Chapter 2

ROHINTON MISTRY: IDENTITY, LOCATION, POSITION

“If God had so wished, he could have made all Indians speak one language…the unity of India has been and shall always be a unity in diversity.”

(Tagore, qtd. in Bandyopadhyay 138)

The question of quintessential belonging to a nation is always subject to doubts especially in postcolonial nation-states like India. As discussed in the first chapter, there are so many reasons, justifications and ways of breaching national affiliations. Naturally enough, the nationality of Parsis residing in India or of those who migrated from India to other places has to be attached to several caveats. But the second and more important supposition would be that Indianness is in itself quintessentially linked to certain ideological and socio-cultural premises as well as to the question of geographical and historical location. Or still further to a belief that nationalities can never be taken as real but are always premised.

“It is difficult to generalise about nationalism because none of the factors we might think of as responsible for forging national consciousness—language, territory, a shared past, religion, race, customs—are applicable in every instance. However, even as we know that each case of nationalism is unique, we do need to make linkages between different histories of the nation, and look for general patterns, if any. What, after all, makes a nation different from other sorts of communities?” (Loomba156)

Mistry’s fiction can broadly be understood as one which analyzes the crisis in Parsi life in postcolonial India. As becomes clear through the various aspects of his
novels, the crisis facing the Parsi community - a religio-ethnic minority of India - arises both from their altered socio-economic conditions in the new political circumstances coming into existence in post-Independence India as well as from the internal problems of a closed and demographically shrinking/challenged community facing multiple displacements. This chapter attempts to locate Parsi community in Indian history of colonial and postcolonial times in order to gain a perspective from which the specificities of Mistry’s engagement with India through the medium of his novels can be read.

John Hinnells and Alan Williams, in the “Introduction” to their edited book *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, trace significant factors and events that constitute Parsi past and, more or less, shape their present. They begin by highlighting the exceptional character of this versatile community: “The Parsis of India are a community which can often only be described in terms of superlatives” (1). Zoroastrianism, their religion, is one of the world’s oldest religious traditions, still the Parsis are now India’s smallest community. Despite their small population, they are among those who have “exercised the greatest influence on the subcontinent, having been foremost in so many areas all out of proportion to their demographic size” (Hinnells and Williams 1). Zoroastrianism takes its name from the ancient Iranian prophet Zoroaster, who is variously dated to have lived between 1400 and 1200 BCE. Parsis are documented to have been very powerful in early part of their history. Their religion was the state religion of three Iranian empires – Achaemenian, Parthian and Sasanian – for more than a thousand years. According to Hinnells and Williams, the ancestors of the Parsis had to leave their native land in the “face of Islamic
persecution after the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century, and perhaps being aware of trading opportunities on the coast of north-west India”, the community migrated to the Indian Subcontinent some twelve hundred years ago (1). Initially, the Parsis were able to adapt well to their new environment as agriculturists, artisans and small-scale merchants and they had a relatively peaceful and secure existence.

With the arrival of European trading companies in India in the seventeenth century, the entrepreneurship inherent in the Parsi spirit saw greater opportunities for success in business, trade and in the new avenues created by the rise in international trade. As the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British came and established their business establishments, the Parsis moved away from their traditional occupations and settlements to take advantage of the new opportunities. Bombay came under the English control in 1662 and the Parsis migrated in increasing numbers to this “new base free of Moghul rule and Maratha raids”. One very attractive feature of a close association with the English for the Parsis was the policy of “freedom of religion and equal justice before the law” adopted by the English regime at that time (Hinnells and Williams 1). It helped attract and encourage minorities to migrate to major centres of trade. As a result of this Parsis came to and prospered in Bombay as it emerged as a cosmopolitan city from the early eighteenth century onwards. Initially most of the Parsi migrants acted as the middlemen for European traders but many of them eventually established themselves as independent businessmen.

The East India Company brought missionaries to their colonies and education was adopted as a means of spreading Christianity and English way of life and value system for training native associates to serve the Company’s economic and political
interests better. Parsis benefited from both, and subsequently they became “perhaps the most westernized community in all of South Asia”. Hinnells and Williams stress the success, prosperity and contribution of Parsis under the English regime:

In terms of trade and commerce they were unparalleled in their success and, consistent with their traditional values, they were the most generous benefactors to public charity in the history of pre-Partition India… They built and ran the Bombay dockyard, and they were India’s leading ship owners; they were pioneers in education, social reform and medicine in the nineteenth century…. They were leaders in banking and commerce, law… medicine, journalism, and were very influential in politics. They were, therefore, pioneers in colonial India…. they contributed some of India’s great leaders through out the twentieth century. (Hinnells and Williams 2)

This aspect of Parsi history is dramatized in detail by Amitav Ghosh in River of Smoke, a novel located in early nineteenth century. But despite their immense contribution to the Indian sub-continent having lived here for more twelve hundred years, the Parsis tend to retain and assert their unique cultural and religious identity – a feature which gets overt representation in Mistry’s fiction. Consequently, they see themselves, and are seen by others, as outsiders and migrants still pining for their long lost traditions. In this sense, Parsis are a diasporic community. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries “new Parsi settlements have grown up in the New World, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and later in the Gulf States” (Hinnells and Williams 2-3).
Novy Kapadia, a noted Parsi theorist, defining his community as an ethno-religious minority in India asserts that they should ideally be addressed as Parsi-Zoroastrians – a term which covers both their identity as Zoroastrians and as natives of ‘Pars’ or ‘Fars’, an ancient Persian province in southern Iran (9). The texts under study are overcast with a palpable sense of loss which is a result of successive displacements and the difficulties of identification with alien places of residence after exile from the original home. Novy Kapadia mentions that according to the 1997 census the Parsi population in India is just 75-80 thousand in number (10). Giving the details of the distribution of the Parsi population the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, citing the 1976 census, reveals that the largest surviving group of about 91 thousand Parsis resides in India; the second largest group is in Iran consisting of about 30 thousand Parsis.

There are sizable groups in the U.S.A., Canada, Britain and Pakistan and smaller ones in several other Asian and African countries (Kapadia et al. 23). Referring to an article “Parsis Struggle in Grim Battle against Extinction” by Madhavankutty Pillai, published in the Asian Age of 13 May 1997, Kapadia reveals that the Parsi population in India has declined from about 1,14,890 in 1951 to approximately 80,000 in 1997. “The community in India… is decreasing at an alarming rate and if the community's population trend continues, in 150 years, there may be no more Parsis”. Trying to find the reasons for this decline, Kapadia points to “prosperity, extreme individualism, urbanization, late marriages, low birth rate and antique laws about not accepting the children of Parsi women married outside the community into the fold” (Kapadia 16). In fact, as has been discussed below, the
paradox of the co-existence of a very rigid orthodoxy with modernity in the Parsi community has been one of the major concerns of critics and observers. Rohinton Mistry’s novels also offer an intensive scrutiny of this aspect of Parsi life through a thorough probing of the Parsi way of life. Having their genesis in the perceived fear of the entire community becoming politically irrelevant, demographically miniscule and that of receding into economically and socially unprivileged position, the novels of Rohinton Mistry, in one of their important aspects, are an attempt to record the various dimensions of Parsi life after India’s independence. Such a history interweaves past with present, history with fiction and the personal with the political.

The all pervasive alienation, sense of loss, pessimism, and a haunting memory of a glorious past, pervading most narratives of Rohinton Mistry, are also closely related to issues of nationality and belonging. These can be best understood in terms of his community’s long and troubled history.

Historically too, Parsis have been a diasporic community defined on religious as well as ethnic lines. In the Indian context also, the Parsi identity materializes both around religion and ethnicity. Parsis are the larger one of the two Zoroastrian communities that migrated from ancient Persia due to religious persecution at the hands of Muslims. Iranis are the second and smaller Zoroastrian community and are believed to have migrated much later than the Parsis and also under a different set of compulsions. There is little agreement about the exact time of the arrival of the Parsis in India. The Story of Sanjan, written in 1599 by the Parsi priest Behman Kaikobad Sanjana and Qisseh-i Zartushtian-i Hindustan, written by Parsi Shapurji Maneckji Sanjana between 1765 and 1805; two narrative works in Persian are among the most
reliable existing accounts of the history of Parsis’ exodus from Iran and settlement in India (Palsetia 3). These accounts based on verbal transmissions give both the 8th century and the 10th centuries as the dates for the arrival of the Parsis in India (Eduljee).

