Chapter – V

Summing Up

When, finally, we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there.
The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
Home is where we have to earn our grace.
(Ezekiel “Enterprise” 26-30)

In a nation, the culture of the mainstream community is invariably accepted as main culture\ kurtculture. The socio-economically backward groups are labelled as minorities and their culture is treated as sub-culture. “...subcultures are understood as being ‘subordinate’, but more subversive than ‘subordinated’ in their relation to mainstream culture” (Brooker 240). The migrants of a nation are also treated as minorities and their cultures are branded as sub-cultures.

However, migration is not only a displacement of place, but also a displacement of culture, tradition and language. The migrants strive hard to preserve their native culture, tradition, and customs in the alien soil. Their unique culture imposes a separate identity upon them. “Such identities are seen as a way of negotiating or resisting the established identities and pathways sanctioned by the emotions of a ‘parent’ society” (Brooker 241).

The Parsis, as discussed earlier, did not migrate from their inherited homeland for economic betterment but to save their life and to preserve the teachings of their prophet Zarathushtra. They were determined not to be
Islamized by the invading Arabs. The Parsi community for centuries together has made several diasporas all over the world. At first, they migrated from Iran to India and lived under the dominant Hindu rulers. During the British regime, the Parsis enjoyed elite status. After the partition of India in 1947, they were not quite content with their lot. So, most of them migrated to foreign countries. But even in the new abodes, the Indian Parsis felt alienated and depressed.

Generally ethnic identity is marked by cultural beliefs, languages, customs, and food habits. The Parsis do possess a unique ethnic identity. They have certain cultural features which are unique in nature. Since the Parsis are an ethno-religious minority, they have to bear the disadvantages of such a community. Since their settlement in India, the Parsis have been strictly adhering to the conditions imposed by the king, Jadhav Rana. They have never supported conversion. They have never made use of their religious rituals in the fire temple as a bait to attract outsiders for conversion. In fact, no outsiders have been allowed into the temple. They have always remained humble, loyal and conscientious in their actions. But unfortunately, they have received only troubles and insults at the hands of the mainstream community. They have always suffered mental and emotional alienation. The attitudes of the mainstream community have sown the seed of hatred in their minds resulting in their assimilation of the British culture during the colonial period.
During the colonial rule, the Parsis entertained the notion that only the Britishers recognized their values. They gave the early Parsi settlers land on the Malabar Hill for the establishment of the first Dokhma or The Tower of Silence.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Eaters* revolve round the condition of the Parsis during the freedom movement. Their indecisive attitudes, whether to remain loyal to the Britishers or to participate in the freedom movement, are depicted clearly in the novels. The following lines from *Eaters* attest to their fear of India attaining freedom: “The Hindus will have one part, Muslims the other, Sikhs, Bengalis, Tamils and God knows who else will have their share, and they won’t want you!” (Eaters 282).

The fall of the British empire accentuated the Parsis’ hostility towards the Indian mainstream community. In the Postcolonial era, they tried to assert their individuality by adhering strictly to their own culture, tradition and religion. Yet, they feared that they might lose their religion and culture. So they kept themselves aloof religiously and culturally from others and this religious and cultural isolation estranged them from others. Though they faced many problems in India, they continued to display their talents in every field of public life. India has found a place in the industrial map of the world, owing to the contribution of the Parsis.

The Parsis consider their race superior, for they believe that they are descendents of ancient Iranian Zoroastrians; they are followers of ancient
religion Zoroastrianism; they enjoy high economic status; they are endowed with elite consciousness and above all they have a high sense of hygiene and health. In spite of their glorious achievements, fabulous business records and superiority consciousness, the Parsis, at times remain detached from the mainstream community because of their feelings of insecurity.

The Parsis in India live amidst great fear as the Sikh driver in Balance warns Maneck, “Today it is Sikhs. Last year it was Muslims; before that, Harijans. One day your sudra and kusti might not be enough to protect you” (Balance 676). The fear they harbour for the Indian politicians heightens the sense of insecurity in their minds.

In addition, the Parsis are culturally, geographically, linguistically and psychologically estranged in India. Alienation has led them to a conscious construction of an identity of their own. The Parsi identity is made up of their ancient religious practices, tradition, culture, history and ethnicity. The Parsi writers address themselves most directly to the question of Parsi identity. They speak about their glorious past, their hideous present, their insecured state, alienated feelings and depressed state. Besides echoing these feelings, they also focus on their steadily dwindling numbers and the lack of interest in cultural and religious matters displayed by the youngsters in the community.

