Chapter- 4

FICTION AS PROTEST

“Resistance has become a much-used word in post-colonial discourse, and indeed in all discussion of ‘Third World’ politics.”

(Ashcroft *Post-Colonial Transformation*19)

Mistry’s fiction can be read as a postcolonial discourse of protest against the nation-state that, in the eyes of this diasporic minority writer, has failed to provide security, equality, democracy and equal economic opportunities to all sections of the society, particularly the ethnic and religious minorities and the economically underprivileged classes. The events and characters are so selected and presented in Mistry’s narratives that a strong element of protest against the social and political hierarchies permeates the texts. However, as is indicated through the epigraph, rather than taking resistance as an absolute given it is more important to assess the nature and effectiveness of different forms of resistance as also the adjustments and pressures that weigh upon such practices. Ashcroft et al while recognizing the centrality of the idea of resistance to postcolonial literature in their book *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* write:

Theorising the nature and practice of post-colonial resistance more generally has become central to post-colonial debates. In particular post-structuralism’s diverse intersections with post-colonialism have foregrounded questions not only of political commitment ... but of agency itself ... (86)

The very important questions of representation and resistance bequeathed by colonialist relations have acquired several new dimensions in postcolonial times within the numerous new configurations of neo-imperialist and postcolonial-
nationalist relations. Said in his *Orientalism* almost anticipates such departures from the monolithic and overarching concern with political and cultural independence from colonial rule when he hints that after contesting European delineations of the Orient which according to him, have been “an integral part of European material civilization and culture” new socio-economic developments may bring about significant shifts in the conception of the Orient. According to him “the vastly expanded American political and economic role in the Near East (the Middle East) makes great claims to our understanding of that Orient” (2). Writing in 1978 Said is aware that the representations of the Orient are liable to change with the changing economic relations of the East and the West necessitating revisions in the politics of resistance and the conception of power.

Within the economy of resistance Postcolonial literature is one of the important sites where the East is getting represented with the nation state as one of the presiding themes. Whereas this form of writing may have gone beyond the need of ‘writing back to the empire’ in the Saidesque sense of enacting a counter canon of the orientalized, the new loci of political, social and cultural power in the nationalist and neo-imperialist centres has put different sets of demands on the practice of textuality. Mistry, for instance, takes a direction which is determined by the needs of his own peculiar position. By persisting with largely realist modes of narration he is clearly not choosing to be radically subversive in his narrative method and his subversive enterprise is more a response to a nationalist conception of power. In fact, in his choice of realism he even gives an appearance of being normative in the western sense which translates into a political choice of great import. As has been discussed in the previous chapters, his use of realism is rather intriguing and has been understood
differently by different critics. At least some critics like Laura Moss have attributed in among other things to a desire for greater acceptance in the West.

In the previous chapter an attempt was made to read the critique of politics in Mistry’s texts. In that sense this chapter can be taken as an extension of the previous one with a slight change in focus. While, Mistry’s critique of the systemic violence and oppression that, in his perception are integral to nation/nationalism/nation-state and the characteristics of his critique formed the subject of the last chapter, the present one focuses on his protest against the emerging social order. As per the logic of his critique the social, cultural and personal can be easily sutured back to the political at both explicit and implicit levels. There is a perception of cultural, linguistic and religious points of salience in the social and cultural order that are understood to be concomitants of the new national/majoritarian culture and which characterize the social world when Mistry’s characters experience and deal with the Maratha world around him. The present chapter attempts to approach Mistry’s texts from this perspective and read in them a protest against the politically determined social culture leading to insecurities in vulnerable sections.

Mistry’s critique of postcolonial India has multiple layers, the exploration of the political idea of nation-state being the most important. On the sociological track the problems get manifested in the generally squalid and unhygienic environment, poor levels of governance and administration and lack of safety as also in the cynicism and incivility of the people comprising the majority population. As will be seen below, Mistry operates through a binary of high caste/class Hindu majority and minorities comprising mainly the Parsis, the rural Dalits and economically underprivileged urban classes.
The example of Dr. Paymaster in *Such a Long Journey* can be cited here to reveal the complex connections between political policy and problems of personal life. A seemingly insignificant and passing reference to the Noble family’s doctor, Dr. Paymaster’s helplessness in subscribing to foreign medical journals says volumes about the difficulties faced by a common man. Dr. Paymaster, who started off as a promising practitioner has to be content with his outdated knowledge of medicine as there is no clear and transparent regulatory mechanism for matters connected with foreign exchange. The rules are convoluted and archaic and are suggestive of tight government control. Through this innocuous looking detail connected with Dr. Paymaster’s professional life a comment is made on the restricting effect of national policies on a common man’s life. The fact that Dr. Paymaster works under the name of Dr. R.C. Lord, his predecessor from whom he had purchased his dispensary adds irony to his situation. Dr. Paymaster initially did not change the name plate but later on when he attempted to do so, his patients believing that there was a new doctor in the dispensary started spreading fallacious stories about the supposedly new doctor’s incompetence. This and several other such accounts about the social world help to delineate the general character of the social world outside Khodadad building. The narrator not being harshly critical of the society does attempt to depict it as ignorant, illiterate, uncivilized and even irrational.

The critics have expressed diverse opinions on the representation of the Indian society in Mistry’s texts offering different perspectives on the blend of realist technique and postmodernist elements. In an attempt to find traces of postmodernist assumptions in Mistry’s novels, Sukeshi Kamra, makes an endeavour to read them in conjunction with various notions of community rooted in postmodernist thought.
Several critics having postmodernist predilections, like, Iris Young and Jean-Luc Nancy have approached communities like nations as homogenizing constructs and spaces where difference is neutralized. Iris Young in the essay “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference” writes that a community achieves, “unification of particular persons through sharing of subjectivities” (qtd. in Kamra, 134). Kamra taking a similar theoretical position in critiquing of Mistry’s representation of Indian society borrows Young’s thesis to say that “in the sociopolitical world the creation of community should be aimed at openness to unassimilated otherness” (135).

Kamra’s thrust is that Mistry betrays a desire to transcend inherited community. According to Kamra, even though Mistry avows “fidelity to realism” texts like *Such a Long Journey*, “offer post-Independence history as a history of the reception, validation and employment of what Benedict Anderson refers to as the notion of imagined community” (135). The argument naturally leads to the question whether Mistry suspects the ontology of nation/nation-state. While it is true that in Mistry’s fiction the Parsis inhabiting enclosed spaces in *Such a Long Journey* - and if Kamra’s thesis is applied to *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* also - and other minorities like the Dalits are to be treated as the unassimilated others of the national community; Kamra’s argument that Mistry’s texts can be consumed as critiques of the uncritical acceptance of the “reception, validation and employment” of the nation-state has to be closely studied before being accepted and the present thesis assumes a position which differs with this view. Several critics like Aijaz Ahmad and Dipesh Chakrabarty have approached the question of nation/nation-state in the postcolonial context and have expressed their reservations to the foregrounding of these notions in
‘history’ as well as theoretical space of the Postcolonial Studies discourse, albeit from their different perspectives. The first chapter in the present study attempted to theorize the reservations of thinkers like Tagore to what was primarily understood as the Western idea of nation/nationalism as well as the gap between the material conditions of postcoloniality and the aspirations of the early nationalists like Gandhi and Aurobindo. The trajectory of thought in the postcolonial times marks a clear deviation from these positions and can be more meaningfully included in a reading of writers like Mistry.

In his obsession with the nation-state and the abstractions that circulate around the idea of it, Mistry certainly attempts to critique politics of identity in the national contexts, yet, at the same time he does not work for the negation of identity nor does he make a case against the foregrounding of national communities ineluctably connected with what Charakrabarty describes variously as “the modernizing narratives of citizenship, bourgeois public and private...self justificatory narratives of citizenship and modernity”(19). Kamra in a kind of recapitulation before embarking on her “imperialistic project” of tracing paradigmatic affiliations with Postmodernism in Mistry’s novels concedes that Mistry has himself professed “fidelity to the traditions of realism” (135). What is appealing in Kamra’s analysis is her reading in Mistry a critique of imposition of national identities in the form of massive discourses that obliterate difference. However, it is also evident that Mistry’s universalist and liberal humanist consciousness acquiesces with the homogenization and universalization of the essentialized idea of nation. Mistry has clear differences with postcolonial positions of critics like Ahmad and Chakrabarty. Given his transparent Marxist predilections, Ahmad in his essay titled, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of
Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’” published in *In Theory* almost typifies the Marxist position on Third World nationalism. In a reply to Frederic Jameson’s ‘over-valorisation’ of the rubric ‘Third World’ in relation to both nation and literature, Ahmad, writes that the upholding of such labels distracts attention from the inherent continuities that these categories have with the opposing processes of capitalism and socialism. With characteristic lucidity he writes:

I shall argue ... that since Jameson defines the so-called Third World in terms of its ‘experience of colonialism and imperialism’, the political category that necessarily follows from this exclusive emphasis is that of ‘the nation’ with nationalism as the peculiarly valorized ideology; and, because of this privileging of the nationalist ideology, it is then theoretically posited that ‘all third-world texts are necessarily ... to be read as ... national allegories ... I find it significant that First and Second Worlds are defined in terms of their production systems (capitalism and socialism, respectively), whereas the third category - the Third World - is defined purely in terms of an ‘experience’ of externally inserted phenomena.(98-100)

For Ahmad, thus, such privileging of ‘nation’ and ‘national’ literature is misleading. For Ahmad the problems of a Postcolonial nation like India are those of any dispensation that adopts capitalist modes of production.

