Chapter – II

The Parsi Nostalgia

The term ‘nostalgia’ describes a sentimentality for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nostalgia). The term denotes a bitter-sweet longing for the unclaimable pleasant past, often bordering on melancholy. In fiction, nostalgia is a recurrent theme, a wishful/wistful recollection of a past way of life for ever lost to the main characters. This concept is manifested in the idealization of religious rituals. These rituals are significant factors in preserving the past and they prevent the disintegration of family and society.

Nostalgic reminiscences are presented in the stories of many characters in the works of Sidhwa and Mistry. These are connected to the changed circumstances of the Parsi community following Independence. This politico-cultural nostalgia really helps to create a sense of loss among the characters, both in domestic and public spheres.

Bapsi Sidhwa in her novels elaborately deals with the theme of nostalgia. By placing Pakistan on the international literary front, Sidhwa has helped to correct what she considers a slanted view towards Pakistan on the part of the Western World.

Sidhwa has drawn extensively on her own communal heritage and benefitted as a budding writer from the privileged environment and cosmopolitan background typical of a wealthy Parsi home. Now a citizen
of the United States, she has once again enlarged her community and this expansion serves her well in *An American Brat*.

The nostalgia surrounding a bygone community fills the novels which weave the rich tapestry of Asian life through a recreation of the smell and taste of food, the colours and textures of clothing, the sounds and odours and sights of crowded streets and over-peopled houses. But Sidhwa’s sometimes raucous and often earthly humour waylays the sentimental impulse (too often the result of nostalgia) and stresses instead the comedy and humanity that lie behind day-to-day life. *The Crow Eaters* in particular exemplifies this quality. Although many Parsis did not at first appreciate Sidhwa’s boisterous portrayal of a fictional group of their community in colonial Lahore, the outsider could not help but love these people and identify with them as they faced life’s most rewarding yet most difficult tasks: the formation of relationships, that is, the maintenance of community inspite of the human proclivity towards stubbornness, pretentiousness, Jealousy, domination and all the other imperfections that comprise character. Far from ridiculing the Parsis, the novel celebrates their community and in turn celebrates the all encompassing idea of community.

*As The Crow Eaters* closes, the powerful destroyer of community, the Partition remains on the sidelines ready to work its wreckage. The inhabitants of this cozy Parsi World have been anglicised to a greater degree than most of their neighbours and they fear that Independence and the subsequent departure of the British might leave them only in alien setting, their community will be shattered. In Sidhwa’s world, the instinct
for community remains so powerful that the characters appreciate its fluidity.

In Sidhwa’s novel *The Pakistani Bride*, she explains how Zaitoon grows up in Lahore almost as Qasim’s daughter and she is also trained to be an obedient Muslim girl. Unfortunately she revels in fantasies about her protector’s lost mountain paradise. This community has been romanticized. After living for years on the plains, Zaitoon is married to tribal man in the North-West region of Pakistan and discovers the flimsiness of her dreams, and rebels once the ideal community she had imagined evolves into a nightmare.

For in reality, it was no longer what she had imagined “a region where men were heroic, proud and incorruptible, ruled by a code of honour that banned all injustice and evil… their women, beautiful as Lories and their bright rose-cheeked children lived beside crystal torrents of matted snow” (*PB*, 90). Zaitoon’s escaping from the corrupted community where she is treated brutally amounts to Afzal Khan a challenge to the strictures of Patriarchy.

In Sidhwa’s fourth novel, *An American Brat* she addresses another aspect of community, the immigrant experience which includes a good deal of nostalgia. As people move from one part of the world, to another, seeming to dissolve national boundaries, the formation and the maintenance of the community involves many dimensions even as the community becomes more fluid.
The novel focuses on the search for community that has turned fluid. There arises a quest that preoccupies the immigrant—caught between the world left behind and the new one he or she faces.

Feroza’s nostalgia with the passage of time, only refers to an exile. She is caught between the two worlds, the one she had forsaken. It offers no hope or prosperity. Feroza finds it difficult to feel comfort in the chosen land.