Nilufer E. Bharucha too acknowledges this lack of consensus about the Parsi arrival in India. She writes, “The exact dates of these landings is disputed by historians and dates as far apart as 756 C.E. and 936 C.E. have been suggested by different schools of historians” (25). Novy Kapadia, tries to settle the question of their arrival in India by citing the eighth century A.D. as the time when they first landed at the Port of Diu after the collapse of the Persian empire in the battle of Nahawand in 642 A.D. The reason for their flight from Iran is generally not a matter of disagreement. It is believed that the Persian Empire crumbled under the onslaught of Islamic invasions. As the Arabs gradually came to control Persia, Islam replaced Zoroastrianism. Religious persecution, thus, is cited as the foremost reason for the flight of the Zoroastrians from the aggressive Islamic regime. The choice of Diu in Gujarat as the place of refuge was due to both to its proximity and centuries old trade ties (Bharucha 25). The article compiled by the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, Jashan, titled “Getting to Know Parsi Zoroastrians,” explains why India became the preferred destination after the exodus from Iran. According to this article, the reasons lay not only in geographical proximity but also in pre-existing cultural and commercial ties. The article goes on to say that, “historians even believe that there were Zoroastrians in India before the refugees came by sea…” (Parsi Fiction 23).
For several centuries, after their arrival in India, the Parsis were more commonly known as Zarathoshti. Palsetia writes, “The Zoroastrians of India came to be known as Parsis i.e. ‘Persians’ (inhabitants of the Iranian province of Persis, modern Fars) and as their name implies, for the Parsis, the sense of their ancestral past remains both relevant and important. The parsis also refer to themselves as ‘Zarathuastrians’, ‘Zarthosti’, ‘Mazdayasnans’, to signify their religious identity as followers of the message of Zarathustra and as worshippers of Ahura Mazda (Palsetia 3). However, later, there occurs a shift in preference from the religion designator Zarathoshti to Parsi which is an indicator both of religion and ethnicity (Palsetia 3).

According to Bharucha, the term ‘Parsi’ could be a derivative of Farsi, the language spoken by Zoroastrian Persians or it could refer to Pars the Southern Iranian Province (25).

According to available historical records also, the Parsis hail from central Asia constituting parts of what is today’s North-Eastern Iran, Northern Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Prophet Zarathustra was himself born in a region lying in present day Russia. The Parsis were members of the glorious Sassanid Empire in Zoroastrian dominated period. Over centuries, the Paris got integrated into the Indian society but even while doing so they tenaciously held on to their customs and traditions.

The community shares an ethnic character which can be explained in terms of linguistic peculiarities, family structure, eating habits, sartorial preferences. The figure on the cover of Family Matters is recognized as a Parsi from the style of his suit and the trademark sola topi. Parsi characters in Hindi Cinema are also identifiable
from their heavily Gujarati accented Hindi, their manner of wearing clothes and the angularities of behaviour. Anjali Gera Roy and Meena Pillai also note that the “stereotype of the Parsi in the Indian imaginary is that of the amusing but harmless bawa whose eccentricities the larger majority is willing to indulge with typical Indian tolerance. Mistry’s fiction enters the skin of the bawa to reply to the stereotype and represents his community with an interiority and compassion not visible before” (22-23). It can be said that their ethnic credentials come into existence in both the senses of a numerically disadvantaged minority group and as a people that shares a cultural tradition. In the case of the Parsis, the ethnic character of the community has undergone several transmutations and the common traditions, sartorial and linguistic traits and, to some extent, even their religious practices have evolved through their multiple experiences and displacements. On their arrival in India the Parsis suffered what can be described as a cultural loss because the local ruler - his name differently spelt in different sources as Jadav Rana, Jadhav Rana or Jadi Rana - allowed them entry only on the following conditions:

1. The nature of their religion would have to be explained to the ruler.
2. The Parsis would discontinue the use of their language and adopt the local language.
3. The Parsi women would adopt the local dress – the sari.
4. The men would lay down their weapons.
5. Like the Hindus, the wedding ceremony would be solemnized in the dark (Bharucha 25-26).
These conditions involved a serious cultural loss for the Parsis. Facts like the one that even to this day people of other religions are not allowed inside the Fire Temple are evidence that at cultural and religious levels Parsis have maintained a discrete distance with the local traditions. While their effortless adopting of the Indian dress and language is a proof of their spirit of adaptability; the situation can also be construed from other perspectives like the one expressed by Bharucha. Bharucha traces the reasons for what can be described as cultural alienation felt by the Parsis to these strictures and restrictions imposed by the king. It will be discussed later in the chapter that there integration at political and economic levels was greater as compared to cultural and religious ones. Bharucha writes:

These unequal conditions provided fertile breeding ground for feelings of ambivalence and alienation from the host country. This ambivalence and alienation became exacerbated during the colonial period, when the Parsis were among the first to embrace English language education and become the most westernized Indian community. (qtd. in Kapadia 16)

The reasons for yet more intense and ‘exacerbated’ sense of alienation among the Paris in the postcolonial times when India acquires the status of a democratic nation-state becomes one of the central issues in Mistry’s fiction. Kapadia acknowledges this problem of increasing alienation and identity crises both among those who chose to migrate to the West as well as those who stayed back. While in the West they are indistinguishable from other Asian communities, “In India, as is reflected in the works of Rohinton Mistry, Dina Mehta, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai and Bapsi Sidhwa, this minority community has to cope with the hegemonic forces of the dominant community” (Kapadia 16).
Followers of Zoroastrianism faced religious persecution at the hands of Arab invaders in Persia from where they fled to take refuge in India. The memory of their exodus from Persia and the consciousness of loss of home becomes an important motif in all the three novels of Mistry. Their status as a diasporic community however is not informed by a desire for or a memory of the original home – the place of nativity. Home in the novels of Rohinton Mistry is more closely connected with the ideas of shelter, space, security, privacy, independence and even withdrawal and escape. It is projected as one of the basic human rights bestowing dignity to existence in modern societies. Another fact that adds to the peculiarity of Paris is that their numerical and demographic disadvantages turned them into a community which clearly lacked political ambition and did not aspire for power in the new and emerging political structures in postcolonial India. Yet, the Parsi mind is strongly endowed with a sense of distinct religious identity.

The novels of Rohinton Mistry can be placed in several paradigms and traditions. First and foremost, they can be received as the continuation of the Parsi literary tradition, especially the one beginning with their arrival in India and extending over pre-colonial, colonial to postcolonial periods. The literary and cultural expressions of this ethno-religious minority have reflected the changing dynamics of their relation to their place of sojourn. In the period preceding British imperialism, there is almost insignificant literary activity. This can be attributed to two reasons. One of these could be the fact that as a diasporic and displaced community, it took them some time to settle down and create a socio-economic niche for themselves. This finds mention in Bharucha when she writes, “…the apparent lack of a literary tradition could be viewed as a natural diasporic phenomenon – where the displaced
community has to first come to terms with its new environment” (29). Bharucha further says that the second factor that could have “deepened the silence” of the Parsis in the pre-colonial times is that India, after the thirteenth century, came under the sway of their erstwhile persecutors - the Muslims. This, according to Barucha could have made the community more insecure leading to a lull or hiatus in cultural and literary activity and a retreat into obscurity (30).

There is also evidence that during this period the Parsis were preoccupied in coming to terms with their altered situation and making efforts to preserve their religious identity. The Rivayats, the collection of a series of letters exchanged between the Indian and Iranian Parsi priests between 1478 and 1766, are documents that went a long way in resolving the confusions and dilemmas over religious questions riddling the minds of Parsis, afraid of their religion getting diluted. Kissah-e-Sanjn, (or The Story of Sanjan, mentioned above) has as its theme an account of the Parsi arrival in India and a eulogy of Parsi character as witnessed in their forbearance of their endless travails (Bharucha 30). These texts of pre-colonial times have a characteristic diasporic stamp. Bharucha notes that these texts possess some essential diasporic characteristics like “the fostering of the motherland myth, insecurity and sense of alienation from the host country” (31). Yet, Parsi consciousness as it develops during these years does not show any desire for a return to the homeland. There is centre-staging of the religious identity and of the shared memory of flight from Iran in the construction of their new identity.

There is a significant increase in Parsi literary production in the colonial period. Nilufer Bharucha opines that the urban Parsis were becoming anglicised in the nineteenth century and there was “considerable debate among the Parsis about
widening gulf between the Gujrati-speaking rural Parsis... the English-speaking, Westernised, urban Parsis” (34). In the second half of the nineteenth century figures like Behram Malabari (1853-1912) emerged on the literary scene. In his journalistic writings, travelogues and poetry he offered the unique perspective of a ‘Parsee-Hindu’ as he described himself. This clearly is evidence of their relatively greater integration into the Indian society in the colonial times. Malabari commented with a lot of liberty on social and political issues, sometimes to the chagrin of the Hindus, who considered his literary interventions in the Hindu society to be an unwelcome interference (Bharucha 37). Among other Parsi writers who wrote during the colonial period are Cornelia Sorabji, a social reformer and novelist who had converted to Christianity; Fredoon Kabarji and A.F. Khabardar, both poets; Jamshedji N. Petit and Jehangir B. Marazban, who wrote Gujarati poetry and playwrights like C.S. Nazir, D.M. Wadia and P.P. Meharjee. Of these Cornelia Sorabji is notable for her advocacy of social reform in the Hindu society. Her *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901) is a feminist espousal of the cause of women in conservative and feudal Indian society. Fredoon Kabarji, modelling his poetry on English verse of the time, wrote mostly on apolitical ideas; his collection of poems is titled *A Minor Georgian’s Swan Song*. On one occasion, however, from his doubly diasporic location in England, he wrote *The Patriots* which deals with the hanging of three young Indian nationalists, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev (Bharucha 40).

