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**Forgiving India: Rohinton Mistry's Parsi Pilgrimage**  
**A Study of Four Works**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial  
fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of  
Master of Philosophy*

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**CERTIFICATE**

July 21, 2006

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. J. V. Prasad', is positioned above the supervisor's name.

**Dr. G. J. V. Prasad**  
(Supervisor)

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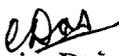
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## DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation titled **Forgiving India: Rohinton Mistry's Parsi Pilgrimage — A Study of Four Works** submitted to the Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is a record of my *bona fide* work.

It has not been submitted in part or full, to any university for the award of any degree.

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## Chapter 1

### Representing “Parsiness”: Nuances of Communal Stereotyping.

In 1819 William Erskine had written a dissertation on the faith of the Parsis in which he had invoked William Jones, the other proclaimed Orientalist, who in 1804 had very knowledgeably pronounced the Zend Avesta to be a mere fabrication of some Parsi priests and that the “simple minded European student” need not be duped by it.<sup>1</sup> Erskine was at pains to point out that the Avesta could not be ascribed to Zoroaster. The argument runs that the Persian historians are prone to romance and cannot approximate the credibility of Greek historians like Herodotus. It does not strike Erskine probably that historiography was becoming a mere site of claims and counter-claims, often unverified and prejudiced. However the purpose of this introductory chapter is not to marshal its arguments in order that it be established how profoundly mistaken the Parsis were to have colluded with the British. For the moment let us assume that as we delve into the historical narratives of the community’s tryst with colonial rule, as a trading community its concessions were probably (like the Muslim Bohras and the Baniyas in Surat and later in Bombay) a ‘structural necessity’. It would perhaps be too simplistic to argue that they were merely collaborating with the British. Within the frame of colonial rule, as traders, they were competitors as well. With the forms of colonial knowledge applied to study, categorize and place different ethnic groups to serve imperialistic ends of domination, the meaning of being a ‘minority’ in India also changed. (However, here, one does not mean to peg the entire onus of politics along ethnically fragmented lines on the colonizer in order to play the good, liberal “post-colonial” Hindu.) In the Imperial Gazetteers, the natives were slotted on the basis of their differences and it must indeed have been difficult for the rulers to spread the net over so many diverse groups without evolving some common minimum denominators by which to bring them within the range of the ‘panoptic’ gaze of the colonial rulers. The Census was one such instrument. As R.P.

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<sup>1</sup> R.P. Masani’s study of “Erskine Dissertation on the Parsis” in 1967, however, acknowledges the ‘pioneering’ work done by him in conducting an exhaustive study of Zoroastrianism. He highlights the ‘misunderstanding’ of the scholar and does not get into the colonial politics of the dissertation, a constitutive reason for any such study of the nature that William Erskine had undertaken, as Said has shown us in his study of *Orientalism*. (Ref: Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. USA: Vintage, 1979).

Bhagat argues in his article, “Census and Construction of Communalism in India” (*EPW*, 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2001):

The desire of the colonial government to learn all it could about the people and land under its control was the reason behind the census taking exercises during colonial India. Just few years before the first census in colonial India in 1872, the work on gazetteers was begun by W.W. Hunter, on the direction of Lord Mayo, which culminated years later in several volumes of Imperial Gazetteers of India. Both the gazetteers and census reports covered large number of subjects dealing with land and people of the different parts of India. As both the gazetteers and the census were initiated under a foreign and authoritarian government, neither public opinion nor the representative institutions existed to limit the subjects investigated either in gazetteers or in the census reports. As a result, the census had played a different role in the social and political life of people in home and in the colonies.

In one of the Imperial Gazetteers on religion<sup>2</sup> the Parsi community is entered as having migrated from Iran and being surrounded by Hindus “of the lower type”, they surrendered their distinctiveness in favor of security. Three elements of their religion are marked as remarkable; that their faith is dualistic, that they are fire-worshippers and that they bury their dead in what are called the ‘dakhmas’ or the towers of silence. Clearly the categories that are marked out as significant are seen as such because they are different from Christian beliefs and rites. Prior to this, the order of the day was that of “social ignorance”, as Bhagat argues, and though that does not mean that there was no communal awareness, the perception of themselves as majority or minority was part a result of the classification-drive of the rulers which later became instrumental in community self-definition.

The Parsi encounter with the British began in Surat where they were primarily settled working as agriculturists, artisans and craftsmen. Prior to this, historical records talk of the flight from Iran and the legends in Qissah-e-Sanjan about how the Parsis were given shelter in Jadav Rana’s kingdom who was assured by the Dastur (priest) who led them, of seamless assimilation into the Hindu way of life. It is even believed that the fact that the

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<sup>2</sup> The Imperial Gazetteer on Religion is a dossier on religions in India, their basic beliefs and rituals. The language employed is official and dispassionate but the ‘knowledge’ of the subjugated performed a similar function as the census did. By slotting the people into knowable regions, it served the cause of administration through visibility of the natives.

Parsis observe their rituals at night is the result of a promise that was extracted by the king who offered them his protection only if they made themselves invisible.

A lot of the problems with writing the history of the Parsis arise from the fact that no authoritative account of the life of the community between their landing in Sanjan and the coming of the Portuguese and the British is available. This is where one believes lies the crux of the matter. Most Parsi narratives about the history of the community highlight a couple of issues. The syncretism of the religion and their glorious exploits in the land of their birth (Iran) and their subsequent loss of roots due to Arab invasion, followed by their exodus to India. In India (and this is what their accounts say) they settled into the role of the adaptive minority and if we are to believe the narratives of explosion of activity during the colonial period, the Parsi spirit, which was lying dormant, rose when it found the right climes for revival. The schematization performed here is a deliberate one, the reasons for which shall be clarified in the course of the chapter.

Edna Bonacich in her response to Blalock Flubert M. Jr's *Toward a Theory of Minority Group Representation*, first outlines what the latter had to say about the "middle-men minorities", such as the Parsis:

- i) That the surrounding societies are generally hostile to and try to maintain their cultural and racial distinctiveness.
- ii) This pushes them to marginal occupations and they respond to it by closing of ranks.
- iii) As a result of this exclusion there is tremendous group solidarity.
- iv) Since they are free of the hierarchy and status consciousness of intra-group divisions, they can trade with anybody. Blalock also believes that these communities, seen as outsiders in the land of settlement, are motivated by a desire to return to their land which they had left under compulsion.

Blalock's characterization of "middle-men minorities" leaves much to be desired. Though it is a useful description as to why certain communities perform the role of brokers, being isolated and excluded from what may be considered the 'mainstream' occupations; it does not take into account the fact that the Parsis have displayed what Bonacich calls "occupational liquidity"<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, such an argument can easily be used

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<sup>3</sup> The remarkable way in which Parsis have redefined the label of being middlemen is worth noting. They not only moved on to commerce, but also displayed great flexibility in their items of trading. This facet of Parsi trading has been suitably covered in Amalendu Guha's Paper. (Guha, Amalendu.

to reinforce theories that such groups are 'disloyal' to the country of residence and hence ally with their colonial masters. The interest that they evince in upholding 'law and order' is characteristic of capitalist entrepreneurs within the colonial frame, irrespective of community. Strong intra-group ties are both an adjustment to their role as an unfamiliar minority as also the economic and political contingencies within the community, to a large extent controlled by the elite. The last point, that they always have one foot in their homeland, needs to be qualified. Though the Parsis did provide communitarian support to later immigrants from Iran, there is hardly any instance of any significant number of Parsis returning, at any point in history.

### **Imaging the Community: An Elitist Soliloquy for the Colonial Audience**

The histories written by the Parsis and sociological texts seem to be caught in a definite mode. Be it Karaka's history written in 1884 or the *A Zoroastrian Tapestry* published in 2002, the exodus from Iran in the seventh or eighth century, the period of 'hypermasculinised' activity during the colonial rule and community as hero are some of the recurring features of one's reading of what one comes across as Parsi history. All this harks towards my former point, that while experiencing minoritisation the historians of the community and its sociologists look upon the colonial period as an opportunity to 'majoritise', a time when the binaries were reversed and a sense of power as the arbiters of one's own destiny was sought to be recovered.

Before one launches into more generalizations that are inevitable for the task at hand, a further qualification is needed. Most of what shall be treated here under the rubric of choices made by the community during the colonial period was actually choices made on behalf of those excluded from the structures of power and recognition. This is not to suggest that such decisions were completely self-serving or auto-generated but made in order to negotiate with changes occurring and opportunities presented. What emerges from such a study, however, is an insight into the layered nature of 'minority' politics, living and experience which are more complex than what can be explained by simple binaristic logic which treats the community either as a passive sufferer or a heroic actor.

There is one trait in the Parsi character which has greatly helped the community to keep itself foremost among the natives of India, and it is one of the many reasons explaining why the government itself attaches more importance to

this community than to any other Asiatic race, and that is their loyalty to the British crown. Under whatever form of government the Parsis have lived in India...noted for their loyalty to the rulers...that it was with the arrival of Europeans and the advent of the British power that they first began to emerge from obscurity ...that they had equal justice even with the governing race...abundant reasons to pray that the sovereignty...may be forever preserved. (277-278: Karaka).

There are two things that emerge from the description above:

- 1) The Parsis are by nature/essence adaptive and the way in which this is expressed is by their loyalty to the ruling group.
- 2) However, the erstwhile circumstances had imposed an “obscurity” on them which the British rule remedied. His claims however are not tall. As another entry in an Imperial Gazetteer<sup>4</sup> suggests, their numbers are touted as entirely disproportionate to their achievements and their “natural genius for trade, their intelligence and their munificent charities” (412) are lauded.

There is a cause-effect argument which not only essentialises the Parsis but the British as well, though in a show of solidarity. Parsi resilience fortuitously meets British sense of justice it seems, while the significance of place (that the Parsis had settled in trading cities of Bombay and Surat) and historical moment (colonization and capitalism in conjunction) are left out of contention.

More than that, what it does is to give us the image of a minority ethnic group which is ahistorical (eternally adaptive) and whose loyalty is depoliticized and not a clear political act.

One major purpose of this chapter is to look at how Parsi novelists have engaged with the images of the community and negotiated with communal stereotypes. While the histories of the community in India and the sociological texts (mostly written around the time of independence) are crucial in understanding how knowledge about the community gets circulated, most of the resources that I have accessed are authored by Parsis themselves and provide an interesting insight into the ways in which a community constructs its self-image, not as a pure act of volition but as part of a larger discourse and how this representation has serrations and its own political logic.

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<sup>4</sup> Imperial Gazetteer of India: Berhampore to Bombay, Vol. 8. Tomorrow's Printers and Publishers.

This is what Fareedoon Junglewalla, a character in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow-Eaters* has to say about Karaka's quintessential *loyal Parsi*:

Yes I have been all things to all people in my time. There was a bumptious son—of —a —bitch in Peshawar called Colonel Williams. I cooed to him—salaamed him so low I got a crick in my balls—battered and marmaladed him until he was eating out of my hand. Within a year I was handling all traffic of goods between Peshawar and Afghanistan. (10)

The *Crow-Eaters* was first published in 1980. The controversy that surrounded the book ruffled many a Parsi feather and the representation of the community in the novel was dismissed as 'inaccurate'. The Penguin edition of the novel released in 1990 added a disclaimer by the author:

Because of a deep rooted admiration for my diminishing community...this work has been a labor of love. The nature of comedy being to exaggerate, the incidents of this book do not reflect at all upon the integrity of a community whose honesty and sense of honor—not to mention its tradition of humor...are legend. The characters drawn in this piece of pure fantasy have no relation whatever to any existing people.

By characterizing her work as pure fantasy, Bapsi Sidhwa cancels the need for a disclaimer at all. For if she insists that her work be seen as imaginary, that it has nothing to do with a community which is honest and honorable otherwise, we are faced with a strange situation. Exaggeration, a word which she uses in her author's note means to overstate or magnify (what exists) and not to invent something *ex nihilo*. If so, there is clearly a difference between exaggeration and pure fantasy, even if we concede that such a thing exists. Moreover, the title itself capitalizes on a popular stereotype of the *talkative Parsi*. The need for such a disclaimer brings us to the familiar terrain of censorship and the accuracy or inaccuracy of representation. However it is also symptomatic of the desire to exercise control over the kind of information that circulates about an ethnic minority and foregrounds the politics of the construction of the images of a community.

Parsi lustre and litany of achievements during the colonial period is a commonplace of almost all narratives that one encounters. This period of hypermasculinized activity<sup>5</sup> is

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<sup>5</sup> This word is frequently used by Luhrmann in her study as she explores the "postcolonial feminization of a colonial elite" in order to suggest a comparison between the "masculinised" narrative of 'action' of the past as opposed to the loss of power/visibility in the present as a minority community.

offset by what is seen as a decline in the fortunes of the community, post independence, and the desire to reclaim what has been lost. Whether it is Karaka's *History of the Parsis* (1884), Hodivala's *Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil* (1920), Nawaz B. Mody's *The Parsis in Western India* (1998) or the most recently published *A Zoroastrian Tapestry* (2002), the tone is hagiographic and the idea is to portray through larger-than-life individuals, the community as hero. The project appears to be to frame a distinct political identity, first as a community different from what Karaka calls other "natives" and then in the post colonial period, as a people with an illustrious past.

In this community of supermen, Mistry's lower middle class Parsi characters living in the small Bombay apartments of the nineties resemble bulls in china shops while the wealth and power of the world of the adolescent narrator Cyrus in Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy* suggest a continuity with the eccentricities and gloss of the lives of elite Parsis during the colonial period as dramatized in Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*. As has been insisted at the outset, because the historiography of the community coupled with the peculiar insecurities of being a minority has so far been either a flashback taking the Iranian period of glory or the colonial period of accomplishments as referents, there is a note that seeps in that these two are the only girders on which the 'foundation' of the community can be laid. That is why if Mistry's characters are made to amble the cities of Parsi lustre, they seem to belong to the texts which approach decolonization (Mistry never enters that zone of history, but one can easily read such an implication into his texts) with a grim foreboding. And these are the poles around which, as I have been reiterating, the narratives of the community revolve, a limitation imposed by the lack of research into those silent alleys of history as yet unexplored. However the novelists both use as well as critique the stereotypes of the "Good Parsi", as Tanya Luhrmann styles it.

Before we make a further foray into literary representation by insiders, one would do well to engage with Luhrmann's critique of Parsi identity after decolonization. She believes that:

Parsis chose to be like the British and so adopted the common British understanding of the Indian world. They did not anticipate that when they lost the British, they would condemn themselves for being themselves the pathetic natives they had learned to see and despise with British eyes...The important theoretical point is that the appearance — perhaps even more than

the actuality—of a shift in power relations can cause a dramatic reversal in symbolic self description. (17)

A few points here need to be noted. Luhrmann characterization of the community (as an anthropologist), though resulted in a book on the post colonial “predicament” of the Parsis, was initially intended as a study of their religion. The logic that she applies to take cognizance of her experiences and the numerous interviews with her objects of study suggests a deterministic tone, best expressed in her words: “The Parsis’ predicament is the dilemma of all those who gamble on the outcome of history and find themselves in a different, often inverted symbolic position from the one that they had chosen” (16-17). However, what transpires from Luhrmann’s argument is that the entire community is united now in its self-denigration and that we have a uniformly suffering and rueful community. The deterministic color provided also disturbs us with the inescapability of historical choices.

However as one has been at pains to point out, as compradors the Parsis were not the only traders, who had a stake in the continuation of the privileges that British rule offered them. Hindus and Muslims in Surat, as Douglas Haynes’ study shows<sup>6</sup> also “gambled” on similar lines. Both Amalendu Guha and David L. White in his doctoral dissertation<sup>7</sup> document the confrontation of Rustom Manock and his scions with the Company regarding payment due to the former for services rendered as broker. Rustom Manock who had considerable clout in the community was humiliated as having hindered the Company’s profits for his personal gains and died in 1720 without having been acquitted of the charges. It was finally his son Nowrosjee who went to England and ultimately won justice for the family. To paint the community in general as collaborators is not only

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<sup>6</sup>Haynes, Douglas E. *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: The Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852- 1928*. OUP: Delhi, 1992. In this study Haynes shows how the ‘public culture’ of Surat underwent subtle changes during the colonial period. He documents how the phenomenon of public giving played an important part in generating community leadership. Moreover, in Surat under communal rule pre-existent forms of communal life was sought to be institutionalized. The leaders of the Parsi community began to pressurize the company to concede their demand for a formalization of leadership in order to snuff out Hindu influence, which resulted in the formation of the Parsi Panchayat in 1818. Thus the control over affairs of the community and preservation of Parsi distinctiveness was as much the reason for “hardening of group solidarity” as the increased regularization of administration by the British.

<sup>7</sup> White, David L. “Parsis as Entrepreneurs in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Western India: The Rustom Manock family and the Parsi Community of Surat and Bombay”. Diss. Virginia U, 1979. White charts through the fortunes of the family the fact that the nature of Parsi politics was more complex than is generally understood. When Amalendu Guha in his Occasional Paper on Parsi Seths argues that the relationship of the community to the colonizers was not merely that of collusion, a close perusal of White’s dissertation demonstrates how from being a broker/ middleman, the Rustom Manock family became traders and the fraught nature of this encounter whenever the interests of the Indian businessmen came into conflict with the Company.

historically unverifiable but also tries to portray co-operation with the colonizers as an aberration and resistance as the norm in India. To apply such a simplistic logic to the Parsis can be easily co-opted into a position which puts the onus of proof of allegiance on the subject without understanding the complexity of the picture. Also, collusion and opposition are not clean categories and as there are several layers to what appears as mutually exclusive.

### **The Philanthropic Parsi**

Novels written by Parsis seem to be uneasily related to the communal stereotypes. There are strands of identification as well as discomfort as they return to the space of the community for a secure world which they feel they can exercise authority upon. We return to the lines uttered by Fareedoon Junglewalla that immediately follow the paragraph from *The Crow Eaters* quoted above:

And once you have the means there is no end to the good that you can do. I donated towards the construction of an orphanage and a hospital. I installed a water pump with a stone plaque dedicating it to my friend Mr. Charles P. Allen. He had just arrived from Wales and held a junior position in the Indian Civil Service; a position that was strategic to my interests. (10)

A familiar 'essentially Parsi' character that one recognizes in literature about them is that of *philanthropy*. This belief is consequent upon the fact that several public structures of Bombay were built by Parsi notables at the peak of their entrepreneurial adventures. And this is supposed to prove that while they may be wily traders they were actually energized by a sense of responsibility towards the community. However, "gift-giving", (a term used by David. L.White) in his study of Parsi philanthropy is a political act in the sense that it affirms a certain kind of relationship between the giver and receiver. Moreover, it is intended to achieve a certain end and the nature of the gift is also a sign of the power equation between the two parties involved in the exchange. In another context, White has also referred to the prevalence of the mobilization of internal group resources among the minority as a function of "community self-definition". The fight to control the mode of symbolization of an ethnic group is taken up by its elite and one cannot shy away from the fact that the success of the Parsi entrepreneurs (whether in shipping or in textile business) hinged upon their ability to mobilize the artisans and craftsmen. Group aggrandizement was fundamental to the internal economics of the community and vis-à-vis the political climate during the colonial period.

David L. White demonstrates how, even after falling out of favour with the British, Rustom Manock maintained his position within the community by contributing freely to projects for development. In charting the nature of “gift giving” White marks a transition from crisis philanthropy to routine gifting. From wells, to temples. This caused a redistribution of wealth within the community itself. Bombay is not an Indian city in the sense that its present forms of living can be traced to developments during the colonial period. Survival of the Parsi community necessitated the establishment of infrastructural supports which would permit Parsis to be Parsis as they settled in a new city. Within the colonial frame of politics, “gifting” necessarily had another addressee in the form of the British. Karaka’s history abounds with instances where he refers to what English newspapers and columnists have to say about the charitable disposition of the Parsis. For the Manock brothers to re-enter into the good graces of the English and for it to translate itself into tangible concessions, they had to use some of their wealth to demonstrate to the Bombay establishment that they were worth trusting and the sign of that trust would be the structures which could make their standing visible. Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy, who earned baronetcy and for a while flourished in the illegal opium trade with China was also a community stalwart who administered and maintained twenty- five schools<sup>8</sup> during his lifetime. These become narratives of power and glory and the communal character of generosity while the fact that gifts are also embedded in the political, economic and social relations are blurred. The sociological studies of the institutions of Parsi charity, however, mostly centered on the pre- and post- independence period inaugurate a more complicated image of Parsi charity.

J.F. Bulsara submitted a report in 1935 to the trustees of Ratan Tata Charity Trust<sup>9</sup> which gives us the picture of the mismanagement of funds and indifference on the part of the administrators which according to him has led to the Parsis living in benighted conditions. He critiques the fact that the doles seem to be usurped by those who have already benefited sufficiently. *The poor in the Parsi community begin to be visible in literature only during this period* and the register being used is that of community decline. P.A. Wadia in his work, *Ere the Shadows Thicken* suggests a move to outgrow institutional support and redefine the contours of the community. He ascribes the decline of the economic status to:

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<sup>8</sup> Wadia, Rusheed R. “Colonial Trade and Parsi Entrepreneurs”. Pheroza M. Godrej and F.M. Mistry. eds. *A Zoroastrian Tapestry: Art, Religion & Culture*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2002

<sup>9</sup> Bulsara, J.F. *Parsi Charity Relief and Community Amelioration*. Bombay: Sanj Vartaman, 1935.

- a) A community that has an increasing number of low income families and families partially or entirely dependent upon the charities of trustees and the Parsi Panchayat, and
- b) That the Parsis are a completely urbanized people without any access to the villages, hence suffering the problems of over-crowding.

Therefore the network of charities seem have moved away from language of philanthropy to the actual lived experience of those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of the act. Also, the biographical pieces of the notables which circulate as community achievements have the curious function of being symptomatic of what “given a certain level of development, a “depoliticized” humanity in general is capable”, as Abdul Jan Mohammad and David Lloyd put it. (6)<sup>10</sup>. Here, the claims made by insiders like Karaka, begin to sound petulant. Meanwhile, if we follow Luhrmann’s argument throughout, when the stereotypes are “positive” and the community itself perpetuates them, these self- images at a different crossing of history can seem to acquire new significations and require a different vocabulary to explain them.

### **The Colonial Ape/ Uneasy Compradors**

One such image that has been variously employed by the Parsi novelists is that of the westernized/ anglicized Parsi. Karaka claims what appears to be an almost common descent, if not by blood then by the several affinities between the Anglo- Saxon race and pure blood Iranian Parsis. Racial similarities are also invoked in order to make the Parsis relationship with the colonizers as a natural meeting of minds. The Indian counterparts become “indigenous” or “alien” in a curious homology to colonial discourses about the Hindus and Muslims. The “most favored race” argument that runs through the history, becomes a justification and a demonstration of the fact that the dynamics of the situation was not *merely* a result of choices and contingencies but that the rulers ‘naturally selected’ the Parsis to bestow favors on them because of inherent characteristics that made them almost already like the British. Latter day novelists have often reacted to the images of the anglicized and westernized Parsi and as Bernard Cohn’s study has shown us<sup>11</sup> the influence of colonization was inscribed on clothes (the Parsi frock coat was a

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<sup>10</sup> JanMohamed, Abdul. et al. “Introduction: Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse.” *Cultural Critique*. 6. The nature and Context of Minority Discourse. (Spring, 1987) 5-12. 20 May, 2006. <<http://links.jstor.org/sici>>

<sup>11</sup> Cohn, Bernard. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996. In his final chapter on clothes, he demonstrates how the apparel became a signifier of both

slight transformation of the English one) and fashion of all those who were part of the colonial encounter. In literary representations such images abound. In Firdaus Kanga's allegorical novel *Trying to Grow*, the protagonist is named Brit and has 'osteogenesis imperfecta'. His parents call him Brit to affirm his identity since he was born with brittle bones but the irony of the word is not lost on the readers. The word could easily be a shortened form of 'British' or 'Briton' and that it has been coupled with 'osteo' (Mistry says in his *Tales from Firozsha Baag* that osteoporosis the most common Parsi disease) has allegorical ramifications for a community that has often been characterized as reluctant Indians. The name dramatizes the westernized upper middle class and at the same time a crumbling sense of community. Brit has to depend on others for any kind of movement and is self-conscious about all relationships but finally finds his identity as an individual as a writer only when he divests himself of all props. Kanga appears to be suggesting that without denying his reality Brit also chooses at the same time not to be defined by it. Parsi identity, then in the post colonial period need not be experienced as a millstone but that the same elements which have given rise to a discourse of self-marginalization can be the components of a re-vision. The father in Cyrus Mistry's play *Doongaji House* is merely a time server, having lost his job. We find him reminiscing about the past:

Do you remember those days? When Rusi was only five or six and Farli was still learning to walk? Things were so cheap then, we had plenty of money...pineapple cake, chocolate liqueurs... think it is their Raj now. Was a time when they would bow and scrape to us...This is a generation of sissies...the blood has been polluted.

What is being read as "postcolonial feminization" is actually the loss of power which had been acquired during the hyper masculine period of colonial discourse. What is left behind and what is experienced as vulnerability is surely best interpreted as the feminine! In the majoritarian politics of the post independence period, it is the Hindus who are associated with phallic power.

