Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

The study argues that several important meanings can be obtained from the conjunction of postcolonial literature (both in the temporal and thematic senses) and nation and nationalism. One of the central thematic concerns of postcolonial literature has been the interrogation of the nation-state, nation and nationalism as political, cultural and historical entities. This consequently involves a foregrounding of these categories in literary writings. The concern with these categories is prominently present in the case of individuals and writers belonging to minority communities dealing with societies divided along racial, religious, cultural, linguistic or other sectarian lines.

Rohinton Mistry’s writings are a serious and meaningful intervention in this theme. His location as a migrant Parsi writer places him in an interesting relationship with postcolonial India. The present study taking a historicist view and taking Mistry’s works to be an alternative form of history traces the meaning of the texts under study by relating the delineation of postcolonial India to the geo-political, cultural and religious location from which they are produced. It is equally an attempt to study the proclivities and specificities of Mistry’s position on nation and nationalism as a Parsi migrant writer as well as the relevance of such an intervention in the larger context of the available discourses on the subject.

Works of postcolonial fiction in English have been understood as national allegories. Rohinton Mistry’s fiction cannot be understood otherwise. At apparent and superficial levels the fiction of contemporary writers like Mistry, Salman Rushdie, V.
S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy and Shashi Tharoor allegorize the national experience to highlight its failure to deliver the promise of equality, justice and human rights in the postcolonial context. The present study has tried to show that the relationship between political theory, literary theory and fiction cannot be understood to be a straight forward one. According to the requirements of the topic, an attempt has been made to juxtapose and relate Mistry’s fiction with some important theories of nation and nationalism with the objective of using one to understand the other or to trace reciprocity in them.

A very cursory survey of the various theories on the concepts of nation and nationalism is enough to reveal that there are as many explanations as there are manifestations of these very important categories in the world today. Marxist, Liberal Humanist, Neo-Liberal on the one hand and Oriental (anti-colonial and postcolonial) and Western on the other apart from subjective/literary and objective/scientific are only some of the various positions from which these categories have been approached. Thus, there is very little consensus in the way these categories are imagined, defined and understood. Different exigencies of political, cultural and economic experiences often mediate efforts to conceptualize them and there can be no universal terms in which they can be explained. This then becomes the basic assumption of the present study.

Secondly, national/nationalist power is today very important both in the local and global senses. It has become the most powerful expression of political and economic power. Originating in the idea of freedom, self rule and emancipation and often drawing sustenance from the belief in nativity (nasce) and fatherland the
nation/nation-state becomes a means of control both economic and political. The almost oxymoronic interfusion of the elements of state (implying monopoly over instruments of force and violence) in that of nation (understood as a homogenous collectivity) become extremely pronounced in the postcolonial nation-states which often lack the naturalness and cohesiveness of nations where territorial and political limits are coeval with the cultural and ethnic ones. Particularly in the context of nation–states, even in a transnational and globalized world economic and cultural order, new and old nationalisms are asserting themselves with a rare vigour. Militant forms of insurgent nationalisms taking the form of terrorist and separatist movements have never been as numerous and common as they are today. In short, nation and nationalism remain trapped in the contestations of power and competition for resources. As nation and nationalism, as pointed out above, also give those in privileged positions, the legitimate right to use violence, they are open to contentiousness.

Mistry and other writers mentioned above give expression to opposition and disillusionment ranging from dissent to protest. At the same time, dissent in the form of literature has to be understood and received with several conditions. The sum total of political and cultural orientations to which the writer owes allegiance, his location as a member of particular religious or ethnic group, the business and commercial necessities of different forms of literatures create the dynamic within which a work materializes. In other words, critiquing and dissent are contingent on the position from where they are voiced. This also leads to the inference that a critique will be informed by both subjective and objective aspects. Although, critical and literary
theory provide theoretical tools of analysis yet the shifts in perspectives of individual writers occupying different locations as insiders and outsiders in relation to the places they critique; in some senses privileged and others not; makes it impractical to equate them or to treat them as identical. The thesis has tried to stress upon the peculiarities of Mistry’s critique which are perceived to typify a particular perspective of a minority community.