The Readers’ Forum of the magazine Parsiana carries a letter by a Parsi reader which clearly states the reason for the unpopularity of their religion:
It is felt that the failing has been on the part of our parents who have little time to impart religion to their children as they don't know it themselves; partly on the part of our elders who are not willing to accept central authority; but the main failing has been on the part of our priestly class. Unlike the Christian priests, or the Jewish rabbis, or the Buddhist monks, who have spent long years, not only in studying their religion but also studying theology and philosophy, other than a few scholars, our priest in general, except being able to repeat our prayers by rote, are not learned enough, in the real sense of the word, and have failed to impart the true meaning of our religion to members of their congregation. In this respect our youth are thoroughly disillusioned by rituals like drinking and washing hands with the taro of a 'sacred' white bull in these days of antiseptics like Dettol and Listerine; to bringing a dog at our funeral ceremony to correctly diagnose whether a person is dead or not in these days of CT Scan and MRI,....(8)

In the beginning, the Parsi writings did not stress much on the Parsi identities. But recently the writers have begun focusing on the minority consciousness. They express their feelings, anguish, anxiety, social differences and cultural ambivalences by launching a separate genre in literature. They articulate their psyche, claim recognition through their writings and present
the distressing traumatic effect of the minority psyche triggered by Hindu chauvinism.

Rohinton Mistry combines the mixed feelings of the wounded psyche of the Parsis and vividly portrays their anguish, fear and hostility through his writings. As a Parsi, his concern is to present a true portrait of the Parsi identity in India. The life of the Parsis pulsates on each page of his writings and the distinctive traits of the Parsis are highlighted in his literary outputs. His works explore the tension that exists between the majority and the minority communities in India. Simultaneously, with the delineation of the Indian identities, he constructs the identities of the Parsis. Mistry's ethnic consciousness both in India and Canada makes his discourse minority-centered. As M.F. Salat in his “Denying the Givens” puts it:

Rohinton Mistry is an interesting case of a writer who, as a Parsi in India and as an Indian in Canada, is part of minority/ethnic culture in both the countries. For him therefore the minority status is a felt and fated experience in both the worlds. It is not surprising therefore that he does not attempt to focalize or problematize questions of marginality and racism in his writings.

(172)

Further, Parsi discourse their socio-cultural identities and questions social inequality. By negating the concept of other, it authentically asserts that their racial self is superior. Parsi discourse provides abundant factors for
understanding the community. It is evident from Mistry’s works that the conditions like adopting the local languages, customs and costumes and the concept of outsiders have led the Parsis feel alienated. Besides, the approach of the Indian politicians towards this tiny community has also worsened a sense of estrangement in them. Mistry’s writings reveal that the fears, anxieties, and the sense of alienation of the Parsis are not completely inherent. Initially, nationalization of banks in 1970s, Nagarwala incident, and Feroze Gandhi’s suspected death created the Parsis’ apprehension over India and its culture. Though they remained aloof from controversial issues, at times they fell victims to the dirty tricks of politicians. In addition, the Parsis did not want to corrupt their religion by intermingling with the mainstream community.

The Parsis are noted for their honesty. But their honesty was questioned after the Nagarwala incident. Nagarwala was allegedly cheated by the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The Nagarwala case invited a lot of attention and, for a while, the Parsis felt that they had lost their honour. They got terribly wounded and they struggled hard to forget the incident. But the harshness and atrocity committed on a member of their community could not be easily forgotten. Mistry brings this incident alive in his maiden novel Journey. He uses the episode with remarkable deftness, to show to the world that Nagarwala was partially, if not completely, ‘innocent’.

The hatred of the Parsis for the Hindu dominants gets manifested because of some bitter incidents which shook the hopes, dreams and
aspirations of this minority community. Besides bemoaning the sad plight of the Parsis, Mistry broods over the fall in the Parsi population.

The Parsi community has become an endangered community due to the factors such as late marriage, urbanization, low birth rate, and strict religious rules which do not permit the children born to parents one of whom is not a Parsi into their fold. Mistry expresses his terrible sense of anguish over the steady dwindling size of the community through his characters. Through Dr.Fitter he moans: “The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left...Extinct like dinosaurs...They’ll have to study our bones, that’s all” (Family 400). Owing to the dwindling rate of population, the Parsis have become over-possessive and over-protective with regard to their identity. It is noticeable that the Parsis have group identity, and this collective identity, they fondly hope, will help them overcome any problem they encounter during their course of life.

It is understood from the works of Mistry that the fear, anxiety and hostility the Parsis faced in India, forced them to migrate to Britain, USA, Canada and Australia. But their sojourn to such countries did not bring them any comfort as they were branded there as just another sub continental Asian community, an identity which they were half willingly forced to concede to. However, the Parsis, facing multiple diasporas failed to find a sense of belonging in the western soil too. In the alien lands, they faced ethnic problems; and at last wisdom dawned on them that only the Indian
environment alone would accept them without reservation. The migrant Parsi Sarosh in Tales longs to come back to India and is ready to accept India, with all its limitations as the only home of his own. Even after the return to India, for a long time, he ruminates over his harsh and painful experiences in the alien land.