Whether one reads the Parsi newspapers published in English (the *Jam-e- Jamshed* and the *Parsiana* are the ones I had access to) or sociological tracts that have been discussed so far, so long as there is a reference to the anglicized nature of Parsis there is a clear

criticism of the colonial hangover and it is easy to (as a reader) generalize the angst and apply it uniformly to the community as a whole and then fall in line with the seemingly innocuous stereotyping that we perform in our everyday lives. Recently during an interview for the post of lecturer in a college, the Principal wanted to know what *the most important fact* about the Parsi community was. I dithered. For, my reading and the way I looked at it did not allow me to give a pat answer. She sensed my discomfort but mistook it for my ignorance and asked the same question, this time phrasing it differently: “Don’t you know the Parsi position during the colonial period?” The word ‘collusion’, which was just a point of departure for my response drew an appreciative murmur from her and she did not stop for me to qualify what I had said. She and her colleague sniggered, saying, “Yes! They sided with the British and made themselves in the rulers’ image!” The interview was then declared to be over and I left the room with the sense of having done something unethical, of being party to a tacit form of violence to the object of my study, which can be easily passed off as harmless, in a situation where for neither of us ignorance could be the alibi. Richard Jenkins in his article “Identity, Categorization and Power”<sup>12</sup>, emphasizes the “transactional” nature of ethnicity. The processes of definition are “internal” and “external” though they run into each other. The actors of the community signal to insiders and outsiders alike the self-definition of their nature and identity. However since the actors draw from/redefine a set of culturally specified practices these processes are not autochthonous and they presuppose an audience, otherwise any form of self- image or self-representation would be meaningless. The second process is external. Here, self-definition takes the form of ‘othering’ the other. If such a categorization is “consensual” (which it hardly ever is in totality) it would be an affirmation of the other’s internal definition of themselves. If the act is “conflictual” or done in opposition to the other, it imposes a “putative name and categorization which affects in significant ways the social experiences of the categorized”. However both within what has been provisionally called “internal” and “external” definitions, the play of power and authority cannot be ruled out because though acts of self-representation by all members of the community may have the same ontological status but they certainly do not have the same acceptability or currency. In the same way, what names we give others and how we look at them is no doubt a dialogic process telling us as much about them as much as our own needs, lacks and desires. However, on the scale of power how we

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<sup>12</sup> Stone, John, and Rutledge Dennis eds. *Race and Ethnicity: Comparative and Theoretical Approaches*. USA: Blackwell, 2003

characterize the other and how they look at us may not be equal in its effects or ramifications.

In dealing with Parsi literature, one has to constantly come across self-representations that may be extremely personal but since they clearly draw from the register of the community's experiences and as I would argue, want to be seen as such, one can only travel along with the writers, self-consciously involved. Another problem with our reading of Parsi writers arises from the fact that since there are modes/nodes of representation that encourage us to *look* at the communal space, the gaze which we reserve for the writer may imperceptibly turn into prying out hints as to whether the narrative is a "narrative of belonging" (Bromley's term)<sup>13</sup>, either to the community or the nation, or not; such an attitude presumes that the test of post-colonial "cosmopolitanism"(as Tim Brennan critiques it)<sup>14</sup> is to belong to more than one place at the same time. As we laugh and wince with Sidhwa and Kanga at Parsis who are anglicized, or revel in the 'quaintness' of the Parsi-ness that Mistry serves us, humor in the form of satire and burlesque tend to become ways of circumventing an intensely psychologized response such as in Daruwalla's "Parsi Hell"- "...Like a fire temple I hoard my inner fires/ Hoard my semen Brown with inbreeding...Death hums over the wires; what affects the spawn/ is rickets, polio...Daughters walk out on the tribe.../A Parsi carries his hell" (1982). The anguish is palpable here and we have the picture of a **xenophobic community**- diminishing, diseased and impotent. The effect is that of a man shouting from the bottom of the well, the shrillness of his voice an index of his emasculation. The specter of daughters walking out on their tribe is a recurring issue with the Parsis and still rages. The children of Parsi women who marry outside the community are not recognized as Parsis since there is no provision for conversion in Zoroastrianism. This accounts for the constant fear of the 'other'-and the 'other' is generally a woman who is a sexual demon- which has a curious homology with colonial and racial discourse. In Gieve Patel's poem, "The Ambiguous fate of Gieve Patel, He being neither Muslim nor Hindu in India"(1966), in the grab for political self-definition, the spots for majority and minority are taken as Parsis live like fossils of a time not long past, scrambling across

<sup>13</sup> Bromley, Roger. *Narratives for a New Belonging: Diasporic Cultural Fictions*. Edinburgh University Press: EUP, 2001. Bromley explores an eclectic range of writers of different backgrounds- British, Caribbean, Chinese-American, Indo-Caribbean, Canadian, Cuban, and Indian writers- and proposes the space of migrant writing as a location from where hitherto marginalized voices can be best articulated from a position that is in itself fractured.

<sup>14</sup> Brennan, Tim. *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*. Harvard: Harvard UP, 1997.

the cities of the forgotten. The angst is sexualized as Patel writes, perhaps unaware that in the criticism of the two communities that bay for each other's blood, he has already assumed a role: "To be no part of this hate is deprivation, / Never could I claim a circumcised butcher/ Mangled a child out of my arms, never rave at the milk bibing, grass-guzzling hypocrite/ Who pulled off my mother's voluminous/ Robes and sliced away at her dugs]...". In the masculine world of hate and retribution, and the melodramatic tone is deliberate, the Parsi finds himself with no part in the acts of violence that were constitutive of the memory of "post-colonial" India. Tanya M. Luhrmann detects in such documents a trace of what she calls the "*feminization*" of a *colonial elite*.<sup>15</sup> However, to apply such a discourse in blanket terms to literature would be to ignore the polyphonic (in the Bakhtinian sense) testimonies of the texts. For instance, Gieve Patel here illustrates, in my opinion, a critique of the masculinised, patriarchal violence that precipitated two nations and also takes a wry view at the same time of the Parsi 'neutrality' (captured by Sidhwa's characterization of the polio-stricken Lenny Baby and her westernized family in *Ice- Candy-Man*) and that this criticism may be seen as a satirical take on the denial of 'manhood' to a minority community and therefore a very subtle understanding of the political and social economy of the construction of identity in multi-ethnic nation like India. In the back-drop, probably, lurks a trace of inherited guilt for what others could perceive the 'neutrality' as, a political silence, now that the Britishers have left the country. A similar note appears in Pestonji's novel *Pervez*,<sup>16</sup> which is about how a Parsi woman redefines her role in a communally fragmented city and while all the while there are references to the Parsi skin that "magically protects", she finds her space in the academia after she exorcises 'extraneous' beliefs and a bad marriage to a Christian. The return to individual autonomy is through communal awareness and not a separation in the way that Kanga or Cyrus Mistry's novels dramatize.

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<sup>15</sup> Luhrmann, Tanya M. *The Good Parsi: The Postcolonial Feminization of a Colonial Elite*. OUP: New Delhi, 1996. Her study tries to establish that the way the Parsi community perceived itself has become a baggage in the colonial era and in the experience of abjection has given rise to the discourse of feminization. Parsi men are often characterized as 'sissies' and 'mama's boys' by the community itself and many women expressed their unwillingness to marry such 'washouts'. The men are seen to live beyond their means and her data as an anthropologist gives her the impression that there exists a discourse in the community that the boys are not 'man enough' to replicate what their predecessors achieved during the colonial period. Luhrmann's study revolves around this trap of self-symbolisation that is a legacy of the past but controls the present as well.

<sup>16</sup> Pestonji, Meher. *Pervez*. Delhi: Harper Collins, 2003

A crucial point needs to be made here. I have referred earlier to the intersection of the “internal” and “external” processes of self-representation, how each includes a form of incorporating the self and the other in its discourse. Bakhtin argues in his *The Dialogic Imagination* that existence is a compound of event and utterance and existence has the nature of a dialogue since no word is directed towards no one. When we are discussing the self-representation of the Parsis under the rubric of a ‘minority’, we have to understand that immediately we are complicit in the discourse that we are claiming to unearth. This is where the concept of ‘performance’ becomes important. According to Goffman,<sup>17</sup> self-presentation is always performative, since it addresses an audience and the validation of the performance is always by an other (this is what Bakhtin also seems to be saying). We create ourselves from materials supplied by the other, but the other can never be a complete area of darkness. For even as we address the other through our performance, we construct the other, or as Bakhtin would put it, it is an act of ‘authoring’. The self-representation that is being referred to here thus needs to be put into perspective. It is a response to the numerous events, documented or otherwise, at the same time that it is a creation. Similarly, the *raison d’être* of this study need not be seen as a *comment* by an outsider on the community but a desire to foreground the complexities inherent in a minority discourse which wants to be seen as such and hence might by implication, rather than explication, suggest ways of examining the concept of agency as well.

Luhrmann’s study, however, is not entirely unhelpful. It seems to be crucial to understand the current position of a community “who puffed up an Empire’s sails” (Adil Jussawala, 1975, 19) and now are seen as/ perceives itself as colonial apes. It appears that in dealing with the role of the community during the colonial period there is either an evasive evocation of the glories or a retrospective criticism of the comprador role. In a critical evaluation of the political and socio-economic condition of the Parsis in 1949, *Parsis: Ere the Shadows Thicken*, Prof. P.A. Wadia marks the gradual decline of the Parsis’ economic condition, “accompanied by poverty and the associated phenomenon of physical and moral decline” in the second decade of the twentieth century. The reasons for this decline though were many. As David L. White and Amalendu Guha’s studies show, having lost out on opium and having suffered the curbs of colonial rule in shipping

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Jenkins in his article highlights the contribution of Goffman to the understanding of the way in which a community represents itself. He explores how such ‘expressions’ are part of a larger network of power and authority but in spite of itself is dialogic in nature.

as well, there was a constant shift in contours of Parsi trade. Meanwhile, many capitalists of the community funded the Congress in the freedom movement and among them the foremost was Jamsethji Tata, S.R. Bomanji, J.B. Petit (all active in the Home Rule Movement and the Swadeshi Movement) However, while these entrepreneurs contributed to the cause of nationalism, a relatively higher number of them stayed away from it or were hesitant in their support. However, this, Guha argues, is true of other business communities such as the Khojas, Bohras and the Banias and may not have anything that is essential to only Parsi politics. Having said that, Wadia goes on to say that the reasons for this decay was the “regrettable” attitude that the Parsis are unable to redefine themselves and remain pro-British, that they tend to rely on charity and at the same time seek to maintain a lifestyle that suggested a state of denial about changed circumstances. (Amalendu Guha also perceives a similar slump in Parsi fortunes around the same period and attributes it to, apart from the above, a scrupulous inbreeding as well.) Wadia’s study is acerbic in its evaluation of Parsi stagnation and more than five decades after its publication we see the persistence of these issues when the ‘visible’ members of the community characterize it. Nevertheless the evocation of Parsi role during colonial activity and those who still identify with the regime of colonial power either in the poems discussed or the fiction do not seem to have any regenerative potential; such characters, on most occasions, are excluded from the main action and serve the function of mere remnants of an era or like the narrators in the poems discussed are caught in their own hell. And in these the community becomes a passive screen where the one can project one’s abjection or, content with representing a tormented consciousness, an angst which cannot be absorbed any more as other dimensions of survival as a minority, press.

### **Problematizing Angst**

Meher Pestonji, in her collection of short stories, *mixed marriage and other stories*, prefaces the pieces with a poem that is confessedly autobiographical. I shall produce that entire text of the poem below:

Once I said it with pride  
I don’t wear a sudra  
or kusti  
I don’t read or write  
Gujarati

Just about speak it  
 I am only accidentally born  
 a Parsi  
 It was the right thing to say  
 To the foreign returned jet set  
 I say the same with diffidence now  
     rather reluctantly  
 It took years to discover  
     you can't escape roots  
     in search of  
     an identity.

(1977)<sup>18</sup>

Meher Pestonji's collection of short stories has the motif of throwing Parsi characters into unexpected situations and her point of entry is the encounter with the other, unlike, say, Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* which plays with memories, specters and fantasy to take us through the history of the community, through familiar landmarks, defamiliarised by a narrator in stupor. The consciousness through which the story gets told, which diffuses everything, running breathlessly from Persia to the present, returning to the colonial period and so forth through his memoscan, is in its waking life Homi Seervai, a Parsi settled abroad. The other in Pestonji's stories is sometimes a Hindu daughter-in-law, a foreigner and sometimes riot victims and their persecutors among whom a Parsi woman who goes out to work. The search here seems to be that of a 'role', rather than 'identity', there is no psychological anguish at being what seems to be a permanent state of irresolution. Some references to the community are standard and terms of this representation that shall be exemplified through the following quote occur in Kanga as well- the writer as 'observer' and hence with access to a more complex and hybrid zone of experience than the people she makes visible for the reader in, say for instance, the titular story:

However the comfortably enclosed space within Cusrow Baug's walls atrophied the world view of the residents, still tinged with nostalgia for British India under which the Parsi community had prospered. The older generation had never resigned itself to independent India. Even now a few

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<sup>18</sup> Pestonji, Meher. *mixed marriage and other parsi stories*. Delhi: Harper Collins, 1999.

homes sported portraits of Queen Elizabeth. Young men and women grew up with the idea of emigrating to Velaat- which could mean England, America, Canada or Australia- as soon as they were qualified enough to seek qualifications abroad. (6)

While emigration for higher qualification abroad is a middle class phenomenon across ethnicity in India, the structure of the argument is not lost on the reader. Nostalgia for the Raj is repeatedly problematised by the writers but it stops at critique, a refusal by the chroniclers of these times to engage with a residue in the Parsi (un)conscious that seems to impede (and yet in some sense, fuel) the search for a different space. The need of the narrator in the poem is, initially, to define herself *against* the congestion of traditionalism (“sudreh” and “kusti”) and easy escapism (“...right thing to say/ To the foreign returned jet set”). Jingo, the Parsi protagonist of Cyrus Mistry’s *The Radiance of Ashes*, is a kindred middle class rebel who goes ‘slumming’, as the narrator puts it. There is an experience of minoritisation within the community and equation of its rejection as ‘expansion’. The “diffidence” of the speaker in Pestonji’s poem is perhaps an awareness that there is no uncontaminated space outside and that recognition of “roots” need not necessarily mean conformism. In Cyrus Mistry’s novel, Jehangir (Jingo) who has abjured ‘action’ and ‘purpose’ for three decades of his life, dreaming of becoming a writer, finds himself caught in the December 1992 riots in Maharashtra and is forced to act and though not directly threatened as a Parsi, uses his ‘neutrality’, as a market researcher and a Parsi to intervene and expose himself. Willing to be engulfed by what blights his city, a city he loves and unabashedly romances, Jehangir begins to write, to chronicle his changed city, a part he cannot leave for someone else to play. Rather than be the atrophied observer of Sidhwa in *Ice-Candy-Man* and getting, involuntarily or unwittingly, caught in the whirl of religious fundamentalism. Yezad in Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* loses his job and burdened with the moral duty of feeding his invalid father-in-law in addition to his wife and two sons, he resorts to playing Matka. Once his string of fortunes is broken, he finds solace in tradition, in the fire temple he had neglected for several years of his life. While in *Radiance of the Ashes*, the ‘city’ replenishes the protagonist and he writes the first few lines of his novel (a narrative that is already written) Yezad turns to religion and as an indirect victim of majority violence, he embraces its faith, the unarguable certainties and in the end we see the birth of a bigot. For, as he believes, Ahura Mazda has delivered him. There seems to be a move towards exploring the vicissitudes of the

experience of being an ethnic minority in the changing city-scape whether in Meher Pestonji, Cyrus Mistry or Rohinton Mistry.

The fear of the outsider manifests itself as a persistent motif. In 1839, Rev. Dr. Wilson, the priest who had been invited to undertake the administration of the University of Bombay, successfully converted two Parsi boys, which sparked off a heated debate between the missionaries and the defenders of Zoroastrian faith. Dr. Wilson's critique of the religion was based on his rejection of dualism and for the first time there was a challenge to the validity of Zoroastrianism in the public domain. There was a lot of soul-searching among the community not the least because it was the first time that they had run to some kind of overt confrontation with the establishment. There was exchange of letters through the newspaper where some argued (observing Christian language of religious validity) that Ahura Mazda (Good) and Angra Mainyu (Evil) are only externalizations of the inner propensity of men towards good and evil and do not have objective existence, that Zoroastrianism is not dualistic. This was a clear re-interpretation of the religion according to the rules of the debate set by the missionaries on the relative superiority of faiths. To this day several Parsis have maintained that Zarathustra preached a non-dualistic faith. The conversion was challenged as being forced upon the boys which was later disproved. Dhanjibhai and Hormusji went on to become Presbyterian ministers. In the former's autobiography, the details of which are discussed by Palsetia<sup>19</sup>, the entire episode is covered and he resolved the issue by demonstrating that though faith was a personal matter and he had decided to convert, he would always remain a Parsi and that it had nothing to do with what religion he adhered to. Karaka plays down the episode in his history, though he mentions it, but stresses on the fact that the controversy was amicably resolved. Though Parsis had brought a mistrust of Muslims to India following their exodus from Iran due to fear of Arab persecution, the conversion case is the only recorded instance of any historical incident where the Parsis found themselves having to defend their faith against what was perceived as a serious threat.

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<sup>19</sup> Palsetia, Jesse S. *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City*. Brill: Netherlands, 2001. A discussion of his autobiography "From Zoroaster to Christ", features here and Palsetia records how after being completely ostracized by the community, towards the end of his life the community accepted him as a Parsi and he seems overwhelmed by what he sees here as the typical Parsi response, that of refined acceptance. Nauroji also goes on to say that some Parsi brethren are actually proud of him for the way he has distinguished himself as after a change of faith, taking this as the sign of a true Parsi.

With the Hindus *becoming* the majority in the post-independence period, the self-perception of the 'fringe' minorities altered. In the colonial period, the Hindus were looked upon as a benighted group, controlled by self-indulgent kings and feudal lords and as the most Anglicized of communities, it is clear that the Parsis had internalized some of the colonial ways of coming to terms with 'difference'. However, with decolonization, the buffer-zone provided by the British was removed and the communities were thrown into a position of 'contact'. Since then the domain of 'contact' has been sought to be explored, evaluated and critiqued in literature (the Parsis being the minority peripheral to 'Hindu', used in the current political sense, imagination) with an intention to come to terms with one's 'identity' and 'role'. The image of the poet hoarding his semen, studies such as S.F. Desai's <sup>20</sup> which advocate eugenics as a way of improving the quality of the race, all implicitly point towards the fear of miscegenation which manifests itself in the form of xenophobia, the fear of the outsider.

Miscegenation, where the uncertainty of sexual economy threatens to tear apart the artificially maintained borders, is a point of contention within most communities in India. However the fact that Parsis are fast declining in number probably accounts for its persistence in discourse about the future of the community and preachers of Zoroastrianism even today, such as the very popular and urbane Khojeste Mistree, believe that if the 'real' message of Zarathustra is understood then the youth of the community would voluntarily marry within the community. <sup>21</sup>

Fear, usually in the form of a woman, invades most Parsi households in the fiction being considered here. In Cyrus Mistry's *Radiance*, Jehangir Moos' mother is inconsolable that her son has fallen in love with a Christian.

<sup>20</sup> With a sense of doom, Desai highlights the condition of the Parsis and there are derogatory remarks on the "quarrelsome tendency" of the community which outsiders may exploit. The most crucial recommendation of the study is a programmatic attitude to reproduction and that the brightest of the races should inter-breed. He invokes Darwin and Mendel and argues that there may be interracial breeding but that it must be selective and not with the rabble. Most importantly it suggests that the community should enforce "sexual segregation of defectives", though he does not explicate on it. Hence though there is a critique of the current status of the community it is done from a very secure vantage-ground of racial superiority.

<sup>21</sup> Philip G. Kreyenbroek and S. N. Munshi in their compendium of interviews which they divide as being that of orthodox, moderate and radical Parsis entitled *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak About Their Religion*, provide an interesting insight on the changing significance of rituals and Zoroastrianism. Tanya M. Luhrmann deals with the reinterpretation of the religion to fit urban living by Khojeste Mistree and his study circle in Bombay. (See her article "Evil in the Sands of Time: Theology and Identity Politics among the Zoroastrian Parsis" published in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 61, No.3 (Aug. 2002) 861-889.



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All I am saying is, it's not natural. Why on earth would an intelligent young Parsi boy who has his whole life before him get so hooked on a dark-skinned slip of a girl like that and ruin his whole life. Unless'- and here she paused for effect-'there is some trickery involved, something underhand.  
(187)

The characters who choose to make a choice that is inimical to the community are seen on the axis of the 'individual' versus the 'collective'. Since most of the narratives play themselves out within the space of the family, the mutual critique emerges from a restricted space. However, the concerns are not merely a phobia of 'pollution' but economic as well as social. As Cyrus explains to Savitha, his Hindu wife, her acceptability within the family is primarily because she is a woman and her children would be Parsis; also the neighbors and trustees are satisfied that the flat in Cusrow Baug shall be retained by a Parsi. In Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*, Nariman Vakeel, loves the Christian Lucy but hemmed in by unrelenting parents and neighbours, resists marriage till the age of forty. Later, he marries a widow, Yasmin Contractor who has two children from an earlier marriage. Unable to exercise her love for Nariman, the 'other' comes to stay in the Parsi housing, debasing herself as a maid. In a battle for right over the hapless ( Luhmann would say, the 'feminized') forty-year old father of three, can only be an observer as the two women fall to their deaths, locked in embrace, betrayed by an apologetic, castrated (by the community) man. Dolly, who marries a Muslim in Kanga's novel is sought to be dissuaded by her mother on grounds of traditional enmity. But the daughter escapes confrontation only because she conveniently migrates to the west.

The purpose of the illustrations from the texts above point towards a meta-point with I have been trying to insinuate throughout the chapter. The controversy in the year 1991 that raged regarding whether Roxan Shah who had married a non-Parsi deserved a ritual journey to the Tower of Silence, (a case which was later settled in favour of the woman and in itself was a landmark decision) or, when the symbolic Uthamna ceremony of J.R.D. Tata in 1993 (which was performed in Bombay though he was interred in France) raised the heckles of a few Dasturs as to the lack of any such precedents, brought the tensile nature of community definition into the public domain.

Since we are here primarily concerned with self-representation, that the writers either burlesque (Sidhwa), trenchantly oppose (Cyrus Mistry) or 'realistically' dramatize the impact of such exclusionary stances and thus subtly critique it (Rohinton Mistry in *Family Matters*), they debate on individual agency in the network of choices available to a 'minority'. This critical stance, it is clear, exists in most writers as a need to (re-)write *through* their community, threatened with diminishing numbers.

In Rohinton Mistry, the dynamics of whose texts shall be explored in the following chapters, the space of the community is the condition of possibility of his fiction. There is an increasing preoccupation with rituals and legends while at the same time his texts live off popular stereotypes of the community. It is Mistry's relationship with his works (an insight into which is allowed by the narrator Kersi in the short story "Swimming Lessons" in his *Tales From Firozsha Baag*) his city (wounded, amputated and vasectomised through the body of the marginalized in *A Fine Balance*) - its men and women, and the concept of distance introduced by virtue of his being a diasporic writer, that shall be examined. In *Such A Long Journey*, the practice of occult by Dilnavaz and Miss Kutpitia inside space of the community vis-à-vis the 'cosmopolitan' (?) space of the city and the sacrifice of the demented Tehmul in the violence that erupts outside the world of the walled in Parsis have a symbolic explanatory potential as Mistry negotiates with history, nation and the experience of 'minoritisation'. Moreover, as a writer belonging to the diaspora, his texts are subject to a politics of reading that needs to be performed. Moreover, is there a possibility that we might read the fiction under study as symptomatic of the very condition it wants to critique? For instance, is it possible that Mistry posits, in the conclusion of his novels, a space of resistance? Or is it too feeble to be considered seriously. As a mode of self-representation, I shall argue, all these coordinates need to be explored to construct the nuances of being a 'minority' writer, without the label limiting our perception or predicting any simplistic critical practice of binaries as discussed at the outset of this chapter.



## Chapter 2

### Flaking walls and pasts: In the City by the Sea

*The truth is that we cannot include as citizens all who are necessary for the city's existence.*

---Aristotle in *The Politics* (III, V: 2)

#### (I)

In the center of Bombay stands a decaying mansion. Fort House was built as the private residence of Sir Jamsedji Jeejeebhoy, a merchant, the first Indian baronet and the most esteemed of the much esteemed nineteenth century Parsis. In its time it was one of the great town houses and commanded a spacious view...which opened on to the Arabian Sea. Now, buildings obscure the vista...All that remains of his town house is a façade, the grand scrollwork cracked, a garden of weeds where the piano once stood. Gutted by fire and abandoned by commerce, the façade is an icon of a community in decline (Luhmann: 1)

This is a reference to the material splendor of Jamsedji Jeejeebhoy (1783-1859) of the JJ School of Arts fame who made his fortune as an opium trader. He is said to have been born in Surat, in a poor weaver's family of priestly lineage. But he started his career, while still in his teens, as a China trader's employee and later became an independent entrepreneur.<sup>1</sup> He was noted for his philanthropy as the first Indian to establish a trust fund and was involved in administering twenty-one schools.<sup>2</sup> His proximity to the colonizers, in these postcolonial times, is buried under paeans to his industriousness, as a

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<sup>1</sup> Amalendu Guha in his Occasional Paper No. 50 on Parsi roots, entrepreneurship and comprador role mentions this in relation to the changing items of the community's trade. They showed remarkable flexibility and adapted themselves moving from weaving to opium and raw cotton to the textile industry.

<sup>2</sup> This and many other details of his 'exemplary' achievements are a part of all past and recent documents about the Parsis in India. (See, for instance, Godrej, Pheroza M., and F.P. Mistry eds. *A Zoroastrian Tapestry: Art, Religion & Culture*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2002. This glossy compendium is a sensual delight. Page after page abounds with pictures of Parsi stalwarts, their descent and art and cuisine. Images of squalor that abound in Mistry present an interesting contrast to the document. See Adi H. Doctor. "Parsis and the Spirit of Indian Nationalism" in the same.)

community tries to cobble together a tapestry of the past that would resuscitate its *exhausted soul*. The purpose of beginning this chapter with an evocation of his now “dying mansion” is to mediate through the symbolic logic of architectural ruins, the warp and woof of history as experienced by a community. The grandness of the design of the structure suggests a fragment from the past but the narratives associated with that time persist and return in several recognizable and sometimes unreadable forms.

Bombay is the city to which there was a constant rural to urban migration from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The rate of urbanization among the Parsis was 94 per cent in 1961 as the center of trade shifted from Surat, as Amalendu Guha mentions in his paper. As the Parsi Seths continued to monopolize business, they defined a powerful perception of themselves as power-brokers and wealthy land-owners and entrepreneurs. Bombay grew into the leading commercial center of British India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of textile mills and overseas trade. Chandervarker tell us that the city was first and foremost built and developed by an indigenous industrial and commercial bourgeoisie comprising of Parsi, Gujarati Hindus and Muslim communities on the basis of an extensive Arabian trade along with Jews Armenians and others. (qtd. in Hansen)<sup>3</sup>

However, though these communities performed the role of compradors, in hindsight it was the Parsis who seem to have westernized themselves with rapidity. The colonial elite along with the colonizers shaped the industrial, capitalistic nature of the city. The urbanization of the community as they came to Bombay from Gujarat coincided with westernization *as the Parsi changed his skin but his soul remained intact*. This is what most versions of Parsi history try to tell us... that while the men became compradors and assumed English habits of dressing, food and other cultural markers, it was religion and its practices that gave them a sense of identity when times and fortunes were rapidly changing. What they also tell us is that the Parsis felt that their culture and civilization was closer to the west and thus for them it was just a case of slipping into old, comfortable shoes.