*An American Brat* records the doings of the probable descendants of the Crow Eaters, that bewildered community of Parsis. Set in the contemporary period, the story is that of a wealthy Parsi family living in Lahore in peaceful times.

The outer world has completely changed since the days of *The Crow Eaters* and *Ice Candy Man*. A community forever fluid has been re-established in order to satisfy present demands.

Zareen in *The American Brat*, fears that her daughter Feroza is succumbing to the influence of the Islamic fundamentalism that is sweeping in Pakistan. For, Feroza criticises her mother for dressing immodestly.

Later, Feroza adjusts to the new community in America. Certainly *An American Brat* succeeds in defining the American experience first as Feroza views it. Feroza discovers her Parsi roots, her religion and her *Kusti* (the string that Parsis Wear as Protection) and decides that she is not going to marry an American. She grows into her Indianness. As a post-colonial novel, this novel speaks about a female character who comes into an
awareness of herself as an Indian. In some ways the story is about Sidhwa herself, her encounter with America and her Westernised ways.

In the novel, the writing of history becomes a part of the effort towards historical narrative. It goes over the past to understand the present and tries to explain events and characters. But when it fails to explain, it raises certain questions. The women writers see history not only as structured by Wars and conquests and the actions of men, but also as identified in the interaction of women and in the cultural traditions of society. But they fail to evoke nostalgia as the major constituent of their concern with the past and do not aim at a revival of the past. Instead, they analyse and interpret history and politics and free them from any form of stereotyping.

Sidhwa in her novels deals with history, past and present and seeks to feminize it in the above fashion with an active interrogation of the woman’s position in the historical, political situations.

Again, in Sidhwa’s work there is no migration or Partition without loss. Even Freddy’s jovial rise extorts its price. The prevalent comedy of her work suggests that migration becomes one of life’s essential rhythms as in *An American Brat*.

Sidhwa also enriches her narratives by using a variety of narrative positions and persona. Thus, the nostalgia gets variegated into a wide spectrum of attitudes to self, society and race. There is an effort of multiple seeing of all Brechtian types, though the epic sweep is beyond Sidhwa. She remains a private voice interested in macro-issues only as they impact the
microcosm of family and self. Her public comments have an off-the-cuff informality that suggest an individual view of history and culture.

*The Crow Eaters* is a closely constructed narrative that begins with an extended flash back. Freddy, a middle-aged man tells the story of his early years to a captive audience consisting of his seven children and some neighbouring kids. He narrates his journey to Punjab with his wife and mother-in-law for control over his household.

Through a fraudulent insurance scheme in which he sets fire to his shop and frightens his mother-in-law, he becomes both rich and the master of his house. He rises to power and eminence in the community through hard work and craft. This flash back dominates the first seventeen chapters.

*The Crow Eaters* also explores both the superficial and deep dimensions of the comic mode. It embodies a larger vision of the world. This vision is also comic and described as broad, tolerant and sympathetic. Here, Sidhwa provides insights about the Parsi faith’s antiquity, their culture, tolerance and other beliefs.

But as a Pakistani, she writes against Indian views of the past, against predominantly Indian versions of the Partition that have increasingly been challenging British interpretations of those events.

Rohinton Mistry’s fiction foregrounds numerous themes such as tradition and memory, the public realm, age, women, family and society in almost recurrent fashion.

Mistry in his *A Fine Balance*, deals with a clean picture of India during the colonial and post-colonial period. It also seems that geographical distance is cancelled out only in the cartography of his mind. His migration
to a foreign land is considered to be more a homecoming than an act of expatriation. The novel like the literary works of other exiles, reflects to quote Pasternak, “[an]obsessive concern with roots, nostalgia and finally a mythicization of a lost country.” (Qtd., by Mukherjee, Exile of the Mind, 989).

The story in A Fine Balance is concerned with the middle classes. They struggle with their ambitious wishes to higher respectability. Here, Mistry inter-mingles history with the personal lives of the characters. The novel deals with socio-political turmoil. In the novel, Dina Dalal, a pretty widow in her forties represents the urban world. Maneck Kohalah, a sensitive Parsi boy represents another world. Ishver Darji and Om Prakash are two rural untouchables from a family of tanners. They also struggle to rise above their designated caste roles by becoming tailors.