As the present thesis concerns itself with postcolonial literature and the postcolonial nation, it has been an endeavour, through the study of theories addressing the question of postcolonial nation, to establish that the possibilities of critiquing this particular category are almost unlimited. The postcolonial nation-state consequent upon the colonial experience opens up a vast range of possibilities of questioning their credentials. The post-war world has, as it is, had to wrestle with epistemological and ontological certitudes which formed the basis of life. Nation and nationalism, just as other aspects of collective experience like religion and morality, have been looked at from new non-conformist positions informed by skepticism linking them less with freedom and justice and more with their power to engender violence; with their having basis in economic imperatives of trade and business and with competitive struggle for global and local resources. The present era of globalization and transnational trade concomitant with expansion of global information technology has only helped to intensify the mood of interrogation. Yet, it remains a fact that it is still difficult to imagine a borderless world or to replace existing identities with a global one.
During the last century, and even before that, major thinkers like Karl Marx, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Tom Nairn, Raymond William and Homi Bhabha to name just a few, have directed their energies at rethinking the categories of nation and nationalism. All of them, from their distinct positions, have offered fresh perspectives which in spite of mutual incompatibilities show a general shift from idealistic and romantic tendencies towards more materialist and historicist one. The script of nation and nationalism has been variously re-read on Marxist lines in which they are construed as expressions of bourgeoisie interests at the level of competing economic blocs or on Foucauldian lines as discursive formations which evolve historically as manifestations of power.

However, it is the theoretical opinion of critics like Edward Said, Montserrat Guibernau, Arundhati Roy etc. on the one hand and Leela Gandhi, Padmani Mongia and Ania Loomba on the other which is of particular relevance in the context of postcolonial nation-states like India. Guibernau, while emphasizing that nation-states as distinct form nations lack the organic cohesiveness where the limits of the political unit are more or less co-terminus with cultural ones also expatiates upon their need to carry out homogenization programmes through creation of a common national culture as well as monopolization of force. Edward Said also forewarns that the binary opposition of the imperial and the native may yield dogmatic forms of nativism and retrieval of religious, civilizational and cultural identities facilitating a substitution of imperial racism with new demarcations based on religion and caste. Critics like Partha Chaterjee and Leela Gandhi have also exposed the disturbing fault lines in postcolonial nationalist enterprises decoding the majoritarian character of nationalist
historiographies and the continuities of institutionalized colonial practices which merely replicate the conformity producing practices of colonialism.

Mistry can most profitably be read by linking his work to some aspects of the critical views mentioned above. Mistry’s fiction indulges in an unremitting criticism of the corrupt, exploitative and repressive national and regional political classes, the uncivilized and generally squalid urban social world, the chauvinistic and exclusionist programmes of fascist political factions like the Shiv Sena and the caste based chronic inequalities of the rural Indian society of India. As has been seen through the discussion on critical theories on nation and nationalism both in postcolonial theory and outside it, postcolonial nation-states suffer from some congenital imperfections. Their having provenance in flawed historiographies; anti-colonial discourses couched in the idiom of religious majorities and the emergence of corrupt political classes exercising rampant repression and cultural policing are only some of the problems which plague these political structures. Such conditions have given rise to postcolonial literature of disillusionment which succeeds the literature of cultural self assertion and celebration of independence in the aftermath of colonialism. Mistry succeeds to a reasonable degree in exposing the threat of communal forces like the Shiv Sena, the highly corrupt political classes and the caste/class ridden rural world. By doing so, Mistry like several other writers like him shows the failure of postcolonial India at social, economic and political levels.

Decolonization, according the meaning implicit in the narratives, is not a simple process of the ouster of the imperial rulers and resumption of self rule on democratic and egalitarian principles; but it also involves the complexities of transfer
and distribution of power; reconfiguration of social and political relations on the axis of power and the re-writing of history in accordance with the new foci of nationalist historiography. Political restructuring is carried out, particularly, in societies like India through an ambivalent process of an appropriation of the native past and assimilation of colonial experience. As justifications for the new regional as well as national entities are sought in dominant religious, linguistic and cultural discourses, the threat to alternative ways of life is felt to increase. Moreover, as the politically engineered exterminations of Major Bilimoria and Avinash and the strategic references to the Delhi anti-Sikh riots and the post-Babri Masjid riots show postcolonial India is represented as a deeply violent. Apart from these while Such a Long Journey is set against the backdrop of war with Pakistan, there are characters that have been displaced by the partition of India and Pakistan in A Fine Balance. The inextricability of overlapping presence of violence in both personal and collective experiences places emphasis on the terror of state power in the life of the nation. Yet, as has asserted before, a critique such as this has to be contextualized in relation to Parsi identity and location. It is difficult to conceive of Parsis as victims as they have not faced systematic victimization and cannot be seen in a Brahmin-Dalit like binary relationship in their immediate context of Bombay.

While it is true that writers like Mistry, Rushdie, Naipaul, Ghosh, Arundhati Roy etc. focus, in their different ways on the deficiencies and flaws of political institutions and policies in their fictional narratives. By portraying the lives and experiences of marginalized groups and individuals in postcolonial nation-states, these writers try to bring out the tragedies of the innocent victims who happen to be born or living in the ‘wrong’ place at the ‘wrong’ time. And, as mentioned in the
study, their writings can specifically be understood as post-Emergency resentment against what is perceived to be the misrule of political classes and the failure of the society to evolve into ideal democratic and civilized societies. It is equally important to note that not only does this form of fiction become a genre in itself but a disproportionately large body of such work is both produced and consumed in the West. In this sense although this fiction attempts to centre-stage the subaltern experience, for obvious reasons it cannot be accepted as an authentic voice of the subaltern.