The history of Bombay is inseparable from the history of colonialism and industrial capitalism. Colonial spatial practices are hardly random or innocent and as Metcalfe

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<sup>3</sup> Hansen, Thomas B. *Wages of Violence: Being and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001

memorably has shown us,<sup>4</sup> they reflect the concerns of the metropolis and participate in the discourse of making power *visible and palpable*. Sandeep Hazareesingh calls it the elite-focused patterns of development.<sup>5</sup> However, certainly it wouldn't be a case of oversight to suggest that every action acquires its meaning(s) within the forces of history that shaped it. Beyond that human beings lose control of what their actions will signify when times are no longer the same. (The spatial practices of urban renewal during the colonial period by the colonizers are seen by him as a resistance to the processes of democratization that were transforming Europe.) Needless to say then that *space* as it is experienced across time and as a site of power, presents a narrative of its own. At this juncture one would perhaps do well to just mention in passing certain ways of understanding space as popularized by Michel Foucault, in his essay "Of Other Spaces", characterizes the present epoch as the epoch of space.

The space in which we live, the space which draws us out of ourselves, in which erosion of our lives, our times and our history occurs, the space that claws and knaws at us, is also in itself a heterogeneous space...we do not live in a void, inside of ourselves in which we could place individuals and things (3).

The heterogeneity of the space we occupy constantly breaks down the screens between the self and the other and introduces radical instability into our lives. Lefebvre is found in a similar territory in asserting the importance rehabilitating the study of space in his *Production of Space*<sup>6</sup>. By 'production' Lefebvre means that humans create the space in which they construct their lives; it is a project shaped by interest of class, experts, grassroots, and other contending forces.

Space is not simply inherited from nature, or passed on by the dead hands of the past, or autonomously determined by laws of spatial geometry, as per conventional location theory. Space is produced and reproduced through

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<sup>4</sup> Metcalfe provides a picture of how the architecture of the major cities in India bears the imprint of colonial intent. The colonizers, he argues were faced with the contradictory task of assertion of empire and remaking India on Western lines. See Thomas R. Metcalfe. *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Hazareesingh argues that Bombay is not an Indian city at all. That the city, as we know it today is a product of the colonial spatial practice in which the native power brokers were also included. He cites it as a reason why though the economy was affluent the people by and large remained poor. See Sandeep Hazareesingh, "Colonial Modernism and the flawed paradigms of urban development: Uneven development in Bombay, 1900-1925". *Urban History* 28, 2 (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. *Production of Space*. London: Blackwell, 1991

human action, even if unanticipated consequences develop and even as space constrains and influences those producing it (qtd in Molotch).<sup>7</sup>

Space is not merely an innocent container where we inscribe our fresh narratives. Lefebvre believes that architecture, human density, locational and economic relations are a force in structuring what can be done in space itself, its political ramifications. Elements of monumental grandeur that disempower, varieties of suburban architecture convey an impression of choice all point towards the fact that ways of being and physical landscape are of a piece (that they reinforce/ constrain each other and are entwined through history) albeit one filled with tensions and competing versions of what a space should be.<sup>8</sup>

Bombay for long, in common parlance has been the city of dreams, a city constructed through the forces of commerce, the language of popular culture—a city of opportunity, what Michel de Certeau calls, a concept –city.<sup>9</sup> It has been a city of *progress*, where “time causes the condition of its own possibility- space itself- to be forgotten” (387). The register of modernity, as the fate of the Parsi community suggests, is no less exclusionary than the systems and prejudices that it was supposed to be challenging and supplanting.

With respect to Mistry, the architectural metaphor evoked as the salutary quote of the chapter is doubly significant. From the stories of the Baag to *Family Matters*, the community is encountered by the reader as living in **closed spaces**, small apartments and their lives are such that whether it be Gustad Noble over his son or Coomy over Nariman Vakeel, the characters exert immense control over each other and the intrusive gaze is often felt enough to create resentment. Najamai in *Tales From Firozsha Baag*, flits from one home to another, prising open the lives of others, controlling her neighbors by virtue of her being the owner of a refrigerator, a widow (and Mistry’s women are all properly

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<sup>7</sup> Molotch, Harvey. “The Space of Lefebvre”. *Theory and Society*. 22.6 (December, 1993) 887-895 8 March, 2006. <<http://links.jstor.org/sici>>

<sup>8</sup> See Henri Lefebvre. *Production Of Space*. London: Blackwell, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> (See De Certeau, M. *Walking in the City: The Practice of Everyday Life*. Transl. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.) The urbanistic discourse that founds such a city is based on the claim that it is rationally organized repressing all mental, physical and political pollution. It urges a control of over subversive tactics of users and seeks to create a universal and anonymous subject. Certeau believes, though, that some forces like tradition offer stubborn resistance. Mistry, who places his characters in one city and then lays the characters bare for our perusal also takes us into the world of traditions and rituals and vis- a –vis the dehumanizing city outside, the way he describes the Doongerwadi scene in *Such A Long Journey*, and the legends of the community in *Family Matters* are of anthropological and mythological interest. Gustad Noble finds peace in the rites as the narrator tells us, for he understands them all.

predictable) who is looking for an escape from the closed space by intertwining her narratives with those of others. With Mistry striking the pose of a realist, omniscient narrator we are swept into the world of an ethnic group, willy-nilly as a *voyeur*. Mistry, as he applies the tools of 'realism', shores up the Parsi characters as **knowable** and by extension **representable**. Though certain characteristics of daily lived reality would be common to any such arrangement, whether Parsi or not, it is the mode of representation and the gaze of the writer, following the characters everywhere in order to give us a feel of 'acutely observed reality' that needs to be addressed and not consumed as an authentic picture of the community. John Rignall argues in his article, *Benjamin's Flaneur and the Problem of Realism* that the

...city as landscape, lying either desolately or seductively open before the fictional characters, and the city as room enclosing them either protectively or oppressively; the city as familiar, knowable and known, the city as mysteriously alien and fantastic; these are well established poles of Balzac's and Dickens's urban fiction (114)<sup>10</sup>.

In a discussion of the realist evocation of the city and its inhabitants, he further goes on to suggest that in the realist writer, a changing, unstable reality is approached with the confidence of a "detached, individual vision of the novelist as narrator" which rests on the assumption that "seeing is equivalent to knowing". In such a sense the limits of realism apply to Mistry as well. However, as Roman Jakobson argues, metaphors and metonyms are embedded in the realist mode as well and thus destabilize its claims as perfect mirror of reality.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting how the decay of a community is often mapped through a concomitant degeneration of space and the two seem to follow a trajectory that conjure up a nostalgia about the past and then pass on to a lamenting on the present condition of the city. As Fali Master, a popular dramatist who performed to packed audiences in the Lalbaug, Parel, and Byculla localities of Bombay in the 1950s, expressed the despair and the insecurity felt by the middle class Parsis of Bombay:

*Oh dear Mumbai, my dear Mumbai.*

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<sup>10</sup> Rignall, John "Benjamin's flâneur and the problem of realism" *Urban Culture: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural studies*. Chris Jenks Ed. London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Jakobson, Roman. *Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances*. *Fundamentals of Language*.

*Tu Fort Market hathi*

*Have tu black market thai gai.*

*Vakhat avo hatho, ke bagal ma bairi lai,*

*Vakhat avo aiyo, ke bairi pun gul thai gai.'*

(Oh dear Mumbai – my dear Mumbai, once upon a time you were identified by the Fort Market. Unfortunately, now you are well known as a city of the black market, it has become your identity in the world today. There was a time when it was safe to walk around the streets holding the wife's hand, but today, the situation is such that you could lose your wife while walking down the streets. (qtd in Pheroza M. Godrej)<sup>12</sup>.

Current urban studies around Bombay such as that of Appadurai's conjure up a space that reminds on of *A Fine Balance*.

To speak of spectrality in Bombay's housing scene moves us beyond the empirics of inequality into the experience of shortage, speculation, crowding and public improvisation. It marks the space of speculation and specularities, empty scenes of dissolved industry, fantasies of urban planning...consumption patterns that violate their spatial preconditions, and bodies that are their own housing. The absent, the ghostly, the speculative and fantastic all have their part to play in the simultaneous excesses and lacks of Bombay's housing scene. (Appadurai 635).

Thus Appadurai uses the term *spectral* in a setting where housing and its lack are grossly *real*. Having said that, before we might be either drawn into the debate of the accuracy or otherwise of the representation of the city, the idea is to foreground the fact that the cityscape that has been produced through history, via the colonial times, post independence, and now the forces of globalization, engages those who observe/ imagine it, differently. Several postcolonial writers have romanced the city and reveled in the anonymity and promise of plurality that it provides. Rushdie's space of the city as depicted in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* is cosmopolitan, 'carnavalesque', foregrounding what Roshan G. Shahani calls, "polyphonous voices" (99). In *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin Chamcha returns to Bombay from London and finds a social space as he becomes part of a CP (M) event for the sake of the woman he loves.

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<sup>12</sup> "A Community at the Crossroads". 528, Symposium on *The City of Dreams*

Satyajit Ray, Salman Rushdie quotes in his *Imaginary Homelands*, imagines it like “an overpainted courtesan, at once seductive and revolting” (110). Such sexual/sexist imagery and representation of the city through corporeal metaphors and language of desire is common.<sup>13</sup>

Firozsha Baag suggests an address but one does not know which part of the city it belongs to. A city by the sea, Mountains and Village (in *A Fine Balance* are all spectral as well as real and so is Khoadad Building (another Parsi Baug in *Such A Long Journey*) but its location is undefined as they almost come to signify any *baug* and the life that bustles inside them the slice of life of any Parsi. There is no evocation of riches and glory of the community in the way that Sidhwa or Boman Desai maps it, except in stray references. However the lives they live seem to be cordoned off from the outside (that is until the predatorial politics of the majority seeps through, in which the community is caught and has a ‘passive’ role). This is in sharp contrast to the historical documents such as Karaka’s *History* which are hagiographic and laudatory as the city in those documents appears to be virgin territory on which Parsi men inscribed their glorious narratives like the Billy Junglewalla of Sidhwa’s *The Crow Eaters*, son of an equally illustrious (read astute businessman) Fareedon Junglewalla who migrated to what is now Pakistan. Firozsha Baag reminds one the inhabitants’ *desire to construct a heterotopia* of indefinitely accumulating time, like a museum where one might just peep in order to form a fairly accurate impression of what the Parsi community is like. The reader feels like a voyeur with some sense of her own power where the objects are there just for her to see. “..the will to enclose in one place all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time, in an immobile place, the whole idea belongs to our modernity”(Foucault). However, it cannot accumulate time since the characters/beings who negotiate time are not artifacts or relics. (Even a state of denial is conscious of its own brittle nature).

What is the way in which space is imagined by Mistry? Bombay is equated with India and the explanation provided is that a writer can write only about what he knows, that

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<sup>13</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz. “Bodies-Cities”. *The City Reader*. Eds. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson. UK: Blackwell, 2002.

having lived for twenty five years of his life in the city he does know it.<sup>14</sup> So while Mistry may be writing about the Bombay of his childhood and youth, for the reader it becomes a metaphor for his imagination of India, case of the microcosm unproblematically mirroring the macrocosm. The use of **place as a metonym** has been critiqued.<sup>15</sup> Certain images come to stand for particular areas and flatten the polyphonic nature of space itself. Closed spaces of “ethnic enclosures” point towards the City (Bombay) and the city in turn is a miniaturized Nation. One points to the other, **reflects** the other, so when Yezad in *Family Matters* pilfers money to play Matka, consequent on his being sacked from the job, consequent on the murder of Mr. Kapur by the Shiv Sena goons, all this is reflected in Jehangir’s loss of innocence as he succumbs to the temptation of bribes as a homework monitor in school. (However the point of contention of some critics is that Mistry is pandering to the westerner’s image of India as an incipient nation, where there is overcrowding, hunger, nakedness and filth. But this shall be taken up in greater detail later.)

The city is malignant and devouring as *A Fine Balance* suggests. After the hemmed- universe of the Baag, we come to political intrigues and the city tumescent with treachery and secrets which negotiate their turns through Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey*. From the cities of splendor that writers such as Boman Desai or Bapsi Sidhwa resurrect from the past, the present becomes the point of reference; the novels are lodged securely in their own time and a certain way that it is imagined. The scapes/scope of referentiality is changed in Mistry. However I would like to argue that the narratives that Mistry builds around the city cannot be detached from the history of the community in Bombay. The writers when read alongside each other imply/illuminate each other’s singularities and silences. Rather the very fact that Mistry makes Bombay (his ‘city’) almost an instrument of allegory for the nation is significant when read in contrast with the history of the community in Bombay. The backdrops of power and splendor, the trade with China and employing British hegemony to their own material advantage during the colonial period,

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<sup>14</sup> Mistry has repeatedly insisted on the same lines, in several interviews that have been cited. It is the ‘realistic’ pretensions of Mistry’s narrative style that make knowing and knowing accurately such a significant issue at stake here.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret C. Rodman’s article discusses as an instance J.W. Fernandez’ critique of the use of Andalusia as a metonym for entire Spain. (Rodman, Margaret. “Empowering Place: Multilocality, Multivocality”. *American Anthropologist*. 94.3 (September, 1992) 640-656. 4 March, 2006. <<http://links.jstor.org/sici>>.

all actions are now defined against such a period of 'hypermasculinity'. The coming of the refugee Parsis from Iran and their seamless assimilation into the kingdom of Jadav Rana as recorded in the *Qissa-e- Sanjan* and the above are the two reference points which are evoked again and again as both the description and explanation of the foundational points of Parsi history and identity in India.

The **closed spaces** that Mistry's characters inhabit people attain peculiar significance (whether he intends it or not) when read against the **expansive narratives** of a tiny minority who came to a virgin city and 'made it big'. The recent publication of *A Zoroastrian Tapestry* is another addition to the already large oeuvre of documents that celebrate the achievements of the community<sup>16</sup>. Significantly, though published very recently, it makes no reference to the way the Parsis live in Bombay today where it is believed, as Mistry says, that majority of them are bank clerks or book-keepers. It is almost as if the underside of the narratives of success does not fit into the scheme of community pride and regeneration.

In the 'The Paying Guests', we encounter Mistry's most dystopic depiction of the cramped space of the community. While the horror is sought to be leavened through humor, Khorshedbai's ultimate derangement as the owners (who are as suffocated as the tenants and want them to vacate the room let out because the wife is expecting) and the tenants haggle for a bit of space deflates any romanticism associated with the notion of community housing and its promise of uniformity. When Khorshedbai and her spouse lose the legal battle, we come upon a scene where she has steals the son of her persecutors and puts him in a cage, which is meant to house her imaginary parrot, to which she talks everyday. The fear and the loneliness of a childless woman is juxtaposed with the fear and guilt of Kashmira, the owner's wife. As a large column of inmates of the Parsi housing gather against the paying guests, Khorshedbai, Mistry wryly observes is perhaps now beyond the loyalties and politics of the ethnic enclave, in her madness.

Bombay , India's first 'city of cash'(Appadurai) and capital, the community housing which are a throwback on the glorious colonial days and its philanthropists, comes back to haunt the posterity, ones who haven't been able to inscribe themselves onto the narratives of power.

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<sup>16</sup> See Note 2. Page after page abounds with pictures of Parsi stalwarts, their descent and art and cuisine. Images of cramped homes and squalor that abound in Mistry present an interesting contrast to the document.

## (II)

Jim Masselos in his article "Postmodern Bombay: fractured discourses"<sup>17</sup> on the December 1992 riots in Bombay observes how the violence that erupted challenged current notions of the city and rewrote the way in which the dwellers experience their city. Several Parsis have written about the way in which the riots affected their perception of themselves as a minority.<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein Pheroza M. Godrej takes us back to the time of the riots after the destruction of the Babri Masjid when the fabric of Bombay's physical and emotional life was devastated by communal riots, the Parsis living in the baus were almost paralyzed. Their gates, which normally had their ornate wrought iron grills open 24 hours a day, suddenly acquired the image of fortresses with 24 hour security being maintained.

Masselos talks about the organic *image* of the city, a functional commercial city before the riots:

Bombay was an ordered city: it was well run administratively and its municipal functions worked adequately. It was an ordered city where people were perceived as living in well-known sectors...certain linguistic groups in some parts...of other religion in other quarters...The reading of a stable city order may never have been accurate...but what 1993 did was to show that it clearly did not apply...Instead it was replaced by another set of ordering, another set of ideas of what the city was about. (223)

The movement to rechristen Bombay as Mumbai, (which precipitates the death of Mr. Kapur in the *Family Matters* in the words of Appadurai was an attempt to purify the city, ethnically cleanse it but nonetheless open up to the world. This is typical of an anti-colonial discourse and it is for the first time in a Mistry novel that we have a Hindu character who romances the city and refuses to accept the chauvinism of the Shiv Sena. The indigenizing discourse inherent in such an alteration of nomenclature is seen by the contestants of this trend (Mr. Kapur, being a Punjabi, is also an alien in the city in the

<sup>17</sup> Masselos, Jim. "Postmodern Bombay: fractured discourses". *Urban Culture: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural studies*. Chris Jenks Ed. London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> N. E. Bharucha raises this issue in her article entitled "Why All this Parsiness? An Assertion of Ethno-Religious Identity in Recent Novels Written By Parsis". (Nabar, Vrinda, and Nilufer E. Bharucha. eds. *Mapping Cultural Spaces: Postcolonial Indian English Writing*. Delhi: Vision Books, 1998)

Sena scheme of things) as an imposed from above name, whose surface structure may be localizing but the deep structure is no less colonial. The changing urban scape of the Bombay that is dramatized along the metamorphosis of Hughes road (in three photographs belonging to 1908, 1940s and 1990 that Mr. Kapur spends a fortune on and shows Yezad as the two tally their memories of their changing city). The altered structures (the memories belong to the colonial period), Yezad mourns the loss of childhood and his Jehangir Mansion, how the roads were widened shrinking the space in which kids play. The railing of the Jehangir Mansion, says Yezad, was the “only thing of beauty in our lives”

How I loved to touch its circles, its volutes and spheres. Whenever I was out with my father, he let me climb on the parapet where the railing was bolted, to see the railing was to know that you were home. From Opera House, nearing the corner, there it was to greet you as the house was crested (24).

To the “authentic” nostalgia of Mr. Kapur and Yezad (outsiders) is opposed the attempt of the Marathi (Shiv Sena Brand insiders) to rewrite the history of the urban landscape by renaming, cleansing and purifying.

Appadurai calls Mumbai the largest center of “urban inequality and spectral citizenship...But specters and utopias as practices of the imagination occupy the same moral terrain” (24). The death of Coomy becomes then the *deus ex machina* as the housing problems of the family are solved. It is probably just as well that in the cauldron of relationships, the story cannot move forward (again the suggestion of movement) without a sacrifice of the most neurotic of all characters. That is why Lucy and Yasmin Contractor fall from the terrace in a fatal embrace.

Whether or not Mistry succeeds in capturing the angst of the community living in the city, it is interesting that it is only when a **nameable** threat impinges **from outside** (whether in the form of Nariman Vakeel’s Christian girlfriend Lucy or the more public Emergency) that the Parsi characters are reluctantly drawn into it. In ‘Auspicious Occasion’, Rustomji, who begins by denigrating the ghatias has to save himself as the crowd closes in on him by playing the clown. However, the city, though it might wrench the characters from the predictability of their routines, either returns them to the fold of the family or dehumanizes them, as Ishvar and Om Darji or Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance*. As a community, Mistry seems to suggest that the characters are living in a time warp, seeking forms of escape from the nation (which is the city, extended) either into the

closed spaces that define them or a flight to the west (such as Gustad Noble dreams for his son Sohrab). Nariman Vakeel's accident in *Family Matters* and Mr. Kapur's murder, the rampaging mobs in *Such A Long Journey*, and the Shiv Sena impinge on the lives of the Parsi characters and break down the façade between the inside and the outside. However it is interesting that Mistry tries to resuscitate the brutalized city through the humaneness of its characters in the tepid conclusion of *A Fine Balance*, and in *Family Matters* as the gaze of the writer is turned back on the family again as a kind of allegory and microcosm of the world outside. The family resides in the same city of threats and fears and moments of truce, without any attempt at self-criticism. The characters begin and end at the same place, often regressing (except Kersi, the narrator in the *Tales*). What does the symbol of mobility—the railway—suggest? A confluence of people, one of the gifts of modernity, meant to reduce distance and time. It is where Ishvar and Om meet Maneck. The characters keep moving—Maneck from the mountains to the city, from the city to Dubai and back to the city where he commits suicide on the railway tracks. There is movement without covering any distance... the characters who dream and want to make the city the canvas of their dreams are left utterly 'homeless'. Even in *Family Matters* we return to the two apartments, the Chateau Felicity and the Pleasant Villa, (clearly a Dickensian style of naming).

How does one understand the narratorial gaze of Mistry as he casts a glance back on the city that he has left behind? In all his three novels there is a central incident that happens to the protagonists living in the city and plucks them out of their purely ethnic zones and forces them to deal with an event of monumental (read 'national') significance. This incident (the Emergency in *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* and the Hindu right wing fundamentalists in *Family Matters*) seen as a visitation from outside is seen as an emanation of/from a space that is extra-ethnic. Interestingly, it is followed by a return to family and community life, for instance the return of Sohrab and to more 'localized' or 'personal' forms of violence inherent in a story such as "The Paying Guests" or in Yezad's transformation into the eternally threatened believer. The city for the honest, well-meaning bank-clerk Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey* is a city of deceit, a site of corruption, of winding lanes, dingy restaurants and intrigues. Memory fuses nostalgia and fear as Gustad goes to Chor Bazaar to meet Ghulam Mohammad. The narrator continues as Gustad fingers a Meccano set which reminds him of his childhood visit with his father: "And as Gustad felt the metal under his fingers, smelled the metallic smell of

rust... the years fell away. He saw a little boy holding his father's hand and walking down these lanes". But the city—scape is constantly changing and finally and the wall around the Khoadad Building (another community housing structure) and its bulwark against the noise and filth beyond, is demolished by the municipality.

Mistry's minority-city (the city in the experiential domain of the subalterns), which he does not name in *A Fine Balance*, is imagined as a site for violence. The beautification drives by the police and municipality is a recurring strain in his work. The city has its excesses, its inassimilable elements that are constantly searching for a space to *be*. Here there is a slight difference in the way that *A Fine Balance* works as compared to the three other texts. Elizabeth Grosz in her article "Bodies-Cities" in discussing how the language of city space and language of the body merge (which shall be further explored in the next chapter) remarks: "The city provides the order and organization that links otherwise unrelated bodies. For example, it links the affluent lifestyle of the banker...to the squalor of the vagrant, the homeless, or the impoverished..." All this is juxtaposed in space, on the principle of exclusion. What remains to be seen are the co-ordinates around which he imagines such juxtaposition. It is only in this novel that Mistry attempts to build his narrative around a significant *polyphony* of voices rather than predominantly Parsi characters. However this experiment with secularization originates with a tale of victimization (Thakur Dharamsi's killing of the low- caste Chamaars) which *delivers* the oppressed to the city, where they meet the Good Samaritan Ashraf Chacha (a Muslim) and then Dina Dalal (a Parsi woman trying to survive on her own after her husband's death). In the flaming wok of the Emergency, this **encounter of the different**, is subsumed in a bitter tale of overwhelming, inescapable violence which turns the characters into sites that again only **reflect** (and not contest, visibly) state violence of which *the city is again, only a passive locale, a site*. It is significant that it is around the time when the novel is set (1975, the year of the Emergency) that the writer had emigrated to Canada and the images of the city, of the characters as powerless and sterile, whatever the reasons for his emigration, may be read alongside each other to provide a legitimacy to what Rustomji says in 'Auspicious Occasion': "Rustomji too would have liked to feel sorrow and compassion. But he was afraid. He had decided long ago that this was no country for sorrow or compassion or pity- these were worthless and at best inappropriate". (8)

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in the article tracing the paths of the emergence of the 19th century city in the west underline how much the relation of social division and exclusion is related to the production of desire.<sup>19</sup> Recurring references to the need for cleanliness also characterize the colonial city. In a thought provoking article entitled “Filth and Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta”, Sudipta Kaviraj critiques the ways in which the encountering of filth in the ‘pablik’ (that how he characterizes it) sphere has been read. He rightly points out that the spatial practices of the poor (his study is that of the transformation of the semiotics of parks in Calcutta) need not be necessarily read as a mere *transitional phase*. Arguing that such manifestations (as clothes drying on the busts of national leaders in parks and the dirt and filth of the shanties that have come up there) give us an inkling of the plural forms that modernity seems to be acquiring in India and to nurse an illusion that given the right economic conditions, the ugliness will disappear, is escapist. The configuration of the public space in European modernity and in India’s colonial modernity, Kaviraj demonstrates is dissimilar. By according conceptual primacy to the use of space by the poor, he reminds us of Mistry’s evocation of people urinating on the walls of Khoadad Building and the slummers shitting beside the railway lines in *A Fine Balance*. While the lower middle class Parsi has a definably middle class attitude to the ‘nuisance’, Mistry appears ambivalent in sharing the angst of the characters. The carnivalesque mode in which he describes ‘Goo Guru’ Rajaram’s exposition on shit or the obscene gesture he makes at the man who stares at the defecating slummers at what for him is a ‘sight’ points towards what Kaviraj calls the ‘politics of insubordination’/ ‘pleasure of defilement’. In the same article, he says:

Insubordination shares its anger and resentment with revolutionary theory, but it lacks the educational and cultural preparation to produce an alternative imagination of the world, and remains satisfied with insulting the elite but leaving the world as it is. Still the solitary act is symbolic and in ways reminiscent of the violent act- it feels purifying. (111)

This ‘theme of insubordination’ presents a problematic while we study what the dispossessed do in the universe of Mistry’s works. There are indeed several ways of understanding spatial practices— and characters with different pasts and different daily

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<sup>19</sup> See “The City: The sewer, the gaze and the contaminating touch”. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Routledge, 1986.

exigencies act differently. The shift from a focus on how space is organized or administered to how it is appropriated/ used suggests a willingness to examine the semiotics of space for modes of living that might illuminate the serrations in the grand narratives of modernity that are imposed from above. Not all minorities have the same story to tell. For instance, a Yezad or a Kapur can nurse a wistfulness for their childhood in the city, while the destitute certainly do not, and indeed cannot. Yet as we shall see, in making Bombay a city of the 'minority', he locates a violent city, which at the same time in 'homing' characters in its streets, ethnic enclaves and cramped apartments, offers them a *strange hospitality*.

