such raid when he was badly in need of it. Shiv Sena’s intelligent agents are always on their furtive moves. One such person who claimed to be a market-surveyor was suspected by Villie Cardmaster, the “Matka Queen” and other neighbours of the Pleasant Villa. Villie Cardmaster said he was most likely from the Shiv Sena, listing names and addresses -- that’s how they had singled out Muslim homes during the Babri Mosque riots. Probably the Sena is planning ahead for next time (101). Police are also pawns to them. Gautam, the journalist and Vilas’ friend had done a story on Matka providing an in-depth analysis about the politician-criminal police nexus. The mention of Shiv Sena in the article had enraged it and Gautam was attacked, abused and threatened by the Shiv Sainiks. His friend Bhaskar, another journalist supports him saying that the finance created from Matka was spent by the Shiv Sena for paying up the terrorists to blow up the stock exchange building. What pains is the paradox that the enemies of the nation and political parties that claim to be the defenders of the nation, all rely on the same source (200). The exposure would naturally invite their ire. Mistry does not spare even the law and order of the country. Once Yezad explains Murad half-heartedly, “Our government makes such crazy laws, people are forced to break them” (437). At another point Jehangir and Murad talk about complaining to the
Canadian government about the rude and unsafe behaviour of the immigration officer. Jehangir despairs, “Governments never help ordinary people.” Murad, the elder one, is a little more hopeful about the Canadian government but not about the Indian one. “You’re thinking of India. …It’s not like that in foreign countries” (247).

Though at times, one feels Mistry over-reacts. He has an important point when he wants to convey that the political happenings do affect the common people like Gustad, Dina, the tailors, Yezad and Mr.Kapur. Despite having a democratic constitution in execution, the government or its police are helpless before the caste-oppression by the hegemonic upper-castes as shown in Balance. There are also two such incidents of caste-violence which Vilas Rane, the letter-writer, narrates in Matters. In fact, the government like Shiv Sena takes their calculated political mileage by harassing ordinary people. Once again Mistry satirizes sharply the violence done by the hegemonic political parties like Shiv Sena:

But it was curious, thought Yezad that Shiv Sena hadn’t made Santa Claus a political issue, considering the tantrums thrown by their mobs over Valentine’s Day. Since coming to power they’d been in a constant fit of censorship and persecution. Top of the list were Muslims, their favourite scapegoats as usual, he felt. Then the Sena had destroyed the work of famous Indian artists, deeming it disrespectful towards Hindu Gods and Goddesses, Men’s magazines, endangering Indian morals with nudity and sex and vulgarity, had their offices set on fire. And women weren’t allowed to work in bars and discos after eight o’clock because it was against Indian family values.

What a joke of a government. Clowns and crooks, or clownish crooks. Santa Claus with mask and machine gun would be a fitting Christmas decoration for the Shiv Sena or any other party, for that matter (265).

The hegemonic oppressions of the political parties in the urban areas are no different from the oppressions perpetrated on the lower-castes by the upper-castes in the rural areas as narrated by Vilas, ironically, after the secular democratic rule in independent India. That is because the minds of the people have not changed or if we put it in the other way; the powerful people do not want to accept change in order to meet their selfish ends and retain their power. The urban menace of the Shiv Sena burning the Muslim families alive, as it happened in the case of Hussain, during the Babri-riots in Bombay and the barbaric menace of the upper-caste in the rural areas are not just the stories to be provided by the journalists but the serious matters to be pondered over.
The story that Vilas tells goes like this: The younger brother of Vilas’ client had an affair with a girl from a higher caste and the couple had to meet the wrath of both of their families. The couple had to face the dire consequences of death by hanging after amputation of their ears and noses (201). It is very painful that the people can be so cruel and inhuman to their own children just to nurture and perpetuate the hegemony of caste-hierarchy.

Vilas Rane, the letter-writer, like the proof-reader and lawyer Mr. Vasantrao Valmik in *Balance* is Mistry’s mouthpiece. As such, he works in a stationery store but he regards this job of a scribe, a form of a social work. He takes this job very seriously and tries to be as faithful as possible in conveying the thoughts and feelings of his client to his family, as if he is transporting the soul of his client. Similarly, while reading the received letter also he values the sacred trust put in him by the client “to read the words for him in the way they would be consumed by his own eyes -- if he could read.” He believes it to be “the invincible contract: not one word added or omitted or delayed” (204). Also “his satisfaction from letter-writing grew more and more profound with time. He heard all about his clients’ lives: the birth of a child; a family quarrel about money; a wife, left behind in the village, was sleeping with the sarpanch; a sick father who had died because the nearest hospital was two days’ travel on ‘kuchcha’ roads; a brother, injured in a farm accident, had recovered and was home again” etc (136).