The Parsis, at present accept to the fact that though they ape and adopt western life, they are Indians, and India is their mother land. They have, at last, discovered their true mother land and come to possess a unique discourse of their own. With this discovery and acquisition as the basis, a critical assessment of the Parsi discourse is attempted in the present thesis.

Reaffirmation of ethnic identity and consciousness in the contemporary literature aim at negating the social construct of marginalization and celebrating the other as a unique socio-cultural trait of a particular community. The representation of the marginalized people in literature voices against the condescending high culture and craves for socio-cultural recognition. Parsi literature as a cultural exercise attempts consciously to bring back the glory of the Zarathushtrians in an alien land and asserts the cultural identity by liberating the Parsis from their socio-political otherness.

Recapping the previous discussions, the present thesis establishes that Mistry in his works constructs his cultural identity through his autobiographical instances. The self expressive articulation of the author remains the agents for his cultural identity. However, Mistry once said that the
character of Yezad in *Family* is not autobiographical, the writer unconsciously expresses his feelings through this character. Kersi, the hero of the story “Swimming Lessons” is the alter ego of Mistry. Kersi settles down in Canada and establishes himself as a story writer. But neither the scenic beauty nor the white people of the multi-pot Canada attracts him. He, rather, goes down the memory lane and is filled with his childhood nostalgia about the tenants in a Parsi apartment in Bombay. He despatches the stories to his parents in India. Mistry makes the readers and Kersi’s parents to read the stories simultaneously. As the stories revolve around the Indian Parsis, his mother assumes that Canada no more attracts his son:

Mother and father read the first five stories, and she was very sad after reading some of them, she said he must be so unhappy there. All his stories are about Bombay, he remembers every little thing about his childhood, he is thinking about it all the time even though he is ten thousand miles away, my poor son, I think he misses his home and us and every thing he left behind, because if he likes it over there why would he not write stories about that, there must be so many new ideas that his new life could give him. (243)

Similarly, Mistry employs water imagery in the same story to indicate, in clear terms, the non-assimilative nature of the Parsis either in India or Canada. Kersi’s inability to swim in the Chaupatty beach in Bombay and his
fruitless efforts in the swimming pool in Canada represent his failure in both the countries.

It is evident from Kersi’s experiences that Mistry cannot fit himself within the complex country, Canada. The settings, the mountains, the fountains and the milky people of Canada fail to catch his attention. But what fascinates Mistry is the people of his community in India, Indians, and the Indian setting. Savita Goel in “Diasporic Consciousness and sense of Displacement in the selected works of Rohinton Mistry” says:

As a Parsi immigrant in Canada, he [Mistry] sees himself as a symbol of double displacement and this sense of displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works. His historical situation involve construction of new identity in the nation to which he has migrated and a complex relationship with the political and cultural history of the nation, the nation to which he has migrated and a complex relationship with the political and cultural history of the nation, he has left behind. In his writings he often tries to revise the history of his homeland. (119)

In his interview with Veena Gokhale in the literary supplement of The Hindu dated 27-10-1996, Mistry tells how he has kept Indian memories alive:

In general, I don’t think there is much one can do to keep memory alive-memory lives and dies on its own... Memory is a
strange thing: When assumed to be dead, it can surprise one by returning to life. I am speaking, of course, not of memory that is concerned with things like street names, film songs, etc. These things can be found in maps and books. I refer to those moments which, at that time of actual occurrence, may have seemed banal, but which, given the gift of remembrance, become moments of revelation. My novels are not 'researched' in the formal sense of word. Newspapers, magazines, chats with visitors from India, chats with people on my infrequent visits to India-these are the things I relay on. Having said that, I will add that all these would be worthless without the two main ingredients: memory and imagination.(3)

Mistry regrets his alienation as an emigrant. His portrayal of Yezad in Family is autobiographical. Mistry is basically a folk singer. He goes to Canada with the hope of establishing himself as a folk singer but he fails in his attempt and is destined to become a writer. He immigrates to Canada in search of a career to ensure material security. But if Yezad and Kersi are the representations of Mistry's own life, it is palpable that he also experiences depression, and alienation and wishes to come back or to settle in India- his homeland like them and all Parsi immigrant Indians.

Mistry represents the Parsi community in affirming his attachment to his home-India, even though he is conscious of the deficiencies and defects of the
Indians. Mistry’s characters too share the similar conviction. It is quite appropriate to say that they echo the attitudes of Atwood’s unnamed narrator in *Surfacing* “If you look like them then you are them” (139).