While the broader implications of this shall be studied in the following chapters, it would suffice to say that architectural barriers were constructed between not only the colonizers and the colonized, but also the rich and the poor—the dynamics of which is glimpsed in the exemplary study of Engels regarding the English working class and also between religious and linguistic communities.<sup>20</sup> The images that we encounter in Mistry's fiction of the sequestered Parsis do end up stereotyping the characters, but it also underlines how beneath the organicity of an well-oiled, modern, commercial city, lie dreams of community (not only of Parsis), purity and a discourse of an *as-if* non-negotiated, non-negotiable difference.

### (III)

How does Canada or Toronto figure as a counterpoint to the imagination of Bombay? The images connect Bombay and Toronto... water imagery, the old man. But for the first time a character gazes out of the building in Toronto he gazes at the swimming pool and the images are erotic, and it is in the space of the diasporic that he finds his voice as a writer. In India even though the city is by the sea, the **outside** comes in through images of threat and fear. Be it Francis (the Christian, whom the Parsi community victimizes), the rent collector Ibrahim (the Muslim) or Om and Ishvar (lower-caste Hindus), they are visitations that rupture the semblance of stability in the lives of the Parsi characters.

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<sup>20</sup> Engels, Friedrich "The Condition of the English Working Class". *A Companion to the City*. Ed. Gary Bridge, and Sophie Watson . UK: Blackwell, 2000.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, it is when the narrator has reached Canada that the sense of the 'I' emerges. The change of space is obviously experienced as liberation, in that not only is Mistry now writing about his past in the form of the book that we read but the narratorial persona that he assumes (that of Kersi) also sends home a book to his parents after all the terse letters that he has written, as an alibi, almost. However the book is about Bombay as all his subsequent books are. However, it simultaneously appears that none can ever *return* to the cities and spaces (physical and of the mind) they have and constantly are leaving behind. Be it Sarosh, Maneck, Om or Ishvar. Only Kersi seeks to return through his tales. However the fictional devices he employs in the story to access the reality he has left behind erupts in several different ways and the voices of Jamshed, Sarosh and Yezad also part of what he has written in the letters that he has addressed to the city. All that Jamshed can do is rant about the ugliness in India and express his relief at having extricated himself. Sarosh makes a troubled return and Yezad cannot leave his beloved Bombay at all. But even then, Kersi in Canada (the writer's persona) *is looking out from an apartment, looking at his past, himself and others and is aware of being watched*. Mistry's representation of Bombay city (a metonym for India) and the Parsis has been critiqued by Germaine Greer, among others. This is perhaps consequent on his location as a migrant writer and the economy of his location. It is clear that he portrays an unchanging community living in the in-side of a relatively repetitive outside, and only the names of the persecutors keep changing. While we shall suspend the discussion of his modes of representation for later, the most documented opposition came from Greer (and the by now famous repudiation of Mistry's of her intervention as "asinine" ) who claimed that she found the city of *A Fine Balance* had nothing in common with the Bombay she knew. On the other hand certain hagiographic accounts congratulate Mistry on an *accurate* representation of the community.<sup>21</sup> However, this is an attempt to take a look at *the kind of space within the city that Mistry imagines for his characters and its implications*. Studies such as T. Luhrmann's document a dying community of which the mansion (as discussed above) is a metaphor<sup>22</sup>. She emphasizes, as we have already discussed the 'hypermasculinised' world of a colonial elite. On the other hand, studies such as Bharucha's, which will be dealt with in greater detail later, highlight the assertion

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<sup>21</sup> Keki N. Daruwalla. "Of Parsis and Novels". Ed. N. Kapadia. J. Dodiya. R.K. Dhawan. *Parsi Fiction*. 2 vols. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> See Tanya M. Luhrmann. *The Good Parsi- the Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society*. Delhi: OUP, 1996.

of Parsi identity in fiction as a reaction to the new associations that being a minority in India acquired after December 1992. Meanwhile, the space which they *inhabit, experience and produce* are as much a space of narratives of the past and present as it is physical, here and now. As such the representation of the **closed space of the community** as juxtaposed to the **individual space of the Toronto apartment** where he can put his past together is an interesting trope. In an anticipation of what shall be elucidated later, one can only suggest that the Canada that disappears from his subsequent works exists at least in *Tales* as the condition of possibility of the **Bombay** that he keeps returning to. Gradually the borders between the community and the outside begin to blur at the same time that he eschews reference to the nation to which he has migrated. However, as we will argue in the course of this work, the one of the two places cannot be silenced in order to let the other speak. To talk about the ‘condition of possibility’ is therefore to say that the way in which Canada enables his writing ‘about’ Bombay, in the *Tales* needs to be retained as we engage with his other texts. For, as Derrida says in his *Of Hospitality*— “For what I don’t want to say or cannot, the unsaid, the forbidden, what is passed over in silence...- all these should be interpreted” (12)

There are some questions that need to be asked here. We have already looked at the way Mistry represents the space that belong to his fictional characters. We have also discussed how the very condition of existence of the city itself is exclusionary. So though community housing might increase isolation it is constructed with the rationale that it shall facilitate *smooth functioning* which a progressive city needs by minimizing friction. So we *have several Bombays and yet another one outside* which for Mistry is one of squalor, corruption and treachery, which again folds inwards and invades the domestic space and the Parsi stereotypes and the slum dwellers seem ill-equipped to negotiate it. Some turn obscurantist (Miss Kutpitia’s occultism and Yezad’s bigotry) and still others just want to survive (Gustad Noble) and return to where they were. Rituals and Parsi cuisine are aesthetically described by Mistry and these constitute the only incorruptible space in his texts. Should this be read as a strategic/ unconscious exoticization for western eyes unfamiliar to the spectacle? Do we have a *representation* of the city which collides with the characters from a minority community and *seeks a centre*? Or may we detect a communitarian impulse that stems from the crises of the present, an impulse which is conscious of its own Thanatos and in a sense, therefore, stages it? These queries seem to return frequently.



### Chapter 3

#### Writing the body-vulgar: Spectacular Shit, Filth, Corporal in Mistry.

"The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived."

(Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 65)

"The biological body, transformed by the human mind into a cultural construct, undergoes a second metamorphosis, emerging as the symbolic representation of the social forces that created it. Bodily parts, functions, boundaries, points of entrance and exit, openings, excretions are endlessly transposed into metaphors . . ."

(Carol Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 48)

"What makes shit such a universal joke is that it's an unmistakable reminder of our duality, of our soiled nature and of our will to glory. It is the ultimate *lèse-majesté*."

(John Berger)

In arguing my way through the tropes of scatology and wounded bodies in Mistry's fiction, I wish to beg immunity from the critical viewpoint that accuses Mistry of a simple neo-Orientalist gaze when he conjures India or cashes in on the popular stereotypes of the Parsi community with an intention to gratify the 'well-fed', 'bored', 'western' reader. That does not mean that such a critique cannot be applied to Mistry. It obviously is a valid take on the mode of representation that he adopts. What one wishes to distance this chapter from is a simple matching of prints, whether or not he 'accurately' describes Bombay or the Parsis. Such a reading of Mistry has two immediate pitfalls:

- i) That it relies too heavily on 'revealing' the intentionality of the author.
- ii) That even if we accept such a reading of his texts as 'accurate' it would mean that having thus unearthed his intentions, the responsibility of the critic ends there. The effect of such a stance would be to sterilize/ reduce the debate around his works to a single node, that when we are faced with the evocations of quaint Parsis or excess, excreta,

mutilated bodies, corpses (in short an “aesthetics of vulgarity” that Achille Mbembe associates with the African postcolony)<sup>1</sup>, as Indian critics we can silence the rumblings inside us with an allegation directed towards a writer who announces his enterprise through the epigraph in *A Fine Balance*:

Holding this book in your hand, sinking back into your soft armchair, you will say to yourself, perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured: this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true.

(Honore de Balzac, *Le Pere Goriot*).

### **Excreting Identity: Living, Reading, Writing**

Having said that, the use of the corporeal in Mistry provides us with an insight into his fiction that allows us to take into account several aspects of “identity”- be it that of an ethnic minority in India or a migrant who, as several critics have pointed out, evades any reference at all to Canada. While studying Mistry one cannot pass over lightly the fact that the Parsis are a community for whom the concept of ‘homeland’ is a problematic one. Not just because of the fact that they had fled to India from Persia, not only because they have no recorded history up to the colonial period, but because their ‘visibility’ in India is intimately connected with the British rule. That the elites of this community were mostly compradors is, by now, to put it colloquially, old hat. However, the other merchant class compradors such as the Gujarati Baniyas and Muslim Bohras have been appropriated into their communal identities as the partition drew the fault lines across the nation. Even a cursory glance at the texts of Mistry acquaints us with this difference and his imagination of Bombay as a “minority” city and the insularity of the Parsis is a symptom of their experience in a post colonial world. But this is the point of departure of

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<sup>1</sup> Mbembe uses Cameroon as an illustration of his “aesthetics” but argues that it has explanatory potential for the African postcolony. In the course of this chapter I shall use his categories selectively. In his article he cites the way the rulers’ image is constructed through excess and extravagance and the fact that excretion, sexuality and such other evocations of the Bakhtinian ‘grotesque’ are appropriated both by the rulers as well as the ruled. Moreover, in applying Mbembe to Mistry, excess and vulgarity shall signify not only the obscenities hurled at power by the dispossessed but also the fundamental way in which power operates, by demonstrating its “vulgarity” in turning citizens into spectacles and observers into voyeurs. (Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. USA: University of California Press, 2001)

this chapter and not one of its contentions. It is clear that the moment of independence of India is not Mistry's preoccupation; the representation of Bombay (a microcosm for India as has been illustrated in the last chapter) is anchored, in his novels, around the year 1975, the year of his emigration to Canada.

By reading the 'vulgarity' (or in the sense of 'obscenity' that Achille Mbembe highlights in his *On the Postcolony*) in Mistry's novels as an index, as allegory and sometimes as mere presentation of the brutalized body and a "refusal to interpret it" (as Sara R. Horowitz reads Bialik's poem "City of Slaughter")<sup>2</sup> whether in his presentation of excrement or the tortured, brutalized body, we can move away toward a more productive engagement with his works. This helps us to overcome the binary of reading him either as a Parsi writer or as a diasporic one and in the process, simplifying the way in which they exist in his works.

In his article "Revolution as Anality in the Scatological Caricatures of the Reformation and the French Revolution", Claude Gandelman argues that caricaturists of the French Revolution as well as the Reformation used scatological and stercoral imagery. The Pope was understood by Luther to have been begotten from the defecatory passage of the devils. It is clear that having been refined out of civilized speech, these references have been used to denote excesses of those who are placed in a position of authority. Scatological imagery has been a recurrent feature of political critique and Swift appears to be a persuasive example. For long the excremental trope has been employed by writers in order to mark a departure from the normal or the disinfected. Satire seems to have been one of the major motivations behind the act for not only is the object of attack devalued, as in the case of Vijayan's novel *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, the magnificence and mystifying effect of power is sought to be dismantled by making a spectacle of its act of defecation. The object is to arouse derisive laughter. It is in Bakhtin's study of *Rabelais and his World* that scatology is treated as a manifestation of the grotesque body as he seeks to rescue Rabelais from being read as a mere satirist and the grotesque as only negativity. Bakhtin argues that the lower bodily stratum has subversive potential not only when it is used to challenge or negate/critique the traditional notions of high culture and

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<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to the article "The Rhetoric of Embodied Memory in the *City of Slaughter*" by Horowitz where she traces the paths that the traumatic memory of the pogrom of Jews at Kishinev in 1903. The poet Bialik visits the scene of the disaster and reconstructs the events by "embodying memory", by retracing the path of the violence from eyewitnesses through the bodies of victims, as Horowitz argues. In the recollection of trauma the body therefore becomes the site par excellence.

seriousness but also affirm folk identity. His discussion of popular festive forms focuses on this ambivalence and his discussion of the carnivalesque is too well known to need further elaboration. However we will dwell a little here on the 'transgressive' potential of the carnivalesque in order to understand whether the linguistic rehabilitation of shit can be seen as subversive per se.

Whether Mistry's dwelling on the vulnerable body as an object of violence of the state and repeated return to scatology has underpinnings apart from the ones already highlighted in the Baag stories, is as some critics have suggested, a mode of representing India that fits into the Naipaul's anxiety in his *Area of Darkness*:

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate mostly beside the railway tracks. But they defecate on the hills; they defecate in the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. Indians defecate everywhere. (70)

This gaze of the colonial modernist is a problematic one and reams of criticism have been expended on this. However what is crucial for Indian critics in such a perception of India is how to articulate one's position vis—à-vis what one perceives when one goes out into the streets of a city and how one responds to that. Dipesh Chakrabarty's article entitled "Open Space/ Public Place: Garbage, Modernity and India" foregrounds the problem accurately. It would be difficult to slot Naipaul's characterization as simply 'western' and believe that one has demonstrated a more nuanced sensitivity to Indian realities. Chakrabarty pertinently argues that Gandhi had also pathologised "selfishness" as a typically Indian streak which is manifested, he believes, in the lack of civic sense in disposing dirt and filth. Nirad C. Chaudhuri also joins the bandwagon in affirming that dirt is somehow inseparable from the Indian character, and that they throw garbage outside with élan. We can see in all these attitudes an anxiety about the use of public place as open space where actions of a "personal" nature are carried out disregarding all norms of "citizen-culture" (Chakrabarty). There was a desire during the 'national movement' to flush out the discomfort of Orientalist observations with a desire to 'show' the outsider that by 'better' use of public places Indians could develop into a nation capable of governing itself. Thus the struggle remained confined to the register of colonial modernity. In the course of his essay, Chakrabarty cites the work of Nita Kumar, an ethno-sociologist who had lived among the people in Benaras in order to study the city when all her neutrality and theoretical training were thrown into disarray when one of her

favorite informants died from a disease which could have been cured had the attitude been less negligent. The researcher was then forced to confront the “**political responsibility**” of her stance and found herself in a situation where she was forced to think that only hygiene and development could be the way out of preventing such meaningless deaths. Thus the dichotomy between the ‘non-modern’ objects of study who responded to the death fatalistically and the ‘modern’ anthropologist who thought it could have been prevented, throws up our own **ambivalence** as critics. To historicize the attitudes towards filth and excreta, disease or pollution does not seem to be the final answer for critics from the postcolony. In Sudipta Kaviraj’s article discussed in the last chapter, he discusses the use of public space as a transformation of forces of modernity and as “politically significant”. Mistry’s representation of people shitting on the tracks is certainly not a novel one. However, perhaps we need to qualify his stance. Rajaram, whom Ishvar christens as the “philosopher of shit” (Goo Guru) turns the gaze on the observer:

“Look at those bastards”, he shouted, “staring at people shitting as if they themselves were without bowels. As if a turd emerging from an arse-hole is a circus performance”. He flung obscene gestures at the passengers, making some of them turn away. One observer took exception and spat from his window seat... “I wish I could bend over, point and shoot like a rocket in their faces...” (170-171).

This exchange between the *observer* and the *observed* is a space where the man who spits at the stench, in a vulgar gesture of violence highlights his impotence to alter that which he perceives. And Rajaram by his expressing his desire to guide the shit to their faces not only critiques the gaze of the observer for whom it is a spectacle but also dramatizes his own vulnerability, as his bravado of expression airs its own impossibility. (However, as we have already mentioned in the preceding chapter, it may also be read as a sign of ‘insubordination’ as Kaviraj argues. Even if such a reading be granted, that the ‘ambivalence’ of Mistry talked about in the last chapter in the representation of filth implicates the writer as well as the critic (a la Chakrabarty) cannot be glossed over. The narrator’s look at shit, however, even though he underlines the ‘inevitability’ of encountering dirt in the city, unlike Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five*, does not foreground the author’s immanence in the evocation of filth. However, it does threaten (by the social and economic connotations of shit in the postcolony) the clean boundaries between the seer and the seen.

### **Post colonial shit and the watering the stench of power:**

Joshua D. Esty in his seminal essay “Excremental Postcolonialism” posits that shit functions as the “governing trope” in postcolonial writing, hinting towards “a failed or flawed postcolonial nationalism”. Beginning with Beckett and Joyce, Esty recalls that both were writing at a time when they were straddling anti-colonial national revival and postcolonial disenchantment. In his study of Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* and Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* he remarks on a similar scatological strain in both writers. In a crucial supplementation to existing theorization on shit, Esty argues that “shit is not the future’s fertilizer, it is an anti-transcendental sign of the present’s failures,” or that “scatology’s refusal of utopia” is its most radical content. Indeed whether it is the Parsi character’s incurable constipation or the sight of the destitute defecating on the roads or railway tracks, in Mistry’s postcolonial city there is no escape.

It would be moot here to cite what Esty says is the most frequent strain of criticism leveled at Armah’s excremental vision.<sup>3</sup>

**Armah’s** harsher critics observe that *The Beautiful Ones* betrays a deep distaste for its own settings, the narrator’s recoil from the shit-ridden city is not simply an abstract device but a visceral rejection of public life in Ghana. His bleakly excremental vision leaves Armah open to charges that he represents a self-loathing view of his society that internalizes the colonial era denigrations of the third world.

**Mistry’s** postcolonial vision is not one that Rushdie would talk about as one way of creating “imagined homelands” in the sense of a dispersed post-national (if one may use

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<sup>3</sup> Armah’s “excremental vision”, is applied to a failed or flawed postcolonial nationalism. It would be perhaps pertinent here to quote from Esty the significance of using such a trope: “Shit then is the governing sign of a literary mode that (1) captures the lure of ethical selfhood and aesthetic freedom, but throws their value into question and (2) acknowledges the burden of national representation but resists allegory” (55). Towards the end of the article, Esty makes a very crucial point: “The possibility that this potentially marginal artistic gesture, one that courts self defeat and critical disgust...” (56) underlines the fact that the very use of dirt, filth and shit in the economy of representation of the postcolony suggests ambivalence and implies indirectly the responsibility of the writer. The writer is aware that it was colonial modernity, as Laporte shows us, which made health and sanitation one of the registers through which to administer the natives. However, the connotative potential of shit cannot be abjured because of this association. Images of excess issuing from the postcolony implicate the author and dramatize the pressure of history on the postcolonial self and the postcolonial novel.

the expression) consciousness that brings “newness into the world” (Bhabha).<sup>4</sup> The bleakness of his vision comes across most powerfully in his *A Fine Balance* and like Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children* where not only excrement but the body of the subject also becomes a metaphor for the nation. The purpose of the above quote is to provide a contrast to what we encounter in Mistry. Scatology is employed both for purposes of satire and burlesque of politics and politicians and for negotiating questions of identity. However, the “self-loathing” that the critics associate with Armah’s vision (not subscribed to completely by Esty in his article)<sup>5</sup> cannot be applied to Mistry summarily. As argued in the chapter on space, clearly there is in Mistry a dichotomy set up between the inside and the outside. The rhythms of the **family** and the strange, impersonal hostile rhythm of the **state as a visitation from outside** whether in the form of the municipality in *Such a Long Journey*, the Emergency in *A Fine Balance* or the Shiv Sena in *Family Matters*, are composed in an interesting way. The family in Mistry’s representation of the Parsi community is I would argue a crucial link. It is through *A Fine Balance* where the structure of the family is shown as having either been destroyed (in the case of Om and Ishvar) or failed (as in the case of Dina Dalal or Maneck Kohlah) that its centrality in *Such a Long Journey*, *Tales* or *Family Matters* can be judged. While this point shall be taken up in detail in the last chapter, it would probably suffice now to say that the narratorial voice in Mistry straddles two worlds- that of the seemingly (I will qualify this later) self-contained, Parsi family structure and the hostile, uncomfortable public space of the city. Armah’s recoil is not Mistry’s. His is a strange romance that ended before he left India in 1975 but and now has an after-life in his fiction.

The questions of identity are troped in Mistry through scatological elements in his fiction.<sup>6</sup> ‘Squatter’ and ‘Swimming Lessons’ travel beyond the use of scatology as mere

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<sup>4</sup> This is a reference to Bhabha’s essay on the diasporic postcolonial migrant writer (à la Rushdie) who in her hybrid being gives birth to a new consciousness that wishes to represent a third space transforming the binaries of home and the land of adoption. (See Bhabha, Homi. “How Newness enters the World: Postmodern Space, postcolonial times and the trials of cultural translation”. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994 )

<sup>5</sup> Esty compares Armah to Naipaul and recalls how the latter had also been similarly trashed as an “effete Western intellectual. However that literary representation of shit and filth in the postcolony is at least a reference to the abysmal difference between the levels of development and the destitute dotting the street, without a place to defecate. Thus Vijayan’s novel which allegorizes the Emergency makes such an event out of the defecating monarch.

<sup>6</sup> In the doctoral dissertation of Martin Genetsch entitled *Difference and Identity in Recent Anglo-Canadian Fiction: M.G. Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath and Rohinton Mistry*, the parallel between the act of defecating and formation of identity as a migrant comes in for discussion. In discussing the ‘Squatter’ Genetsch suggests that Nariman Hansotia’s description of Sarosh’s obsession as a desire to

gimmickry and burlesque, as evident in the figure of the constipated Rustomji of 'Auspicious Occasion'. Both deal with the experience of a fresh migrant and the imagery used here has interesting implications for ways of reading Mistry as a 'minority' writer, be it in the homeland or abroad. In the short story 'Squatter' (narrated by Nariman Hansotia), Sarosh emigrates to Canada making a vow that if he cannot become completely Canadian in ten years he would acknowledge defeat and return to Bombay. The Western toilet is completely immured to his overtures and unless he climbs up and squats on the bowl, like the WCs of Firozsha Baag, he cannot defecate. Hounded by fears of the promise he had made to himself, Sarosh adopts several ridiculous measures but his bowels remain unresponsive. The agony of Sarosh (now Sid) is an allegory of a desire on the part of the migrant to assimilate, to merge seamlessly into the fabric of the adopted nation. In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, there is a similar evocation ("As a child," Kingston tells us, "I pictured a naked child sitting on a modern toilet desperately trying to perform until it died of congestion" (86).<sup>7</sup>)

In his insightful article "Deregulating the Evacuated Body: Rohinton Mistry's Squatter", John Eustace makes a further observation. He links the discourses of the two stories involving Savukshaw and Sarosh. Drawing on Warwick Anderson's study "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and Poetics of Pollution"<sup>8</sup> which talks about how the difference between the 'debased' and the 'healthy' body was created during the colonial period, between the closed, clean American body and the "open grotesque Filipino body". Texts and toilets worked in tandem to bring about the control of the savage's body. Eustace applies this 'trope of debasement' to the squatting figure of Sarosh, the racial other. The interpretive mechanism at work here makes the so called 'privy' a "surveillable" space that can be read through the tell-tale marks left on it such as those on the seat or the fact that his feet did not show from beneath the door. While Sarosh's story is narrated in what can be called a "carnavalesque" style, it creates a zone where the

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adapt is flawed. More likely, he says that the latter wanted to assimilate. However that he says was where Sarosh went wrong. The rationale given is that Canada provides for 'multiculturalism' and Sarosh would have been a successful Canadian had he not pressed for assimilation. This I would argue is a very simple reading of Sarosh's problem and fails to take into account the symbolic connotations of the story. Moreover such a stance would also fail to explain why, the narrator in the final story "Swimming Lessons" who makes no such overtures is called a Paki and is racially abused.

<sup>7</sup> For the diasporic subject to regenerate herself she has to constantly digest authority and tradition and turn them into "fecal signs", separating herself from the constant drive towards appropriation and uniformity. Blockage, says the writer is the ultimate postmodern nightmare.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson's study focuses on the change of signification with colonialism, as Filipino subjects were re-inscribed as squatters on territory that required regulation. They become the contaminating other, something that has been already discussed in the chapter. The enclosure of the toilet therefore reduced the visibility of the abject other and also confined the subject to a more manageable space.

abject, colonial other and a critique of those discourses persist. While “debasement” functions as significant trope in Sarosh’s story, power is sought to be regained through the Parsi saviour of the Indian cricket team in England. Eustace observes that in an inversion of colonizers falling ill in the colonies, here a member of the team contracts a disease. In comes the ‘healthy’, ‘virile’ Savukshaw and resurrects the team’s flailing fortunes. In this tale, the flipside of the ignominy and loneliness of Sarosh is shown, in the form of a man who leaves his colonial audience dumbstruck. The next story, as Hansotia says would be that of Savukshaw the artist, the Parsi Picasso- who is probably Tiresias, scuttling across two worlds. However the thrust of the narrative is on Sarosh and the ambivalence of his squatting body, as Eustace says, “as a means of deregulating the evacuated colonial body” (38)

In his article “The Excremental Sublime: The Postmodern Literature of Blockage and Release” Roberto Maria Dainotto sounds the threat that the society in which we live constantly seeks to reduce our selves to excremental left-overs. In the short story, Sarosh fails to void the past and waits for a symbolic confirmation of his filtration into Canada. Congestion and failure to excrete is a way of signaling the materiality of the past and I would argue has significant implications for diasporic identity as well as the alienation of the Parsi Sid when he returns to India after a decade. Filth and scatology remain in his consciousness as sign of the failure to transform into the strong, ambivalent, political hybrid that Bhabha reads as part of the psyche of postcolonial migrant writers such as Rushdie. As a reject Sarosh is inassimilable into Bhabha’s scheme of things, and here too an excess:

“He had watched as a kid when cranes had lowered these cement and concrete hulks of respectable grey into the water. They were grimy black now and, from their angularities rose the distinct stench of human excrement. The old pattern was never found by Sarosh; he searched in vain. Patterns of life are selfish and unforgiving”. (177)

No wonder then that by its association with both filth and childhood (in Chaupatty) and dissolution water should be such an important element in Mistry’s early fiction.