Vilas is, in fact, playing a role of the creative writer like God, who is the witness of the endless flow of such stories from time immemorial and would go on and on with such dramas of the matters of the families. This simile to God goes well with the metaphor of God’s quilt in *Balance*. There too, Mistry compares Dina’s quilt with that gigantic one of God, still incomplete; more and more patches and pieces are yet to be joined. And Vilas feels himself honourably privileged to share the lives of so many families through his scribal service.

Writing and reading the ongoing drama of family matters, the endless tragedy and comedy, realized that collectively, the letters formed a pattern only he was privileged to see. He let the mail flow through his consciousness, allowing the episodes to fall into place of their own accord, like bits of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope. He felt that chance events, random cruelty, unexpected
generosity could, together, form a design that was otherwise invisible. If it were possible to read letters for all of humanity, compose infinity of responses on their behalf, he would have a god’s-eye view of the world, and be able to understand it (136).

Through Vilas’ speech Mistry suggests that every family on this planet has its own matters to be tackled; one different from the other and yet a lot of common things among them, simple and yet complicated and that’s where lies the awe-inspiring greatness of the God. Each member of the family matters and the entire family matters for each of its members.

Jehangir’s naive mind is puzzled by the matters that have disturbed the long existing peace, harmony and bliss of his family. His mental puzzle is symbolized by the jigsaw puzzle which he is trying to organize to get a harmonized picture. The jigsaw puzzle has been used by Mistry as a leitmotif in the novel. M. L. Garg comments on this symbolization:

Jehangir’s act of fitting together the jigsaw puzzle symbolizes his attempt to work out the quarrels and power politics that rocks his family which he wishes would live together in happiness and harmony (Garg, 2007: 58).

Just as in Balance, Mistry talks about the story-factory of God and the endless patched up gigantic quilt of God, here too, he means to join the pieces of reality into a harmonious whole. Jehangir’s jigsaw puzzle, the various separate blocks forming to make a large canvas, can indeed be a metaphor for all these stories that go to make up India, the nation’s narrative. Mistry is interested in the vast pattern of interconnections between individuals and community, between times: in the form of memory and spatial locations – the image of jigsaw representing interlinked stories of his characters acquires a talismanic significance (Rebecca, 2005: 30-31). Vilas Rane, like Valmik of Balance, reads and writes stories of misery, caste-violence, government callousness and official arrogance. In other words what Bhabha calls the “scraps, patches and rags of daily life which must be repeatedly turned into signs of a national culture” (Bhabha, 1994: 145) to build up the nation’s narrative. Stories act as a defence against the randomness of life. Valmik in Balance observes, “to share the story redeems everything” (604). Likewise, characters in Matters share each other’s
story of loss and happiness. The relationship between Mr. Kapur and Yezad is more amicable than the employer/employee kind as is the case with Dina and the tailors in Balance. They share their lives in all the odd and good times. Matters is about the imposed patterns and double-edged search for order in the flux at both the individual and the national levels. If the national allegory is considered less as a story of the nation in a finite, self-contained textual space than as a proliferation of stories that go up to make the present day ongoing narrative of India, then a better understanding of our nation or imagined nationhood can be achieved.

Mistry exploits the dual meanings of the word ‘matter’; both as a verb and as a noun at various points in the novel. The following piece of conversation between Roxana and Mr. Rangarajan at the clinic of Dr. Tarapore throws light on the significance of the title. When Roxana says she is just a housewife, Mr. Rangarajan replies:

“Just? Mr. Rangrajan was aghast. “What are you saying, dear lady? Housewifery is a most important calling, requiring umpteen talents. Without housewife there is no home; without home, no family. And without family, nothing else matters, everything from top to bottom falls apart or descends into chaos. Which is basically the malady of the West. Would you not agree, Professor Vakil?”

“I don’t think they have a monopoly,” said Nariman, “We do quite well here too when it comes to creating miserable families” (175).