By way of further elucidation of his position Ahmad writes:

…there is a very tight fit between the Three Worlds Theory, the over-valorization of the nationalist ideology, and the assertion that ‘national allegory’ is the primary, even exclusive, form of narrativity in the so-called Third World. If this ‘Third World’ is constituted by the singular ‘experience of
colonialism and imperialism’, and if the only possible response is a nationalist one, then what else is there that is more urgent to narrate than this ‘experience’? ... if the motivating force for history here is neither class formation and class struggle not the intersecting conflicts based upon class, gender, nation, race, region, and so on, but the unitary ‘experience’ of national oppression … then what else can one narrate but that national oppression?

(102, italics in original)

It can be contended that Mistry is also writing a national allegory and in doing so is privileging the category of nation. By highlighting the failure of the postcolonial nation-state to ensure progress, democratic rights of citizens and in maintaining the basic standards commensurate with modernity Mistry seems to fall back upon what Ahmad taking Jameson’s phrase describes as “general liberal and humanistic universalism” (qtd in Ahmad 103). Or, rather than tracing ambivalences in the text of the nation and understanding its basic character to be mimetic - as Bhabha does at length in “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” - Mistry would like the mimicry to be more perfect. For Mistry nation is a supposed to be a guarantor of liberal, democratic and social securities but which in the context of Third World nations has turned hegemonic and oppressive basically (as the present one and the previous chapter try to establish) due to social and political practices in these societies. Such societies have failed to emulate the egalitarian norms of nationalism. Mistry understands the ‘democratic’ politics of postcolonial India to be based on majoritarian or almost fascist principles breeding social and economic inequalities and oppression of vulnerable sections. Mistry does try to create an intersection of caste and class in A Fine Balance, but in Family Matters and Such a Long Journey his
emphasis is on the problems of an ethnic identity in postcolonial India. Moreover, he
does not lay too much emphasis on the bourgeois character of postcolonial nation and
nationalism.

In theorizing the nature of Mistry’s protest it needs to be understood that it is
not purely a critique of political practices but also of the social world of
Bombay/Mumbai, the majoritarian character of which becomes an important theme.

In reading of Mistry’s text it becomes important to give a theoretical account
of the fact that his novels while critiquing Emergency/post-Emergency India, present
a characteristically apolitical Parsi picture of India through the memory of Parsi
characters. It is also important to note that in trying to build a contrast between the
present and the past Mistry deals with them differently. Whereas while dealing with
the past he avoids specifying the temporal details clearly the present is historicized in
great detail. This makes the depiction of the past an idealized and vague mixture of
different periods in colonial and postcolonial times dealing with personal rather than
historical domains.

In the Parsi context the memory of the past is generally linked to a period of
prosperity. Moreover, the element of memory is integral to the progress of the
narratives. There are sustained and rueful comparisons between the past and the
present, highlighting the real or perceived disadvantages the Parsis have had to suffer
in post-Independence India. The lapses into memory help to construct the political
unconscious of the novels as Parsi narratives expressive of their maladjustment in the
new socio-political environment. At yet another level retrieval of the past is a way of
writing about a dying way of life. Writing here functions as a method of cultural self
preservation. R.S. Pathak observes, “the Indian Parsi novelists have thrown significant
light on the way of life of their community, which is remarkably different from that of Indians” (“Problematising” 88). However, it is also true that critiquing of political reality is missing in these accounts.

For the Parsis, reminiscence of the past is deeply connected with nostalgia related to times of cultural and political freedom and economic prosperity. The past is an imaginary location which facilitates an escape from the harsh realities of the newly formed nation-state which is shown as a political space where political factions draw sustenance from fascist and chauvinistic ideas about religion and language. For a community with a tenacious sense of its cultural, religious and ethnic character prevailing intolerance and repression carried out on the same grounds can be particularly agonizing as it brings back the memory of earlier experiences of persecution and displacement. Interestingly, the strategy of revisiting the past in not limited to Parsi characters like Nariman and Gustad only but is also employed with peculiar assiduousness by Kapur in *Family Matters*. Kapur is an avid collector of old photographs of Bombay. If he finds a photograph he spends long periods of time discussing its details with Yezad.

The element of protest in Mistry’s fiction needs to be understood in the context of a prosperous Parsi past in colonial India. The increasing discomfiture of the Parsis with the hegemonic elements in the Indian way of life finds comfortable escape into a nostalgic recollection of the past.

Mistry portrays the characters of Gustad and Nariman in such a way that their deprivations and frustrations become their defining traits. Gustad is painfully aware of the family’s fall from a privileged social status to the present one where they are too cramped even to adjust an extra bed for the children. There are repeated references to
paucity of space. When Gustad’s daughter Roshan wins a raffle at school and gets a large porcelain doll as prize there is no room in the house for it. The doll has to be undressed so that her dress and her body can be stacked separately. Pecuniary conditions of Gustad’s family head towards a crisis when their daughter falls sick. Gustad first has to sell his camera to pay the medical bills and later on when the doctor prescribes a special diet for Roshan, Dilnavaz has to sell off her wedding bangles. Through these details and descriptions, the novelist draws attention to the fate of ordinary Parsi families in Mumbai.

Nariman Vakeel, the ailing and aged protagonist of *Family Matters* is shown to be in an even more pitiable condition when he is abandoned by his own family consisting of his step children Jal and Coomy and sent to his real daughter Roxanna Chenoy’s house after he has a fall and fractures his leg. In this case also, the resources the family commands are too meagre to provide him with a dignified life in old age, despite having retired from a comparatively respectable position as college lecturer. The flat of Roxana where Nariman is dumped by his step-children is a one bedroom flat. There is an acute shortage of space here too and it is one factor that precipitates tensions between the husband and wife after Nariman’s arrival. Yezad and Roxana occupy the sole bedroom in the flat and the hall serves as the boys’ bedroom at night and family room during the day. Nariman’s presence is not only an inconvenience, as further improvisations have to be made for adjusting him, but it is also an intrusion in the privacy of the Chenoy couple. The story, hereafter, becomes a game of strategies and counter-strategies by Yezad’s family on the one hand and Jal and Coomy on the other to foist Nariman on the other. At one point, Coomy in her desperation to escape the fulfilment of her promise of taking Nariman back makes her brother break open
the plaster of the ceiling of Nariman’s room. It is an instance of poetic justice that Coomy dies while her neighbour Edul Munshi an eccentric handyman and she are engaged in repairing the ceiling, an act to defend her lie of damaged ceiling. Nariman becomes a figure of pity as he has to bear continuous humiliation in an ailing condition. He becomes a representative figure who comes to stand for aged people like him in the Parsi community who suffer disgrace due to the adversities borne by the community as a whole.

Gustad’s problems hurt him and his family even more because their present state is a huge climb down from what they had been one generation ago. Gustad’s grandfather owned a furniture shop and his father who went bankrupt owned a book store which too was “treacherously despoiled and ruined” (8). That was the time when as a nineteen year old Gustad saw his life go to pieces: “when all anxieties intensified, and anger grew – a strange, unfocussed anger – and helplessness” (Such a Long Journey 8). Apparently, Mistry here also intends his readers to take his protagonist’s fate to be symbolic of his community.

In great contrast to the earlier days, Gustad yearns for books and has virtually no furniture left in his small home. Gustad repeatedly retreats into the world of memories remembering with a feeling of nostalgia the good old days, grandfather’s furniture store and his father’s book store when theirs was a prosperous business family. When Gustad realizes that he has fallen into a trap after he receives a letter of threat for not depositing the money sent by Major Billimoria, he dejectedly sits in his grandfather’s chair and wishes for an escape route: “If I could let the world go by, spend the rest of life in this chair” (141). The past also has a way of entering into the present in a recurring pattern in the form of family heirlooms like the ivory paper
knife with a sculpted handle which Gustad brings out to open Billimoria’s letter. Gustad has a special fondness for the possessions which have come down to him from his ancestors. These few articles are the only connection he has with his past prosperity, dignity and pride.

*Family Matters*, of all the three novels of Mistry, is one the canvas of which is shrunk to keep a very close focus on a middle-class Parsi family in Mumbai of the mid 1990s. As largely a personal account of the tribulations of Nariman Vakil and his immediate family, it is a narrative where the focus is mostly on the personal familial relationships and conduct in an economically insecure social environment. As a result, the novel does not critique society and political/administrative structures of postcolonial India, to the same degree, as the other two novels by the author do. The Parsi character of the story is very prominent and the suffering, degradation and humiliation of the individuals due to economic hardships and acute sense of personal insecurity have a strong socio-cultural dimension to it. Not only the conduct of elders like Jal, Coomy and Yezad but even that of Yezad’s sons Jehangir and Murad is affected by the hardships faced by the family. Jehangir, for instance, who is the homework monitor of his class starts accepting bribes from defaulters.