A Fine Balance is a humane novel. The novel deals with the values of a society that deny one, the value of growing old with dignity. The novel clearly pictures the dwindling Parsi community in India to which Mistry himself belongs.

Dina Dalal in the beginning resists the intimacy between Maneck and the tailors. The mutual dependence between them finally makes her agree to let the tailors sleep in her Verandah for she could not afford to lose their services.

But how firm to stand how much to bend? Where was the line between compassion and foolishness. Kindness and weakness? And that was from her position. From this, it might be a line between mercy and cruelty, consideration and callousness, she could draw it on this side but they might see it on that side. (AFB, 382)
In the novel, Maneck is a victim of displacement. He got this sense of displacement while moving from the secluded environment of his home in the hills to the college in the city. He is humiliated by his seniors. He tries his level best to adapt himself to the political atmosphere of the college, but cannot help feeling alienated. He becomes nostalgic and is constantly reminded of his home. In the end, Maneck commits suicide. Moreover in the name of poverty alleviation and civic beautification beggars are carried away and dumped in labour camps. Along with the beggars, poor people are also taken away.

So in the presentation of the major characters in the novel, their loneliness and struggle for identity and survival in a cruel world gain significance. It is social circumstances, sense of isolation and rootlessness, there arises a bond of understanding as they struggle to survive. *A Fine Balance* has established Mistry firmly as a significant literary figure in the Indian and Indo-Canadian traditions of fiction writing.

The ending of *A Fine Balance* is unconventional. Maneck, the boarding Parsi young man, is deeply upset at the misfortunes that befall on his family. His sorrows multiply when he visits Bombay. He finds that Dina has been evicted from her house.

Maneck’s dejection and extreme despair make him commit suicide. Mistry’s portrayal of Maneck as a sensitive man brings out clearly the struggles Maneck faces in his life. Finally he is lost in a struggle of despair and hope.

*A Fine Balance* opens with a train journey and concludes with an ‘Epilogue’ 1984 after Dina completes her journey of emancipation and
self-realisation. Ishvar and Om, now beggars too have their ambitions and
they have their own odysseys.

Mistry is considered an accomplished fictionist. In his fiction, he
deals with the life of the Indian middle class in Bombay comprising several
communities. In his portrayal of urban community life, he focuses on the
interaction of the Parsis with other communities.

Mistry's fame as an outstanding story teller rests on his appeal to
femininity. Parsis all over the world consider him a spokesperson of their
own anxieties, problems and frustrations. Mistry offers them a glimpse of
their own culture. Readers from the Parsi community appreciated his
honest portrayal of things; his wonderfully layered characters and his
knowledge of customs of the community. Ultimately the book became a hit
among non–Parsis too.

Given to nostalgia. Gustad Noble in Such a Long Journey
expresses his desire to get back to Iran, the Parsis' Primary space.
Commenting on the predicament of the Parsis in Bombay he says: “No
future for minorities with all these fascist Shivsena politics and Marathi
language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America –
twice as good as the white man to get half as much”(SLJ,55).

The Parsis’ longing to return to Iran, which they know is closed to
them for ever. In the novel, there are only three non-Parsi characters
namely Malcolm Saldena, Gulam Mohammed and the pavement artist. In A
Fine Balance, there are Ishvar and Om the two non–Parsi Dalits in
addition to the Parsi characters.
Parsis and poverty are in contradictory pain. Cowasjee in the novel cries out in anguish to God: “Your floods are washing away poor people’s huts… where is your fairness? Have you got any brains or not? Flood the Tatas this year! Flood the Birlas, flood the Mafatlals’” (SLJ, 127).

The significant ethnic-atrophy syndrome lies in the high rate of divorce among the Parsis. Mistry records in his fiction the ethnic atrophy that has set in his community. The fates of his characters are interwoven. The story ‘Swimming Lessons’ also deals with Mistry’s personal identity, his desire for recollections of his homeland and his adjustment in a new environment.

The story also evokes the issue of identity ranging from a reconciled sense of self-belonging to two geographical areas. In this story, Mistry emphasises on both his created home and community in Canada. He also employs a variety of tones and attitudes: nostalgic, ironic and also humorous.