The bath is full. Water imagery is recurring in my life. Chaupatty beach, swimming pool, bathtub. I step in and immerse myself up to the neck. It feels good. The hot water loses its opacity when the chlorine or whatever it

is has cleared. My hair is still dry. I close my eyes, hold my breath and dunk my head. Fighting the panic I stay under and count to thirty...The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside.  
(Swimming Lessons, 248)

Traditionally, water in literature has been the symbol of regeneration. There is the suggestion of a progression in the words “Chaupatty beach, swimming pool, bathtub”. “Swimming Lessons”, with its meta-fictional references and its use of the writer’s body as the experiential site straddles both India and Canada. It is the writer who enters the bathtub in his attempt to negotiate with rather than confront. It has a crucial parallel to “Squatter”:

In ‘Squatter’, Sarosh hears the rumbling in his stomach, and the sheen of burlesque provided by Mistry in the following description has underpinnings that seem to exceed the merely ridiculous: “And Sarosh pushed hard, harder than he had ever pushed before, harder in all his the years of trying in the new land. And the memories of Bombay, the immigration interview in New Delhi, his mother’s prayer book, all these of their own accord emerged from beyond the region of the ten years to push with him and give him new found strength”. (165). All this happens in such a space (in the plane about to take off for India, and so belongs to a place neither here nor there) that itself symbolizes the dissolution of ‘self’-hood and as a solution to Sid’s conundrum dramatizes its own impossibility.

In ‘Swimming Lessons’, the narrator’s statement that more needs to be seen of the world below the water, suggests submergence and the willingness of the writer to acknowledge the refracted nature of reality. Here again he can negotiate with the past and present, simultaneously, only under the regenerative ‘distortion’ that water provides. To Kersi in this story (like Sarosh) even though he is not a failed migrant, revelation of the necessity of submergence comes only when he is already under the water, again an ambivalent space, physically. If we take Kersi’s statement to its logical conclusion, the movement seems to be that *from separation and a detached stance* of criticality (perhaps prompted by fears of the unfamiliar or the lurking other both as a Parsi in India or a migrant in Canada) vis- a- vis Chaupatty and the swimming pool toward a *recognition of immanence* with the body inside the water.

Before the above expiatory dip in the water as discussed in the preceding lines, India and Canada are linked through 'private' images that are employed by Mistry to perform the work of symbols, which in turn reserve implications for his experience of 'minoritisation' and the response to it. The slate must be cleaned constantly as the past continuously defecates on it and the present implants fears in the migrant of herself being reduced to excess, waste. That's why water remains a recurring presence in the fiction of Mistry. Shit, filth and water are metonyms of the condition of the diasporic individual.

The bathroom needs cleaning. I open a new can of Ajax and scour the tub. Sloshing with the mug from the bucket was the standard bathing procedure in the bathrooms of Firozsha Baag, so my preference is always now for a shower. I've never used the bathtub as yet; besides it would be too much like Chaupatty or the swimming pool, wallowing in my own dirt. Still, it must be cleaned. (248)

### **Excess(ing) the 'other'**

After assimilation the body releases its excess- which is a necessary act; the product is waste but at the same time it is the condition of possibility of a healthy body. Indeed shit which is the body's waste is an index of its functionality. This aspect of shit has been theorized upon by Julia Kristeva in her "Powers of Horror: An essay on Abjection". Abjection is an attempt, to summarize Kristeva, to achieve subjectivity by jettisoning a pseudo-object and thus invoking a contrast between self and other: by abjecting the other, a subject "holds on to the possibility of its own coherence." As Shasta Turner interpolates in her article "Scatology and the Postmodern Subject",<sup>9</sup> contact with substances like shit poses a threat to that coherence because "excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death." Yet ironically, abjection ends up by *increasing* the instability of the challenged subject, for the act of casting out the pseudo-"object" always casts out part of the "subject" as well. As Kristeva remarks, "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself." Kristeva understands of abjection attempts a critique of power and shit for her is embodied negativity that has to be repressed in order that a coherent self may be presented. And all

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<sup>9</sup> Turner, Shasta. "Scatology and the Postmodern Subject". <<http://www.majorweather.com/projects>>

this applies to more than just the individual. It is also a description of a process of othering that lies at the heart of the exclusionary tendencies of the organization of any form of order. The ‘minoritisation’ experienced by the Parsi characters and the migrant, thus, is what enables/makes possible the ‘majoritisation’ of the other. The abject can therefore be read as the excreta of the process of symbolization and the national imaginary is also implicated in such a mechanism. In Dominique Laporte’s *History of Shit*, he outlines how the idea of civilization and order in the barbaric lands is clearly tied to the history of shit as social barriers were set up in the city by separating the clean from the unclean. The sight of filth was a sign of recalcitrant subjects who had to be ordered and in colonialism it became a particularly effective way of fragmenting the colonizer from the colonized.

Commenting on the difficulty of codifying shit and its superfluity the author, says that “giving up any metaphysical consistency, this sort of subject becomes, quite literally, an excrement, a surplus that cannot be codified and inscribed in the fabricated notions of “reality”. Its “resistance to codification institutes at the same time its absolute superfluity in relation to the symbolic order” (Sublime). Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* also offers fecal signs as allegorical signs of authorial consciousness and as the epiphany of the radical writer opposing war and its horrors, possibly highlighting the uselessness of it all.

Billy looked inside the latrine. The wailing was coming from there. The place was crammed with Americans who had taken their pants down. The welcome feast had made them as sick as volcanoes. The buckets were full or had been kicked over. An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, "There they go, there they go." He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book. (125)

That the trope of excretion has been employed to the migrant’s experience could also be read under another light. Scatology in Mistry becomes a metaphor for the process of migration itself. Nationhood can never be a stable identity since a nation finds its citizens expendable. And not only that, after the excretion, to the post—colonial migrant it appears that nothing has changed for/in the homeland as the body politic continues to function in the same manner, unheeding of the letters(in the form of fiction by diasporic writers) posted to it from the host nation. As the trajectory of migration is from an

underdeveloped, often erstwhile colony to the developed nations, the migrant is most of the time a racialized other and in the land of adoption her identity is an appendage, a baggage, a memory. This position which is constitutive of the diasporic condition, I argue, has strong resemblances to the status of waste matter or filth. Filth/Shit is a reminder of that which can be excluded from a functional state of things though paradoxically it is an indicator of the same functionality. Thus the writer circulates this feeling of excess and 'uselessness' in his fiction, desiring to articulate an identity that is a constantly threatened one, threatened by memory, past and the present rapidly accumulating as past.

The novels of Mistry are about the marginalized and apart from his first novel *A Fine Balance* provides a place where the narrator makes the warts of the city of dreams stage their suffering through their bodies.

One makes such a statement self-consciously because one is aware of the essentialising drift it leads towards. The *raison d'être* of this dissertation is to explore the complexities of 'minoritisation' not in order to tamper with its explanatory potential but to understand through the works of Mistry, some of the ways in which it may be inscribed or written about. What singles out the *A Fine Balance* is the assortment of characters that it brings into focus. Dina Dalal is a Parsi woman trying to cling on to her specious independence as a widow. Maneck Kohlah is the son of her childhood friend Aban who is forced to leave the hills by his parents and bundled off to the city of opportunity, the city by the sea. He eventually becomes Dina's paying guest. Into the predominantly Parsi world of Mistry (a world he had created in his *Tales* and *Such a Long Journey*) are introduced two Hindu lower caste characters, Ishvar and Om Darji, who have left their village after their entire family has been burnt to death by the high caste Thakurs. Chamaars. Cobblers by caste, they change their profession when Om's father Narayan takes to tailoring as a way of keeping at bay the obnoxious stink of cowhide and the fortunes of the family take an upward route. Not before long though, the mobility of the benighted chamaars irks their lords (and Mistry's tale is set in 1975 in the year of the emergency and long after untouchability has been officially abolished) and Om and his uncle Ishvar are the only survivors of the caste violence since they had been away at the time of the incident. Significantly (and I shall explain why in the next chapter) it is the Muslim Ashraf Chacha who provides them shelter. Looking for work in the city, they chance upon Dina Dalal and she engages them as tailors. Through the tortured past of the Darjis, the world outside

enters her tiny apartment, releasing energies that tear through the very fabric, social and interpersonal relationships.

Shit and filth have an important resonance in this novel and its manifestations can be appreciated only when we place it in the context of the ways in art has used them or how their presence has sometimes confounded or confirmed modes of signification.

However, in the context of the application of the Bakhtinian categories of grotesque and the obscene to literature from the postcolony, Achille Mbembe makes a persuasive point that the “aesthetics of vulgarity” that is a recurrent feature of literature from Africa cannot be read in simple Bakhtinian terms. Bakhtin claims that the grotesque and the obscene are above all the province of the ordinary people. He maintains that as a means of resistance to the dominant culture and as a refuge from it, obscenity and the grotesque are parodies that cock a snook at officialdom and provide an alternative mode of being for the subject. However, he outlines the fact that though Bakhtin’s theorization is important as a point of departure one cannot lose sight of the other nuances of the aesthetics of shit, filth, tortured bodies and corpses that appear to be a recurring feature of the literature that is emerging from the erstwhile colonies:

...we need to uncover the use of the grotesque and the obscene made not just in ordinary people’s lives but (i) in the timing and the location of those occasions that the state power organizes for dramatizing its own magnificence (ii) the actual material used in those ceremonial displays through which it makes manifest its majesty, and (iii) the specific manner in which it offers these as spectacles for its “subjects”. (104)

In our understanding of the works of Mistry, Mbembe’s terms of analysis may be applied instructively. The backdrop in which *A Fine Balance* is set is the Emergency of 1975. Driven away from their village due to upper caste violence, the duo of Om and Ishvar seek refuge in the ‘cosmopolitan’ space of the city only to discover that their village was actually a microcosm for the nation and the city becomes a theatre where the government displays its power through its use of space and place. From their jhuggi, they are thrown into the streets and out of the streets into an irrigation project at the outskirts of the city. The purpose was two fold: i) to turn the street-dwellers into ‘useful’ citizens, participating in nation-building and as a natural fallout ii) to empty the streets of their excess and construct a clean and beautiful city- as the emergency was declared with the logic that an iron hand was needed to press into conformity anti- national elements,

threatening the absolute power of the Prime Minister and the place/site on which this spectacle was played out was the body of the poor and the destitute, the minoritised groups all of whom festered like sores on the body of the city.

Shankar, the incapacitated beggar who is befriended by Ishvar and Om near Dinabai's house and whose story runs parallel to theirs in the narrative describes the Beggarmaster's tricks of trade with grotesque relish:

Also Beggarmaster has to be very imaginative. If all beggars have the same injury, the public gets used to it and feels no pity. Public likes to see variety. Some wounds are so common, they do not work anymore. For example, putting out a baby's eyes will not automatically earn money. Blind beggars are everywhere. But blind with eyeballs missing, face showing empty sockets, plus nose chopped off- now anyone will give money for that. Diseases are also useful. A big growth on the neck or face, oozing yellow pus. That works well. (322-323)

In thus describing the grotesque, the purpose may be seen as a scathing indictment of India as the postcolony, the image of the festering wounds and people watching with pity can be seen not only as a satire directed at the apathetic citizen but India as spectacle and the world watching and if we stretch the logic a little further then one may safely conclude that *A Fine Balance* is a veritable space of performance where Mistry tries to collate all the boils and warts of postcolonial India- urban overcrowding, persecution of religious minorities, upper caste oppression on the lower castes, assertion of right wing fundamentalism, poverty, state as death dealer during the Emergency and so on. Like Dina's patchwork quilt put together,<sup>10</sup> Mistry strings together the postcolony's hacked limbs in the novel. It is not surprising then, that he has faced allegations of conjuring up an India in his novels that is defamiliarised enough to appear recognizable to a western audience, a consumable 'third-world' nation.<sup>11</sup> In the lines quoted above, the public is

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<sup>10</sup> This stitching of the patchwork quilt is an extremely interesting motif introduced by Mistry. It can be interpreted at several levels but we shall discuss the ones immediately pertinent to our discussion. Structurally it can be read as an allusion to Madame Defarge's act of knitting in the *Tale of Two Cities*, which is now associated with revolution/rebellion. In *A Fine Balance* ironical use has been made of the quilt that Dina stitches. Beginning as a parallel to the act of narrativization, the act of putting together unconnected stories, it finally ends up as a cushion for the body of Ishvar that has been reduced to a stump. It symbolizes failure and an airless universe where the characters are mere pawns in the endgame of power (=destiny) and stops just short of reducing the desires of those who stray into the narrative to mere impertinence.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. New Delhi: Oxford, 1992.

the spectator, the common Indian for whom (as Achille Mbembe says) the state offers such sights and thus the two are complicitous in turning the streets into sites of performance where lived experience of the destitute becomes something which is there to be seen and rated according to effectiveness. Just as the State and the public are complicitous, in the representation of India the writer and the audience cannot but be implicated in a relationship of mutual aggrandizement. To say with Graham Huggan as he argues in his *The Postcolonial Exotic*, that Mistry falls into the breed of writers who sell the exoticized east, willy-nilly would not seem to be an unproductive way of looking at his works as far as his representation of the Parsi community in his *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and to some extent, *Such a Long Journey* go. However to dismiss him as an opportunist as far as the political content of his works go would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

### **Laughing at and laughing with: split bodies, corpses and agency**

Mbembe's reading of "vulgarity" in the postcolony opens up the debate further. Is it enough that the postcolonial subject is making fun of the *commandement*? What nature of politics is being implied here? In Mistry we see constant expletives of a sexual and excremental nature directed at the Ms. Gandhi's party, the upper castes, the Shiv Sena and the Hindus. How are we to read such an act?

One is reminded here of Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* where the president is seen defecating and there is painstaking description of his turd and mode of release suggesting that because all men and women shit alike and this visibility of, as Mistry says in his *Family Matters*, the fact that "we all stank at the other end"<sup>(51)</sup> is supposed to undermine power but it is also a fact that to parody the excesses of the postcolonial powers, images of excess are continuously being produced and circulated. Vijayan's novel is an allegory of the Emergency and its chaotic impact on the citizens told through tropes of defecation and debauchery. To invoke Mbembe once again:

Rather defecation, copulation, pomp and extravagance are classical ingredients in the production of power and there is nothing specifically African about this; the obsession with orifices results from the fact that, in the

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postcolony, the *commandement* is constantly engaged in projecting an image of itself and of the world- a fantasy it presents to its subjects as a truth beyond dispute, a truth to be instilled into them so that they acquire a habit of obedience and discipline. The commandement aspires to act as a total cosmology for its subjects- yet owing to the very oddity of this cosmology, popular humor causes it, often quite unintentionally, to capsize. (109).

Violence in the postcolonial city to Mistry is both what Foucault calls “biopolitics” and Mbembe calls “necropolitics” (115). One might also argue that the way the state appropriates the body of the people for functioning in the only way it can, by excess and spectacular violence is sought to be encapsulated by the writer through language or rather ‘imitated’. Such use of the masculine body as metaphor to connote the nation and critique it is evident in Salman Rushdie’s characterization of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight’s Children*. Kavita Daiya’s article observes that the violence done to the body of the protagonist suggests that the construction of masculinity in the postcolonial nation is not the case of only the repressed expressing itself but a combination of forces that turned out to be a continuation of violence by other means and other structures of legitimation.

This metaphor of Saleem’s masculine body as the Indian nation is suggested throughout the narrative. Hence, “as the body politic began to crack,” Saleem began to be physically mutilated: for example, his finger is lopped off in an accident (coinciding with the bloody language riots in Bombay); as he lives through Pakistan’s civil war of 1965 and India’s Emergency in 1975, Saleem ends up forcibly lobotomized, sterilized and sperectomized. Nehru’s note to “Baby Saleem” then not only writes him as the nation’s representative; it signals that the dismembering, bodily violence suffered by Saleem’s male body will emblemize the fragmentation of the postcolonial national body. Saleem’s mutilated body thus embodies the spatial and social partitions of the nation, and his life becomes an allegory of Indian national life. As he says: “the cracks in the earth” “will-be-have-been reborn in my skin.”...His wounded, emasculated male body becomes then, both witness and victim of the violence of nations and nationalisms.

The rendering impotent of the masculine body in the form of Ishvar occurs in Mistry as well. The violence and malevolence that hangs like air around the city is seen to have

been unleashed from those sources who are supposed to have governed it- the elected government, in all his fiction. Images of sterility appropriate male bodies- as the postcolonial city's underbelly is shown as capable of regeneration. *A Fine Balance, Such a Long Journey* or for that matter, in *Family Matters*, it is significant that the Parsis do not encounter direct physical violence. Even when a Parsi body becomes a site, it is the marginalized, already deformed 'other', Tehmul Lungraa. Sudden, violent deaths whenever they do occur are the result of accidents Dina's husband Rustom K. Dalal) or intra- community bickering (Lucy and Yasmin Contractor). Tehmul also dies caught in the cross-exchange of stone throwing, as we have discussed earlier, prima facie an unintended casualty and on second thoughts the 'meetest' offering.

As a writer belonging to a minority community which grapples with the threat of extinction, Mistry is aware of colonial history when Parsis made their fortunes and became urbanized. Representations of Parsis in literature and cinema have also been predominantly that of an angst-ridden community, idiosyncratic and severely anglicized. As discussed earlier, sociological studies around and after independence betray the insecurity of a people who are seen/ generalized to have connived with the British, labeled as reluctant Indians. It is clear that Mistry attempts to write the forgotten minorities into the history/consciousness of the postcolony. While Hindus and Muslims occupy the officially and politically important positions of dominant majority and minority as Gieve Patel's poem scathingly captures in his "The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel, he being neither Muslim nor Hindu in India", the struggle becomes one between memory and forgetting. As the postcolony emerged out of the violence of colonial rule and the holocaust of the partition the memories of the communities directly involved in the exploding cauldron of loyalties and betrayals found a peg, albeit one of violence and excess, but a peg nevertheless. In a world of drastic changes, search for an identity orients itself around these problematic moments of origin, with the rupture of historical continuity. How does Mistry present Parsi identity in his works where, as I have already mentioned, the immediate targets of state repression are 'other' bodies? This is a crucial point that needs to be made. In his fiction there are 'buffer bodies' (like that of Om, Ishvar, Tehmul or Mr. Kapur in *Family Matters*) and there are characters like Yasmin, Coomy Contractor, Edulji or Rustom K. Dalal, who apparently die in accidents. Moreover, throughout *Family Matters*, Nariman Vakeel's ageing body is the location where two Parsi families play out their enmities, which turns the novel into a parade of

corpses. Maneck Kohlah's suicide by jumping on to the tracks is again a seemingly private act. However, if we reverse the logic we may also say that the effects of power are visible not only as dramatized through the bodies of Shankar the beggar or the maimed Ishvar but also in Dina Dalal's tragic return to her brother's home when she fails to sustain her independence premised on the loss of her tailors and the non-payment of rent. It is palpable in the transformation of Yezad into a firebrand Parsi fundamentalist. Maneck Kohlah's suicide then no longer seems a solipsistic act but a matching of excess by excess, the act of expending one's life. This reversal would probably tell us that the 'buffer bodies' are also those of the Parsis. That in the theatre of power, whether it is the Shiv Sena or the Emergency, violence is spectacular as well as insidious and therefore there are no 'buffer' zones at all.

Does that mean that Mistry tries to write the Parsis and the 'others' into the narratives emerging from the postcolony by making 'victimhood' the condition of entry? If so, what are the implications of such a politics? This shall be discussed by implication in the conclusion in order to try to read a few patterns out of the compositeness that his texts put across.

In a response to a question by Christian Hoeller during an interview on the "neurosis" or "cult of victimization" emerging from the African postcolony that Mbembe has elsewhere contested and critiqued, we can gain an insight into the politics and implications of victimization. I shall produce the reply verbatim:

We cannot evade the violent aspects of our history. *We have to confront in the same breath the terror visited upon us by racial imperialism as well as our own self-inflicted brutalities.* For this to happen, we have to widen the scope of cultural and political critique and renew the archives of our past and of our present. But there is no way we will overcome the neurosis of victimization if, by transforming the past into our subjective present, we root our identities in injury alone. For the past to become a principle of action in the present, we have to manage to admit the reality of loss and stop living in the past instead of integrating it in to the present as that which must sustain human dialogue. In any case, the complete restitution of the past is not only terrifying, but also a clear impossibility. In order to build a truly cosmopolitan culture in Africa, the present has somewhat to be liberated from the past. It should be clear that I am not advocating the erasure of the past. I am

preoccupied with ways in which we can open avenues for memorial practices that foster the work of remembrance - but remembrance as part of the work of freedom, the ultimate ethical frontier. This cannot be achieved through black racial romanticism.” (Italics mine)

Whether it is Saleem Sinai or Ishvar Darji, violence and injury in the postcolony cannot be detached from the colonial experience. This is not to subscribe to any punching-bag theory and the “self-inflicted brutalities” that are visited on the bodies of the citizens or the threat of the same suggests a continuation of the “state of emergency” by other means. Mistry’s fiction moves the onus of the debate from the hybridized selves of post colonial writers and characters inhabiting the metropole to the material conditions of the land he has left behind. Apart from *Firozsha Baag*, where in three stories (“Lend Me your Light”, “Squatter” and “Swimming Lessons”) we have characters trying to negotiate with multiple locations; Canada (or the Western metropolis) is gradually effaced out of his texts. The violence of the partition and communal riots in independent India (December 1992, Godhra etc.) divide the lives lost into statistics, blurring the fact that communal violence in the postcolonial India cannot be *rationalized* in terms of the holocaust of the partition. “Minority” literature of the kind of Mistry is interesting because in its unqualified vilification of the Emergency and the rise of hindu fundamentalism it (un)consciously confuses registers, illustrating a very crucial point. That each “state of exception”(Schmitt) creates its own “minority” as the Parsi community visits its insecurities on those whom it considers “outsiders” (‘ghatis’, Christians, Hindus, Muslims) as do those white Canadian boys whom the narrator of “Swimming Lessons” meets at the pool who call him a Paki and are apprehensive that soon the water will start smelling of curry. His incorporation of the Parsi community into the discourse (which I would argue is different from the way identity is troped by other writers such as Sidhwa, Kanga, Desai, Nargis Dalal or Vakil) of current politics in India may be compared with Pestonji’s *mixed marriage and other stories* and Cyrus Mistry’s *Radiance of Ashes*, where we encounter Parsi characters performing a social and political critique and in the process giving themselves a role.<sup>12</sup> However Mistry’s difference lies in

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<sup>12</sup> It may be argued that the writers mentioned within parentheses foreground a conception that highlights comfortably well off characters deliberating on questions of individual liberty and freedom. Their focus more crucially is not on the problems that beset the postcolony but the emergence of the ‘self’ vis a vis family and tradition. This would apply to Vakil, Dalal in *Skin Deep* and Kanga, where the problems are no different from the elite of other communities. In Sidhwa and Desai there is a

the fact that while articulating what is at stake for the minorities in his Bombay, he stages the middle class protectiveness of the Parsi families which is probably generally true of the middle class of other communities as well- be it the majority or the minority. However, there is no move to romanticize the community in Mistry. Even the increased responsiveness of his later texts towards Parsi legends and myths need not be a simple need to return to the past or the nostalgia of a diasporic writer.<sup>13</sup> In an article entitled “Resistance through representation of the tortured body in Labou Tansi’s *La vie et demie*”, Pascale Perraudin underlines the importance of the body trope for the postcolony:

Why emphasize the body in such a way? First of all, it is here that subjectivity articulates itself, as does the power that both delimits and seeks to control the legitimacy of this subjectivity... Thus, the recurring image of the body is not accidental in the context of the postcolony and the author intentionally uses it as a metaphor for the articulation of the subject: by staging the dynamic that governs the relationship between rebel and despot through interposed bodies (or flesh), he invites us to notice how different parameters, in their intersecting and converging, give birth to a new type of subject.... Thus the body, the site of subjectivity's repression, nonetheless includes elements that permit the renegotiation of the attempted repression (80).

Tansi’s representation of the tortured body is seen by Perraudin as an “act of intervention” for pain retains a private, intimate space that resists incorporation. Therefore the parading of wounded bodies is not “simple exhibitionism” as it suggests a form of agency. As Bibby has observed, the body, once evoked, can no longer be forgotten (15), and thus it becomes difficult to forget the traced or imposed limits of subjectivity. Corporeality provides a graphic dimension by which the attention of each

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concern with history and community identity. However, in Cyrus Mistry and Meher Pestonji an individual Parsi character negotiates with the challenges and complexities of living in a city whose surface calm has been disturbed by communal and state violence. The immanence in the contemporary is obvious.

<sup>13</sup> This shall be discussed in more detail in the conclusion. For now, suffice it to say that in the stories of Parsi legends that Nariman Vakeel tells his grandsons, the trope of story-telling as effective way of postponing the death of the community is evident. This ‘oral writing’ of the past I would argue, is more than nostalgia. But more of this later.

confronted person is focused. Whether the withdrawal of the victim can be read as a form of rebellion is debatable. When Maneck returns to the hills from the gulf after a gap of eight years, this is what the newspaper holds for him:

He began going more rapidly through the newspapers. After a while even the pictures looked the same. Train derailment, monsoon floods, bridge collapse; ministers being garlanded, ministers making speeches, ministers visiting areas of natural and man made disasters...Then something in the paper caught his eye...it was a photograph of three young women. Dressed in cholis and petticoats they were hanging from a ceiling fan...one end of their saris was tied to the fan hook and the other round their necks. Their heads were tilted. The arms hung limp like the limbs of rag dolls. (583)

On further reading Maneck further discovers that the three sisters are actually sisters of his friend Avinash, the college union leader who had disappeared and then found dead on the railway tracks during the Emergency. The *visibility* of the ministers is juxtaposed to the visualization of the suicide and “the circle is completed” (the title of the final chapter) when Maneck, after meeting Dina, defeated and resigned to small mercies in her brother’s house and Ishvar on Shankar the beggar’s gaadi, with limbs amputated and spitting blood, jumps on the tracks before an oncoming train. It is perhaps true that *A Fine Balance* seems to take us on a guided tour of violence and privation in India - caste oppression, communal riots, torture, forced physical labor and vasectomy of the ‘excess’(the beggars, the loafers and the street dwellers,) of the city during the Emergency and finally anti-Sikh riots (and a gratuitous reference to bride burning too). However, that his three works of fiction are *testimonies and memorials* to the impact of biopolitics and necropolitics on the body of the city and its “minorities” is obvious.

### **In the times of siege: Biopower, Necropower and resistance in Mistry**

Foucault’s concept of biopower is linked by Mbembe to two other concepts- the state of exception and the state of siege.