The Parsis during the period of India’s struggle for independence have been known to have openly identified with the cause of India’s independence. Several notable Parsi figures feature in the list of Indian freedom fighters. K.F. Nariman was an ardent promoter of the swadeshi movement, DadabhaiNaoroji was one of the
founders of the Indian National Congress and Sir Dinshaw Eduljee Wacha was the president of the Indian National Congress at its 1901 session. Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, the Vice Chancellor of the Bombay University also played an active role in Indian Freedom Movement.

While Mistry’s lineage can be traced back to the Parsi writers of the pre-colonial times, such a genealogy is liable to suffer from several disruptions and discontinuities. In the case of the writers mentioned above there is comparatively greater assimilation with their social context which is visible in their espousal of social causes, their consciousness of nationalist aspirations under the British rule and their relatively uninhibited intervention in Hindu practices. Although, there is continuity in terms of religious consciousness Mistry’s identification with and proximity to these writers almost ends there. The dissimilarities between Mistry and these earlier writers are more glaring than the affinities they share. The socio-political context of postcolonial India, the altered condition of the Parsis in the emerging socio-political and cultural context after India’s Independence and the new set of conditions governing the migration of the Parsis to the West all produce fresh conditions for a new culture of writing.

Bill Ashcroft, in his book *Post-Colonial Transformation*, discusses the complex and diverse ways in which different societies have negotiated their colonial past and have shaped their post-colonial present. Warning against a simplistic evaluation of colonial and postcolonial experience, he observes: “the striking thing about colonial experience is that after colonization postcolonial societies did very often develop in ways which sometimes revealed a remarkable capacity for change and adaptation. A common view of colonization, which represents it as an
unmitigated cultural disaster, disregards the often quite extraordinary ways in which colonized societies engaged and utilized imperial culture for their own purposes” (2). Obviously, Ashcroft attempts to look at colonial experience from a Bhabhaesque perspective of mimicry and hybridity. But it is important to remember here that “Postcolonialism, then, is a word that is useful only if we use it with caution and qualifications” (21).

Whereas, foregrounding and reading the continuities of colonial experience as mimicry either in the context of the Parsis or that of other dominant and marginal communities of India would only help to occlude the more important question of the possibilities of oppression in hegemonic conditions; it can with great caution be said the socio-economic privileges of the colonial period and subsequent migrations to the West bring about a different set of dynamics for the Parsis. There is no doubt that the colonial rule was a period of plethora of opportunities in comparison to the life in Independent India as a microscopic minority community, particularly in Mumbai which is the locale of most of Mistry’s narratives and where most Indian Parsis live.

It is thus borne out that different communities have responded in their different ways to the political and cultural dominance of Europe and to the changes facilitated in the postcolonial period. The generally held position of most nationalist historians and political thinkers is that colonialism destroyed native cultures, languages and literature along with the executing an economic plunder. For Parsis, in colonial Mumbai, the central concern, unlike other colonised communities was not a perception of threat to ethnic and religious identity and uniqueness due to colonial dominance. On the contrary their persecution and fear of extinction get materialized in the postcolonial nation-state, at the hands of extreme right-wing groups like the
Shiv Sena and the corrupt political and administrative system. And this is what has occupied Mistry’s attention in most of his work. “A common strategy of post-colonial self-assertion has been the attempt to rediscover some authentic pre-colonial cultural reality in order to redress the impact of European imperialism” (Ashcroft 3). This urge to search for an identity uncorrupted by the recent past and the material constraints is also visible in all the male protagonists of Mistry’s characters. But this aspect is shown to assume fanatic proportions particularly when they find the challenges of life to too formidable and turn towards religion and withdrawal from society.

The kind of aggressive nationalism that Shiv Sena pursues in Mumbai, targeting and terrorising ethnic minorities and migrants, can be best understood in terms of Seamus Deane’s observation about Irish nationalism:

All nationalisms have a metaphysical dimension, for they are all driven by an ambition to realize their intrinsic essence in some specific and tangible form. The form may be a political structure or a literary tradition. Although the problems created by such an ambition are sufficiently intractable in themselves, they are intensified to the point of absurdity when a nationalist self-conception imagines itself to be the ideal model to which all others should conform…. That is a characteristic of colonial and imperial nations. (8-9)

This very meaningful inference of Deane’s when read in conjunction with Leela Gandhi’s statement quoted in the first chapter that the limits of resistance and the post-colonial nation and nationalism get translated in their assuming the role and function of “conformity producing prison-house which reverses, and merely replicates, the old colonial divisions of racial consciousness” helps one re-configure
the questions of mimicry and continuation (81). It also helps settle the new dynamic within which Mistry’s writings are to be placed. The double context of loss of privilege and the rise of ultra-nationalist forces in the postcolonial times along with new migrations to the West are some factors which help define this new culture of writing. The hegemonic nationalists attempt to “universalize themselves” and view every other group with suspicion. In response, insurgent nationalisms come up and “attempt to create a version of history for themselves in which their intrinsic essence has always manifested itself, thereby producing readings of the past that are as monolithic as that which they are trying to supplant” (Deane 9). Both the hegemonic nationalism and challenging others are based on what Deane Seamus calls “metaphysical essentialism” which “has been able… to tell a characteristically modern (or modernist) story, with a power and persuasiveness …. the story of the fall of modern humankind from a state of bliss into the peculiarly modern condition of alienation” (9). In its extreme form, this nationalism results in a process of radical dispossession, marginalization and denigration of identity. This is the kind of world Mistry deals with in his fiction.

Often literary critics tend to classify, describe and evaluate authors like Rohinton Mistry under the rubric of postcoloniality, a term that has been much debated. Despite its wide spread use, the term ‘postcolonial’ (or its derivatives ‘postcolonialism’ and ‘postcoloniality’) is rather vague, meaning and implying different locations, ideological positions and visions of history to different people. “Even in the temporal sense, the word postcolonial cannot be used in any single sense… The term is not only inadequate to the task of defining contemporary realities in the once-colonised countries, and vague in terms of indicating a specific period of
history, but may also cloud the internal social and racial differences of many societies” (Loomba12-13).

The term postcolonial has different meanings in different contexts referring to historical periods and political contexts at one place and to different literary works and processes of academic and aesthetic representation and specific sociocultural and psychological conditions at another.

Different critics and writers respond differently to this term depending on the own location and political orientation. While many from Homi K. Bhabha to Ashcroft, inspired by post-structuralism and deconstruction find this term as a proper way far representing the historical experiences of once colonised Third World societies, others like Aijaz Ahmad and Ama Ata Aidoo disturbed by the periodicity implied by the term that appears to take the focus away from the present social economic and political inequalities, to a past that too is suggested to be over, find the title deceptive for fallaciously camouflaging unequal global power structures controlling the former colonies in the neo-colonial and imperialistic economic and political world order. Ama Ata Aidoo observes "applied to Africa, India, and some other parts of the world, ‘postcolonial’ is not only a fiction, but a most pernicious fiction, a cover-up of a dangerous period in our people’s lives" (qtd. by Mongia, 1). These reservations gain weight from the fact that most so-called postcolonial theoreticians are located in the Western/American Academy and more or less accept the contemporary America dominated world order, focusing on culture rather than political, economic or military domination. For most of them colonial rule did not result in decolonization but in equally oppressive neo-colonial political and economic structures offered under impressive names like globalization and restructuring.
The term postcolonial literature has been deployed in recent years “to replace what earlier went on the names of ‘third world’ or ‘Commonwealth’ literature, to describe colonial discourse analysis, to detail the situations of migrant groups within First World states, and to specify up oppositional reading practices” (Mongia 2). If one takes into account the social, economic and political hierarchies that have different levels and structures in different geographical and historical locations in a vast country like India, the homogenising aspect of the term ‘postcolonial’ appears even more disturbing as a tool for description or contextualising of literary works or authors. Mistry’s critique of post-Independence Indian nation-state needs to be understood as a discourse from the perspective of a diasporic member of the alienated and disillusioned ethnic minority. A novel like Such a Long Journey portrays geographical location where regionalism and parochial sentiments run very high, due to the manipulation of political and administrative institutions and the public opinion for narrow selfish political ambitions by certain individuals, symbolised by Indira Gandhi at the national level and Shiv Sena at the local level.