Nilufer E. Bharucha rues the fact that the only means of exploring the external political/social realities in this text takes place through Yezad, Roxanna’s husband (182-3). The political context involving post-Babri Bombay riots and the Shiv Sena is minimized and limited to Yezad’s employer Mr. Kapur’s death and the character of Husain who is the victim of post-Babri riots. Yezad becomes the sole means of linking the narrative with the world of Bombay. His excursions in local trains, his
experiences in the sports shop and his conversations with Vilas the professional letter writer who writes letters for migrant labourers turns into a platform for indulging in a critique of social and political culture of Bombay. Bharucha corroborates this when she says that, “Yezad’s life like that of millions of other Bombayites/Mumbaikars is full of the stress and strain of a daily commute to work on overcrowded trains and the far from adequate salaries and insalubrious working conditions” (183). Forming a continuity with the story of Maneck in *A Fine Balance*, Yezad broods over his frustrated dream of migrating to Canada. Once again, like in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry attempts to forge a brotherhood of the vulnerable and the marginalized by bringing together Yezad, and Husain.

Husain is a kind of refugee in Bombay/Mumbai. He is a victim of post-Babri Masjid demolition riots in which his whole family was mercilessly wiped out. He is now a reclusive spooky presence as an employee in Kapurs sports goods store. Kapur’s shop is a kind of an asylum for him as rather than being of much use himself it is Kapur who has to tend to him when the memory of riots haunts him and sends him into dark moods. Kanaganayakam’s observation of a very conspicuous political correctness in Mistry, referred to in the previous chapter gets reflected again in Mistry’s deliberate attempts at creating such configurations as does what Khair observes to be excessive concerns with pessimism and victimhood. Husain is clearly a superimposition or an interloper who makes a rather unjustified entry in the narrative. There is again a lot of artifice in the incidence of Kapur’s death which is linked to a goof up with the Shiv Sena name police. Although there is regular heckling by Shiv
Sainiks who on their visits (in the absence of Kapur) insist that the sports good shop have a signboard in Marathi, Yezad exaggerates the threat by lying about a demand for money which he meant to use to meet his own urgent needs. However, there is confusion when the Shiv Sainiks visit in the presence of Kapur and he loses his temper and dies in a fit of anger. Kapur’s death marks the end of both his secularist ideology which he exhibited in ostentatious ways by, for example, having a mechanized Santa wielding bat and ball on Christmas Eve as well as through his romance with the spirit of Bombay. His effusions about Bombay, such as “Bombay endures because it gives and it receives. Within this warp and weft is woven the special texture of its social fabric, the spirit of tolerance, acceptance, generosity” (152), begin to look ironic. Such illusions about harmonious co-existence, as in the case of the painted wall encircling Khodadad building in *Such a Long Journey*, are bound to collapse. In Mistry’s scheme of things, in a culture of divisive politics there may be scope for a discourse of nationalist secularism but not of harmonious co-existence at existential level.

Lonely and ailing Nariman Vakil’s lapses into memory, as compared to Gustad’s nostalgic ones, are almost pathological. Towards the end of his life they are hard to distinguish from deliriums. *Family Matters* in one of its very important dimensions is a critique of Parsi rigidness on the question of marriage outside the community. One reason for the unhappy marriage and family life of Nariman is his inability to marry his beloved Lucy, a Christian girl, nearly fifty years ago. These events of the past, narrated though flashback passages, marked by italics, re-construct Nariman’s failed attempt to marry Lucy due to the rigid family and Parsi community
traditions. Nariman’s tragedy and the predicament of his extended family are a result of a complicated chain of events. Nariman, psychologically speaking, could never reconcile with the fact of losing Lucy and having to marry Jal and Coomy’s mother Yasmin due to the orthodoxies of his community. Mistry highlights the tragedy of Nariman as a victim of social pressures by revealing his fantasies and memories. In his ailing condition, the invalid old man slips back and forth between consciousness and unconsciousness and develops the tendency of mentally recreating his experiences with Lucy. *Family Matters*, is not as stringent a critique of Indian society as *Such a Long Journey* or *A Fine Balance* are, because the subject of the novel, as pointed out above, is more or less limited to the domestic and personal world of a family in metropolitan Bombay/Mumbai.

Even in *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, the dull drab nature of middle/lower-middle class domestic environment and the struggle to make both ends meet while retaining some human dignity, are focussed upon and personal tragedies and daily humiliations of ordinary simple individuals are brought out. Gustad’s desperate attempts at eking out a few dollops of happiness out of his desperate circumstances by organizing a feast on Roshan’s birthday end in a disastrous tragi-comedy. There are several impediments in the way of Gustad’s efforts to rise above the quotidian monotony of his much reduced circumstances. By bringing the live or “jeevti-jaagti” chicken home Gustad wants to resurrect the past. “For once, he was determined, just once – for one day at least, this humble flat would fill with the happiness and merriment that used to reside in his childhood home” (19-20). In this way, he wants to relive the gaiety of more prosperous times in his childhood when his grandmother had a live chicken brought home to be cooked with “special herbs and masala for the feast cooking under her supervision” (19).
Innocuous looking details getting connected to the realities of political dispensation and social reality, as in the case of Dr. Paymaster above, becomes a sustained pattern in Mistry’s novels. There are strange ways in which the outside world enters the world of Parsis. Mistry uses the description of Roshan’s birthday party - a sequence of multiple disasters, small and big, to bring into focus some larger and more serious issues connected with the socio-economic reality with which the Gustad family is forced to contend in their altered situation as members of a religious and ethnic minority in postcolonial India. The hiccups in the smooth progress of the party - temporary ones like the power failure to more lasting threats like Sohrab’s rebellion and his refusal to go to the IIT - and in a fairy tale manner bring an end to his parents’ sacrifices through his academic brilliance and progressiveness - are not confined to domestic sphere. The party which begins with the ominous mention of Bilimoria’s name, the consciousness of the paucity of rum, the feeling of satisfaction at the absence of Mrs Dinshawji and Miss Kuptitia as that would make the nine pieces of chicken last more ends with Sohrab’s audacious challenge to the authority of his father. All these irritants can be linked to the larger problems threatening to devastate Gustad’s life. The black paper on the window panes, with which according to Dilmawaz, “even starlight and moonlight is blocked out” (47), reveal the extent of Gustad’s estrangement and desire for withdrawal resulting from his much reduced economic circumstances and an acute consciousness of the change from an affluent state to a impecunious one. The black paper was originally pasted on the window panes during the war in 71, but was never removed as Gustad felt better with it. Mistry’s purpose in representing these events and memories of Gustad is to suggest
that the decline in family’s fortunes is not a personal failure but a result of the restructuring of the society where redistribution of wealth and material resources is still in progress. The failure of the new nation-states to ensure basic civic amenities like water and power is visible in difficulties faced by Gustad and his wife.

The narratives also perform the task of extolling the Parsi way of life which is perceived to be totally different from the Maratha/Hindu way of life. Mistry seems to be particularly concerned about highlighting the loss of the finer aspects of life as the Parsi’s become more and more marginalised and impoverished. Music is shown to be an integral part of the life of the Parsis before Independence, but by the seventies it is either completely lost or has become a rarely undertaken exercise, “For all the music that had filled his home in happier times - his father’s huge radiogram in its dark cabinet of polished seesum, the records lining row upon row of shelves, there was not a single musical instrument in the house” (Such a Long Journey 23). He remembers how his grandmother “would describe the mandolin for Gustad, telling him about the songs she used to play, in her gentle, accepting voice which lacked the necessary force to influence things in the Noble household” (23). The second generation of fictional Parsis like Yezad are too preoccupied with the fulfilment of their financial responsibilities to indulge themselves in the pursuit of literature and music.

Music and books of English literature are woven into nostalgia forming an important part of the lost world. On his visit to the Chor Bazaar to fetch the parcel sent by Billimoria, Gustad cannot restrain himself from buying Great Dialogues of Plato, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics and Gray’s Anatomy of the Human Body. He cherishes a dream of one day having a book case where he can keep his books.
One of the bonds that bound Gustad to the friend of his youth, Malcolm Saldanha is music. Malcolm and his father used to be accomplished violinists and Gustad, as a young man, used to visit them to enjoy their music. That Misrty’s consciousness of loss of cherished values and finer aspects of life is actually also a form of protest against an oppressive socio-political reality which is held to be responsible for it gets reflected in the predicament of Malcolm. When Gustad and Malcolm reunite accidentally after a long gap of about thirty years they share fond memories of the musical sessions at the latter’s home. They remember the fascination Cesar Franck’s Sonata used to have for both of them and for Malcolm’s father. For all the interest he had in music Malcolm has failed to establish himself as a musician. He rues the fact that he was forced to accept a job at the municipality to take care of his economic needs. According to Malcolm the “only ones who make money in music are those monkeys who play for recording studios. Rubbish like jingles of Hindi movie soundtracks” (*Such a Long Journey* 220). One cannot miss a clear disapproval of what can be described as an Indian way of life and a feeling of alienation in this comment. Malcolm’s knowledge of classical western music is a part of the legacy that does not enjoy favour anymore. There is an unmistakable sentiment of rejection of the sociological reality around them. Nariman Vakeel too in *Family Matters* is shown to be extremely appreciative of music and literature. Yet, for him also music is something that is more connected with his past than with his present. In the present it comes only in rationed doses from the window of Yezad’s musician neighbour.