Michel Foucault characterizes ‘biopower’ as one that makes the power to give life and death its domain and the function of power is seen as “positive”, that is it has preservation of life as its rationale. Such a power divides human beings into groups- the ones that are supposed to merit death and the ones that should live. This gave rise to the

notion of biopolitics which takes the society as a body and seeks to regulate/ discipline it in order to make it functional in the service of order. 'Biopolitics' is different from the Aristotelian notion of politics where man's political function is supposed to be one of the many roles that he performs in society. However, as Foucault argues, with modern man his politics places his very existence as a living organism comes under question.

To this concept of biopower, Achille Mbembe supplements his concept of 'necropower' and necropolitics. He argues that the split between the living and the dead that Foucault premises his notion of 'biopower' on is not enough to explain the modern function of power, not just of the state but of several other sources of violence. Modern politics is about subjecting people to the conditions of the living dead. While Foucault seeks to recover the space of resistance (whether he succeeds or not) Mbembe opines that under necropower the lines between the "resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom" are continually threatened.

Mbembe's attribution of the "aesthetics of vulgarity" to the postcolony also implicates both the rulers and the subjects. Rereading Bakhtin, Mbembe goes on to say that the former's contention that in the 'carnavalesque' the space of resistance emerges from an aesthetics of the "grotesque", the "vulgar" and the "low" and that the 'carnavalesque' is inherently transgressive needs to be qualified. Its potential for resistance has been skeptically viewed by several theorists, without dismissing its importance. This romanticisation of the grotesque is seen as a sanguineous celebration of the folk as a space of pure positivity and resistance.

Umberto Eco has also expressed his reservations saying that it is only when the carnival results in a drastic reversal of status quo that it can really be considered as an effective politics. If we invoke Kristeva here, we would probably end up with a situation where the object is only "formalized" and does not lead to any serious transgression. Moreover in the postmodern world of "pastiche" (Jameson's term) and the simulacrum of reality<sup>14</sup> to cling on to Bakhtin without reading him against the grain becomes a merely formal exercise. Thus Eco writes that "in a world of everlasting transgression, nothing remains comic or carnivalesque, nothing can any longer become an object of parody, if not

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<sup>14</sup> This recognition of reality as simulation in the media-ated versions of it, Baudrillard argues is a hallmark of the consumer society that we live in where there is endlessly multiplying discourse without reference points. Simulation as a conceptual category seems to have uncanny explanatory potential for the kind of reality we inhabit. Achille Mbembe also argues that it is simulacrum which defines the relation between the rulers and the ruled in the postcolony who otherwise belong to the same episteme of vulgarity.

transgression itself"<sup>15</sup>. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have concurred with Eco that transgression and the carnivalesque are not necessarily politically coextensive. The important word of caution that they sound is a pertinent one highlighting the fact that an insistence on the contravening potential of the carnivalesque and the image of grotesque bodies may only be a mere ruse to effect a bourgeois transcendence, or simply put, an easy theoretical resolution of an extremely complex problem.

In Achille Mbembe's essay "The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarities in the Postcolony", he poses the explanation that the images of excess in the postcolony, the "obscene and grotesque, both part of official and non-official cultures, resistance and domination", defy any simple binarisation. The postcolony according to Mbembe is disinclined towards continence. "Ordinary people guide, deceive and toy with power" (128) and "conviviality" best describes the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. His critique is aimed at the excess that characterizes the life and art most African postcolonies. Power expresses itself through extravaganza and display (and I would argue that the grotesque, tortured and wounded body of the people qualify as the 'spectacular') and therefore if there is an element of exhibitionism and "vulgarity" in the way people react, it is clear that domination and resistance belong to the same register. Thus "outbursts of ribaldry" or the derisive stance proves that the official world is taken seriously and the effort to laugh away its inscriptions on the body of the city and the citizens is an attempt to use ridicule as a mode to "render power powerless". Mbembe clarifies that there is nothing specifically African about the narratives of shit, defecation, extravagance and copulation but they have always been "classical ingredients in the production of power".

If as Mbembe argues that the dominant and the dominated belong to the same episteme, then it is but natural, probably, that the patterns of exclusion on which the former is based would be visible in the latter as well.

Similarly there is probably nothing specifically Parsi about the 'galley'-humor in Mistry. Rather it is a larger manifestation of the experience of power and powerlessness. In *Family Matters*, Nariman Vakeel is cast as the aged, vulnerable father who has lost control over his bodily functions due to a broken leg and Parkinson's and the strife and turf war that it leads to as economic worries of Roxana and her husband Yezad who have

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<sup>15</sup> Eco, Umberto. "The Frames of Comic Freedom." *In Carnival!*. Ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. Berlin: Mouton, 1984.

to look after him are compounded by the violence in the city outside in the form of the marauding Shiv Sena and the changing landscape of the city that they have grown up in. The detailing of his encumbered digestion and excretion becomes a metaphor for a general feeling of powerlessness that the Parsi characters encounter outside- be it Yezad, Jal, or Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey*.

Whether it be Rustomji of the Baag stories who suffers constipation or Sarosh/Sid in Canada (and the obduracy of bowels or a lack of control over them is a recurrent motif in Parsi films as well) its symbolic content exceeds its mere association with humor. While it may be alleged that it tends to stereotype the Parsis, it appears that here through the body of the minority Parsi character his uneasiness or feeling of being an excess in postcolonial India is being dramatized. In the grotesque characterization of Tehmul also the “aesthetics of vulgarity” argument is borne out.

It may be argued that Mistry’s intention is to make the ‘other’ minorities visible- Parsis, the lower castes, the Christians and those who have failed to write themselves into the narrative of the Great Indian Dream- the Saroshes and the Manecks. However apart from this visibility and the textual evocation of vulgarity as partly a satire aimed at state power, the space for resistance in Mistry is a deeply problematic one. The emergency and the communal violence in the vortex of which the characters find themselves embroiled is unlike the stance of Cyrus in *The Radiance of Ashes*, a passive one. The community therefore is no longer hero of its own destiny:

An important point needs to be made here. If the ruler and the ruled draw from the same register of power, it is clear that clean boundaries between the ways in which they operate is precluded. The ‘family’ (as the desire for the purest form of community) in the works of Mistry is a bulwark against the loss of power as experienced by the community after independence (as discussed in the first chapter). Significantly though, Mistry establishes that the Parsis (and other minorities such as Ishvar and Om, Shankar, Mr. Kapur as a Punjabi in Bombay) are *also* victims of the postcolonial state, the patterns of exclusion are practiced on them with a different rationale. Rather, by including a Francis in “One Sunday”, a Tehmul in *Journey*, a Lucy (and a Parkinson- ridden Nariman Vakeel as symbolizing an ageing community, close to death who represses his desires until they return to him in his delirium) in *Family Matters*, Mistry reconstructs the process of

'othering' under the bustling surface of the city that reach a climax in a state of exception/emergency.

The *state of emergency*, in the sense argued by Giorgio Agamben, visits the bodies of the minorities in Mistry's fiction. In his lecture entitled "The State of Emergency"<sup>16</sup>, Agamben draws our attention to the fundamental contradiction in its very conceptualization. It is a state where law is used to invoke relaxation of law, giving unrestrained powers to the sovereign, precipitating a space devoid of law—"For one reason or another this space devoid of law seems so essential to the legal order itself that the latter makes every possible attempt to assure a relation to the former, as if the law in order to guarantee its functioning would necessarily have to entertain a relation to an anomy". By temporarily suspending the norm, the state of emergency seeks to make the norm applicable. But as Agamben believes, after Benjamin, in the modern state "once the possibility of a state of emergency, in which the exception and the norm are temporally and spatially distinct, has fallen away, what becomes effective is the state of emergency in which we are living, and where we can no longer distinguish the rule. In this case, all fiction of a bond between it and law disappears: there is only a zone of anomy dominated by pure violence with no legal cover." He recounts the debate between Schmitt and Benjamin which he says boiled down to the zone of anomy within power. For the former, an apologist for the Reich it had to maintain its connection with law at all costs. While for the Marxist Benjamin it had to be detached from this attachment, because only if *emergency* is recognized as a state of "pure violence" and not as mere temporary suspension of law, that a transformative politics of resistance can be imagined. *The 'nomos' needs 'anomy' for its proper functioning, however when the "state of exception" becomes the general condition of life, the state turns into an "apparatus of death"*. The practice of 'biopower' and 'necropower' in a state of *emergency* to return to Mbembe, then produces the images of excess in the form of tortured, mutilated bodies and bloody corpses, within a structure of legitimation that is itself ambivalent. In the fiction discussed, they become the trope through which Mistry depicts domination. Whether it is the bodies of Major Bilimoria and Tehmul, Ishvar, Ashraf Chacha or Maneck or Mr. Kapur, they become the index of the health of the postcolonial state. However, the

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<sup>16</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *The State of Emergency*. Centre Roland- Barthes, University of Paris. 2002. <<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpagambenschmitt.html>>

question of agency in Mistry does not receive sufficient treatment.<sup>17</sup> *Such a Long Journey* ends with the death of Tehmul in Gustad's arms and the return of Sohrab to the family, *A Fine Balance* with tepid, defeated survivors in Ishvar, Om and Dina and the suicide of Maneck. And, finally in *Family Matters* with the decay and death of Nariman Vakeel, the violent end of Coomy and Edulji and the metamorphosis of Yezad into a bigot. During the times of siege, there is nostalgia for familiar landscapes (Gustad and Yezad reminisce about the city of their childhood) and a safe city (unlike Cyrus in *The Radiance of Ashes* who confronts the city torn apart with organized violence directed at the slum-dwellers and minorities) relieved only by moments of respite stolen under the panoptical gaze of power. And those that do not romance the past labor to return to the diurnal rhythm of trivial, daily life, of the very normalcy which always abjects difference. That is why it appears that whether it is *survival* (Gustad, Dina, Om, Ishvar or Yezad) or Maneck's *suicide* both kinds of reaction flaunt the futility of human designs. The transgression through language is significant and the politics of the scatological critique and wounded bodies and corpses is also evident but at the end of it all the reader is left with a feeling of inescapability. (One must hasten to add here that in the stories dealing with scatology and the body of the migrant, the argument of resistance and renewal of identity may be more comfortably posited, though not categorically.)

What are the implications of such a denouement in the context of engagement with a scarred city that Mistry migrated from before he re-turned through his narratives? The purpose of the discussion above was to highlight that even in the use that Mistry makes of images and tropes, as he straddles his several identities, we witness the claim of various forces and that compete, and are not necessarily complementary to each other.

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<sup>17</sup> Both Mbembe and Agamben theorize sovereignty in a way that does not infringe on the possibility of resistance. Benjamin's desire to retain the category of "pure violence" also partakes of this necessity. The move in Foucault's career from 'discipline' to 'governmentality' draws legitimacy from such an attempt. In Mistry, resistance as a separate category is not posited. It is glimpsed sometimes in the solidarity of the marginalized and the resolve of the characters to survive, even when reduced to mere time-servers. Mistry isn't immune to the charge of sentimentalisation. When the postcolony and its flaming issues become the back-drop, one cannot but interrogate responsibility. For the stake are very high. The question that disturbs one is how to place the subject of representation in such a scheme of things.



## Chapter 4

### Reception of 'difference' in Mistry: Of protocols, writers and critics.

In attempting a critical survey of the academic attention received by Rohinton Mistry, one is struck by the reluctance to discuss certain basic features of his work. The mode of representation he adopts has been rhapsodized about—each blurb reminds us of his proximity to Balzac or for that matter Charles Dickens and other Victorian realists. Laura Moss in her article<sup>1</sup> attributes the future of the post-colonial novel to realism. Arguing that the racy narrative techniques of most novelists under this rubric (the allusion is towards 'magic realism') attenuate the legacy of violence and inequities of the colonial encounter, she dismisses the idea that the realist text is incapable of subversion. When we shall, in the course of this chapter discuss critics such as Ian Almond, and mediate their arguments on the *sense of resignation* of the characters towards the end of the novels (and this view which has been supported by the likes of Timothy Brennan<sup>2</sup>) we might be tempted to associate this with the narrative technique of Mistry. However, as Roman Jakobson's study of metaphor and metonymy has shown us, the description of a secure reality that can be *reflected* in words is a claim that is slightly passé. To follow Laura Moss, the tale told from multiple viewpoints without the tyranny of control may be one way in which realism ("not in itself monoplicitous or multiplicitous") may be rescued. This, I would argue is a definitive feature of Mistry's texts (especially in the *Tales*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*) and if indeed the silence of postcolonial critics is (partly, at least) due to the queasiness about the realist form and its association with capitalism and conservatism, it would be a classic case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Having said that, one needs to be vigilant of what makes even a sympathetic

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Moss in "The Plague of Normality": Reconfiguring Realism in Postcolonial Theory" makes a persuasive case for retention of the critical potential of 'realism' and cites the examples of writers such as Soyinka and Miriam Tlali who perform a critique of the postcolony through the form. (Moss, Laura. "The Plague of Normality": Reconfiguring Realism in Postcolonial Theory". *Jouvert*. 5.1 (Autumn, 2000) <<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5i1/con51.htm>> )

<sup>2</sup> Brennan, Timothy. "The National Longing for Form." *Nation and Narration*. ed. Homi Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 44-71. Timothy Brennan has been one of the fiercest critics of realism in the postcolonial novel, arguing that in the end it cannot outgrow its form for in its fidelity to accuracy it sponsors conservatism.

critic such as Kwame Antony Appiah (who accords it some radicalism) relegate it to the bottom of the evolutionary scale of the postcolonial novel<sup>3</sup>. Another facet that is significant about Mistry's texts is that there is no sustained reference to colonial rule or its excesses. Sporadically a few characters recall the Parsi stalwarts of that era but these are voices of nostalgia, muted and not over-emphasized. It would be difficult to say whether this class of bank clerks, book-keepers, shop keepers or an odd doctor or college teacher ever tasted the glories of British rule but the stake that they hold in an independent nation is clear enough. Mistry writes them into the nation's body and it is this context also that in the final analysis he needs to be evaluated.

### **Knotted Identities, Whispering din of voices**

Though a debate is gathering around the works of Mistry, there is a genuine discomfort with the stringent political critique and the ways in which one may respond to it, not to mention the desire to construct a rationale for what Mistry sees and writes. It was with the twin volume of essays entitled *Parsi Fiction*, the first of its kind that brings together writers of the subcontinent, belonging to the community, that an interest was declared to domesticate these expatriate writers into the fold of the this definitional "Parsi" tag. This was a significant way of reading their fiction. Though such an attempt may not be a novel one and one might also argue that the 'Parsi' content of the works of these writers are too obvious to deserve special mention, it suggested a significant move to prioritize group identity over the diasporic one. In Mistry- criticism this serves to foreground two broad strands which can be divined which underline the point made above. While there is a recognition of the location of Mistry and the hybrid space that he inhabits, his texts are not worked through in terms of the evidence that they present through their mode of representation, metaphors and symbols, how the different identities get negotiated and the tension that is set up when one interrogates his texts with the question of 'responsibility'. The term 'responsibility', I would argue, is not exhausted in the 'accuracy' of representation. We find ourselves returning here to the issue of realism once more. Though this dissertation does not mean to recuperate the technique through Mistry, it shall (I hope) be able to sustain a metonymic awareness of the same by the semiotic

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<sup>3</sup> Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Here, he allows legitimacy to realism adopted in Achebe's *Things fall Apart* because it signifies for him a stage of the postcolonial novel where there was an assertion of pre-colonial forms of life and an uncritical presentation of the past. This is severely critiqued by Laura Moss when she dismisses the assumption that Achebe's realism naturalizes reality.

treatment of his texts. Keki N. Daruwalla remarks on the 'authentic' representation of Parsi life in the novels of Mistry. However, he faults the writer for what he calls the 'distortion' of historical facts in the transposition of the Nagerwalla episode in his *Such a Long Journey* and shows an unease with the way Mistry seeks to posit an alternative history of the Emergency by 'fictionalizing' it. Daruwalla cites the fact that since Mistry had emigrated during the early days of the Emergency, his view is atrophied.<sup>4</sup> Here I would like to make a point which is crucial to the very edifice of this dissertation. 'Responsibility' is produced in the act of writing and reading. It is a process which generates its own dialectics and involves an inter-subjective exchange between the addressee and the addressor. For the way in which Mistry creates Bombay, the Parsis, the Emergency and the menace of right-wing fundamentalism have different implications for readers belonging to different zones of experience. Therefore we cannot impute success/failure binaries casually. Often, the different identities are found in a conflictual state due to the burden of history and therefore it is impossible to write in a way that masters memory or induces forgetting at the very place where contradictions threaten to pull the structure apart. Formally, one might say that the novels of Mistry move towards a closure, a completion of the circle, he would say, but the brittle sense of closure refers metonymically to the impossibility that the journey shall someday end. In Mani Meitei's piece "Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and its critical realism"<sup>5</sup>, the critic applauds the writer's radicalism which he seems to equate with the portrayal of the excesses of Indira's rule. The following statement in the essay will perhaps illustrate my point better:

So when looked at closely Rohinton Mistry is not an anarchist nor does he favour the blue print of a society based on radical change...politics apart that the novelist wants to emphasize is the question of life, i.e. the problem of human loneliness in the modern world. (112).

It in saying "politics apart" that some crucial problems in the way Mistry has been read lies. We need not repeat the truism of the Marxian view of art in order to underscore the limitation of such a point of view. It is indeed true that Mistry is a "pilgrim of modernity"

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<sup>4</sup> See his article in *Parsi Fiction* vol 1.

<sup>5</sup> In several essays in this collection (including Meitei and N.S. Dharan's) the titles are not approached through a close reading of the text. Paraphrasing the object of study to buttress the title is the standard procedure. The purpose of mentioning such a seemingly dispensable point is not to question the engagement of the scholars. To provide an introduction to the work of Mistry is indeed a crucial task. However one needs to supplement elucidation with a critique or rather a spelling out of the implicit. Otherwise, the works can fall into a simple ethnocentric study.

as I shall argue in the final chapter. To 'strategically essentialize' (Spivak) Mistry is a minority-parsi-indian- diasporic-male writer at the same time and his texts cannot effectively silence any of these. The politics of his representation, needless to say, cannot be (as the bid by critics suggests) suspended to become Parsi or diasporic as and when the reader may so wish. Whether it is N.S. Dharan who remarks on the "ethnic atrophy" in Mistry or Savita Goel in the *Fiction of the Nineties* who wishes to foreground the ways in which "diasporic consciousness and displacement" surfaces in the *Baag Stories* or in *A Fine Balance*; there is lack of an actual textual foray into the works and most criticism appears to be content, fitting the text into explanatory categories such as the above, without performing a close reading that shall highlight its several tongues. In his essay "New Lamps for Old: Diaspora, Migrancy, Borders", Vijay Mishra offers a psycholinguistic explanation of the phenomenon of 'displacement' and the ways in which the diasporic writer may condense meanings in the act of remembering that fuses the hyphenated identities and sets up a politics that may be conservative (Naipaul, who tries to recover a sense of power through the critique of India in a text such as *Area Of Darkness*, when confronted with the chaotic realities of India) or like Ghosh it may be seen as bestowed with the potential of destabilization of any homogenizing rhetoric. To return to Mishra and his insight into the memorializing nature of diaspora discourse:

The Idea of India exists in the mind of the diaspora through forms of spatial displacement in which the site is transformed into a word. This form of transference/transformation of space means that India gets internalized and projected onto the other geographical space without so much as a hint of dissonance. Where epic textuality requires a fixed point of reference, a past that cannot be duplicated but only rememorated, what we get in the diaspora is a whole series of displacements that lead to the construction of new spaces as the metaphors of India.

Thus the inchoate nature of identity, built on a "series of displacements" may precipitate new forms of expression but the "construction of new spaces as metaphors of India" needs to be looked into. Mistry writes about India and describes, metaphorises and reveals it. What Mishra seems to be suggesting, is the *inalienability of writing India* by its diasporic authors. This is an interesting addition. While this may be read as an essentialising argument, the value of Mishra's point appears to lie in implying that the

spaces from which the migrant writer constructs his fiction are 'doubled' spaces. This approximates what Paul Gilroy, in his now well known study of Black Atlantic identity called 'traces'<sup>6</sup>. The question that needs to be asked here is whether while adopting the 'realist' mode such doubleness can be foregrounded. Or are they mutually exclusive?

In Uma Parmeshwaran's "Dispelling the spells of memory: Another approach to reading our yesterdays", she reads the inability of the Indian diasporic writers of Canada to write about their 'host' nation (the immigrant is here presented as a guest, for reasons which shall be clarified in the final chapter) as a failure, a desire to pursue a career in the "non-threatening backdrop of a faraway space". Referring to the tendency towards ghettoisation of communities even in a displaced space, she argues the necessity of incorporating Indian voices into the discourse of the Canadian nation, thus hybridizing not only the subject but history itself. Though this point is well taken, the charge that the texts of the likes of Mistry and Vassanji might simply be playing to the gallery, as it were, is an allegation that can equally be applied to an author like Hanif Kureishi or for that matter, Salman Rushdie. Consequent on the success of a novel, writers have been known to bask in the niche, with minor alterations. However, a few more complications need to be explored here. Uma Parmeshwaran throws the gauntlet towards writers of the Indian/ Asian Diaspora in Canada saying that a self-imposed censorship reins in the writers who scurry to what they claim is the land that "they know best"<sup>7</sup>, in order to postpone a stake in the discourse of multiculturalism in the "in the land of milk and honey".

### **'Apron Strings'/Second Sites**

In the same breath, the common refrain of writing about 'what one knows best' is worth deliberating on a little. This is where the mode of Mistry's return is a little problematic. After the brief dallying with the theme of emigration in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, there is a pattern in which it returns in the texts. In *A Fine Balance*, Maneck Kohlah returns

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> This statement was made by Mistry in his interview with Geoff Hancock and he goes on to say that he would write a novel on Canada when it came to him and that he has no "principles" on this. Though the writer seems to be able to separate the two seamlessly, this dissertation is of the opinion that in the complex interweaving of memory and desire, Mistry cannot repress any remnant of his identity and that it returns in his fiction in a layered form.

after having spent eight years in the Gulf, denuded further of all his dreams. The first 'displacement' that he suffered from the hills to the city in pursuit of middle class aspirations rebounds in the form of a violent death. He follows Sarosh's failure, only his is more overtly tragic. Yezad Chenoy in *Family Matters* follows Maneck, as he transforms into a Parsi bigot. He had failed to emigrate to Canada in his youth and the subsequent events precipitate a loss of his 'sense of place as familiar' as Bombay erupts in communal riots, he loses his paltry job in a sporting goods emporium, is unable to provide for his family and ailing father-in-law, gambles and loses all. It is finally the providential death of Coomy in Chateau Felicity that solves their economic problems. However, in the traumatic turn of events, he had already taken the escape route. Maneck and Yezad (the aborted migrants, like Sarosh) follow Tehmul as the sacrificial offering the 'disenfranchised' make from time to time so that the others might go on living.

In Mistry 'displacement', loss of moorings (in the sense ascribed by Mishra) is a defining theme. Mistry steers clear of direct references to Canada after his first collection of short stories but I would argue that it returns in the form of metaphors/tropes/symbols/metonyms that not only undermine the kind of position taken by Uma Parmeshwaran but also the 'realism' that is simply ascribed to him. All said and done, the refusal to speak about the 'host' nation is not unimportant but it need not be a diktat or a prescription for the diasporic authors, for the celebration of 'hybridity' (a similar stand is taken by Huggan in his *The Postcolonial Exotic*) is easier assumed than achieved as Uma Parmeshwaran's own suspicion of ghetto and ethnic grouping announces. This is also why Joshua D. Esty sounds a note of caution before one dismisses a writer like the 'Naipaul' of the *Area of Darkness* in his "Excremental Postcolonialism".

One crucial point in the debate appears to be this- How does one be persistently vigilant (and this is what Rushdie also means when he says that writers should make a "devil of a racket" in order to be heard) or what are the special forms of insight gained as a migrant? Is there a hierarchy in the academia about what an author ought to see? Does one form of commitment (let's say Kureishi's) imply more 'responsibility' than the other (in this case Mistry's)? It is interesting to observe that Uma Parmeshwaran clubs Mistry as a diasporic writer and wants his works to respond to what it feels like to be an Indian and a citizen of Canada, thus hybridizing the archives of different modes of belonging to the adopted

nation. Such writers she believes, in persistently writing about the land of their birth circulate what she calls “negative images”. In pointing out the puzzling disjuncture between the romanticization by Indo- Canadians of their “native land” and the way the authors such as Mistry represents it, she tries to eavesdrop on the silence about Canada. Critics such as Patricia Gabriel Sharmani, John Eustace and Arun Prabha Mukherjee<sup>8</sup> have sought to initiate Mistry into the discourse of Canadian diasporic writers who seek to democratize the space from where the nation’s image is produced. John Eustace in his insightful reading of “Squatter” demonstrates how it depicts the debasement of the once colonized, through the body. The colonial mode of control through the medical discourse of hygiene and the mode of defecation is repeated in the Canadian set-up as Sid/Sarosh fails to evacuate his bowels in the Western toilet unless he squats. This is not merely a failure of assimilation but also a reminder of Sarosh’s place as the colonial other, the outsider and the critique of the systems that perpetuate this racialisation through several registers of modernity. In Sharmani’s article “Interrogating Multiculturalism: Double Diaspora, Nation, and Re-Narration in Rohinton Mistry's Canadian Tales”, she takes up the short stories to this effect in the *Baag*. She is of the opinion that the pressing questions that Mistry raises about the multicultural imaginary in Canada and national self-image in this work of fiction is returned to in the case of those texts that are set exclusively in India. In voicing the concerns that surround a reliance on ethnicity, she cautions:

Thus, in suggesting that "ethnic" is a label foisted on minority communities to perpetuate their exclusion, Mistry provokes a re-examination of the term as it is used in current constructions of the national. For instance, the narrator of "Lend Me Your Light" comes to fully realize what it is to be called an ethnic in Canada only after he juxtaposes his experience of discrimination as a non-white immigrant in Toronto with memories of his own community's attitude towards non-Parsi Indians, whom it referred to as “ghati”: “With much shame I remember this word ghati. A suppurating sore of a word, oozing the stench of bigotry. It consigned a whole race to the mute roles of coolies and menials, forever unredeemable”. (182)

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<sup>8</sup> This is cited in Uma Parmeswaran’s essay that has been discussed here. Mukherjee is supposed to have read the parts of *Such a Long Journey* where Indira Gandhi’s government is discussed as a veiled reference to Mulroney’s government.