Loomba rightly observes that the term ‘postcolonial’ does not apply to “those at the bottom end” of the socio-economic hierarchy, who are still “at the far economic margins of the nation-state so that nothing is ‘post’ about their colonisation (13). Moreover, as has been said in the first chapter and as will be re-iterated later it is difficult to accept any form of postcolonial literature as an absolute representation of the whole ‘postcolonial’ reality. In Loomb’s opinion, the ‘internal fractures and divisions’ are important if ‘postcolonialism’ is to be “anything more than a term signifying a technical transfer of governance” (14). Independence from the colonial
rule did not bring the social and political benefits for the ordinary citizens the hopes for which were roused by the nationalist rhetoric of anti-colonial struggle. And the disenchantment with the political system that had failed to deliver was manifest as early as the late sixties in form of movements like Naxalism in many part of India. This mood also got reflected in literary works like Grish Karnad’s Kannada and English play Tughlaq (1964) or poems of revolutionary Punjabi poet Pash (1950-88).

Highlighting yet another aspect of postcolonial theory, Mongia writes, “Postcolonial theory… problematises the nation-state and its ideologies and reveals the difficulties of conceiving the nation even as an ‘imagined community’” (5). The newly independent nation-states like India and Pakistan made available the benefits of freedom only selectively and unevenly. The end of colonial rule did not mean the end of colonial institutions or power centres: most of the individuals and groups that got the control of the new nationstates were already privileged and were entrenched in corridors of power. So political ‘freedom’ did not automatically bring about changes for the better for the minority communities or “in the status of women, the working class or the peasantry in most colonised countries” (Loomba 16). The end of the colonial rule proved rather disadvantageous for the Parsis because they were doing very well during the British rule.

In this sense, it would be more appropriate to think of postcolonialism “not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (Loomba 16). The inequities of the contemporary world order need to be understood from the perspective of neo-imperial world order, dominated by globalised capital and complex
ethnic, religious and political conflicts all over the world. Foregrounding of the colonial past accompanying the use of the term ‘postcolonial’ hinders rather aiding the process of proper appreciation of the contemporary socio-cultural realities. Opposition to colonial rule was spearheaded by forms of nationalist struggle which cannot offer a blueprint for dealing with the problems of the twenty-first century. A section of the first chapter is devoted to a re-reading of anti-colonial discourses to show their historical limits in the colonial period with very little relevance to the reality of postcolonial nations and nationalisms.

Another problem with the postcolonial theory highlighted by Ania Loomba is that “it shifts the focus from locations and institutions to individuals and their subjectivities. Postcoloniality becomes a vague condition of people anywhere and everywhere, and the specificities of locale do not matter” (20). In the sense that Mistry’s narratives are highly located in history and geo-political complexities of twentieth century India, it would not be appropriate to read them out of their socio-cultural and political context. The literary texts are complex clusters of linguistic and cultural signs and can be exploited as extremely productive sites for ideological debates and exchanges. A novel by an author like Rohinton Mistry may be enunciated by an individual or a particular incident but as a literary text it ends up being a complex articulation between individuals, social contexts and the symbolic possibilities inherent in literary language. Every significant text encodes the tensions, complexities and nuances within the cultures portrayed in it. At the same time, many other factors are important for the ideological impact of literary works. "Literary texts circulate in society not just because of their intrinsic merit, but because they are part of other institutions such as the market, or the education system. Via these
institutions, they play a crucial role in constructing a cultural authority” (Loomba 63). Literature is nowadays widely recognised as suitable material that is essential for the study of culture or history of a society or nation. The citizens of a particular nation-state can be driven to a sense of alienation, resistance, revolt or to a revolutionary ideology and politics on recognition of injustice. Mistry’s characters suffer the inequality inherent in socio-political system and respond in their own individual ways to it. At the same time they stand for the highly complex relationships on the plane of religious, social and economic realities that become evident in the newly independent postcolonial societies. It is, thus, after several adjustments and pre-conditions that Mistry’s novels can be described as part of postcolonial literature.

Pramod K. Nayar tries to understand postcoloniality from a native Indian perspective unlike most other diasporic intellectuals settled in the metropolitan academy. He views postcoloniality as a new socio-economic and cultural condition. Despite several and often contradictory connotations and political ideological positions implied by the term, at its simplest, it refer to the historical, material, and actual living conditions of nation-states that had experienced colonial rule. For Nayar, the term refers to the new economic and political structures as well as the dominant cultural forms that come to replace those of colonial regimes. It is also a continuing process of decolonization involving strategies of resistance to political, economic and cultural hegemony to be found in the history of colonialism as well as to those forms of economic and cultural control threatening Asian, African and South American regions in the new climate of neocolonialism. The resistance to these latter threats often takes the form of cultural nationalisms, religious fundamentalism, tribalism, regionalisms and reclaimation of folkloric cultural forms.
Postcoloniality is, moreover, a realization of the in-betweenness of the postcolonial subject stuck somewhere between the delayed, incomplete and reluctant initiation into modernity and a nostalgic desire for ‘original’ indigenous life. Nayar further describes postcoloniality as narrative and representational strategies and modes of negotiation adopted by writers and critics of postcolonial societies to contest ideologies of racism and imperialism or what in other words can be described as legacies of colonialism. The postcolonial condition can still be further extended to include the efforts to contend with the exclusionary tactics of nationalist historiographies in the process of the formation and consolidation of new nation-states. This makes critiquing and interrogating the cultural politics of these national spaces a legitimate exercise. It is in line with these concerns of the postcolonial condition that Nayar then goes on to trace the evolution of postcolonial literature from early writers like Chinua Achebe, R.K. Narayan, Wole Soyinka, Raja Rao, George Lamming, Patrick White, Derek Walcott and others to later day writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul and Rohinton Mistry (81-82). While the earlier writers take up themes such as nationalism, cultural self-assertion, decolonization, projection of local histories; there is in the works of Rushdie and Naipaul greater critical reflection and probing of the postcolonial condition. The authorial tone becomes more cynical as the fallaciousness of the postcolonial dream and the continuation of colonial processes within these comes home. The earlier themes give way to more contemporary ones like interrogation of cultural and political repressiveness of new national structures, identity, migrancy, multiculturalism and displacement (72-82).
A cogent consciousness of the racial past which percolates into Mistry’s writings is an expression of massive residue of collective memory; even so, his writings can more conveniently be read, received and interpreted within the parameters of postcolonial fiction or what Nayar generally describes as the postcolonial literature of disillusionment. Achebe’s *A Man of the People*, Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*, Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*, all are in more senses than one works of disillusionment. Mistry gives articulation to concerns similar to those in these works from the unique position of a postcolonial diasporic Parsi writing from his doubly diasporic location in the West. Significantly, as will be seen later, the differences between Mistry and writers like Rushdie and Naipaul acquire salience in the context of the different varieties of political consciousness that informs their writings.

The change that the Parsi community has undergone after India’s Independence from the British colonial regime in terms of their economic and social status has had serious bearing on the writings of the contemporary Parsi writers. The proximity that the Parsis enjoyed with the colonial masters introduced new transmutations in their identity. Tanya Luhrman in the “Preface” to her book on the Parsis writes that colonial period brought an increasingly anglicized Parsi community nurturing a desire “that they might one day be Englishmen” to the economic vanguard (ix). Nani A. Palkhiwala documents in his work, *We the Nation: the Lost Decades*, the participation of the Parsis in the economic and social progress of the country both in colonial times and during the early years after Independence. The Parsis were in the vanguard of shipping, aviation, banking and catering industries. R.S. Pathak in his essay “Power, Politics and Politicians in the Parsi Novels” cites two archival facts
which throw light on the kind of patronage the Parsis were privileged with under the British. He reveals that in eighteen sixty nine a monument was built in London’s Regent Park with Sir Cowasjee Jehangir’s donation to commemorate the collaboration between the British and the Parsis in India. He also reveals that during the Crimean war approximately six thousand Parsis gathered in Bombay to offer prayers for the victory of the British. Roy and Pillai look at the Parsis as an ethnicity that combines within it Zoroastrian codes of food, drink and behaviour and Western mores. To these two could be added Indian Gujarati linguistic traits. Yet, it is also true that, as they opine, the, “Parsis are both a sacral and colonial diaspora for they have adopted Western practices more readily than other placed ethnicities under colonialism” (Roy and Pillai 23).

However, as far as consciousness of identity is concerned Parsis like Mistry seem to settle for a, “primordial attachment- the congruities of blood, speech, custom and so on” (Geertz 142). In the postcolonial times it is tantamount to foregrounding selective aspects of ethnicity. Mistry’s fiction for instance attempts to gloss over the Indian aspect of Parsi identity trying to fix the focus on primordial aspects while taking the English aspects as naturally acquired. Whereas Parsi historians like E. Kulke have noted that Parsis always possessed an elite consciousness and their assimilation into Indian socio-cultural society was never complete, this should not lead to the conjecture that they were in any way hostile to their immediate and larger social backdrop. After observing their rise to prominence during the British times, Bharucha precludes the plausibility of any sweeping conjectures, “…if there was identification with the Raj, among the Parsis, there was also a strong spirit of nationalism and in some cases even revolutionary radicalism” (33).
That, Parsis like Dadabhai Naoroji and Pherozeshah Mehta and Madame Bhikaji Cama identified with the Indian nationalist movement, is indicative of the level of their integration in the Indian society. Given the greater scope and openness that literature enjoys, the condition of un/belonging of Parsis in India has been more intimately and uninhibitedly scripted by writers of fiction. Nissim Ezekiel used the phrase ‘natural outsiders’ to describe the collective subjectivity of the Parsi community in the pre-independence era. (qtd. in Pathak, “Problematizing” 95).