Mistry is an adept teller of stories. The secret of his success as a narrator is that he uses different types of narrative techniques in his writings. His maiden novel, *Journey* is in third person narration. He employs the flash back technique quite interestingly in the narrative. A piece of furniture from Gastad’s childhood kindles the nostalgic feelings of the protagonist’s sweet past. In his *Balance*, Mistry employs third person narration. The dead bodies found on the railway track in the prologue, symbolically denote the impending terrific incidents which lead to dire consequences. Unlike his other novels, *Balance* has chapterized the important stories under sub headings. ‘Prologue: 1975’ starts with the introduction of Emergency in India and the story is brought to a close in the ‘Epilogue : 1984’ which marks the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

In *Family*, Mistry makes use of the stream of consciousness technique, a clever fictional device he has not used in his other two novels. The stream of consciousness technique takes the readers into the hidden recesses of ever-changing consciousness of the characters and reveals to us what is happening inside their minds. Epilogue as a narrative device is used in this novel. Jehangir describes the events after five years. One can assume that the Epilogue is the first part of the novel. The rest, therefore, is the recollection
by Jehangir. It is clear from the last part in the epilogue in which Jehangir is
haunted by the sweet memories of his grand father, Nariman. The following
statement confirms this: “And Jehangir said he was going to write a big fat
book when he grew up, called The Complete History of the Chenoy and
Vakeel Families” (Family 45).

The recollection of the past and the thought about the present are
powerful devices effectively used by Mistry in his novels and stories. The
other devices Mistry employs are flash back, parody, pun, letters, news papers,
irony and exaggeration.

Mistry sees Parsi women mainly as home makers who are bodily very
weak. They are engaged either in cooking, sewing or looking after the
children. His women, be it Dilnavaz in Journey or Roxana in Family, confine
themselves in their family circle and never try to come out of the household
chores. But neither Gustad nor Yezad treat them badly. Gustad treats Dilnavaz
as his equal. He shares the events reported in the news papers with her. It is
"the habit of twenty one years, to share all with her, was too powerful"
(Journey 169). Whereas for Dina Dayal, the principal character in Balance, the
question of individuality is more crucial. She undergoes lot of sufferings in
the patriarchal society and Mistry has presented her as a woman revolting
against the deep-seated patriarchal set up. She tries her utmost level to
overcome male chauvinism imposed by her brother Nusswan. The
proclamation of Emergency has marred her self image.
Mistry is very fastidious about the titles of his novels. His titles are symbolic and elegant. *Such a Long Journey* symbolizes the racial-diasporic journey of the Parsi race. The journey of Gustad Noble, in a sense, symbolizes the odyssey of the Parsi community itself. “The journey-chanced, unplanned, solitary” (*Journey* 219). *A Fine Balance* highlights how the Parsis in India feel difficulty in balancing their life between hope and despair. Having arrived at the city to continue his studies, Maneck faces depression due to the sad plight of his intimate friends Ishvar and Om. He resorts to the extreme step of committing suicide. Dina Dayal, loses her individuality and becomes a mere servant in her brother’s household. The novel portrays the pathetic conditions of the Parsis in the backdrop of Emergency.

*Family Matters*, as the title implies, is quite different from Mistry’s first two novels. It narrates the pathetic story of an old Parsi, Nariman Vakeel and the tribulations faced by him for being a Parsi. The humble lot of Yezad and his two children lends liveliness to the novel. Mistry’s short story collection *Tales*, is typically Parsi in form. Most of the characters are drawn from the Parsi fold and they clearly reveal their psyche.

Mistry draws a number of characters from different communities and focuses on their unity. The tailor-turned-beggars, Om and Ishvar, pay regular visits to Dina’s house and Dina provides them food and “Those two made her laugh every day”(*Balance* 712-713). It is noticeable that Dina serves them food in Nusswan and Ruby’s plate. It denotes the fact that Dina, forgetting her
social status, intermingles with the beggars and treats them her equal. The novel ends with the words: “She washed the two plates, returning them to the sideboard for Nusswan and Ruby to dine off at night. Then she dried her hands and decided to take a nap before starting the evening meal” (Balance 713). It is noted that in Mistry’s works the Parsi characters play major roles except Om and Ishvar in Balance. His characters reveal his personal despair, frustration, impotent rage and anguish in view of the attitudes of the dominants towards the Parsi community.

Parsi Literature reflects the fear, anger and anguish felt by their community members. By revolting against their downgraded status, they demand liberty from social prejudice. Future researches may concentrate on the semblance between the Parsi religion and Hinduism. The researches can concentrate on their cultural roots with special emphasis on their socio-cultural customs. The works of Parsi expatriate writers like Farrukh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga and Boman Desai can be investigated to find out the various dimensions of cultural ambivalences and the expatriate’s quest for roots and their attempts in articulating identities of their own in the foreign soil. There is ample scope for comparative studies of Parsi writers and writers belonging to different ethnic groups in India.