Although there is regular reference to books in *Family Matters* also, yet there seems...
to be a difference. The fondness of Yezad’s children, the post-Independence
generation of the Parsis, for Enid Blyton is not exactly endorsed as the discussions
between Nariman and the children go on to reveal the racism and sexism contained in
the books.

Parsi love for music, art and reading survives in *A Fine Balance* also through
the character of Dina, a person of the generation older than Maneck and Sohrab. But
her passion does not have the same intensity and openness that Gustad’s or Vakeel’s
have. This appears mainly owing to her gender in a patriarchal Parsi social and family
set up. While Nusswan shows no interest in either music or reading, Dina’s outings as
an unmarried young girl are mostly undisclosed personal outings which take her to
libraries: the older libraries for flipping through encyclopedias, art books and medical
books and the newer ones for listening to records of composers like Brahms, Mozart,
Schumann and Bach. These names were a part of her faded and vague memories of
the days when her father used to listen to them. She even begins to visit concerts and
recitals. Dina is clearly not a connoisseur and her enjoyment of these musical
performances is that of an amateur. Dina’s meeting and marriage with Rustom is also
because of their common interest in music. What is more important is that these
aesthetic pursuits are smothered under the tormenting pressures of her life as a citizen
of Bombay.

Mistry shows his characters oscillating between two choices when they are
faced with a crisis. It is interesting to note that in Mistry’s discourse in the face of
adversity, individuals seek solace either in their ethnic/religious identity as Gustad
and Yezad to lesser and greater extent respectively are shown to do. Or alternatively,
they can choose to almost dissociate themselves from their ethnic/religious identities, as Nariman Vakeel in *Family Matters* attempts to do in his youth or as Dina and Maneck are forced to do by their circumstances in *A Fine Balance*. Dina and Maneck come out as ordinary citizens of postcolonial India struggling to find a way of life that provides them with at least some semblance of dignity. As a result, both of them have to step across the protective and private domain of family and ethnic enclosures and redefine the meaning of their existence in the context of Indian social and political life. Unlike Gustad and Yezad falling back upon the comfort of a sense of belonging to an ethnic group is not available to them. In fact, for Dina and Nariman, belonging to Parsi community is in itself a problem.

Dina is aware of her Parsi identity, but her economic and social circumstances, more or less, force her to forget about her unique ethnic background in cosmopolitan Mumbai. She very rarely refers to her Parsi identity. Nevertheless, she finds strength in the faith she has in her struggle to survive and lead an independent existence without having to look towards her arrogant brother for her two meals and roof on her head. On one of his visits to Dina’s apartment to meet Om and Ishwar, when Rajaram, the hair collector, reveals his intention of committing suicide she dissuades him by saying, “I don’t know very well, but as a Parsi, my belief makes me say this: suicide is wrong, human beings are not meant to select their time of death. For then they would also be able to pick the moment of birth” (*A Fine Balance* 477).

But such allusions to her Parsi identity are very few. Due to a combination of factors ranging from social and economic to personal, alienation from the ethnic community is not uncommon in the times Mistry’s novels deal with. Mistry takes up this theme in all the three texts. At another point in the narrative while advising
Maneck to mentally recite Ashem Vahu before his exam, she says, “I am not a very religious person myself …think of it as insurance” (501). Meneck also shows very little sense of belonging to his community. It is after great amount of persuasion by Dina Dalal that he agrees to visit his mother’s relatives, the Sodawalla family. And on coming back he is so tired of their child-like behaviour and non-stop talk that he accuses Dina Dalal of having ruined his evening. Bapsi Sidhwa too confirms this stereotype of a garrulous, inquisitive and meddling Parsis, in her novel, symbolically named, *The Crow Eaters.*

In *Family Matters* Nariman, despite his earlier failed attempt to disobey the community’s pressure on the question of his love marriage to Lucy, betrays a strong sense of Parsi identity as an old man as is evidenced in his narrating stories from Parsi folklore and religious belief to Yezad’s sons. Although both Gustad and Nariman are in open dispute with their community’s rigid religious orthodoxies (Gustad has a long standing disagreement with his neighbour Mr. Rabaldi who is critical of Gustad for his public espousal of reform in Parsi religious norms) yet, they betray a strong consciousness of religious and/or ethnic identity and of a sense of difference with dominant Hindu identity. Nariman, is not a practising Parsi the way Gustad is. The opening of *Such a Long Journey* shows Gustad performing the Parsi ritual of *kusti* and offering prayers to Ahura Mazda. The confabulations between the grandfather and grandsons, in *Family Matters* become a way of re-narrating old myths and legends of ancient Iran. Nariman as a repository of Parsi history and folklore apparently is trying to pass it on to the next generation. Thus, the theme of the eternal battle between good and evil finds expression in the story of Zahuuk and Faridoon. However, *Family Matters* in one of its seminal thematic concerns remains a strong critique of Parsi
orthodoxy and its hermeticism making Mistry’s protest endoscopic also. Nariman’s life remains an unfulfilled one because of the damage the stringent laws of his community do to him by not allowing him to marry outside of it. Yezad is a liberal person to begin with but turns into a dogmatic Parsi as social and economic problems become almost insurmountable. His attempt to find solace in dogmatic faith should be understood as a coping strategy to deal with his frustrations and failures on the social and economic front. He turns to religion not as a result of a genuine feeling of belonging but due to a desire for withdrawal which results from the crises in his life. Bharucha’s observations in this context are appropriate. She opines that Yezad, “the agnostic son-in-law is increasingly drawn to religion as a mode of comfort from the hopelessness of his domestic and professional situation. He takes to slipping into the neighbouring agiary, the fire temple, on his way home from work” (192). By the end of the novel he turns into a full blown religious fanatic and is fully dedicated to reading volumes of Parsi history and Zoroastrianism. His strained relations with his elders son Murad are also primarily because of his conservative outlook. It can be said that compared to the other two texts Family Matters is more critical of the religious orthodoxies prevalent in the Parsi community but as far as Yezad’s bigotry is concerned it has to be looked upon differently. It could be a tacit justification for fundamentalist tendencies in people of minorities in a nation-state like India. Yezad’s religious fundamentalism cannot be understood as an essential Parsi trait but as something that is foisted on him because of his circumstances.

Mistry also highlights the ghettoisation of the Parsis in Bombay/Mumbai to suggest that the dual factors of Parsi obsession with tradition and aggressive hegemonic social engineering by the Shiv Sena are to blame for the alienation of his
minority community. The families residing in Khodadad building, in *Such a Long Journey*, have barely any social connection with the mainstream Maratha Hindu society of Bombay/Mumbai which forms their immediate social context. Maratha identity gets concretized both around high caste Hindu religious identity and Maratha history, cultural practices and language, the former at an implicit and assumed level while the latter is strongly foregrounded. The interpersonal social connection between the members of the Parsi society and the Maratha society of Bombay are non-existent outside of the transactions necessitated by the fact of social co-existence. Their mutual distrust is shown to be rooted in historical reasons or in what Parsis perceive as the cultural transformation of Bombay in consonance with the assertion of Maratha identity. As will be seen in the next chapter, the private conversations of Parsi characters betray a strong sense of dislike for the society around them. There is strong sense of unease in the face of the valorization of Maratha history, language and culture at an organized level. The presence of political outfits like the Shiv Sena and their agenda of cultural policing with the aim of total social, political and economic control is a more militant way of establishing Maratha supremacy which gets converted into electoral gains and political rule.

Feeling alienated and persecuted, Gustad and Dinshawji often reflect on how the processions taken out by the Shiv Sainiks for the separate state of Maharashtra always bore a chauvinistic character. They would break the window panes of Parsi dominated establishments and threaten to take away from the Parsi crow-eaters what was rightfully theirs (the Maratha Hindus’). Shiv Sena’s agenda resting on the logic of majoritarian fascism or racist discrimination deriving its legitimacy from regional and religious identity is presented as an important reason for the growing alienation of
minorities like the Parsis. These socio-political developments are disabling for religious and ethnic minorities and engender a sense of fear in the minds of minorities at the same time making non-secularism and fascism the basis of socio-political organization. Mistry, liberally incorporates instances of intimidation and of programmatic cultural homogenization of the society in Bombay through the outings of the characters in Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance, and Family Matters. In the last novel when Roxanna and Yezad are returning from Jal and Coomy’s house after celebrating Nariman’s birthday before his fall, they are confronted by rogues who begin to tease Roxanna. In a clear attempt at communal intimidation, they first address Yezad as ‘bavaji’ before chanting a lewd Hindi film song and finally giving a unconcealed threat“We are Shiv Sena people, we are invincible”(44). If an analogy is drawn with Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, it becomes apparent that although episodes related with street protests and morchas for a separate state of Maharashtra are integral to this narrative also but the threat is not individualized. The threat, if any, gets diluted through the perceptions of the metaphorical figure of Saleem Sinai and the heavy burden of allegory in a highly self referential narrative:

Language marchers demanded the partition of the state of Bombay along linguistic - boundaries the dream of Maharashtra was at the head of some processions, the mirage of Gujarat led the others forward. Heat, gnawing at the mind's divisions between fantasy and reality, made anything seem possible; the half waking chaos of afternoon siestas fogged men's brains, and the air was filled with the stickiness of aroused desires. What grows best in the heat: fantasy; unreason; lust.
In 1956, then, languages marched militantly through the daytime streets; by night, they rioted in my head. We shall be watching your life with the close attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.