Several other Parsi writers, through the pages of their fiction have given candid accounts of the cultural confusion of the Parsis. However, it is another thing that Brit who suffers from congenital osteogenesis imperfecta is more like a poignant symbol of the maladjustment and pain of culturally lost Parsi community in India. Daryus Kotwal in Firdaus Kanga’s semiautobiographical novel *Trying to Grow* confesses that ‘We are reluctant Indians’ (Kanga 32). R.S. Pathak after conducting an extensive analysis of the works of Parsi novelists comes to the conclusion that Parsi characters, "despite their bravado…suffer from a kind of cultural neurasthenia” (‘Problematizing’ 97). He goes on to say that the works of writers like Dina Mehta, Bapsi Sidhwa and Firdaus Kanga establish the cultural closeness of the Parsis to the English. He describes their partiality for the English way of life as ‘Anglomania’. Their Anglomania is matched by an equally fierce dislike for the Indian way of life. Freedon Junglewalla in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Crow Eaters* confesses that pragmatically it suited the Parsis to develop proximity with the English:
Where do you think we’ll be…if we did not curry favour? Next to the nawabs, rajas and princelings, we are the greatest toadies of the British Empire! These are no the ugly words… They are the sweet dictates of our delicious need to exist, to live and prosper in peace. Otherwise, where would we Parsis be? Cleaning our gutters with the untouchables – a dispersed pinch of snuff sneezed from the heterogeneous nostrils of India. (12)

Roshni in Dina Mehta’s *And Some take a Lover* and several other characters in Sidhwa’s *The Crow Eaters* like Khan Bahadur Sir Noshirwan Jeevanjee Easymoney, Lady Easymoney, Behram alias Billy and his wife Tanya, all evince a strong fondness of English mannerisms, language and lifestyle. The ambivalent responses of these characters to the Indian Freedom Struggle are again suggestive of the cultural and political dilemma in which they find themselves. Fredoon or Freddie, in *The Crow Eaters* is distrustful of Indian Nationalist Movement. He believes that people like Naoroji are “making monkeys of themselves” (282).

Bapsi Sidhwa shows similar consternation about political choices in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man*, published under the title *Cracking India* in USA. The Parsi characters find it hard to make a choice between ‘Swaraj’ and British Raj. Col. Bharucha, the leader of the Parsis in Lahore, exhibits a deep sense of insecurity and apprehensiveness on the eve of Indian independence, “No one knows which way the wind will blow… There may be not one but two- or even three-nations…If we are stuck with the Hindus they’ll convert us by the sword. And God help us if we’re stuck with the Sikhs” (37).
Similar conflict of interest of the Parsi community has been observed in Dina Mehta’s And Some Take a Lover also. R.S. Pathak writes, “Dina Mehta’s is an absorbing work about the conflicting loyalties of a Parsi family enmeshed in the political and personal turmoil” (“Problematizing” 94). The protagonist Roshni’s mother has this to say about Gandhi, “that scoundrel and vagrant the arch-traitor, the unmentionable, except with abuse” (Mehta 38). In addition to this the lack of identification with the Indian community is another theme taken up by Parsi writers. Roshni in And Some Take a Lover suffers because of a lack of understanding with her lover Sudhir. Roshni’s second lover, Rustom Bharucha, gives voice to the collective alienation that the Parsis suffer from, “Did you feel how rootless they are? That they do not belong? What has this country to offer us? What kind of natural life? We Parsis are alien here” (Mehta 18). This conspicuous ambivalence in the cultural identity of the Parsis is a result of their “deliberate anglicisation” as a result of which “orthodoxy and progressive attitudes” got juxtaposed in the Parsi character (Pathak “Power” 139).

Mistry, along with writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta and Boman Desai can be considered as a special and unique group of Indian writers in English because of their specific ethno-religious concerns. This genre of fiction mostly written from diasporic locations narrates stories with explicit political import combining within its themes diasporic experiences and the politics of postcolonial India. Mistry, because of his peculiar position, relates with equal ease to the continuum of Parsi literature as well as to the postcolonial literature inaugurated by writers like Salman Rushdie, deriving its mixed inspiration from indigenous socio-political and cultural reality and the techniques of fiction writing borrowed from the likes of Garcia and Kafka. Mistry’s affinities with other
postcolonial diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie are several. The authorial project of venturing out of the personal space and giving expression to historical and political consciousness while taking their cue from strong ideological moorings finds uninhibited expression in their fiction. It amounts to an intervention in political and historical reality through works of art often with a subversive intent. From an attitude of resignation and submission towards political reality through depiction of personal and apolitical stories, writers like Mistry and Rushdie now increasingly decide to veer away from entirely personal subjects. In their own specific ways, these writers traverse the distance from politically complacent literature to socially and politically conscious one. Listing the themes of Rushdie’s major works, Andrew Teverson traces their trajectory:

… from his early bile-spewing satires on South Asian political leaders in *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* through his serio-comic eructations of anger at institutionalized racism in the British police force in *The Satanic Verses* to his interrogations of the global power of the US in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet, Fury* (2001), and *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). In all these cases, Rushdie assertively demonstrates that he is a writer who is prepared to bite off big chunks of the world and chew them over. (12-13)

In his avowed anti-establishmentarian approach and as a writer who writes on political themes, Mistry comes close to Rushdie but in their respective practice of writing they show major differences. Mistry differs from Rushdie most significantly in his foregrounding of ethnic and religious experience and in holding it as historically valuable. Nariman in *Family Matters*, narrating myths connected with Parsi beliefs tells his grandchildren, “But beliefs are more powerful than facts” (162).
This amounts to the affirmation of an alternative historical reality. Mistry’s oppositional project would then aim at correcting and contesting the fallacies and projections of received history combined with the dual task of asserting Parsi ethnic and historical identity. Mistry writes with a strong sense of location on the margins of the new Hindu dominated Indian society. In this sense his narratives can be accorded the status of minority discourses produced from the distance of a far off diasporic location. In another, yet connected sense his works can also be accorded the status of novels of memory.

Mistry has routinely been read as a migrant writer leading to his appropriation in several different ways in diasporic studies. Trying to situate Mistry’s fiction in the contemporary discourses of ethnicity, nation, migration and diaspora, Anjali Gera Roy and Meena T. Pillai try to develop their critical discourse around terms like “new borderless space”, “migration”, “quintessential outsiders” credited with a “double vision” and go even further to call Mistry “the displaced subject of Postmodernity” (11). They invoke the authority of Polish/British sociologist Zygmunt Baumann to assert that in the contemporary reality “the world is on the move” (12). As a result, their critique appears to valorize the theme of migration in Mistry’s fiction, further suggesting that Mistry celebrates multiplicity of identities and spaces and “highlight[s] futility of categories” (11).

While his diasporic location is central to his theorization of the nation, Mistry never appears to valorize diasprocity in the sense of making it - to borrow Ahmad’s phrase cited in chapter one again - the “ontological condition of all human beings” (127). On the contrary, diasprocity, movement and journey are for him an existential problematic. Nor would it be right to say that he tries to repose his faith in the futility
of all categories. His own identity as a Parsi remains a crucial part of his consciousness as does the idea of nation as one that cannot be obliterated or dismissed merely as a construct. Rather it is a category the reality of which has to be owned and historicized in order to be critiqued not only as a hegemonic discourse but as a system that possesses the capacity to facilitate oppressive practices, discrimination, majoritarian control of political space, history and national resources.

Focusing on the migrant status of Rohinton Mistry, the individual, for a study of his literary works, as Roy and Pillai tend to do, seriously compromises the complexity and richness of Mistry’s portrayal of the harsh realities of post-Independence Indian state. Roy and Pillai travel to Marx’s concept of alienation inherent to capitalism and to Edmund Burke’s concept of sublime in order to imagine a new migrant sublime in which the context “assumes disproportionately larger significance than the particular texts situated within it” (12). They add that, “the migrant sublime is linked to uncertainty, to what is unsayable or unspeakable. In short, at the heart of the migrant sublime too there is this paradox of representation” (13). Reading Mistry’s novels one hardly feels any ‘uncertainty’ about the exploitation and marginalisation of the minorities and the economically unprivileged in India and particularly in Mumbai.

Roy and Pillai witness in Mistry “a profound sense of this migrant sublime” (13). Apparently, such a reading places a disproportionate emphasis on his diasporic location and looks at his representations as an expression of the condition of hybridity. There is no contesting the fact that his texts are an outcome of multiple experiences and representations cannot be taken as absolute because every representation is contingent and linked to its location and politics. Yet, even a cursory
reading of Mistry’s fiction would reveal that in his mode of representation he does not valorize hybridity.