The story that is set in Canada is completely structured to accommodate the narrative. The shift between the Indian past and Canadian present dramatises the clash that occurs between Oriental and Western culture. Mistry’s life in Canada is juxtaposed with his Indian past. This occurs only in the processes of memory. In Canada everything changes and this transfers his mind to India. So he becomes nostalgic.

Mistry’s apartment in Canada reminds him very well of his home in Firozsha Baag. The swimming pool draws a portrait of Chowpatty Beach in his mind. Even the character of the old man makes him remember of his grandpa. He used to sit on the veranda and stare at the traffic outside
Firozsha Baag. He was unable to read the Bombay Samachar. So he waved to any one who passed by in the compound like Rustomji, Nariman Hansotia in his 1932 Mercedez – Benz, the fat ayah Jaakaylee with her shopping bag and the kuchrawalli with her basket and long bamboo broom.

There is a Portuguese woman who gathers and disseminates information. She is also the communicator for the apartment building. She seems so life-like and is like a woman in any Indian neighbourhood.

The parents too feel that the son (the narrator of the story) is alienated and estranged from them. He does not present any ideas about his personal life. They express their surprise by asking why ‘every thing about his life is locked in silence and secrecy’ and why he bothered to visit them last year if he had nothing to say. In every letter of his, he mentions just the Canadian weather. They feel that he is not happy. He doesn’t desire to communicate this to his parents.

The son like Mistry is another diasporic writer. He becomes nostalgic and returns through his writings to Bombay where he spent his childhood. He writes stories about his homeland only on the basis of memory. He likes to preserve his stories before they fade away altogether. The question of identity both metaphoric and literal depicted through literary and artistic tools are used as strategies for survival in a world that is alien and often hostile. This is explored clearly in Mistry’s stories. In ‘Swimming lessons’ there lies an oscillation between personal constructs of home and away. The protagonist is skeptical of the Western culture he has joined.
Mistry’s use of oppositions and contrasts, parallels between cultures to construct an identity focuses on the ambivalent position of the victim of diaspora. He remembers every little thing about his childhood. Even though he is miles away, he is always thinking about Bombay.

Mistry’s portrayal of the Parsi families is totally authentic. He achieves this authenticity only by distancing himself by his emigration to Canada. Mistry also asserts that the Parsi community is the richest and most advanced, philanthropic community in India.

The ‘Swimming Lessons’ gives an insight into Parsi culture. It also presents Parsi religious ceremonies and the belief in Avan Yazad, as the guardian. In the story, although the son lives in Canada, his parents do not like him to forget Parsi values, culture, rituals and ceremonies accompanying religious festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi.

Mistry points to the expatriate’s sensitivity to the Canadian weather. The narrator describes the extremely cold winter. He is conscious that immigrants from hot countries enjoy the snow only in the first year or for a couple of years more. But inevitably the dread sets in and the approach of winter gets them fretting and moping.

In the story, the father tells his wife to write to their son, “remind him he is a Zoroastrian, *menashi gavashni, Kunshani*, better write the translation also, good thoughts, good words, good deeds. He must have forgotten what it means and tell him to say prayers and do kusti at least twice a day”(237). The mother also wonders whether he still wears his Sudra and Kusti.
‘Swimming Lessons’ is mostly about Canada. Mistry employs water imagery here. The initial inability of the son to swim smoothly in the waters of Chowpatty Beach in Bombay and also in the swimming pool in Canada simply portrays his inability to assimilate into either society. Water becomes the medium through which he is reborn. He also perceives life in dual perspective or the ‘stereoscopic’ vision of life.

The protagonist in Canada really misses the rich cultural and religious life of India. He thinks of its significance. Gustad in Such a Long Journey is nostalgic about the past, the happy carefree days of his childhood, the family gatherings, the holidays and the rich smells of his father’s carpentry business. It is only a nostalgia that is private and silent.

In the novel, Jamshed’s alienation is a consequence of his material well – being in childhood. This material well-being has served to alienate the Parsis from the ground realities of the nation they live in. Percy risks his life in order to uplift the conditions of the rural villagers. This implies a criticism of alienation.