It’s time to talk about the voices. But if only our Padma were here…

(*Midnight’s Children*, 231-232)

In Mistry’s narrative the threat is ontological and personal, while for Rushdie it is epistemological. It does not get concretized in the minds of individuals or affect their consciousness. The nature of protest in Mistry’s fiction materializes at the level of day to day existence. The idea of the society of Bombay/Mumbai, as seen from Parsi perspective, evolves at several levels in Mistry’s fiction. At one level, it is the need to contend with local authorities which are seemingly uncooperative, corrupt, callous and even violent. The decision to demolish the compound wall of the Parsi building in *Such a Long Journey* is indicative of the insensitiveness of the local municipal authorities and of their disregard for the convenience and wishes of the people. Another face of the society is characterized by difficult living conditions given the chronic inefficiencies of civic administration. The roads are unsafe, the traffic chaotic and the trains overcrowded.

The disapproval of the outside world, seen through protagonist Gustad’s eyes, is characterized by a tangible fear of lawlessness, absence of civic sense, pervasive dishonesty and poor administration. Almost all Parsi characters associate risk with the act of venturing out of home. Different characters betray different levels of withdrawal, fear and alienation. The pattern of loss, estrangement and withdrawal spanning over generations is visible in the change from engagement to withdrawal.
The roads of Bombay are described as the most unsafe place and the very act of going out on them is associated with grave risk. At a point in the text, disappointment with his son and his resentment against, what he perceives is his thanklessness, refresh Gustad’s memories of the accident in which while trying to save ten year old Sohrab, he permanently damaged his leg resulting in a barely perceptible limp. Like other encounters with the outside world this too is remarkable for its unsavoury character. It is actually an accident which is precipitated by the callousness of the conductor. Out to celebrate his son’s admission to St Xavier’s High School, Gustad along with Sohrab, inadvertently boards a wrong bus – one which is not going to Churchgate where he wanted to take Sohrab to treat him to fish curry. The conductor, due to a characteristic peevishness of temperament either wants him to buy a ticket to the next station or get down from the moving bus. Finally, Gustad and Sohrab are forced to get down after the bus comes to a halt right in the middle of the road. Gustad, on noticing, that Sohrab had lost his balance jumps to push him out of the way of traffic and in the process smashes his hip. Moreover, it is not only the conductor’s attitude that is exposed during Gustad’s fall and injury in Such a long Journey, but the callous social behaviour of the conductor is replicated in the roadside water-seller who is inhumane enough to demand twenty paisa for the two glasses of water brought by him – one of which was used to moisten Gustad’s rain drenched face and the other which he was unable to drink.

A prominent aspect of Mistry’s critique of post-Independence India is the dehumanising nature of what goes under the name of economic development and progress. In all his novels, big business and commercialisation are shown to take
away the meagre means of livelihood of poor artisans and small businessmen driving them to big cosmopolitan centres as economic slaves and refugees. This pattern is visible in the lives of Om, Ishwar and Maneck as this theme is explored in detail in *A Fine Balance*. The victims of ‘progress’ suffer and are driven to desperation. The small scale business of Farokh Kohlah, Maneck’s father begins to collapse in the face of unequal competition from big corporations. Farokh is almost a tragic figure as he decides to resist the invasive onslaught of industrial and consumerist order by persisting with his small scale business even in highly unfavourable circumstances.

Mistry highlights the anti-human and anti-environmental nature of big commercial projects by showing that Farokh’s decision of not altering his way of business is based on his ideological convictions as he does not endorse the idea of progress that is incompatible with modes of living and ecological balance. Farokh with his intense or what appears to others, an almost insane love for nature is in the habit of going on long solitary walks. He treats trees and rocks like living things and loves to embrace, touch and talk to them, reminding the reader of the proponents of Chipko movement, desperately trying to protect the ecology of the hills.

The ecological loss caused by mindless commercial expansion finds a symbolic expression in the losses and fragmentation suffered by Kohlah family.

Farokh belongs to a class of people for whom development with its unilateral agenda of wealth generation is an imposition. However, the pervasiveness of consumerism is too diffuse to be understood or controlled. It soon finds manifestations in aggressive marketing strategies. Whereas, Maneck is in favour of employing counter strategies, Farokh does not relate to them. Maneck’s idea of hard selling is incomprehensible to
him. He responds to Maneck’s suggestion by asking, “What kind of language is that? Sounds absolutely undignified. Like begging. These companies from the city can behave like barbarians if they want to. Here we are civilized people” (220).

This difference of opinion about acceptance or rejection of new ways of business becomes one of the major reasons for the conflict between the father and son. Maneck’s migration to the city to get enrolled in a course of Refrigeration and Air Conditioning can be understood as a kind of displacement as well as dissociation from the obstinate obsession of his father with tradition. The end result is the collapse of the family business and the end of security provided by it. The novel bemoans the entry of large scale business and industry in regional economic set-ups which ends up destabilizing the personal family life and creates several imbalances. Maneck’s migration to the city by the sea is not one undertaken because of individual priorities but is a result of the new economic compulsions. The estrangement between the father and the son is also a corollary of socio-economic changes taking place around them.

After the death of Farokh Kohlah when Mrs. Kohlah’s fall in an inaccessible corner of the mountains raises the need to summon the palkhiwalas or porters of long armed chairs, the nostalgia accompanying the description goes beyond the incidental details. These porters like Farokh have been sent out of business by the roads and new means of transportation. As the palkhi bearers “trotted off in perfect unison, their legs and arms moving like well-oiled machinery…Maneck was reminded of the steam engine his father had shown him at close quarters” (A Fine Balance 589). The invasiveness of the impersonal business drive for more and more profit at the expense of innumerable human beings thrown out of their age-old professions, resembling
inexorably expanding concentric rings, devastates the peaceful lives of the Kohlahs just as the entry of a readymade clothes business necessitates the migration of Om and Ishwar - two skilled workers - to a more competitive and unsympathetic place. The loss is felt most keenly by Maneck when he returns from Dubai after the death of his father and leads to his almost unpremeditated decision to commit suicide. It is only after his father’s death that he can relate to the agony that his father must have undergone tormented by the conflicting needs to preserve his way of life and to send his son away:

Now he felt the despair his father had felt as the familiar world slipped from around him, the valleys gashed and ugly, the woods disappearing. Daddy was right, he thought, the hills were dying, and I was so stupid to believe the hills were eternal, that a father could stay forever young. If only I had talked to him…He was too late. He stumbled and fell on his knees, his fingers in the ooze. The rain descended pitilessly. He felt unable to rise. He covered his face with his muddy hands and wept, and wept, and wept” (596).

The lines can also be taken as another example of Mistry’s pessimistic outlook which appear to prepare the reader for Maneck’s suicide. Maneck’s final leap in front of the train can be seen as a result of the existential crisis that begins to plague him. The loss of family, his experience of the political oppression that exterminates Avinash and his family and the mutilation of Om and Ishwar make him completely lose hope. The alternative possibility of migrating to the Middle East also does not hold any charm for him anymore. The sight of his friends Ishwar and Om as cripples begging on streets, after they are conspiratorially victimized by Dharamsi in the
family planning camp, had given him the irrecoverable final setback of his life before he happens to see the photograph of Avinash’s three sisters in the newspaper. The three sisters, as Maneck reads in the old newspaper, committed suicide by hanging themselves in order to spare their father the shame of not getting his daughters married for want of dowry. In this sense the novel also becomes a strong protest against the dehumanising national agenda of ‘development’ and insensitive and abusive politics in postcolonial nation-state.