As suggested above Mistry’s critical and ruthless representation of the problems and politics of ‘postcolonial’ India is similar to Salman Rushdie’s treatment of histories and politics of India and other countries of the Indian sub-continent at almost the same historical moment. Still, the nature of their narratives being so different from each other in technique and treatment of themes and characters (Rushdie, an iconic quintessential ‘postmodern’ writers and Mistry very similar to nineteenth century realistic novelists), that it appears simplistic when both the writers are branded diasporic writers. This is the result of the routine attempts by writers and critics to homogenize the diaspora studies and to read all ‘diasporic’ texts (whether they are written by a diasporic writer like Mistry or they deal with diasporic experience) on identical lines. It is quite common to equate Mistry with writers like Rushdie and to see their works as having similar or closely related concerns. A comparison of the writings of Mistry and Rushdie can not only expose the heterogeneity within diaspora discourses but also make Mistry’s ideological as well as geo-cultural location as a writer more explicit.

In one of his interviews with Oprah Winfrey, Mistry has emphasized his sense of alienation with the West by saying that he has been unable to relate to and identify with the West to the extent of making him comfortable with its cultural practices. Asserting that both intra-national and international structures of power are the villain, Mistry says “The villain is injustice. And that’s the villain anywhere in the world where discontent and suffering is” (qtd. in Roy & Pillai 22).
Alienation is a major theme of Parsi writings because of their memory and contemporary socio-cultural location. Mistry’s awareness of the ambivalence and instability of his cultural, geographical, and ideological location is evident in the way his texts, particularly *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, explore the cultural politics of diaspora (Gabriel 27). While, a writer like Bapsi Sidhwa gives profuse expression to the issues of alienation and assimilation and those of transforming identities in her novels like *The American Brat*, Mistry is discreetly taciturn about his Western experiences. Sharmani Patricia Gabriel comments on this peculiarity in Mistry by saying that “while most writers speak of their experiences of alienation in Canada, Mistry, as a Canadian of Parsi ethnicity, has experienced national exclusion not only in Canada but also in his Indian homeland” (28).

It is true that Mistry maintains silence about his last diaspora. Chelva Kanaganayakam tries to resolve the issue of typology by saying that “Mistry is Indian, Canadian, diasporic, and much more... much of his writings in the last two decades have been about India and not Canada, although he has lived in Canada from 1975.... the overall quality of diasporic discourse is meagre in his corpus”(30). Roy and Pillai also acknowledge Mistry’s much acclaimed vivid sense of place. The texts written by him, it seems, grow out of the cogency of memory and from an unforgettable and indelible perception of marginality. Based on such observations and arguments one can say that Mistry’s texts are more diasporic because of the writer’s location than because of their being stories of migrants and their identity related dilemmas. His texts are an incisive and deep study of the political, cultural and economic antecedents in national histories that bring margins and the marginalized into existence.
[They] offer contrapuntal reading of Indian multiculturalism, readings that give scope for alternative views of a whole ensemble of marginalized attitudes – cultural, political, social and literary. The alienation of the ‘yet-colonized’ in the decolonized state of India and continued existence of oppressive structures of caste, class, race and gender domination within the boundaries of the secular Indian democracy is what Mistry strives to portray. (Roy and Pillai 16)

To these assertions one may add that along with being a contrapuntal reading of Indian multiculturalism, Mistry’s work is also a critique of state-based or state-oriented secularism – a discourse of secularism that is politically generated in the interest of making the ideas of nation and nationalism viable in multi-religious and multicultural spaces. The state/nation oriented concept of unity in diversity is premised on the centrality of nationalist politics in the life a people and is a purely political construct. As far as the world of Mistry’s fiction is concerned, this idea of secularism is presented as flawed as it sponsors a majoritarian, appropriative and homogenizing political structure. It is a world in which the state or nation becomes an overarching, omnipresent and all-encompassing idea which comes to control and determine all aspects of life with no possibility of life outside it. It is a condition where nation becomes the dominant discourse – all other discourses either emanate from it or merge into it. Towards the close of Such a Long Journey, the protagonist, Gustad Noble’s crestfallen remark, “Nothing is beyond the government. Ordinary people like us are helpless against them” is an admission of powerlessness of an individual in the face of all encompassing, corrupt, repressive, homogenizing and centralized political regime (338).
Similarly, Roy and Pillai’s argument that Mistry registers the alienation of the ‘yet-colonized’ can be extended to say that his works are also engaged with the alienation of the “lately-colonized” national sub-denominations which became the subjects of oppression in the emergent national political realities. There is as Mistry shows continuation of chronic forms of oppression and exploitation for caste and religion based minorities; however, there are some other communities like the Parsis that have lost their privileged position as a result of structural changes after the end of colonial rule or otherwise have developed a sense of unease in the new political conditions. In addition to this, it is equally Mistry’s aim to see oppression as a universal human condition and to oppose its dialectics. As quoted above, Mistry told Oprah Winfrey in an interview that his fight is against ‘injustice’ everywhere in the world, the ‘villain’ that is the cause of all the human suffering and discontent.

Thus, to describe his novels as novels of memory and as minority discourses will be more faithful to their ontological bases. Mistry, partly because of his realist mode of narration, does not tamper with foundational concepts like space and time and far less those of identity and history. He does not deconstruct or problematize the idea of space nor does he, a la Rushdie, prefer to become ‘outlandish’ in the non-literal sense of the word. There is no effort at reshaping or redefining individual or collective identity as an experience of the condition of migrancy. Rushdie’s preference for the uncommon experience of levitation, for instance, in order to allow the earth to move while he is floating, “upwards from history, from memory, (Shame 87) from time” is conspicuously missing in Mistry.

Such statements profess an inherent suspicion of space and time. Rushdie’s approach comes closer to being in the state of constant movement that Polish/British
sociologist Zygmunt Baumann quoted above has referred to. While Rushdie’s idea of shifting space and incessant movement is ludic, in Mistry’s case it is existential and historical. Moreover, Rushdie’s sense of unbelonging could be possible in the case of an individual but not for a collectivity. Rushdie foregrounds individual experience of travel across national and cultural barriers leading to a belief in “provisional nature of all truths, all certainties” (Imaginary 12). Mistry does not eschew destinations rather bemoans their absence in his narratives. Mistry’s almost existential question asked through Gustad, the protagonist of Such a Long Journey, when he is about to embark on a journey conspicuously lacks any ludic resonance. The question asked when Gustad is about to set out for Delhi in a crowded Indian train for a crucial meeting with Bilimoria, his friend, about the reality of his alleged role in a scandal involving sixty lakh rupees is, “Would this long journey be worth it? Was any journey ever worth the trouble?” (294, italics mine).

For Mistry a journey either long or short cannot be an aimless journey from nowhere to nowhere. The professed aim of Mistry as is reflected in his interaction with Oprah Winfrey is to discover freedom and justice taking in a liberal humanist sense both freedom and oppression to be universal conditions. Gustad’s question has an existential ring and a poignant longing for stability and meaning in life. Identities for him are not a process but are locked in social, economic and political grids becoming the basis of binaries like power and powerlessness and possession and dispossession. They do not only come into existence in history; they are susceptible to be appropriated in social and political discourses like that of the nation and nation-state for political utilization. While Mistry’s condition is diasporic and global – his choice of English as a medium, for instance, is itself evidence that he is writing for a
global audience – yet he does not consciously foreground the ‘fluid’, the ‘scattered’ and the ‘global’ as the inescapable and universal condition of life. Rather, he imagines the relationships of life and society in concrete space and politics and as bound to location.

One has to account for the differences in diasporic consciousness and the different ways in which members of the diaspora approach the questions of dislocation, journey, loss and memory. For Mistry the idea of journey is more deeply connected with loss and pain. At the same time, one has a feeling that the author is groping for a purpose and meaning in the multiple displacements of his religio-ethnic community.

Roy and Pillai are right in contending that Mistry gives voice to an alternate cultural and political reality by writing what they describe as metahistory. However, one can argue that what Mistry writes comes closer a counter-history of the nation. Mistry’s novels can more appropriately be described as, “subversive attempt[s] from the margins to expose the ideological underpinnings inherent in the selection, codification and presentation of events as official history” (Roy, and Pillai 19). Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* fit into the definition of metahistories with greater ease. Mistry’s project does not aim at weaving a fustian narrative of the nation which through the fuzziness of telling raises doubts about the legitimacy of postcolonial nationalisms. Mistry’s project is oppositional in nature like that of Arundhati Roy as it asserts the right to have a say in a situation where, “a dominant caste, class and ethnic majority arrogates the right to speak for the people by occluding subaltern and minority histories that include women, ethno-religious minorities, and the backward classes” (Roy and Pillai 21).
Although, Mistry seriously interrogates and critiques the postcolonial nation, he at no point seems to suggest that the idea of the nation is a dispensable one. He is not dismissive of the idea of nation and this is one reason that, as far as his narratives are concerned, they does not openly profess a distance from India. Mistry restricts himself to exposing the flawed, repressive and coercive character of such political structures along with their dependence on selectively produced nationalist historiographies. He projects them as sites of exploitation or as places where there is a continuation of the colonial (and pre-colonial) exploitative structures.