Gustad is involved in surviving hardships. This improves the circular stances of those around him. His private grief and nostalgia help to deepen his character, giving it multi-layered intensity.

The fiction of Rohinton Mistry could be read as a nostalgic look at the community he has left behind. Mistry is acutely realistic and he stresses the contradictions within the Parsi experience in the country (India) of their residence.

Mistry recognises the importance of religion and ritual in the construction of human identity. His fiction can be read as the predicament
of an individual who seeks to cope and adjust with the contradictions
between the past and the present of the community. Mistry as a Parsi
writer, tackles religion and rituals with fervor since these are the
significant elements of Parsi identity.

The conclusion of the novel shows Gustad, ready to accept the
imperfections of existence. He controls his desire for better times. He
removes the dark paper that had been on the windows since the last war,
waiting for calmer days, an act that indicates the readiness to accept things
as they are.

In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry’s exploration of the way of life of a
community becomes more penetrative. The life of Gustad Noble, the
main protagonist of the novel, is an attempt to link family, friends,
community work and India itself. It is a parable on the nobility of
ordinariness.

Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters*, is in many ways a rites of passage book in which the child is the witness—one can very well say—it is a kind of ‘the child is the father of the man’ text.

*Family Matters* deals with the larger issues of religious zealotry,
and bigotry. Mistry has emphasized current issues, the glorious Parsi-past,
the Indian connection and ways and mores of the Parsi Zoroastrians. He
discourses not only on the problems of Nariman Vakeel, an aged Parsi of seventy nine years, suffering from Parkinson and Osteoporosis but through him, on the ageing Parsi community on the verge of extinction.
At the time of discoursing on the various issues facing the Parsi community, through the paradigmatic shift to Nariman’s love affair in the flash back scenes, Nariman’s past life history is unfolded.

The first flash back provides only the initial piece of the jigsaw puzzles that completely express the entire story of Nariman’s unhappiness. It describes how one evening thirty-six years ago Nariman finally capitulated to his parents’ insistent demand that he end his liaison with that Goan woman and agree to settle down (FM, II). The same evening had been preceded by the evening at the Breachcandy Beach when he had told Lucy Braganza that he was ending their long relationship. The flashback over the text moves into contemporary times again since the family celebrates Nariman’s seventy ninth birth day.

As for Nariman, inspite of the hardships of his cheek-by-jowl existence in the tiny flat and his son-in-law’s at times justified grumpiness, life becomes better than it was in his spacious flat, where he had to contend with Coomy’s sourness and Jal’s helplessness. Nariman had his grandson’s company and when he talked in his sleep, Roxana and Yezad rushed out of their bedroom to standby and watch till he settled back into sleep. The talking in his sleep is again a part of flashback episode.

These flashbacks of Nariman reveal his painful past. The next flashback explains the tragedy that ultimately blights Nariman’s life and those of his step-children forever.

As the text weaves in and out of times past and present, it also pauses for a while to take in concerns dear to Mistry’s heart and after this flashback it is the turn of immigration to be discussed.
In the novel, Mistry’s own problems with a time—warp, common to most Diasporic writers and occasional lapses into nostalgia surface in the chapters dealing with Jehangir’s school-St.Xavier’s—not coincidentally also Mistry’s alma mater. There lies plenty of scope to remember old-school-teachers, pretty females as well as those who were male and priests.

Mr.Kapur’s nostalgic praise of Bombay is also offset by Yezad’s own memories, especially regarding the Bombay Docks explosion in 1944. This particular story gains importance when it is retold to his sons in the context of the clock at home, which only Yezad winds. Yezad as a story teller tells his sons how their grandfather who had been a cashier in a bank had safeguarded the bank’s money in the midst of the chaos and destruction that had overtaken the city when a ship in the docks had exploded.

Thus the sentimental longing for the happy past, both in the personal and social fronts gains significance in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry. A close analysis reveals that these sentimental recollections on Parsi festivities and the nostalgic moments on the very entity called ‘Bombay’ nourish the fragile Parsi-psyche in a fusion of past, present and possibly the future.