Dipesh Chakrabarty in his “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History” gets engaged with the problematic of the notions of ‘history’ and ‘modernity’ in the context of the postcolonial nation-state/nationalism. Chakrabarty narrates how (national) history almost becomes indispensible in spaces “which did comfortably without it until as late as the eighteenth century?” He then goes on to assert that “‘Economics’ and ‘History’ are the knowledge forms that correspond to the two major institutions that the rise (and later universalization) of the bourgeois order has given the world – the capitalist mode of production and the nation state” (19). The history of the nation-state is also a narrative of modernity and Chakrabarty tries to give an account of the violence that is attendant on such notions. He reproduces an extract that narrates the experience of two American doctors involved in the eradication of smallpox in the 70s given by Lawrence and Girija Brilliant in their essay “Death for a Killer Disease”. The extract reads like this:

In the middle of gentle Indian night, an intruder burst through the bamboo door of the simple abode hut. He was a government vaccinator, under orders to break resistance against smallpox vaccination. Lakshmi Singh awoke
screaming and scrambled to hide herself. Her husband leaped out of bed...Outside a squad of doctors and policemen quickly overpowered Mohan Singh. The instant he was pinned to the ground, a second vaccinator jabbed smallpox vaccine into his arm...the rest of the team overpowered the entire family and vaccinated each in turn. Lakshmi Singh bit into one doctor’s hand, but to no avail. (qtd in Chakrabarty, 22)

The extract is not only comparable with but can be held as a parallel account to Mistry’s almost grotesque accounts of beggars being made to forcibly contribute to national growth by working in an irrigation project or of the methods of garnering numbers in the vasectomy programmes by government employees or leaders like Thakur Dharamsi. Chakrabarty like Mistry, cites the incident as an example of both ‘foundational’ i.e. historic as well as quotidian coercion that according to him is a part of the overlapping narratives of modernity and (national) history. These arguments can be profitably employed in the reading Mistry. The previous chapter and the present one take up several instances of violence, abuse and even displacement that take place as a part of the discourses of modernity and nationalist history of progress. Most prominently the amputation and vasectomy of Ishwar and Om, their captive stay in an irrigation project, Aviansh’s and Bilimoria’s murder and the devastation of the ecological and economic balance of the small village where Farukh Kohlah lives – all these acts of violence are justified through the discourse of progress and nationalism. While the texts do not overly emphasise the bourgeois interests behind such developments, there is a keen consciousness of the possibilities of violence and annihilation in such spaces. It is a curious fact that while deriding such instances of
abuse of human rights Misry seems to be in agreement with the nation’s role in promoting modernity in the civic sense, liberal and democratic rights and values. Thus, Mistry’s debate unlike that of Chakrabarty is not with the entire Eurocentric system of knowledge that is dovetailed with the primarily European ideas of nation and nationalism but only with its selective aspects. An attempt has also been made in the present chapter to bring out how Mistry’s critique falls short of a purely leftist analysis of a nation-state as it is leavened by a heavy dose of cultural contestations between the majority Maratha community and the miniscule Parsi community.

It becomes evident that the texts under study, at least, at a visible level are also critical of the neo-liberal economic trends. Mistry has gone on record to say that migration to the West cannot be taken to be a panacea for socio-political and economic problems. Migration to economically richer and supposedly more liberal and democratic countries is one of the alternatives before his characters like Maneck and Yezad. In *A Fine Balance*, this kind of migration in search for employment is presented as a kind of an exile. The issue of emigration runs like a thematic streak in *Family Matters* also in which Yezad’s dream of emigration to Canada, his only hope of prosperity and security, remains unrealized. Yezad is acerbic in his criticism of the emigration policies as he feels that his application for residence in Canada was baselessly rejected. Whereas, Maneck’s decision to not return to Dubai is rooted in his individuality and is a response to excruciating injustice he has seen around him, Yezad’s desire to migrate to Canada is symbolic of a popular desire of the people in the third world, who wish to escape from places like India for better economic possibilities in the Western world as it is perceived to offer greater opportunities as well as security from the threat of majorities.
One theme that recurs in Mistry’s fiction is the loss of sense of security and belongingness as the social and political structures undergo transformation in postcolonial India. Most of the minorities and individuals belonging to weaker sections of society are made to feel more and more insecure, threatened and ostracised in the new socio-economic order. The chasm between the bigger outside world and the narrow domestic spaces for the minorities, the poor and the lower castes is shown to be increasing everyday in postcolonial India. Mistry does not hesitate in giving the Parsis a role in this unending process of alienation of the micro and the macro. Their unconscionable paranoia breeds in them an urge to withdraw into their private world of ethnic religious identities. Sukeshi Kamra rightly observes about Such a Long Journey:

...the most crucial critique of identity politics is to be found in Mistry’s representation of relations between the micro and macro as a matter of impossible distance. At the centre of the text is a Parsi community, whose day-to-day existence is the subject of the novel. National concerns and views enter this world only marginally ... The powerlessness of the micro and the undeniable impact of the macro on them, forms the very metaphorical base of the text. (137-8)

This is equally true of other novels of Mistry also. The distance between the world of the Parsis and the Maratha society is wide and increasing, indicative of lack of integration, belonging and identification. The wall of Khodadad building, the Parsi enclosure, in Such a Long Journey is the symbol for this marked division between the public and the private. The small compound wall is literally a barrier between the
Parsis and the mainstream Mumbai/Bombay society. And the threat of demolition of this wall is dramatised throughout the narrative as a process of invading and violating the uniqueness of the Parsi world. Apparently, the authorial sympathies lie with the protection of the wall. The immediate threat to the community comes in the form of a notice that is pasted on one of the pillars of the building. The notice is a piece of advance information from the municipality for shifting the compound wall of Khodadad building by a few yards so that the road outside can be widened. The wall through its rich and layered symbolism is developed into an important motif as the narrative progresses. The prospect of the wall receding or getting demolished gives rise to fear in the minds of people like Gustad. The proposal of demolition of the wall by the city municipal corporation can be understood as a threat of an unwelcome infringement into Parsi privacy or as the grim prospect of further marginalization. It can also be understood as the denial of right to space. The importance of the wall for the Parsi community is linked to their gradually increasing recession into ethnic enclosures particularly after independence.

At a more symbolic level, the insulating wall acts as a demarcating line between the world of the Parsis, the contiguous social and political context of metropolitan Bombay/Mumbai, and the national political regime which directly or remotely affects everyone. This wall has a great emotional importance for the residents of Khodadad building as it gives them a sense of security. It is described as “the sole provider of privacy,” especially for Gustad and his former friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria, when they performed their kusti prayers at dawn. It is within the confines of this wall that Parsi life, conscious of the jungle of concrete going up and
blocking the sun on almost all sides, goes on. Not only is there a threat from the administration to relocate the wall a few feet closer to Khodadad building, thus cutting the compound into half but there is also the additional problem that passers-by use the wall as an open-air-lavatory. Outsiders urinating and defecating close to the wall evokes strong nuances of an uncivilized and uncultured society existing right at the bounds of a shrinking Parsi world.

Troubled by the constant nuisance of buzzing mosquitoes because of the stinking compound wall, Gustad thinks of an ingenious plan of solving the problem. On the way to his bank, Gustad has often stumbled upon a pavement artist who makes sketches of gods and goddesses of all religions. Whichever part of the pavement he sits acquires a consecrated status. Gustad plans to transfer the pavement artist to the compound wall of Khodadad building. The pavement artist finally shifts his place of work and makes the compound wall of Khodadad building his new canvas.

At the most apparent level through this episode, Mistry suggestively satirises the Mumbai society in its blind and superstitious reverence for the images of deities but complete disregard for civic values, cleanliness of public spaces and matters of hygiene. If Gustad’s scheme is a huge success, as the problem of stench and mosquitoes almost disappears, his success is rooted in irony. At another level, the incidence of gods of different religions co-existing on a wall in a society plagued with religious factionalism creates a juxtaposition of the questions of co-existence and the political discourse of secularism. The gods, prophets and saints depicted on the wall come from all religions and sects: the Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, a representation of the Jumma Masjid, Moses, Nataraja, Abraham, Mary, Jesus, Laxmi, Saraswati and even Swami Vivekananda, Our Lady of Fatima and Zarathustra. Not
only is the problem of stench and filth solved, but, there is on show an ardent public reverence for the wall. Obeisance is paid to the painted idols in different forms like offerings of coins and incense sticks.

Kamra regards this incident as an important aspect of Mistry’s reinscription of the history of post-Independence India where religion can be used for unifying rather than dividing people. There is an articulation in these new discourses of the possibility of unity somehow built despite the essential heterogeneity of the society. This almost utopian idea confirms Mistry humanist credentials. The text is thus seen as, “a description of a community that is the exact opposite of the forced identification implicit in the concept of nation. This space [Bombay/Mumbai] is described in the text as the space of heterogeneity … as post-independence movements of definition in ethnic and religious terms challenge the very heterogeneity that Mistry imbues the city with” (Kamra 138). Such a utopian co-existence neutralizing differences of religion and class/caste is also evidenced in A Fine Balance in the coming together of members of lower caste and those of the Parsi community. If this camaraderie is seen in its full scope it includes moffusil outcastes like Shankar the beggar, the beggar master and even Rajaram.

What contributes to the protagonist Gustad’s sense of happiness is the fact that “apart from the way the wall had been transformed into a clean place, there was such a sense of goodness about it, about the holy pictures” (Such a Long Journey 214). In Mistry’s pessimistic world, the element of hope is provided by such incidents which highlight the positive role religion can play in a society. In this sense, although people like Yezad may be drawn to religion for incorrect reasons, Mistry recognizes the
positive value of religion. Mistry’s concern with assertion of religious and ethnic Parsi identity throughout his texts is linked to his belief in religion as a positive value in human life. The temporary resolution of the wall problem will be brought to a permanent end when the wall itself disappears as a consequence of administrative intrusion. The alternative of secularist living presented through the person of Kapur in *A Fine Balance* is in a similar way terminated without being completely realized. The question of dividing or uniting the society, according to Mistry's thesis, is linked to the strategic adjustments that political power has to constantly make. Nevertheless, the idols of almost all religions and offerings made before them are an interesting comment on ordinary person’s apolitical sense of religion

> Today there were bunches of them, in *agarbatti* holders, sending up their fragile wisps of white, sweet scented smoke. Nearby, in a little earthen thurible, *loban* smouldered with its unique, pleasantly pungent fragrance. Candles and oil lamps were lit at intervals. And there was even a stick of sandalwood before the portrait of Zarathustra. The black wall had verily become a shrine for all races and religions. (286)

The footpath artist is also presented as a metaphorical figure, emblematic of cultural hybridity. A way in which Mistry pits the definition of culturally hybrid community against both “that proposed by the centre as well as that implied by the closed Parsi community, walled in by its virtuous maintaining of ethnic separateness…[the footpath artist] does not insist on national identity nor on the ethnic ones…and is the quintessential street person, whose identity is offered as lying in difference, the polyglot” (Kamra 139-140).
Accidents, personal tragedies, mishaps and chance happenings play a significant role in the suffering, pain, loss and tragedies of various marginalised individuals in Mistry’s fiction, which, in a way, is both a reflection on Mistry’s pessimistic vision and his way of analysing their general condition. The apathy of his characters can also be traced back to the attitude of rudeness, money-mindedness and lack of concern for human values which is presented as a dominant characteristic of the twentieth century Bombay/Mumbai society. By focusing repeatedly on such behaviour of ordinary citizens, Mistry draws attention to the weaknesses of the contemporary culture and dehumanised human values.