To this one can add that both literature and fiction cannot be understood literally. Although, contemporary fiction has long shed the label of autonomy and has claimed the right to portray and grapple with socio-political realities – creating interesting combinations of literature and history/literature as history – yet, the position of a literary work has to be arrived at through a study of narrative and artistic choices and the geo-political and economic location of its interventions.

In the present study through an analysis of Parsi history and literature an effort has been made to unravel the problematic of the relationship of the Parsi diaspora with the Indian society in colonial and postcolonial times. While Parsis as an ethnic and religious community have remained almost tenacious in their sense of difference; their position of economic privilege has become restricted to a very small section of the community in the postcolonial times. Mistry is to be understood as the voice of those Parsis in postcolonial India, who have an acute consciousness of the loss of a privileged social and economic status. There is in all the three novels a comparison and contrast of the facts of the present times and the memories of the past. While the
present is portrayed as inimical both to the Parsis and the economically underprivileged and minority sections the past is something that is idealized and longed for. The study accounts for the fact that Mistry’s narratives while maintaining a discreet silence about the experience in the West, are equally evasive about the political and social character of the colonized societies. When Mistry deals with the Parsi past through the memories of members of the older generation like Gustad and Nariman, he does not locate their experiences in the socio-political context of the colonial times. This has to be theorized as a selective elision. In some sections of A Fine Balance which are located in pre-Independence India, the writer rather than capturing a comprehensive picture of a colonized society’s struggle for freedom restricts himself to delineating the rise of communal sentiments, the beginning of riots and the rise of outfits like the R.S.S. A mood of pessimism and grimness that pervades all the three novels also arises from the Parsi community’s gradual progress towards extinction. Internal problems like loss of economic privilege, individualism, late marriages or choosing to remain single, low birth rate and archaic laws governing inter-community marriages can also be held to be responsible for a dark world view that the novels seem to offer. The Parsi world is shown to consist mainly of three types of characters. There are people of the older generation of Parsis like Nariman Gustad and Dinshawji who have experienced the transition from the colonial to postcolonial times. These characters are severely critical of the present times and nostalgic about the past. Memories of a glorious world which has been lost persistently clash with the ugliness of the present times. The second and younger generation of Parsis like Yezad, Maneck and Sohrab are more alienated than the older
generation. They have no past to look back to and refuse to accept the conditions of life they find around them. Their existential crisis gets compounded by the fact that they do not have hope of a good future or economic security for themselves. Sohrab’s rebellion is in equal measure against the social and political world as against his own father, whose obsession about sending him to IIT is repugnant to him. Sohrab, while being overly concerned about his individualist choices cannot appreciate the socio-economic factors that contribute to his father’s worries about him. Similarly, Maneck’s entry into Bombay/Mumbai is also necessitated by the change in the fortunes of the family. The character of these crises act as good examples of Mistry’s perpetual attempts at tracing the roots of personal problems to the changes in the socio-economic world. The younger generation of Parsis also show a desire for migrating to other countries. It can be said that these Parsis of the younger generation come very close to Mistry himself as he also migrated to Canada at a very young age. The third type of Parsi characters is best exemplified by Jal and Coomy in *Family Matters*. The unmarried and eccentric brother and sister leading a life of withdrawal are representative of maladjustment of the worst order. Their idiosyncratic behavior and almost complete withdrawal can be attributed both of the internal problems of the Parsi community and their failure to cope with the altered socio-political conditions. As has been said above, it has been brought out by the present study that Mistry makes an effort to trace the reasons for the personal problems in the socio-political conditions. The most conspicuous example of this is the number of accidents that ultimately lead to devastation of personal lives.
Another important issue in reading Mistry is the critical opinion about his use of realist mode of narration. It is clear that Mistry’s use of realism coheres with his liberal humanist belief in pre-discursive experience. It also aligns with his need to valorize Parsi religious and ethnic identity as important as it does with his desire for justice and equality in a generalized and universal sense. Although, there are conspicuous postmodernist elements in his novels – his assertion of ethnic and religious difference, avoiding a strictly linear narrative, a free interweaving of historical facts with fictional ones – his realism gets manifested in holding experience as real and pre-discursive, representations as true and history as absolute. This dimension of his work takes him at some distance from a purely Foucauldian position which would read nation and its historical evolution and the question of power as arrested in language thus discounting the importance of experience. Thus, Mistry’s choice of the convention of realism is of central importance to his politics. This is possibly a way of minimizing the indeterminacies of experience that may result from several factors like his residence in the West; his compliance to the political and business compulsions of the conventions of diasporic English fiction for global audience written on indigenous experience and the idiosyncrasies of individual narratives. It is equally important to recognize in this the need to retain the reader as consumer and non-participating receiver and an avoidance of presenting the text as a construct but as a natural reflection of reality.