Mistry’s focus here is on the obsession of the purity of race among the Parsis that has created many miserable families like Nariman’s. The bitterness which Coomy nurses for years mars the happiness of the family even for the second generation. When she conspires to break the plastering of the ceiling of their flat in order to defer the return of her step-father from Roxana’s flat, Jal reluctantly accomplices her in the scheme. He loses his patience and temper when Coomy stretches it too much while bickering with Yezad. He retorts tauntingly when he says,

“I wanted Pappa to stay away, but in a civilized manner ...without fighting, or ruining family relationships.”
“Why should you care? Family does not matter to you! You keep nursing your bitterness instead of nursing papa, I’ve begged you for thirty years to let it go, to forgive, to look for peace” (186).
For Coomy, the family does not matter much while for Jal it does. Coomy thinks that the roots of the trouble are in Nariman’s neglect of his family in the past. He caused suffering for his family by giving undue importance to his pre-marital affair. In another case, it is the family of Roxana that stay united and caring even in the midst of unfavourable conditions and financial problems. Yezad compromises with his moral values and honesty when he brings home the money envelope of Mr.Kapur to help his family, but his conscience bites him and he is not able to sleep at night. When he is awake at midnight drinking soda to release the “tightness round his chest” he sees Murad clandestinely keeping the Christmas gift of Santa Claus for Jehangir in the sock hung by Roxana. Murad had collected the money by cutting on his bus fare by walking down to and from school. Yezad feels very proud of his loving children and he wants to share these happy moments with Roxana; and tell her how his family has proved an anchor, a succour that holds him and supports him even in the midst of all troubles, it is the love and care of his family that matters a lot to him. He feels the contentment and happiness inspite of his worries (364). Similarly, Jal, though single, feels proud of Roxie’s family and especially his nephews; all of them as part of his own family, no matter, he doesn’t have his own. He feels so after the despairing talk of inspector Masalawala and Dr.Fitter about the diminishing number of the Parsees (405). Yezad, despite his warm relations with his father-in-law, is not willing to cooperate in taking the responsibility of Nariman, whom he fondly calls the ‘chief’, even for a few days, but then he changes his attitude and starts considering him a part of his family with compassion for him and concern for his dear Roxie’s strenuous round-the-clock care of her father without a word of grumble. Roxana notices this happy change and feels satisfied that the family does matter for her dear Yezda (410). It is Jal who comes up with a solution for the crucial circumstances his half-sister’s family is passing through. He has already been feeling guilty of what Coomy had made him do; and as he is emotionally attached to Roxana’s family he is ready to share his bigger house Chateau Felicity in which now he is alone after Coomy’s death. The sharing would be a sort of atonement for her/his/their wrong-doings. Yezad appreciates Jal’s decision but as his inclination towards the orthodox ideas increases day by day he, who was a liberal once, becomes intolerant; especially, when he and Murad argue on the matter of religion and endogamy. Sometimes when Jal tries to make peace between Yezad and Murad, he is accused by Yezad of interfering in private family matters. He then onwards rarely opens his mouth. When Roxana
advises Yezad to be fair to Jal and not dominate like Coomy, he says that Jal is free to talk about anything except this one topic (450). It is ironical that Jal who considers Yezad’s family his own is considered an outsider in his family matters.

In *Journey* and *Matters*, “Mistry seeks to create a family realism and a portrait of community inside larger India” with multicultural mosaic. “The social and political context is just an instrument of individual change” (Dodiya, 2006: 94). The individuals accept their fate or destiny as a supreme force and do so with dignity and grace. “For we have learnt along the way that even in a culture riddled with fatalists, the common man holds his head up high and always emerges from battle, relatively unscathed” (Dodiya, 2006: 95). And it is the family of an individual that imparts the strength for sustenance against all odds. Nariman comments, “I’m truly blessed to have such a family. Makes up for all other deficiencies” (117). It would be a very apt point to think of the women-power, fortifying an otherwise disturbed or broken household. Mr. Kapur explains his wife’s contribution for family-welfare when he withdraws his wish to contest the elections: “But family comes first, Yezad, you understand that, family services before public service, my wife reminded me” (294). Not only the minor female characters like Villey Cardmaster but also Coomy and Yasmin are the typical symbols of feminine sacrifice and strength of character surrendering their personal happiness in upholding the family values. But Roxana appears to constitute the most balanced personality of all the significant female characters. In spite of Yezad’s initial reluctance and hostility, Roxana continues to take care of her father without grumbling or complaining unlike Coomy. Delighted by the pleasant and accommodating personality of Roxana, Rangarajan the plasterer, considers her an excellent example of womanhood and upholds the status and the duties of a housewife. Anita Myles explains how Mistry, as a realist, could not ignore the significant role a woman plays in protecting her family and thus in sustaining the community ultimately:

> Family strength, religious observances and social succour in *Family Matters* are indubitably provided by various female characters and while the men are engrossed in fruitless dreams or in reminiscences of the lost glorious past, the women successfully conceal their own frustrations in order to succulate the family (Myles, 2004: 131).
The question “Aren’t you happy?” asked by the concerned Roxana to Jehangir at the very end, in fact, becomes a refrain, though unasked overtly to her sons and husband. This ‘sweet-tempered lady’ wants to see everybody in her family happy. All the characters have sought happiness, or at least stability by following the dictates of duty as far as possible, but they often find that duty comes in conflict with personal inclination or immediate need.

Mistry, in this novel, dwells upon the Parsees’ involvement in tradition, and at the same time reveals Parsee individuals’ and families’ efforts to compromise in the changing patterns of life. But, actually, Mistry emphasises that the struggle and suffering are not limited to just one family but to all others existing in this world as each one survives by making compromises at every step. This comprehensive outlook provides the novel a sense of universal import. Anita Myles similarly voices:

*Conversations, interactions and characters in the novel, sometimes create an erroneous inference that the novelist is more concerned with the survival of the Parsi community only; however, a serious perusal projects the profound idea that no community prospers in isolation and that the entire globe must be accepted as a large family (Myles, 2004: 124).*

Mr. Kapur’s broad-minded idea of a united family traverses upwards from the concept of miniscule nuclear relationship to the broader horizon of close-knit mankind. Mr. Kapur has special affection for Bombay, almost fanatical passion. Bombay, a semblance of a large household for Mr. Kapur, survives due to the spirit of tolerance and acceptance. Having avoided train-travel all along, once Kapur visits the railway platform with a view to observe life around at a time when a train just started moving with several passengers racing alongside to catch it, all succeeding except one who raises his arms which are grabbed by travellers on board miraculously pulling him inside the compartment safely. After witnessing this episode Mr. Kapur observes:

*Whose hands were they, and whose hands were they grasping? Hindu, Muslim, Dalit, Parsi, Christians? No one knew and no one cared. Fellow passengers, that’s all they were (153).*

Mistry globalizes the theme wherever possible by painting a cosmic picture of humanity as a family and thus propagating the concept of multicultural citizenship.
One would construe *Matters* as a narrow focussing on the Parsee experience alone, but viewed in the light of post-colonial criticism and current ethnic studies; it may be perceived from the point of view of the “identitarian politics” (Gandhi, 1998: 126), a text which endeavours to secure a distinct space for Mistry’s community within the hegemonic culture. Contrapuntal reading or reading against the grain becomes all the more important for Mistry’s texts dealing with the marginalised communities. Mistry’s texts can be read as “having been written in those in-between spaces, the Derridian interstices, through which they cross the border between ethnicity and transnationality” (Bharucha, 2003b: 59). Graham Haggan’s talk of “cultural decentralization” and “a shift of emphasis away from the desire for homogeneity towards an acceptance of diversity” (Haggan, 1995: 407-11) in the Australian and Canadian context may sound true for all post-colonial writings in general. In the ongoing process of globalization, the market forces have diluted the sense of belongingness and accelerated the intercultural interaction at the global level. Transnationalism has come to stay, and more and more countries in the West are adopting multiculturalism as a policy. Mistry’s native country India is already a multicultural nation-state and Canada, where he is in diaspora, has passed a “law on multiculturalism according to which the culture of each immigrant community was recognised as essential to its proper development” (Judge, 2003: 5).

The following quote by Jagroop Biring would sum up well:

Mistry’s assertion of ethnicity is to be analysed in the wake of multicultural nation-states and transnational spaces that for him are not fabricated constructs but inexorable processes of changing geopolitical reality. By centre-staging singularities and individuations as parameters of ethnicity, Mistry is in fact celebrating hybridity and multiculturalism by virtue of which *Family Matters* transcends the label of ethnocentrism to be an example of world literature (Biring, 2006: 61).
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