There are repeated references to accidents in Mistry’s narratives leading to a conclusion that Indian roads are characterized by lack of safety. It is common for personal lives to get devastated as a result of such accidents. The undisciplined driving and lawlessness on the roads is symbolically presented in the incident describing the death of two close relatives of Gustad’s spinster neighbour Miss Kutpitia, her brother and his son. This accident caused by the recklessness of a rash driver ruins her life. The irony in the description of the accident is barely concealed, “On the return journey, there was an accident on the Ghats. A lorry driver lost control, colliding first with a busload of vacationers, then the car in which Farad and his father were riding, and all three vehicles went off the mountain road. The lorry driver was the lone survivor” (Such a long Journey 63). Coincidentally, Gustad’s first meeting with Ghulam Mohammad, who is later introduced as Bilimoria’s agent, takes place when he is taken in his taxi after his accident. Gustad never meets him again, although in his heart he always wanted to thank him, till the time comes when Ghulam
Mohammad is himself knocked off by a speeding vehicle when Gustad and Dinshawji are taking a walk near their bank. There is also something sinister about the accidents that fill up the pages of the texts as they cannot be ascribed to chance only. Ghulam Mohammad, at least, is sure, as he tells Gustad when he goes to collect the money sent by Billimoria from his Chor Bazaar shop that his accident was a ploy to eliminate him. The accidents that cause loss to human life and in some cases maim and disable people are an inexplicable mix of chaotic roads and sinister ploys to eliminate people. In his last meeting with Bilimoria, Gustad hears from his own mouth that there was another attempt to liquidate Ghulam Mohammad, “[t]hey tried to finish him off on the Lambretta. Their favourite way, traffic accident. He was asking too many questions’ (Such a long Journey 278). Almost all the episodes involving the roads of Bombay are accompanied by one or the other accident taking place.

Dina in A Fine Balance shows a similar fear of Indian roads and dissuades Rustom from riding too much bicycle on them. Her fears soon become true when Rustom is killed in an accident. The fundamental inefficiency of the institutions is brought out by the return by the police evidence department of the mangled and rusted bicycle of Rustom after a period of twelve years signalling the closure of the case.

The short journey of a local nature with which the novel A Fine Balance opens is punctuated by an accident in which a youth commits suicide by jumping in front of the train. The interruption in greeted by a comment made by a grumbling passenger who complains about the regularity with which people commit suicide on railway tracks; “Why does everybody have to choose the railway tracks only for dying?” (5) The dehumanised self-centred commuter’s cynical remark is presented as a comment
on an insensitive society. The origin of the problems of the Chenoy family and Jal and Coomy also lie in Nariman’s accident on Bombay roads where he is regularly dissuaded from going.

The quest for a shelter/home is a central thematic concern of *A Fine Balance*: a basic human need that is denied to the vulnerable sections of the society in a metropolis like Bombay/Mumbai. Ishwar and Om on their part have to perpetually struggle for shelter. Their vulnerability is of a higher order as compared to Maneck’s and Dina’s. Their exposure to widespread political repression and exploitation is more. They are repeatedly victimized by the representatives of political powers. Thokray the slumlord works with the patronage of political powers exploits the homeless to the hilt. After their short stay in the slum Ishwar and Om are forced to live on the pavement. They manage to get a small space outside the shop of a chemist after agreeing to pay the watchman a small gratification every day. The challenge of gaining an economic foothold in the absence of opportunities is coupled with the challenge of dealing with new forms of exploitation. The city offers neither opportunities of escape nor resistance. The socio-political context is shown as completely repressive. There is political intervention and control in all forms of life.

After being rendered homeless as a consequence of their ouster from the slum Ishwar and Om have to get reconciled to their new life as pavement dwellers. The stability and security associated with home comes to an end. Their vulnerability increases in proportion to the level of their exposure to socio-political oppression. Existence in the city also invests them with a new identity. Their caste based identity – the sense of belonging to a social group even if that group is chronically underprivileged also comes to an end.
Even as footpath dwellers, the poor are subjected to the worst forms of exploitation and repression. The denial of a living space and even a minimum level of freedom, are most clearly witnessed in the case of Om and Ishwar. Their effort, to lead a respectable life by earning through honourable means is foiled again and again by the social set-up and the State’s intolerance for the any form of freedom personal or social. Emergency further increases the threat of forfeiture of personal freedom and choice. In order to consolidate itself, the political power has to re-iterate its power in different forms.

However, the most ugly face of Bombay/Mumbai is brought out in Mistry’s descriptions of life in slums. The slum where Ishwar and Omprakash, the low-caste tailors, settle down constitutes a marginal sector of the city where mainly the migrants who have been displaced from their native cities or villages have congregated. They live an unprivileged life and have failed to gain any form of economic or social foothold in the hostile environment of the city. Most of them work as beggars and street performers having no other options for making existence possible. Their neighbour Rajaram, who collects human hair to sell it to exporters, paints a grim picture in front of Ishwar and Omprakash by telling them that he too is a migrant like them who came to the city with a short term plan of returning. However that is not always possible. He regards his surroundings and explains, “who wants to live like this? … But sometimes people have no choice. Sometimes the city grabs you, sinks its claws into you, and refuses to let go” (172).

The corruption in social and administrative system of the metropolis is highlighted as Ishwar and Om begin to get accustomed to the culture of the city. Their
first outing to claim their basic right as citizens of the city by applying for a ration card is an unpleasant experience. The officer in charge coaxes them to undergo vasectomy in return for issuing them a ration card. He even refuses to recognize the slum in which they live as a proper address. The only other alternative is to get the card made is through an agent who, in return for two hundred rupees, promises to ensure that all objections are ignored. The incidence is reflective of a chaotic administrative system and complete absence of accountability in government offices. The exploitativeness of the system projects itself in extremely crude forms with no attempt at circumspection. The atrocious treatment of Ishwar and Om at the hands of authorities can be construed both as an instance of corruption at personal level in a system where such deviations are normal as well as a manifestation of government policies which are violative of basic human rights.

The agent, who offers his services to Ishwar and Om, informs them that the suggestion of vasectomy made by the officer was necessitated by the invasive programme for family planning being carried out by the government. As there is political Emergency in the country the government can use coercive methods for implementing its policies. The agent tells the two tailors that the government has gone to the extent of linking promotions with the number of vasectomies facilitated by government employees. People seem to accept the fact that Emergency in one of its aspects would mean increased levels of policing and curtailment of human rights. There is a palpable feeling among the people that normal conditions have ceased to exist. When Ishwar and Om are rounded up with people travelling without ticket they hear a casual remark about a more unrelenting behaviour of the police, “I heard that
under Emergency law, no ticket means one week in lockup” (180). The bunch of culprits are however let off after being made to do fifty sit ups each in public. Rajaram later explains that they were spared the stay in the lockup as, “the jails are full with the Prime Minister’s enemies – union workers, newspaper people, teachers, students. So maybe there is no more room in the prisons” (182).

The portrayal of the education system in the novel also reflects the problems of an important component of the society. The conditions in the hostel, where Maneck has to stay in Bombay, are so unsanitary that it is almost uninhabitable. The building is poorly maintained, rooms are infested with cockroaches and the bathrooms are filthy. *A Fine Balance* is the only text where the education system is brought in for a close scrutiny. The ailing and neglected education system becomes a casualty of universal and pervasive political interference and control. It is a society where political control is absolute and infiltrates into all aspects of life. Everything must issue from and be determined by the political powers. The text tries to expose the absence of liberal values and autonomy in education. Maneck’s failure to get accommodated in this culture is reflective of its imperfections. It is evidence of its inability to play a constructive role in the life of a common man.

Rather than being enabling and empowering, the education system as delineated in *A Fine Balance*, turns into an instrument of control and suppression of a very important section of the society. Maneck’s solitary friend Avinash, shows signs of progressiveness in his efforts to generate collective will for reform and improvement. Avinash, who becomes a student leader and later gets murdered because of his interventions in the prevailing education system, becomes the face of
resistance. He embodies the activist agency within democratic traditions that sets out to offer opposition to the ulterior forces that attempt to use educational institutions for political advantage.