In one of his essays “Ten Years of fatwa” included in the non-fiction work, *Step Across This Line*, Rushdie has gone on record to say that he has, “come down on the side of those who by preference, nature or circumstance simply do not belong. This unbelonging – I think of it as disorientation, loss of the East – is my artistic country now” (266, italics in original). Despite his double diasporic location, Mistry does not appear to be haunted by such an ‘unbelonging’. His narratives are a testimony to the deep urge and need of minority communities and marginalised individuals to belong and to be accepted as equal citizens.

There are some critics like John Clement Ball who attempt to downplay the importance of narrative techniques and comparing Mistry and Rushdie in his essay “Taking the Measure of India’s Emergency” almost equates the two writers. He writes, “*Midnight’s Children* is mesmerizing, sensational, politically explosive. *A Fine Balance* may not be as innovative or daring, but in its quieter way it is just as skilled and no less politically charged” (238). However, reference can be made to writings that resist such equations.
Aijaz Ahmad in his critique of Rushdie’s *Shame* in his essay “Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*: Postmodern Migrancy and the Representation of Women” has indicated, that from the manner of the portrayal of Sufiya Zinobia as mentally retarded and physically deformed it does not seem that Rushdie believes in the possibility of resistance and freedom (145-46). According to Ahmad, freedom, in Rushdie’s opinion, can be an individual and not a collective trait which can be ascertained only by a distrust of established discourses of religion, identity and, most importantly, that of nation. On the other hand, the question asked by Gustad Noble, quoted above about the search for meaning in journeys cannot be understood as an attempt to resolve a radically individualized identity crisis that leads to a desire for an escape from history. On the contrary, it tries to come to terms with the predicament of the personal in the political and the historical.

The backdrop at least in the case of *A Fine Balance* and *Such a Long Journey* is so full of historical detail that even a casual reader cannot fail to locate these narratives in their socio-cultural and historical contexts. There is a search for meaning in the long journeys undertaken over centuries - asking if these transportations across cultures and lands had any content, import and telos in them. This shows that Mistry’s texts possess a strong humanist consciousness. Going beyond the ethnic and religious experience, Mistry is capable of asserting a belonging with all human beings. The journey referred to above could as well be the journey of life undertaken as human beings. While being diasporic Mistry takes recourse to a universalist imagination as the following passage from *A Fine Balance* clearly shows. Irrespective of the context in which they are uttered, these lines have a much greater human relevance:
Why did humans do that to their feelings? Whether it was anger or love or sadness, they always tried to put something else forward in its place. And then there were those who pretended their emotions were bigger and grander than anyone else’s. A little annoyance they acted out like a gigantic rage; where a smile or chuckle would do, they laughed hysterically. Either way, it was dishonest. (503)

A writer like Mistry, eschewing a purely political function of his writing and giving an almost poetic exposition to human nature, can be understood as making an attempt at generating a liberal humanist discourse. Mistry texts have a sprinkling of statements which appear to have a liberalist underpinning in their approaching human experience in universal terms.

Rushdie, on the other hand, seems to aver that his politics of resistance involves stepping across the dominant social discourses that determine the subjectivities. He ends up re-inscribing in them a hybridization that renders them ineffective and open to disruptions. The treatment he gives to postcolonial nation-states in Midnight’s Children and Shame is in line with this objective. By achieving a breach in the dominant social discourses he “hybridizes them to such an extent they become capable of saying something else” (Teverson 23; italics in original).

When applied to the depiction of nation/nationalism in Rushdie’s novels, this strategy is useful in revealing the inherent contradictions in the schema of the discourse of postcolonial nation. This technique gets exemplified in the metaphorical figures of Saleem Sinai, Omar Khayam Shakeel and Sufia Zinobia, all of whom are anomalous by virtue of the indeterminacies inherent in circumstances of their birth.
As personifications of national and religious identities, they are congenitally tarnished. In fact, the essence of their identities lies in their hybridity and ambivalence. However, Mistry’s novels, unlike those of Rushdie’s, are not almost impersonal political allegories narrated in what has been described as ‘the politically and historically grounded mode of magic realism’ (Teverson16). For Mistry the element of the personal as rooted in the political, social and economic reality remains important. Almost all his stories involve small, lower middle class, Parsi families. He retains his focus on the day to day problems of these families and the crises at individual and family levels to show how the socio-political context constantly impinges upon their lives to the extent of determining almost everything that is happening there. John Ball in his review of *A Fine Balance* reads in “the intersection of the political and the personal a compelling moral resonance” (239).

This mode of writing needs to retain realist technique of narration. Laura Moss in her essay “Can Rohinton Mistry’s Realism Rescue the Novel?” lauds Mistry’s use of realist mode of narration and finds it both artistically as well as thematically useful. Mistry’s mode of representation leaves greater scope for showing concrete instances of repression perpetrated on the minorities and the marginalised under the national politics. The stabilities of personal life and of Parsi history and existence can only be expressed through a concrete form of realism. Thus while there is in a good presence in Mistry’s texts of what has been widely understood as re-inscription of history, this is not done by completely negating personal experience. Rather it is achieved as an encounter and a contest between the political and the personal. R.S. Pathak, on the other hand, describing Mistry’s fiction as postmodernist, expatiates on the specific
sense in which it can be called so. Writing about *A Fine Balance*, in his essay,
“Power, Politics and Politicians in the Parsi Novels,” he says that it is a

… postmodernist novel in more senses than one. It highlights the
emergence of the less privileged classes in a big way on the political
firmament of the country. It powerfully delineates the rise of the Dalits, their
assertion, the social tension in the rural areas, the changing aspirations of the
lower castes and caste-based violence. (143)

By way of justification of his observation, Pathak cites Derrida and Lyotard,
“Postmodernists like Derrida and Lyotard seem to endorse an anti-politics rejecting
both dominant institutions and oppositional social movements” (143). It is difficult to
concur with the argument that attempts to read Mistry as a postmodernist novelist
because the dominant mode of Mistry’s writing is realist with language being treated
as almost a neutral medium, logical and causality-centred plot structures, well-defined
and socio-culturally located characters and closed ending of the narratives. There is
hardly anything diffuse, uncertain, playful, self-reflexive or open ended about
Mistry’s novels. It is true that some element here or there can be found that is also
present in contemporary post-modern fiction but Mistry’s approach to fiction is very
different from the post-modernists like Rushdie. The ‘anti-political’ agenda of his
texts does reflect a postmodern tendency of deconstruction but the broader
assumptions on which Mistry’s texts are built are liberal humanistic – the possibility
or hope of a just social order and more equitable and fair political structures.

The characters in Mistry are shown to possess a strong social and political
consciousness which becomes the fountainhead of their actions. His characters lay
emphasis on the importance of the personal and of subjective consciousness as real. His narratives do not decenter the human subject or subjective consciousness as having no basis except in linguistic construct. Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai and Sufia Zinobia are larger than life metaphorical figures that easily blur the lines between fantasy and reality and therefore offer very little scope of acting as socially and political conscious individuals. Mistry’s characters like Ishwar and Om in A Fine Balance are almost illiterate and belong to the low Chamaar caste; still they have a potent sense of social consciousness and a desire for social dignity and economic progress. Rushie’s characters are no more that playthings in their creator’s hands, lacking any will and capacity for conscious action as representative human agents. The personal as in the case of Saleem Sinai and Omar Khayam Shakeel is constituted of historical forces beyond their control. In the case of Shakeel and Sinai, their existence is coterminous with the postcolonial nation with which their birth coincides. The personal as politically constructed through nationalist discourses lacks any substance. These characters are merely the figures that configurations of power leave on the fictional canvas conceptualised by the novelist, having little scope for action outside these discourses of power.

The personal is uncontesting and fully implicated in the political discourse of the nation, or, as in the case of Saleem Sinai and Omar Khayam Shakeel even comic and undignified. Mistry’s characters have a historical consciousness rooted in religious and ethnic memory and in the consciousness of the social and political
reality. Mistry’s Parsi characters are realistic portraiture of real life flesh and blood human beings who pass through the ordeal of daily social and personal existence facing problems that accompany it and most importantly endeavour to overcome them.