Gregory Mc Elwain in his article “Paddling away from the past: Alienation and Assimilation in Rohinton Mistry’s “Swimming Lessons””— underlines how the immigrant gradually learns to ‘see’ the world he has only ‘looked’ at so far, after he has quietened India for the present having written and posted his first book. He makes up his mind to check the name of the old man in the directory (whom he had earlier thus labeled along with PW and the woman who stirred his erotic fantasies in the pool, the ‘pink one piece suit’) and buy a book of trees in order to be able to identify them. Loss returns to him in the form of the death of the old man, a motif that will be repeated in his later novels. The italicized narrative in the story takes us back to his parents in Bombay and Mc Elwain points out that the “story that restores him to India also helps him to come to terms with his past and prepares him for the future in Canada” (25). The argument of restoration might appear seductive as far as the story “Swimming Lessons” goes, but when seen in the perspective of his entire oeuvre (so far), the mode of return of Bombay (suggesting that the haunting and need of an anchor in his fiction is not something he is in a hurry to let go) in his works contradicts the positive image of the young migrant in Canada about to take a plunge. Routing his argument through the form of what he calls the ethnic short story cycle (“a hybrid within a hybrid”) he argues it offers a form that may challenge the “totalizing impression of the traditional novel of social and psychological realism” (77) and offers different ethnic groups in Canada the space away from the grand, ‘comprehensive’ pretensions of the novel. Rocio Davis also refers to the significance of ‘place’ in Mistry’s fiction. The centrality of place, its multivocality that Mistry highlights in his references to the ‘minority city’ in his later novels, when juxtaposed to the plurality that the genre of the short story implies for Davis, conjures up the possibility of foregrounding “postcolonial doubleness”. However it is difficult to sustain the primacy of short fiction in representing hybridity, for even in the putative ‘realistic’ novel that Mistry writes, a revision of our reading strategies can locate the aporias that are constitutive of any attempt to return to a secure ‘place’.

### **What makes him tick: Retrospective rationales?**

On the other hand, Bharucha locates the ‘Parsiness’ of his works and signifies a turn to “ethno-religious identity”. However, she does not demonstrate that if there is indeed such an assertion in recent novels by Parsis following increased awareness of themselves as ‘minorities’ in the last decade and a half, why was such a strain missing in the parsi

writers that preceded this new breed ? India has never really been as complete a communal haven as we would like to believe and the violence that attended the partition still festers. There was always uncertainty about the role of the Parsis in a post-independent India that led many to migrate and still others (if we read the poetry and the non-fictional texts of the early 60s and 70s) to reflect on how to fashion a new and workable individual and community self-definition in a Hindu dominated set-up.

Writing in the series *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*, Amritjit Singh says that Mistry “de-exoticizes” his native land for the foreign reader. He emphasizes the “quiet dignity and subtle individuality” of the characters saying that not only does Mistry construct a minority that resists assimilation but also “de-exoticizes his ancestral land for Western readers for whom the whole Third world is often a large mass and most of whom rarely experience its many diverse parts in their specificity or full humanity” (210). So the contention here is that Mistry ‘humanizes’ India for the Western audience. This is exactly the reverse of baiters of Mistry who believe that by stereotyping the Parsis and propagating “negative images” about Bombay (a microcosm for India) he merely adds to the connotations of the orient, as an insider. Both positions appear to consider the West as the recipient of the images and the latter seems to betray a discomfort about how ‘we’ are viewed by ‘them’. What is missing in such blanket views is the fact that the ‘family’ is a space which is seen not only as oppressive (as in the case of Sohrab and Maneck, the alienation from which is more due to middle class, patriarchal codes) but also as a structure in which the history of a dying community may be preserved. While we read Mistry, this desire to preserve memory needs to be consistently referred to. While a Nariman Hansotia in the *Baag* underlines the importance of the oral transmission of myths and legends or fables for that matter, the role played by Nariman Vakeel, the grandfather as disseminator of tales and Jehangir, the grandson as creative auditor in *Family Matters* is central to Mistry’s fiction. This is what I find is the crucial difference if one considers the entire oeuvre of let’s say, diasporic writers like Amitav Ghosh or Salman Rushdie who have a more familiar ‘rootlessness’ at the core of their works. Family is the site and victim of both violence, want, prohibitions and exploitation but at the same time it remains securely in place for you to both critique it and embrace it.

His meteoric career cannot then be credited altogether to the exotic nature of the Parsis. Instead, he has turned their lives into a metaphor that stands for the

human experience: the fears, the joys, the ambitions and failures, the terror and the conflicts, finally the sense of balance that once attained will allow the characters to withstand the outer world, a world awash with dangers to personal fulfillment and identity. (102).

It is curious to observe that while Amritjit Singh absolves Mistry of the charge of exoticization, Robert L. Ross argues that since the Parsis are strangers to the western imagination and known only due to the way they bury the dead, there is obviously the lure of the unknown associated with the community's self-representation. However, Ross quickly universalizes the description, saying that the specificities open into a more shared human experience. The idea is seems to be locate the theme of Mistry's works on a vague category called 'balance' which is supposed to lead to the transcendence of the individual, approximating what Ian Almond calls the 'oriental' idea of resigned acceptance of the lack of balance between the powerful and the powerless. (Indeed most critics seem to stress on the over-determined nature of the violence unleashed by the government/ the Hindu majority and reinforce the binary). The rest of Ross's article appears to be an introduction to the Emergency. And a simple recognition of the fact that by writing in the backdrop of an event that occurred in 1975, Mistry takes an artistic risk but that the merit of the writer lies in being able to again, universalize. The contradiction lies in the fact while the thrust in the works of Mistry appears to be towards 'minoritising' Bombay, capturing the warp and woof of the lives of the disenfranchised, he is read by Ross as important for being able to *sublimate the lives of the Parsis from 'narrow parochialism' to general human experience*. Indeed, in my opinion such a collapsing of the specificities of a less represented class (lower middle class, dalits, beggars and destitute) and community in the fiction of a diasporic writer would count more as a limitation than otherwise.

Ian Almond in his article compares Mistry with Mulk Raj Anand and discusses how the novel *Untouchable* had been "Indianized" by the Mahatma, shorn off its modernist Joycean style which he thought attenuated the 'reality' that it sought to portray.<sup>9</sup> He

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<sup>9</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee makes a reference to this in her article which appears in a volume of essays (Nabar, Vrinda, and Nilufer E. Bharucha. eds. *Mapping Cultural Spaces: Postcolonial Indian English Writing*. Delhi: Vision Books, 1998) which we shall have occasion to discuss this in another context, it will be worthwhile to mention what she says with reference to Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao that their anxiety came out of their own desire to be rooted in a sense of place. The anxiety of the new generation of writers thrives on the pressures of the global market and in their fiction India becomes a 'trope'. To

locates an unease in both writers-Anand and Mistry-with their expatriate condition and underlines how the two come to terms with it differently. While the former relies on Gandhi to Indianize his text, according to Almond, Mistry takes a Yeatsian turn and tries to evoke a stoicism that sits uneasily on the depiction of injustice in the novel. The graphic detailing of the wounds and lot of the destitute coupled with an acerbic criticism of the Emergency and communal bigotry surely does not match the note on which the novel ends. Yeats's orientalisising discourse in "Lapis Lazuli" is invoked in order to clinch the point. The critic then makes a very important point. He invokes Denis Walder who had said with reference to Narayan's *Malgudi* that painstaking representation of a place is a textual assertion of "agency" by stressing "specificity". Mistry's description, he suggests, is a loss of "agency" though he wishes to present Bombay as a 'minority' city. The latent orientalisation and the resultant westernisation visible in Mistry is a problem that dogs most Indian writers (including Seth), says Almond. In a generous summing up of *A Fine Balance*-

A Westerner's understanding of East as the antithesis of tragedy seeps into the novel, offering an almost mystical alternative to the bleak, political landscape the book surveys. In a certain sense the image of "eternal India" already to western readers through Narayan and Naipaul ("India will go on", Narayan famously remarked) is re-evoked but this time through Yeatsian eyes, not the gentle indifference of Srinivas or the acerbic cynicism of Naipaul. That Mistry in attempting to "re-orientalise" his text actually renders it more Western than ever, is perhaps an irony that the author of *Fine Balance* is far from deserving. (216).

Mistry directly quotes from "Easter 1916" and *Lapis Lazuli* and this is the fulcrum that Almond seizes upon. Meenakshi Mukherjee ascribes this to the "anxiety of Indianness", a

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some it might seem on reading the fiction of Mistry that the writer never left. However, the texts of Mistry here have been read through symbols and tropes and thus connives (in a very limited sense) with what Mukherjee attributes to diasporic writers of this generation. It is interesting that she leaves Mistry out of her discussion. Which side of the divide would he fall? His rootedness in the community confounds the generalization that has been made. What is the politics behind this recurring feature in Mistry? Apart from the obvious commercial reason of marketing a niche, how do we read his representation as a minority writer? That Mistry allegorizes India is borne out by the fact that his "Emergency" novel where towards the end we also notice the Anti-Sikh riots is set in an unnamed city by the sea. Bombay, one would say, but that he withholds what he mentions in the other works is surely significant.

war of position between the representatives of the bhasha literature and English (largely migrant) writers, for recognition as the legitimate heir to the task of telling India the nation (and how best to tell it) now, with forces of globalization fast blurring margins and boundaries, not always liberating.

While Almond analyses the political implications of the way the novels of Mistry end, a critic like Peter Morey in trying to unearth the philosophical assumptions. Peter Morey locates that a “moral ambiguity in motivation is at the heart of the novel” (65) and interprets the actions of the characters in terms of the Zoroastrian concepts of “munashni, gavashni, kunashni” which implies good thoughts words and deeds. While he reads the *Family Matters* in terms of Kantian ethics, he is also persuaded that- “The religious components of Parsi identity are particularly important for Parsi characters, especially in the context of creeping Hindu majoritarianism that surrounds them” (71). His essay is entitled “Running Repairs: Corruption, Community and Duty in Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters*” and reduces the theme of the novel to a ‘duty’ as opposed to ‘inclination’ paradigm and measures the failure of the characters in terms of Kant’s ‘ethical imperative’ and religious edicts. The change that Yezad undergoes is attributed to his failure to choose the higher form of duty (towards truth) and reflect on the ethical implications of his new role.

As Yezad transforms from an agnostic to a fanatic, the transformation is subtle but insidious. That Mistry should place the burden of bigotry on a man who was only looking for some respite in the fire-temple is an interesting device. Considering that Yezad as a Parsi is not directly a target of communal violence but caught in the mad flames of a burning city, flames of want, guilt, desire and mutual suspicion as were Dina and Maneck, it is perhaps even stranger. Yezad becomes conscious of borders and, in what can be seen as a wish fulfillment, demarcates a space within the house (that which was denied to him outside) and guards it with fanatic zeal. The porousness of the lines that he has drawn as a domineering patriarch is based on the consent of the family to allow him that space and the only serious threat he faces is from Murad, who openly resists him. Mistry caricatures Yezad, in an authorial coming to terms with the stench of power. *The structure of his fiction appears to need such a reconciliation* and this perhaps where Almond’s observation becomes incisive. Whether it is Gustad’s goodbye to Tehmul and the return of Sohrab, the clowning of the decapitated Ishvar and the vasectomised Om

or the conniving laughter of Dina or for that matter the truce between Murad and his father on the former's birthday or the wistful "Yes, I am happy" that Jehangir tells his mother.

"But why does Mistry depend on India as a metaphor when he has lived in Canada for nearly twenty-five years?" Robert L. Ross poses this crucial question but evades any engagement with it. The argument follows that he is different from writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Divakurani since he engages with contemporary social realities in India. Later Ross goes on to repeat a common pattern in Mistry's criticism. He evokes the writer's interviews to brandish the authenticity of his representation without engaging with the multivocality of the text, something that Almond does. Such evasion can only peter into *assertions* of the 'difference' of the nature of Mistry's fiction without working through textual evidence. Thus when Ross attempts to shrink the issues posed by Mistry into a single question it is hardly any discursive value at all when he says: "Broad in its range, powerful in its execution, numbing in its reality, *A Fine Balance* asks what Hilary Mantel<sup>10</sup> calls an "age-old" question[which I believe is significant because a lot of Mistry criticism appears to revolve around these rhetorical questions]: "In the face of the world's beauty, in the face of the self-evident fact of altruism, how can atrocious conduct occur, how can hideous beliefs survive?"

Roshan G. Shahani makes a point that orients the debate further. Her point of contention is that Indian Writing in English is addressed towards the metropolitan urban readership in India and not the west. Now this point is hardly novel as far as the analysis is concerned. As Rushdie quotes Mistry in his *Imaginary Homelands*, of the self- image that the latter has of his work: "I certainly feel that if the sub-continental readers had rejected the works, I should have thought it a failure, no matter what the reaction in the West. So I would say that I write for people who feel a part of the things I write about." (19-20). It is clear that Mistry seeks to underline his immanence in what he writes. His famous dismissive response to Germaine Greer's trashing of *A Fine Balance* as a Canadian's gaze on Bombay has been too gleefully noted by critics to deserve special mention here. One cannot pass over this lightly since in her criticism she highlights how critics (and writers) affiliated to different ideological positions may give themselves away

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<sup>10</sup> The review of this work appears in the New York Review of Books and the impatience of the reviewer with the "clever" and zany postcolonial fiction is stated. Mistry is credited with writing a simple book that steers clear of insincerity.

through what they see or are impervious to. However, though Mistry may count his success as a writer (if we take him at his word) to the extent that he has been accepted by the 'Indian' audience (obviously metropolitan bourgeois), a cursory look at the names of the publishers of his works (Vintage, Faber and Faber in league with Penguin, McClelland and Stewart, Alfred and Knopf etc.) suggests that he does command a decent readership in the other hemisphere as well. Meanwhile, the latter part of his statement needs to be qualified. *There are a multiplicity of ways in which readers may feel part of the events in the novels.* This is where the location becomes important. To universalize the response of the reader as Mistry tends to suggest through his statement, in saying that he is satisfied that his books have been 'accepted' by the readers in the subcontinent is to homogenize the complexity of a reader's response. For, like Peter Morey (who reads the work in terms of Kantian categories and the allegory that *A Fine Balance* holds as microcosmic India), Nilufer E. Bharucha (who tries to highlight the significance of ethnic and transcultural spaces in the constructed nature of the Mistry response) Uma Parmeshwaran's reminder of the politics of the market or for that matter Ian Almond (who has been discussed at length) suggest different nodes of reading and to simply say what Mistry does, might have the effect of co-opting the politics of each response into the discourse of authorial intention.

### **Anchoring Criticism: Community as contender**

To return to a point that was made when we opened our discussion. We have, in the beginning, explored the "Parsiness" of the Parsi writers where we have placed Mistry. Nilufer E. Bharucha in her article, "Why all this Parsiness? An Assertion of Ethno-Religious Identity in Recent Novels written by Parsis" argues that with the 'minorities' feeling insecure after the rise of Hindu fanaticism, there is a desire to 'assert' (and I would argue 'retreat' also) into the territory of secure identity in the fiction written by Parsis. However, this dissertation anchors itself in a slightly different space. As has been contested in the chapter on communal stereotypes, the Parsi writers (including Mistry) do not only *assert* identity but also make it a site from which emerge the ghosts of the postcolonial nation-state. In Mistry it is obvious that he fields stereotypes (as a "secure point of identification", in the words of Bhabha) such as Rustomji (in 'Auspicious

Occasion') or Dinshawji (in *Such a Long Journey*)<sup>11</sup>. Apart from *A Fine Balance*, the narratives do revolve around Parsi settings but it is clear that both the space 'outside' (Bombay, sometimes violent, corrupt, dirty, intolerant and sometimes loving, hospitable) and the Parsi home (apply the same description) contaminate each other, though the balance of power tilts towards the former.

Nevertheless, while we recognize the point that Bharucha makes is significant but unless the 'reactionary' nature of the logic attributed is supplemented with the other nuances of being 'parisi' or being a migrant/ otherwise parisi writer, it might stall an engagement with the works (not only of Rohinton Mistry but also, let's say the latest entrant, Cyrus Mistry) that highlight how this Parsiness/ parsipanu can never remain a hallowed cordon sanitaire (to which a pure retreat is possible) as the traces of different identities, overlap and complicate the question of responsibility. Tanya M. Luhrmann in writing about the *angst* of the community which finds itself dethroned from its colonial pre-eminence<sup>12</sup> provides literary vignettes that illustrate this facet in Mistry's writing. While this alienation is a feature of most of the middle class in India, the position of the Parsis as admittedly one of

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<sup>11</sup> The lecherous male is a recurring figure in the works of Mistry. That Rustomji sexually desires his part-time servant and invades her body with the penetrating gaze in *Baag* or the sexual innuendoes that Dinshawji reserves for Laurie Coutinho in *Such a Long Journey* is described by Mistry with an amused tolerance as a quirk of character. Rustomji believes that the priest of the fire-temple that his wife frequents molests unsuspecting women. In *A Fine Balance*, Dina stops her visits to the fire temple after feeling discomfited with the caresses of the Dustoorji. The author conveys all this in a language of desire and barely concealed laughter which makes it obvious that he is drawing on the pool of standard stereotypes about Parsi humor.

<sup>12</sup> Luhrmann's study is an important one in that it analyses various kinds of texts to vindicate her thesis. However, valorizing the 'angst' of a particular community as an anthropological endeavor may have its persuasive reasons. In Mistry we have quirky characters, xenophobia and intra-community squabbles and if they are read against the back-drop of Luhrmann's work, we may yet be able to 'explain' it. However, when I contacted Rusheed R. Wadia, a historian of the community based in Bombay, this is what he wrote to me when I put a question to him having read *The Good Parsi*. I quote the full text of the response he e-mailed to me:

"Firstly, I would not agree with the view that the Parsees are caught in a "time warp ". They are a very upwardly mobile community with a high incidence of out-migration to the West and to the Pacific Ocean areas .There is a large no. of Parsees in the Gulf in well paid jobs. I think I know what you are referring to. They are embroiled in internecine tensions amongst themselves over death rituals, acceptance or rejection of the dakhma (tower of silence) as a means of disposal of their dead, questions concerning marrying outside the community and the fate of children of marriage across communities. As an insider I would like to sound a word of caution: It is perfectly possible to meet Parsees who are successful & highly westernized but continue to cling on to ideas which others see the need to abandon. This is a situation one runs into in all communities.

You have inquired about how intellectuals (contemporary) deal with colonial stereotypes .Well I do not see much of all this happening .There is hardly any engagement with these matters .Stereotypes circulate, occasionally in public forums, but generally in spaces more private .I have known this for years that there is an undercurrent of antipathy / suspicion towards Muslims among sections of the Parsee community".

the most anglicized lot is hardly a feature of much deliberation in the lower middle class homes of Mistry where the pressures are more about paying the rent, bickering on whether to use the expensive china or not or how frequently one can afford meat. The quotidian then, seemingly innocuously, becomes a critique of what enables it, both in its maintenance and its rupture. Novy Kapadia in writing about the “The Politics of Survival and Domination in *A Fine Balance*”, remarks on the “rootlessness” of all the four central characters after having been expelled from their first homes. Paradoxically, the plot revolves around the desire of these characters to salvage this painfully acquired shelter, drawn by necessity. From the predominantly Parsi world of *Journey*, we enter a territory premised on difference. The space is secularized but with similar results. In highlighting the insecurity of the community and the concomitant impact on its yet unresolved issues concerning marriage (as Firdaus Kanga’s novel illustrates) and death rites, critics such as Kapadia appropriate the rubric of “Parsi Fiction” to provide an internal critique of the problems that beset a ‘minority’ community. (Having said that, a large amount of space in several pieces of criticism is devoted to a recounting of historical facts regarding the flight of the Parsis from Iran, their landing at Sanjan and then a reference to their colonial encounter. This is appended to most introductory notes to Parsi fiction/writers. While they seek to provide information about the Parsis, there are very few critics who tease out how the texts dramatize the location of the authors, history, memory, nation, migrancy. Since, as Keki Daruwalla points out, all the novelists of the community write from the West). Nilufer E. Bharucha in her work<sup>13</sup> makes a case that Rohinton Mistry should be read not only as a South Asian Canadian writer, a postcolonial Indian writer or a diasporic Indian writer but also read (“deconstructed” is the word she uses) as a Parsi, which tends to get elided in the homogenizing discourse of the academia. One perhaps is not extricable from the other, as I have been continuously stressing. In the variegated voices that emerge from his fiction, the critique of power he loyally mounts through his ‘powerless characters’, the anger and the torment at the change of Bombay from a hospitable to a hostile city, are located in the niche of images of the postcolony (Mbembe) that Rajeswari Sunder Rajan believes that the academia unhelpfully ignores. Meanwhile the flipside shows that by prioritizing the “ethno-religious” identity of the writer, there lies the danger that from a “positive” strategical affirmation of identity,

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<sup>13</sup> Bharucha, Nilufer E. *Rohinton Mistry: Ethnic Enclosures and Transcultural Spaces*, Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2003. It is an exhaustive study of all four novels where she takes the Parsi identity of Mistry as the point of departure.

Bharucha's desire for "multivalent" criticism can degenerate into the same limitations and hegemonic appropriation that she wishes to resist.

### **Picking up the marks on the critical trail:**

Criticism of the works of Rohinton Mistry is relatively young, perhaps less than a decade. Also, he seems to have been largely left alone by recent postcolonial studies. Even if this is a contested claim, it would be difficult to disagree that he hasn't quite received the attention a Salman Rushdie, a Chinua Achebe or an Amitav Ghosh have. While the reasons for this may be many, we will for the moment steer clear of any unsupportable generalization. What this chapter sought to focus upon are the different trends/strands that have been thrown up during this brief and intermittent affair. In this mode of reading this section will have tried to take stock of the views being mooted and then foreground the limitations, if any that are visible. This approach, I need to clarify, thus does not dismiss the importance of the often motley crowd of opinions that point toward a beginning in this direction.

Meanwhile through a little detour, I would like to illustrate a further point.

The patriotism of those who are in the minority in a nation-state has always been under question. In recent films on 'terrorism' such as *Sarfarosh* and *Mission Kashmir*<sup>14</sup> a Muslim police officer is viewed suspiciously as sharing a sense of communal loyalty with a Muslim malcontent. Being among the few 'bollywood' films in which this 'problem' is confronted directly, the solution provided is interesting. Both police officers are hurt and angrily remonstrate that even after serving the force for a long time ('without a blemish') they should be thought unworthy of handling what directly affects the nation's security. Very conveniently then, they are given a chance and they provide a sterling example of

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<sup>14</sup> In a recent film by Rakeysh Mehra entitled *Rang De Basanti*, we had a bigoted Hindu nationalist youth and a Muslim student (among others) brought together by a British woman (supposed to be the grand-daughter of the English jailor who had to reluctantly abide by the orders of executing Bhagat Singh) who wants to make a film on his diary. While shooting for the story a disaster occurs and they are forced into living their roles and take on the system to "awaken a generation", as the promos said. The final scene had the two in question, dying in each other's arms, having learnt the meaning of sacrifice. One can easily denounce the sentimental quotient in these films and the reinforcement of the image of a 'healthy' nation that they float. However, what is important here is to understand that it presents a prolegomena/ opportunity in the direction of which criticism can move. Mistry is often dismissed as a writer who is a trifle too sentimental. Having said that, the nature of the critique in his texts may be seen as an opening to an engagement with the realities inhabited by his lower middle class character, saved from destitution by community shelters, the 'ghatis' and the destitute and beggars, the unclaimed children of the postcolonial nation.

their integrity. This provisionally settles the question of what is a higher fidelity. This obviously depends on the success of the mission through which the virility/ masculinity/ patriotism of the entire police force shall be demonstrated. Crucially though, what is more important is that the communalism inherent in the narrative is sought to be secularized through a pat on the back of the 'minority' officer.