It has been the aim of the present study, through a prolonged comparison, between Rushdie and Mistry to show that Mistry has no intention of radically destabilizing the social and political institutions or in any way de-center the human
subject. As such the ideas of journey and movement remain an existential problematic and do not assume ludic connotations for conceiving a reality where the human subject is subservient and subject to discursive formations. The avoidance of linearity in the narrative and a confused jostling between past and present, history and fiction and the personal and the political can be linked to uncertainly about the meaning of life and not merely to experimentation and playfulness connected with postmodernist self-reflexivity. Mistry continues to hold the nation as important for delivery of justice and basic human rights. His critique of postcolonial India is not premised on a radical distrust of the categories of nation and nationalism.

On the basis of the above aspects of Mistry’s writings it can be said that he oscillates between the particular and the universal. The last chapter of the thesis tries to listen to the many voices in which he speaks. The valorization of Parsi identity in opposition to a rather homogenized Maratha social world, the criticism of the political leaders whose unconscionable greed impedes in the way of the achievement of democratic goals, his upholding of universal liberal humanist values and his rare attempt at portraying caste-ridden rural India – all make him readjust his language and narrative. The last chapter focuses on what can be described as re-appropriation of English in the context the import of English into the cosmopolitan centre and neo-orientalist orientations of print capitalism in the neo-liberal era. There are objective reasons for a critique like Mistry’s which are rooted in the inherent weaknesses of postcolonial nation-states like their majoritarian character which is unaccomodative of vulnerable sections and their failure to create democratic and just societies. At the same time the critique has to be linked to the location of the Parsis as a minority. At
yet another level, Mistry is a prominent writer of the canon of Indian writing in English being produced from the West. Mistry’s use of an appropriated english is in line with his overall objective of the valorization of Parsi identity which happens to be an obscure minority in postcolonial India. In this sense a liberal use of expressions related with Parsi religion and culture are incorporated into the text as a way of asserting difference and as a way of contending with majoritarian nationalist discourses. But more or less homogenized depiction of the selective aspects of Maratha character and social life and a rather unrefined delineation of the rural world of India with character types like Dukhi and his wife can be understood as the by now familiar requirements of the canon of writings about India.

It can thus be said that the theoretical probing of nation and nationalism has become intense given the new intellectual currents and modes of thinking. Postcolonial nations and nationalisms are not only less cohesive but have failed to deliver the promise of equality and justice. They are at a distant remove from their conception in anti-colonial discourses of nation and nationalism. They have also brought into existence new margins as they are conceived on majoritarian lines. These conditions create the necessity and possibility of critiquing them. Mistry’s writings are an example of this. However, Mistry’s critique is strongly informed by the imperatives of its location. Mistry’s project of valorization of Parsi identity, his role as a native informant, his selective portraiture of only the darker side of India and the business compulsions of neo-orientalist print capitalism make it a critique which has to be read under these conditions.
In the end it can be concluded that Mistry presents the nation as omnipresent and invasive; irredeemable and intimidative; as undemocratic, corrupt and cruel. Such a representation or history grants salience to selective aspects in line with Mistry’s identity as a Parsi and his location in the West. Without discounting the importance of his writings as interventions having a fair amount of objectivity, it has to be conceded that portraiture of the underbelly of the Indian political and social world and the disturbing aspects of its chequered history would make more saleable material in relation to the audience which is largely cosmopolitan, elitist and located in the West. Such a depiction would be equally satisfying to the political unconscious of a disgruntled and beleaguered community used to preferential treatment but having to reconcile with a much reduced status in social and political world. One certainly cannot escape a certain bleakness and pessimism in such an account. Mistry’s silence on the very important issue of political and cultural independence from colonial rule through a nationalist project and his valorization of the colonial past as a glorious period of Parsi history; his eliding over preexisting inequalities which created the space for the emergence of regional forces like the Shiv Sena and the process of the appropriation of such regional forces for parochial and divisive politics; his almost unrefined representation of the caste system in rural India – all these hint towards some tactical adjustments and a deliberately assumed naivety. A citable symptom of such adjustments would be that while Mistry critiques the newspaper rather reductively for its almost abstract and direct correspondence with nationalist interests he does not sufficiently historicize the newspaper as a part of print capitalism of which his fiction is also a part. The economic interests and forces which determine the
functioning of mass media as a whole and its numerous alignments with economic 
and political powers at national and global levels are insufficiently accounted for. 
There is a subjectivity (Mistry’s own or collective Parsi subjectivity) which is behind 
a portrayal which is concrete and abstract in equal measure.