Aijaz Ahmad has written at length about Rushdie’s identification with post-structuralist modes of thinking and his almost radical suspicion and skepticism about social and political constructions which could be seen as a corroboration of his belief in the verbal construction of reality: “quality of linguistic quicksand... as if the truth of each utterance were conditioned by the existence of its opposite, and Rushdie seems forever to be raking back with one hand what he has given with the other” (Ahmad 135). Treverson in a highly revealing statement avers, “For Rushdie, politics is central to his art, but art is also central to his politics” (13). Realism in art, for Rushdie, is a way of acquiescing and showing conformity with the settled relationship of the sign and the signifier. The duty of an oppositional writer is to unsettle this relationship. It is with this objective that Rushdie employs extremely experimental narrative techniques. Though, both Rushdie and Mistry can be seen as writers of resistance, there are major points of difference between them.

Rushdie’s narrative techniques are integral to the achievement of his subversive goals, which, in a sense, are more in the aesthetic domain than in the social/political, as is the case with Mistry. As Teverson suggests, the formal narrative devices and techniques used by Rushdie can be understood in terms of Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization. And taking note of the intellectual aspect of Rushdie’s critiques of postcolonial nationalism and nation-states, his narrative method can be related to Brecht’s theory of alienation (15).
While there may be superficial resemblances between these writers the similarities cannot be maintained in a sustained way. Whereas Shklovsky refrains from assigning a political function to defamiliarization in art there would appear major points of difference between Rushdie and Brecht because of ideological differences between the two. The strategy of destabilizing the rationalist discourses and myths of history, religion, nation and even individual through an often playful interplay of fantastical and real is a radical one but it also involves the peril of getting inescapably trapped in the labyrinths of language, or of sacrificing any serious political subversion to playfulness. In *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie asserts that magic-realist techniques of writing help to, “break down our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be” (122).

In *Shame*, for instance, the narrator, by calling himself a “translated man” questions the certainties associated with identity (29). Such articulations emphasizing hybridity and in-betweenness foreground the writer’s diasporic identity which transcends nationalities and communities. Rather than refuting the notions of history and identity as fallacious and fictive by exposing their constructedness in fairy-tale unreality, Mistry, while being oppositional like Rushdie has a different approach. Radical scepticism of post-structuralist variety is incompatible with Mistry’s politics. Therefore, instead of dismissing reality he owns it first, in order to critique its iniquities later. Mistry’s works, while highlighting, the systematic economic exploitation in the context of postcolonial India and exposing the working of corrupt political regime have an equally important theme of critiquing the Hindu dominated social structure. Treverson traces a straight theoretical line between Rushdie’s writing on one hand and the theories of Antonio Gramsci, Said, Bhabha and Foucault on the other:
Gramsci’s argument, subsequently appropriated by ‘radical literary theory’ and fused with a Foucauldian understanding of power relations, is that dominant social classes establish their political ascendancy most effectively and enduringly not by use of force alone but by employing culture – which includes language and literature – to persuade ‘subaltern’ classes to consent to their subordination. (19)

This inheritance of theoretical leanings is, according to Treverson, found in Rushdie’s responding to the idea of nation at the level of narration, something that you do not see in Mistry’s fiction. As discussed above, Ahmad attempts to read Rushdie’s projections of the postcolonial nation as supportive of a transnational reality suitable for the existence of transnational economic powers (142-3). The same charge can be levelled against Mistry also given his deep mistrust of postcolonial Indian nation-state and his diasporic location. Yet, the differences between Rushdie’s and Mistry’s mode of writing and world view, as discussed below, are too profound and conspicuous to be explained away in simplistic comparisons.

The playfulness of Rushdie’s narration is in itself a problematic, the meaning and relevance of which, in the context of Indian Writing in English, has been hard to fathom. Francesca Orsini in her essay “India in the Mirror of World Fiction” dwells on the question at length. Whereas Rushdie’s ‘overblown magic realism’ has been ostensibly linked with the narrative techniques of Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, Orsini refuses to corroborate such connections. She writes,

Claims that the capacious, magical, non-linear novel [Midnight’s Children] could be seen as natural heir to the imaginary of the Ramayana and
Mahabharta- ‘at once contemporaneously postcolonial and ancien-

ly, inescapably Indian’ – overlooked the stark contrast between the amorality of the Hindu epics and the impeccably liberal viewpoint of the postmodern best-
seller: multicultural, anti-sexist, tolerant of difference, and so forth… (320)

Mistry’s novels, on the other hand, evoke a narrative universe reminiscent of the nineteenth century ‘Realistic’ novel. Mistry, using a non-experimental mode of story-telling, very similar to conventional Indian narrative mode used in much of vernacular literatures, is able to establish his commitment not only to the non-

essentialist cultural politics of India but also of diaspora which “derives not only from his experience as an Indian immigrant in Canada but also from his Parsi ethnicity” (Gabriel 27).

Pranav Jani, in his recent work Decentering Rushdie: Cosmopolitanism and the Indian Novel in English, a study of seven major post-Independence Indian novels in English, including Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, asserts that this fiction is “attentive to questions of class position and identity formation, especially as produced by categories of nation, gender, class, and/or sexuality. However, these texts take up “different orientations toward the nation, make use of different aesthetics and narrative strategies, and/or articulate different ideological positions in identifying postcolonial problems and resolutions (if any)” (6).

Reading and analysing the novels, he too, like Orsini, points to the canonical status Rushdie has acquired in the field on contemporary Indian literature in English. He attempts to interrogate the “theoretical assumptions about postcoloniality and
cosmopolitanism that associate these terms with postnational perspectives, magical realism, and postmodernist epistemology - that reduce “postcolonial (Indian) literature,” in short, to “Rushdie” (6-7).

Taking a broader historical perspective, Pranav Jani does not place Rushdie at the centre of the history of post-Independence Indian novel in English. Rather, he argues that imposition and aftermath of Emergency (1975-77) represents the crucial period when a significant shift in the attitude, ideological perspective and thematic orientation towards India as a nation-state and democracy become visible in Indian fiction in English. Both Mistry and Rushdie grew up in the pre-Emergency period and they made their first appearance on the literary scene in immediate post-Emergency scene. The nationalist sentiment of the anti-colonial struggle somehow was inherent in the ideological perspective of the authors who wrote fiction before 1975. Jani observes:

In the early decades of independence, Indian English novels often exhibited and encouraged in their audiences what I call “namak-halaal cosmopolitanism,” a cosmopolitanism that remained “true to its salt” in that it was oriented toward and committed to the nation as a potentially emancipatory space. In the context of an intellectual environment, from the 1930s to the 1960s, that was charged by the cultural and political radicalism of the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association and the Indian Peoples’ Theater Association, this “namak-halaal cosmopolitanism” expressed a worldliness and rejection of parochialism that was, at the same time, “salt of the earth.” (7)
Even a cursory reading of *Midnight’s Children* or *Such a Long Journey* would reveal that excesses of Emergency left such an indelible impression on the consciousness on Rushdie and Mistry that their very attitude to Indian Nation-state and democracy underwent a drastic transformation leading to a deep sense of alienation and distrust of the political system and the politicians. “It is only after the Emergency and the crackdown on democracy and popular struggle conducted by Nehru’s daughter, under the aegis of “secularism” and “socialism” no less, that we see English-novelists look away from the nation as a potential site for fulfilling the promises of decolonization” (Jani 7).

The phenomenal rise in communalist and regionalist forces during the last thirty-five years or so, neoliberal strategies of development induced by multinational corporations, (presented under the euphemism ‘liberalisation and globalisation’), expediency-determined policies, both at the national as well as state levels, and aggressive militarism have contributed to the disenchantment of the sensitive fiction writers even further. This sentiment is very prominent in contemporary fiction in English and is referred to as postnational turn among Indian fiction in English.

Jani argues that rather than directly assigning “realism” to early, ‘pre-Emergency’ novels and “magical realism” to postnational ones, it would be “more useful to think about how changing orientations toward the nation relate to broad shifts in the narrative projects of the Indian English novel” (8).

One can argue that pre-Emergency novels are marked by a belief in the nationalist project resulting in an ideological perspective more or less shared by the novelist, the assumed in the textual discourses and, at least, the native audience,
“aiming to produce in the reader a sense of ethical and activist commitment to the nation as a site of potential emancipation, to the truth of oppression and resistance. Postnational works, however, tend to turn away from coherence and the telos of the nation through narrative strategies that produce discordant relationships and disrupt processes of knowing” (Jani 8).

The historical and cultural dimensions have become very prominent in Indian fiction in English since 1980’s. The history, politics and culture of Indian Sub-continent find very prominent place in the writing of Indian novelist’s like Amitav Ghosh and Shashi Tharoor. To the non-native reader, Mistry, Ghosh, Tharoor, Roy etc., are ‘native informants’. Some of them deliberately undertake the task of representing and critiquing the nation, other can be read from this perspective. India and Indianness have been the central thematic concerns of many Indian English novels since the 1980’s: prominent among them are Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*, Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* and *Riot*, Vikram Chandra’s *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, *Shame* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, just to name the most prominent ones.


Verma 129


<eprints.soas.ac.uk/8581/1/Orsini_India_in_the_Mirror.pdf>

Palsetia, Jesse S. *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City.*