Belonging to the family of a poor tubercular mill worker, Avinash, who is the president of the student’s union and hostel committee, makes an effort to bring about improvement in the functioning of the college canteen by mobilizing students into taking recourse to democratic ways of protest. He tastes initial success also when the caterer of the college canteen who enjoys political patronage and who had been providing unhygienic food, is replaced by another caterer. However, their optimism is short lived as political forces and larger vested interests begin to intervene and exert pressure through coercive methods. In the times of Emergency, the state is in a heightened state of political activity and educational institutions also experience very intense forms of repressive politics. Soon the democratically chosen leader of the students is replaced by the goon squads from outside who ironically call themselves ‘Students For Democracy’ and ‘Students Against Fascism’. Ensuring regimentation of the teachers and students, they make them politically unthreatening. There is an effort to normalize or neutralize all forms of independence and free thought. Two professors who dare to voice their objection to the presence of these outsiders are arrested under MISA – the draconian Maintenance of Internal Security enacted to contain all forms of rebellion. Avinash informs Maneck that under the pretext of this new law, ‘“fundamental rights have been suspended, most of the opposition is under arrest, union leaders are in jail, and even some student leaders”’ (A Fine Balance 245).
Dina’s making of a patchwork quilt from the leftover swatches of cloth is a retelling of the story of their collective experiences. At one level the patchwork quilt is a metaphor for the mosaic of people belonging to different social sections coming together. The stories of their social and political oppression and dispossession are interwoven with the sense of a larger and existential struggle that is integral to the human condition and existence.

Both *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters* have episodes describing the Parsi funeral ceremony in detail. As an evidence of the text’s venturing out of the Parsi world both Dina and Maneck go out to attend the funeral of Shankar. Dina’s discomfiture is evident in her question, “Neither Maneck not I have ever been to a Hindu funeral…what should we do when we get there?” (505).

*A Fine Balance* unlike the other two texts is an attempt at transcending ethnic enclosures. A major part of the text does not concern itself with the diagnosis of the problems of the Parsi community. The entry of a Dina Dalal into the Indian society as an independent individual opens up the possibilities for a deeper and wider social representation than would be possible from the distance of a Parsi enclosure. The convergence of characters from diverse caste and religion based sections of the Indian society hints at Mistry’s belief in the possibility of a wider and universal human bonding that surmounts differences of caste and religion. The concern and sympathy that the different characters like Maneck and Avinash; Dina, Maneck and the tailors, and Ashraf and the tailors show for one another are built purely on humanist sentiments. Chelva Kanaganayakam rightly says that while “[u]niversalism and humanism are useful descriptive terms…they often lead to generalizations that are not
particularly helpful” (30). Kanaganayakam’s reluctance to use classical critical vocabulary in the analysis of Mistry’s works derives from the suspicion of such terms in the present critical discourse. Yet, it would still not be appropriate to write off realism and realist techniques of writing as useless. Mistry’s project in representation of the Parsi community can be better understood in terms of Arjun Appadurai’s theories of ethnic identities in the age of globalization. He argues that issues of nationalism, violence and ethnic identity are closely connected in the modern globalised world order:

The contemporary world is filled with examples of ethnic consciousness that are closely linked to nationalism and violence. It will no longer serve to look at ethnicity as just another principle of group identity, as just another cultural device for the pursuit of group interests, or as some dialectical combination of the two. We need an account of ethnicity that explores its modernity …. (Modernity at Large 139).

Parsis as a small ethnic/cultural group cannot assert their identity or claim national space as other large ethnic groups like the “Tamils, Serbs, Sikhs, Malaysians, Basques” can. These groups, because of their sheer numbers and because of greater political representation, are “all claimants to nationhood, and are all involved in violent confrontations with existing state structures and other large-scale ethnic groupings. This matrix of large size, nationalist aspiration, and violence characterizes these new ethnicities” (Appadurai 139). But for the Parsis the question is of simple survival as a unique religious/cultural identity and, rather than actively asserting their rights, Mistry’s characters are shown as withdrawing into their personal domestic
world, trying to avoid the aggressive and bullying tactics of the surrounding world. The affirmation of liberal humanist belief in universalism can also be linked to this.

*A Fine Balance* comes across as a very scathing attack on the coercion, intimidation and violence during the period of Emergency in India which is shown to erode the very basis of democracy by manipulating, sabotaging and vitiating the electoral system in rural India. The novel exposes many social evils like casteism, social violence against the Dalits and the poor and the failure of the administrative and judicial system to protect the hapless victims against the muscle-power of the privileged classes.

Though Mistry’s narrative focus is mostly on the Parsi community and their suffering, alienation and socio-economic problems are given the maximum narrative space, similar marginalisation and victimisation of other minority communities is also highlighted, particularly in the later two novels. The suffering and brutalisation of low caste and poor Hindus has already been discussed in context of the narrative concerning Dukhi, Om, Ishwar and Avinash. Mistry uses a minor Muslim character Ibrahim in *A Fine Balance*, to narrate yet another tale of inhuman suffering and tragedy in the postcolonial Bombay/Mumbai.

Ibrahim, a Muslim rent-collector of the landlord in *A Fine Balance*, is a symbol of the masses struggling to survive somehow in the big city. His tragic existence is presented as a case of living without any hope. His lifelong services for the landlord which involve performing multiple roles of “the landlord’s spy, blackmailer, deliverer of threats, and all round harasser of tenants” or in short and unnatural suppression of his inherent goodness and honesty, is not sufficient to reward
him with a life of respectability and decency (86). His is the life of an average lower middle class Indian. The complexities of his life resemble what he thinks is “the plot of a bad Hindi movie minus the happy ending” (90). His daughter and wife are shown to succumb to tuberculosis, his son becomes a member of the underworld and the only remaining daughter ventures into prostitution. In order to lighten the burden of his frustrations he gets used to resorting to coping strategies like visiting all kinds of fortune tellers. His visits could vary from those to palmists and astrologers to card-picking doves and communicating cows. These also ceased when he became conscious of its differences with simple belief and faith in God. Ibrahim’s troubles finally get resolved in submission. Equipped with a new plastic folder – a replacement of his older buckram one – containing rent receipts, bills and records of the tenants what remained was to decide which one of the two plastic or flesh would endure for a longer time. The small account of Ibrahim’s life is a common story of failure, unremarkable life and submission which is important not in itself but because it is the symptom of the society. Ibrahim’s life is presented as symbolic of the struggling masses ready to make any compromise to just survive.

Another equally shocking incident is narrated in Such a Long Journey highlighting the pitiable plight of poor hungry homeless street children, a common sight in most Indian cities. On one of his outings, Gustad notices some starving street children standing close to a milk kiosk looking for an opportunity to drink the leftover milk from the bottles left behind by the rich customers. One of the little girls is caught and thrashed by the shopkeeper. Gustad is so disgusted with his behaviour that he, moved by pity and humane sentiments, not only rebukes the shopkeeper but also
treats the children to bottles of milk. The portrayal of churlish, unsympathetic and unwise character of the society gets exacerbated through references to the Shiv Sena and its intolerance. The text becomes a sustained critique of the political and social formulation of Marathi identity aimed at dispossession of all non-Marathi social and religious minorities. Of all the “Sakarams and Dattarams and Tukarams” who clamour outside Parsi Bank establishments and threaten to oust “Parsi crow-eaters” (39-40).

Obviously, Mistry’s social critique is a critique of the nation-state from the perspective of the minorities, the poor and the handicapped who people the margins of the national social, economic and cultural spheres. Although, the instances of political persecution and exploitation graphically detailed in *A Fine Balance* are not given the same space in *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters*, yet there is a strong feeling of alienation and lack of identification with the emerging socio-political context in Mistry’s fictional world. This is visible in the multiple crises at the individual, family and community level as a result of more ominous socio-economic and cultural crises caused by the changes in political and economic system. With the old security and privilege of the colonial society gone, Parsis begin to suffer from a sense of disorientation. There is repugnance towards the outside world, that is perceived to be uncultured and uncouth, as opposed to the more refined world of the Parsis, who are shown to possess more fine tuned sensibilities. There is also a tangible dread of the majoritarian ideas around which politics of caste, religion and language is practiced. Postcolonial societies after colonial rule easily slide into political practices which take their inspiration from chauvinistic, revivalist and essentialized notions of identity and culture reducing the possibility of non-partisan, democratic and inclusive practices.
Ania Loomba rightly points out that if “scholarship is not to be at the service of American or any other power, critiques of past and ongoing empires are going to be more necessary than ever” (228). This is true not only for the academic world but also the creative sphere. And Rohinton Mistry, whatever his limitations, appears to doing his duty for an equitable democratic world by exposing the fascistic forces, ideologies, discourses dominating India in general and Bombay/Mumbai in particular.

Mistry appears to have been trying, like Robert Young, to expose his contemporary White as well as non-White mythologies, “to recognize, retrieve, rework”, the stories telling “different kinds of history”. Despite their similarities “each is not reducible to any other, nor to any single framework. Histories that can be told in many forms, argued in different ways, thought through from different perspectives.” Like Young again, every time he writes about one, he finds “[him]self in the presence of new absences, new things that [he has] not written about, new conceptual turns and moves that need to be made” (White Mythologies 1).
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