Thus patriotism becomes a matter of staging loyalties for the gratification of an apathetic postcolonial audience in search of myths and the unresolved question becomes a stick with which to beat the minorities, elites etc. For instance, Amitav Ghosh's being a Hindu is not one of the terms in which he is often studied, as are Salman Rushdie or Rohinton Mistry in terms of their religion. However, here one would like to qualify this statement. The reason for the slightly off-key sounding discussion above is to highlight the fact that when we pose the question of representation of the homeland in the case of Mistry, we can easily be unwittingly drawn into collapsing his vision of Bombay and Indian politics into a *typically minority position*, either valorizing it or trashing it. In the spirit of this work, it would be apposite to quote Appadurai who strikes the note when he says:

Thus minorities in many parts of the world are as artificial as the majority they seem to threaten: whites in the United States, Hindus in India...are all examples of how the political and administrative designation of some groups as minorities (blacks and hispanics in the United States...Muslims and Christians in India) helps to pull majorities (silent or vocal) together...Ethnic nationalisms are frequently reactive and defensive rather than spontaneous and deep rooted, as the tribalist model would have us believe...Minorities are as often made as they are born. (800)

Rohinton Mistry is a "minority" writer whether in his identity as a Parsi or as a diasporic writer. That said, I would like to underline the 'constructed-ness of this very form of description since a slavish reliance on terminology can easily degenerate into essentialism or a resultant protectionism or intolerance. Also it has the effect of blurring the other facets of his identity that manifest themselves in the way he represents women or a character like Tehmul or Shankar. Abdul Jan Mohammad and David Lloyd in their seminal *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* argue that an "affirmative" reading of marginalized cultural forms is required if there is to be a recovery of alternative practices smothered by colonization/capitalism, in order that hegemonic practices be

contested. This stress on specificity is timely and important. What is recoverable, even at the risk of repetition one must clarify, is not a pure form but a hybrid one. The Parsi rituals, language are a product of a long history of intermixing and need not be read as either frozen or separable from ‘impurity’. Since minorities and majorities are both made, as Appadurai says, Lloyd and Mohammad’s recuperation of “damaged” forms would be regressive unless carried out cautiously. While Mistry in an interview<sup>15</sup> stresses the aesthetic content of rituals that draw him towards their memorialization in his texts (we observe painstaking description of the uthamna ceremony when Gustad’s friend Dinshawji dies) he perhaps believes that they are best preserved within the cosmos of ‘fictional’ documents.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in her article “The Postcolonial Intellectual Revisited” articulates some of the concerns which have been reverberating throughout this work. While we debate questions of identity politics and the ‘homeless’ soul while calling for a hybrid, multi-vocal space of the political, there is a realm, the realm that African critics such as Mbembe and Joshua D. Esty occupy, which has ramifications for the kind of postcolonial critique that can be associated with Mistry, even if it means reading him against the grain. The Emergency followed by the communal uprisings of the last decade has been the backdrop of the fiction of Mistry. Third World intellectuals have made the latter a just and defining concern. However there is one incident in the *Satanic Verses* she cites (which occasioned the reference to the African critics above) where Bhupen Gandhi narrates a railway incident where the train had plunged off a bridge and the surviving passengers who swam towards the shore were drowned and then robbed by local villagers. Zeenat Vakil asks him to shut up saying that Saladin who has just returned from the West would think that they are benighted savages. The incident, as Rajan argues, is

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<sup>15</sup> This was in response to a question asked by Val Ross in an interview that appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, November 30, 1991, 9. In another tete-a-tete with Nermeen Shaikh (available on Asia Source) he very poignantly points out that though he was a practicing musician before emigrating, he was more of a “mimic”. Singing Simon and Garfunkel and Leonard Cohen, he quit music in Canada and says that he feels that it had something to do with the condition of being a migrant. The semiotics of his reply has interesting underpinnings and I quote it verbatim: “Going to Canada, faced with the reality of earning a living and realizing that although I had, up to that point in my life, read books and listened to music that came from the West, there was a lot more involved in *living* in the West. I felt very comfortable with the books and the music, but actually *living* in the West made that same music seem much less relevant. It suddenly brought home to me very clearly the fact that I was imitating something that was not mine, that made no sense in terms of my own life, my own reality” (Q&A, Asia Source Interview)

“quickly repressed”. The perceived pressure of the western gaze is palpable. Then, she cites a newspaper story that appeared on 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1995, about a mob that had gathered to protest against the police which had killed a teenager from a shanty who was trying to defecate in a park in Delhi. The middle class residents of the area had obtained a court order prohibiting the slum dwellers from defiling their parks and residential surroundings. Tear gas was lobbed to disperse the irate mob. This incident brings out into the open several problems of the postcolonial nation (with a potential to revive the “civilizational otherness” argument and hence evaded) state that do not easily find its way into the “third-world” intellectual or writer’s material. Mistry stands apart in this, though the politics of the same cannot be left unexamined. We will end with a quote of Rajan’s which can be extended as one of the reasons why the critical silence around the texts needs to be probed:

We cannot ignore these frames even if they be wrong, disingenuous, partial or inadequate since it is the structure of our lived experience. But the issues that the events expose have names—poverty, resource distribution, state violence, human rights violation, urban sanitation, development- and there is no reason why they should be left outside of the explanatory frames of academic discourse or relegated to the realm of the unmentionable...in the international division of intellectual labor, making sense of this world is not a task that must fall to the share of only some ( those who are proximate to this reality) while others are exempt from its pressures (615-616).

The contention of this dissertation that Mistry is a “minority” writer does not only wish to draw its legitimacy solely from the *fact* that he is a Parsi. In incorporating ‘minor’ tropes and realities into his works, he creates a space that is different from other widely published (and discussed) diasporic authors such as Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai and so on. Mistry’s oeuvre needs to be explored not through strait-jacketed notions about ‘diasporic’ or ‘minority’ writing. The idea is not to suspend taking a position but to examine the implications of his fiction for these categories and also how the “tradition” of such readings needs to interrogate itself through them.

## Chapter 5 (Conclusion)

### Re-membering Home: Memory, Violence and Hospitality

"...I am one foot up the gangway for some journey  
 Which all may take but not at equal cost  
 Upon this ship there is a cabin for me,  
     The wind hangs in the sails- and the dread moment  
 When my own shore will dwindle and be lost."

(Death, Anna Akhmatova, *Poems*, 194, 113)

It's the dwindling of the shores, the dimming that poses the question here. The dread in the poet's heart about leaving her "own" shores, pursued by the winds of memory in the forgetfulness of the cabin, the shelter. Indeed, are we not all in the same journey though the items in one's luggage are different? When the narrator in "Lend Me Your Light" boards the flight to India, he packs "chocolates, cheeses, jams, jellies, puddings, cake mixes, panty hose, stainless steel razor blades", those items which in India were always priced out of reach. It is the same narrator of the "Swimming Lessons", who asks the question—"I felt like one of those soldiers who, in wartime, accumulates strange things for barter. What was I hoping to barter them for? Attention? Gratitude? Balm to soothe guilt or some other malady of the conscience? I wonder now" (186). In his first collection of short stories, the immigrant writer brings "Canada" home to his family in the form of bright packets of material well-being, a fuller life it would seem to the one's who peruse these with envy and pride, reminiscent of the excitement of those naked children who follow the van out of the airport, in the hope of largesse. To the narrator, though, hoping for some kind of absolution with the 'gifts' that he brings back, the land seems "brown, weary, unhappy" (186). The strange things that the soldiers accumulate for barter, metonymically point to the strangeness of the lands visited and are needed by both parties to the exchange. For the author it becomes an alibi, a measure of his life 'there', or the picture of it that he is willing to share with the ones he had left behind. In the lower

middle class families that Mistry represents, this is what represents the 'aura' of the migrant, the aura of access to a 'richer' world.

The title of this dissertation is "Forgiving India: Rohinton Mistry's Parsi Pilgrimage", and it is here that I want to return to what would be the concluding arguments of this dissertation. So far, we have seen how the Parsis have willy-nilly constructed their self-images in fiction, the way in which 'space' has also determined how we look at Mistry's characters, that it is Bombay which is also in question and how the 'minority' characters define and are defined by their memories of the city. In the way that he imagines the Emergency and the its excesses through the body of the city and its brutalized dispossessed, we have foregrounded the response of a 'minority' writer through his location and also what finds place in his fiction. (This is not to suggest that Mistry has been marginalized as a writer. On the contrary, as the chapter on criticism suggests, there has been a gap between readership and criticism of his works).

Having said that, what is it that Mistry has to forgive India for? He is neither an exile, nor a refugee, much less, a vilified writer. Unlike Rushdie who was under the shadow of the fatwa against him in Iran, which had its echoes in India in the in the discourses of Muslim and Hindu reactionaries Mistry seems a cosier writer, one who looks at India in the way that an average middleclass, educated native would. But as we have seen, one cannot simplify matters to that extent, for to call Mistry just another of a certain ilk would have the effect of neutralizing what his fictional world offers or gag those innumerable voices that surface in order to subvert any imputation of an overarching theme that one might use as a cork to bottle up the implications of the texts under study.

Death remains an important point of entry into his work. Even though we have talked about the wounded bodies in a preceding chapter, the limit of representation of the pain and its address in the past, bobs above the surface in the form of the death of Tehmul, Maneck, Coomy, Yasmin, Lucy and the fading away of Nariman. In an article entitled "Death and the Diaspora Writer: Hybridity and Mourning in the works of Jamaica Kincaid", Ramon E. Soto-Crespo argues that mourning and death are a way to maintain transcultural associations and need not be viewed as a pathological state that needs to be overcome. In Kincaid this mourning is for a personal loss and it creates an allegory of imperialism that functions as a political critique. The critic describes the unhelpfulness of

studies of Kincaid's works that look to transcend mourning and fix its value only on what follows it. This makes the improvement through healing of the writer the end of writing. Mistry and Kincaid are very different authors but I want to focus on this theme of death a little further. In the numerous corpses that we encounter in Mistry, I would like to pose a link to the way Mistry mourns Bombay and the passing away of familiarity. Or, in a certain sense the agonizing plenitude of sameness. Death in his texts is sometimes the result of Violence encountered by the characters from the community as well as what I have consistently maintained, the outside. At other times like passing away of the old man in the Toronto apartment and Nariman Vakeel, it belongs to the album of personal memories and the register of loss. Though Mistry builds up the edifice of opposition in all his works, the façade breaks down as the two worlds collapse into each other. Death thus is a mode of remembering, a mode of hybridizing the self and the diaspora writer of the postcolony therefore makes this both the trope as well as the limit of all symbolisms. In this world of death and mourning there are other visitors too- and they travel in the local train— "Fate and Reality, the latter's offspring, the New Reality and also Poverty and Hunger, Virtue and Vice, Apathy and Corruption" (187). Mistry constructs his reality as doubles, not necessarily opposed to each other.

### **The tropes of 'Pilgrimage' and 'Forgiveness'**

To return to the title. The mode in which the title has been written is part ironic, part serious. In the former sense, I wish to maintain distance from any critical viewpoint that seeks to congratulate Mistry for having depicted India, as I have articulated at the beginning of the last chapter, accurately. For in that sense the memories that he continuously excretes in his fiction would have sinned against him and then logically, "India" would be asking for forgiveness. But I wish to shift the onus onto the author and suggest that it is he who is in need of absolution, even if (perhaps *because* he says), when in Canada "Now I know what soldiers must experience in the trenches, after a respite far behind the lines" (187). In that case the fact that the characters, particularly in the novels of Mistry experience a permanent state of emergency, whether it is rising prices, bicycle accidents, potholes, crowded local trains and other more pronounced hazards of 'postcolonial' diurnal living, draws the word "respite" from him. However this is an unquiet peace and there is more to the diasporic experience than bringing home attractively wrapped 'gifts' as compensation for absence. These works are signifiers of loss and the voice gained that is premised on this loss.

Brian May in his incisive study “Memorials to Modernity: Postcolonial Pilgrimage in Naipaul and Rushdie”, demonstrates how the writers return to their ‘homeland’ and in their texts deal with identity. In a part travel and partly autobiographical study *Area of Darkness*, Naipaul returns to India and visits the Himalayas. In Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, too there is the motif of a pilgrimage. Both writers map this territory in diverse fashion. However, in the alienation of the author towards all that he sees, there is an important point that I wish to bring up for discussion. The severance from the community as experienced by both “Naipaul” the narrator and Mirza in *Satanic Verses* where he goes for Haj is emphasized by May as the inability of the two to accept religion as a point of identification. There is however, no attempt made to cast a glance of nostalgia on the believers and aestheticise both the devoutness of the pilgrims and one’s separation from it. The most important observation that is made is that there is no epiphany that rescues the alienation of the character. What is more significant is that the authors construct their novels as May argues as “memorials to modernity”. That they are individuals witnessing the failure of modernity but are unwilling to celebrate it<sup>1</sup>. Therefore the garland and the incense sticks that Naipaul finds in his hotel room by an admirer (in the *Area of Darkness*) who had clearly stolen in his absence suggests that his sense of self is again challenged, and in a gesture of generosity Naipaul puts a symbolic garland over the entire, which receives, as May argues, his tired Westernized head. Earlier it is the anti-self type he chooses as his persona, from a pool of available native types. He wanders through central India wanting to see the “limits of human degradation” and he fails to fit into the native culture. But this private failure takes on a new dimension with the incident in the hotel room.

By memorializing modernity, by refusing to celebrate the demise of it suggested by the frenzied faithful, May suggests that Naipaul and Rushdie have already hybridized themselves, however problematically. In Mistry, the terms in which he represents his city as “brown, weary, unhappy” is carried ominously into his later fiction as well. This is

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<sup>1</sup> May, Brian. “Memorials to Modernity: Postcolonial Pilgrimage in Naipaul and Rushdie.” *ELH* 68 (2001). 241-265. 4 February, 2006. <<http://muse.jhu.edu>>. he notes how recent postcolonial studies after Bhabha have moved away from the sterile discourse of opposition to that of “hybridity”. May goes a step further and tries to detect a note of “sympathy” towards modernity, though not romancing it but by recognizing one’s immanence in it.

aggravated by a silence about the new land. In a different sense, therefore, Mistry also foregrounds the tension between the glance one casts back on one's 'homeland', what one sees and the burden of that vision, albeit a glance he is compelled to cast to enable his fiction. Mistry's pilgrimage is to Bombay, and is routed through the community and his imagination of the 'minority' space. The journey that Kersi makes in the *Tales* ends in a failure. The vision that the diasporic writer has gained gives rise to the figure of Tiresias<sup>2</sup> and hence even if Mistry is silent about the migrant's experience, this dissertation has so far, I believe, managed to establish that the silence is porous.

There is one other reason why this textual journey of Mistry may be troped as a pilgrimage. There is an increasing concern in his works towards the rituals of the Parsis, which as a dying community, he feels that it is his aesthetic duty to preserve. In *Such a Long Journey*, *Tales* and most crucially in his last novel *Family Matters*, we glimpse such a concern. In *Family Matters*, he returns to the family and makes it the space of both the perpetuation of stories, myths and rituals. As a double, which we have discussed is a motif in his works (the deaths of Coomy and Edul Munshi and Lucy and Yasmin occur in pairs) he constructs the character of Yezad, who retreats into the shell of stifling religious edicts in his household, in his search for coherence. While the mode of return in *A Fine Balance* was different, they exhibit two forms of pilgrimage that the writer undertakes. The closure of Mistry's fiction forces open both the characters and the spaces that they occupy.

Thus Mistry's pilgrimage has a strong expiatory undercurrent to it. The paradox is that he is both the seeker and giver of forgiveness. The idea of 'forgiveness' has a special significance after the Western civilization's brush with war and colonialism. In a deeply fragmented society that we all live in, postcolonial societies, violently wrenched from pre-colonial forms of life and the separation into 'majority' and 'minority' that has left a lasting legacy in the blaze of partition mass murders, rapes and other forms of brutalization. The buck however did not stop there. The political parties that rode the hope of freedom and in their own ways played their roles to win it undertook national

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<sup>2</sup> In the story "Lend Me Your Light" in the *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Kersi the narrator, compares himself to Tiresias on the eve of his departure to Canada: "... I saw myself as someone out of a Greek tragedy, guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration from the land of my birth, and paying the purse in burnt-out eyes. I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto..." (180)

reconstruction amid some fanfare. What also happened was the ascent of the Congress and its near total domination of the political life, as motley leaders came under an awning, with discrete often conflicting aspirations. What was also precipitated was the rise of dynastic rule which saw to it that Indira Gandhi ascended the throne after her father. With the departure of the British a new mode of governing would be required in order that those pockets which were brought under centralized rule could be made to participate in the task of picking up the fragments. Gradually though, the grand dreams were hastily placed on the backburner as the issues of realpolitik, the survival of the party and its stalwarts were prioritized. The aggrandizement of the political establishment was effected through a cynical use of those very categories, caste and religion that the colonizers had capitalized on. It is true that while the society was already fragmented into these categories and any upheaval of the order imposed by years of genuflection to hierarchy was bound to be fraught, responsibility in a larger sense was sacrificed to expedience. Thus the insecurity of the minorities was aggravated rather than assuaged. And it is to this city of the lower middle class, the beggars and the victims of caste and religious violence, political connivance and apathy that Mistry takes us. This is what his memories are of India amid intimations of tenderness as that glimpsed in the relationship between Tehmul and Gustad or Nariman Vakeel and his grandson Jehangir or for that matter the verbal exchange between the old man in the apartment building in Canada and Kersi, the narrator.

Mistry's desire for absolution is met with silence. Nor are his memories and the pain through which he accesses his past explicitly asking for forgiveness. Does one need to utter the desire to be forgiven in order to receive it? Is the onus on the perceived transgressor to demonstrate her repentance in order that she might be pardoned? Forgiveness in this sense would mean transcendence and this is what Derrida wishes to contest in his *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*.

However I would be tempted to contest this conditional logic of the exchange, this presupposition that forgiveness can only be considered on condition that it be asked, in the course of a scene of repentance attesting at once to the consciousness of the fault, the transformation of the guilty, at least the implicit obligation to do everything to avoid the return of evil. (34)

If such be the transaction involved in the exchange then it is obvious that the postcolonial sense of guilt at having uttered the word "respite" of the diasporic writer can only be

replaced by a commensurate hiding of it, a condition that might manifest itself as a tirade against the problems of the “homeland”, and dismissed as a lack of responsibility. Thus forgiveness I would argue is not a decision but a process that seeks to involve the parties involved in a relationship of exchange. As Derrida argues, all systems are based on exclusion and thus it is not as if some originary peace had been disrupted by an act of transgression. It would be apposite to qualify this further:

Before the modern forms of what is called in, the strict sense colonialism, all states (I would dare to say, without playing too much on the word and etymology, all cultures) have their origin in an aggression of the colonial type. This foundational violence is not only forgotten. The foundation is made in order to hide it; by its essence it tends to organize amnesia, sometimes under the celebration and sublimation of grand beginnings (57).

Mistry has no nooks of relaxation in his fiction. The violence that finds its way into his fiction invades the all spaces. Whether it is the Parsi who calls the laborers ‘ghatis’ and fears contamination, whether it is Rustomji, the bawaji who is about to be attacked and has to go clowning to save himself .In Canada it is racialized violence as the narrator of “Swimming Lessons” is called a Paki and jeered at by the white visitors to the swimming pool. Sometimes it is the Parsi priest who is murdered or a Christian servant who is beaten up by the residents of the Baag. Elsewhere it is Lucy who dives to her death, spurned by her Parsi lover who loves her but cannot marry her or .the overwhelming organized, legalized violence of the state beautifying the ‘nation’. In this chain of hostilities, Mistry distances himself from all forms of grand beginnings. (As John Eustace’s study of the “Squatter” highlights<sup>3</sup>, the references to multiculturalism are always undercut by a tone of burlesque. For instance, the mechanical laxative CNI – Crappus Non Interruptus—is meant to cure the migrant of the past by a smooth evacuation of the bowels.) And to look for respite would be another act of violence, for, in trying to evade the necessity of constant vigilance one is only trying to put a blanket on the past, which is not only impossible but an escapism that shall repeat a familiar pattern of exclusion. This is why Mistry cannot be “forgiven”, nor can he “forgive” for the desire for reconciliation, a therapeutic journey to the homeland that might make diasporic living easier. Derrida calls “forgiveness” the “madness of the impossible” and the desire to undertake such an endeavor is willy- nilly to be torn from the inside. And this is what the

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<sup>3</sup> “Deregulating the Evacuated Body: Rohinton Mistry’s Squatter”. This article has been discussed in greater detail in the third chapter.

fiction of Mistry foregrounds. Unlike *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, in his *Family Matters*, Jehangir's interior monologue towards the end does not posit a weary temporary respite but a continuation in Chateau Felicity of the forms of exclusion and border-lines that had led the lives of the characters into suspicion, bitterness, allegations and unquiet deaths.

### **The space of resistance/ respite**

This brings us to a crucial argument. Does Mistry represent an overwhelming and inalienable violence and make his characters passive recipients of it? Though the way his novels end would point towards such a view, there is a space of resistance, a slight murmur of a possibility which a perhaps even a doggedly optimistic stance will only whisper. For the odds are heavily stacked against the characters and often enough the only possible position appears to be to lie low and let the crisis pass. The connotations of 'pilgrimage' and 'forgiveness' that we have reserved for this study point towards what can be loosely called after Levinas, *the ethics of hospitality*. In the world that the texts of Mistry etch for us we find less the desire for polemics and more of a concentration on healing. Though this is not to suggest that violence can be thus redressed or that Mistry tries to reconcile the characters to their fate. We will here recall Ian Almond who had remarked that perhaps Mistry had inadvertently been pushed into taking a position that militates against the stringent critique that he mounts through his texts. Whether Almond is correct in his assessment or not is not the moot question. We have often referred to the tepidity of the way Mistry closes his novels. It is the politics of this tepidity that we might examine to see if there is at all any implication of agency. If so, what are aporias and possibilities of this form of resistance? How does one approach the other and encounter his strangeness? As Richard Stamelman reads Edmond Jabes in the article "The Strangeness of the Other and the Otherness of the Stranger: Edmond Jabes"<sup>4</sup>—

To be human is to live a life of estrangement. It is to attain through the life of one's irreducible alterity, a level of humanness beyond the human, beyond the ordinary...Through the paradoxical absence and presence of the stranger, his proximity and distance, his difference and heterogeneity, and above all the exteriority of his being, one is called to participate in a more absolute and transcendental humanity (120)

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<sup>4</sup> Stamelman, Richard. "The Strangeness of the Other and the Otherness of the Stranger: Edmond Jabes". *Yale French Studies*. 82.1. (1993) 118-134. 29 June, 2006. <<http://links.jstor.org/sici>>

Though we may set aside the suggestions of absolute humanity, it is through the trope of the stranger that we may gain an insight into the ethics of hospitality that we have mentioned above that whether the encounter with difference does indeed prompt a reconsideration of the self. This idea that has here been attributed to Jabes is evident in Levinas especially in his discussions in *Totality and Infinity*. Maintaining that all selves in this world are originally in an 'unhoused' state and that home gives us a respite from elemental struggles and helps us to recollect ourselves, Levinas says, "To dwell is not the simple fact of reality of an anonymous being cast into existence, as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat with oneself as in land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, a welcome"<sup>5</sup>.

Following its welcome into the home the self becomes a possessive being and if the self banishes all trace of the other and its own recollection then the home will remain a shrine to itself and the language of the other, the only way of getting over the sameness of the self will be lost. The irreducibility of the other is a recurrent theme in the writings of Levinas and he says that it is responsibility to the other that can paralyze possession. However, this stupefaction of the self and the vague suggestion of an infinite responsibility when it encounters the other has been a contentious issue with theorists. Colin Davis, in his study of Levinasian ethics through the event of murder<sup>6</sup> underlines the importance of the gamble that such a politics would entail-

In Levinas's account, my debt to the other is infinite and unconditional, and the other is certainly not just my ally and friend. Hospitality entails an acceptance of risk. The guest may turn out to be a murderer or rapist (and so might the host). In the context of an ethics of hospitality, I can never be entirely sure who or what I am inviting in. I must give the benefit of the doubt, and I must know that I may regret doing so (251).

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<sup>5</sup> Davis, Colin. "The Cost of being Ethical: Fiction, Violence, and Altericide". *Common Knowledge* 9.2 (2003) 241-253. <<http://links.osu.edu>> He applies Levinasian and Girardian categories to Camus' *The Stranger* and the short story "The Host" and tries to demonstrate how fiction can interrogate the impasse reached by Levinas in his conception of the self and the other and violence.

<sup>6</sup> Davis sums up his essay with an observation that has important ramifications for the study of fiction undertaken here and I reproduce the quote below: "The link between fiction and violence is long established, and more often than not we will be disappointed if we expect our stories to be edifying. "L'Hôte" nevertheless shows that literature may occupy an ethical space by not knowing and not seeking to know final answers. Its ethics of hospitality consists in leaving unresolved the questions of ownership and belonging, and in its invitation to the reader to share in that suspension of knowledge. Of course, in the context of the violent disputes over territory and sovereignty that are on my mind as I write this article, it is a terrible risk to practice this sort of hospitality, to question one's own right to the ownership of land" (252-253).

In *A Fine Balance*, just before the epilogue begins, Dina has returned to her brother's house after losing her apartment, friends and freedom, we are let into a typical Sunday routine of a 'happy' family playing cards. The Emergency and its excesses have forced Dina to withstand the indignity to avoid which she had refused to return to her brother's house after her husband's death. In a seemingly innocuous scene that the writer lets us into, which we will reproduce here for its suggestive potential:

After presenting his completed sequences, he analyzed the errors others had made. "You should never have thrown away the knave of hearts", he told Dina. "That's why you lost".

"I took a chance".

He gathered up the cards and started shuffling. "Okay, whose deal is it?"

"Mine", said Dina, and accepted the deck. (565)

The predictability of Dina's life is threatened with the arrival of Maneck, Ishvar and Om. Ishvar and Om are without a shelter in the city and when Dina hires them as tailors, they enter the cramped space of her home. At the outset, the characters are all drawn by a common need, which is economic in nature. Maneck is Dina's paying guest. However, they all have unspeakable grief and loneliness lurking in their past and the tension that is built up as Dina mistrusts them initially not out of any malevolence but that their unkempt appearance seemed to be a mark of their destitution. In addition the invasion of her privacy which she had jealously guarded makes her cautious and reluctant to let the strangers sleep in the shelter of her home. However, as their pasts unfold, a subtle negotiation takes place between the characters. This process of opening to the other need not necessarily be a process of knowing the other and its reduction to the co-ordinates of the self. What is more important is the responsibility that is never uttered but which manifests itself in the epilogue. (Dina loses her home and the risk she had taken pays no dividends as Om is forcibly vasectomised and Ishvar rendered a cripple in a similar operation gone awry, in the wake of the government's 'garibi hatao' campaign and the declaration of Emergency). Unable to confront the responsibility of the knowledge gained through being a passive onlooker/a non-actor as men are seized (Avinash)<sup>7</sup>, killed (the

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<sup>7</sup> It is significant that when Maneck dies he still has the chessmen set given to him by Avinash. This is one of the problems of Mistry's fiction. There are several references to fate and its working which, it could be said, militates against any serious consideration of agency. While it may itself be read as symptomatic of the alienation suffered by the characters and a reaction/ bulwark against it, that it does

Sikhs in the epilogue who are caught in the retaliatory violence when Indira is assassinated) and mutilated (his friends, Ishvar and Om), Maneck annihilates himself. This way of coming to terms with the brutalities of power and loss is juxtaposed to the act of accepting the deck in the scene quoted above. Dina survives and when Nusswan and his wife are away pilfers food for her destitute friends as they perform a daily ritual of making her laugh. Dina accepts her lot and within the space that she commands in the absence of the master of the house, for several years enacts this stealthy hospitality.

Levinas has also come in for criticism for what is seen as the idealistic theorization, that this complete strangeness of the other may be co-opted into an irreducible essence and may result in the birth of a discourse that is very different from what he would have us believe. Critics debate on whether Levinas advocated a lukewarm respect for the other by making the realm of the political secondary to the exchange. In Levinas's discussion there is a third party (the rest of humanity that shall be influenced by the way the other is welcomed) involved in the transaction, which is seen as the recuperation of the political. Colin Davis is of the opinion that in the context of hospitality the accountability of the self is anything but simple.

The extreme nature of Levinasian responsibility, and its difference from weak versions of respect for otherness, become clear in the violent language in which Levinas formulates his ethics; this is especially the case in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, which is generally accepted to be, after *Totality and Infinity*, his second major work. In *Autrement*, the subject is described as persecuted, obsessed, traumatized, wounded, stripped bare, and exposed. The subject is a hostage accused of a crime it did not commit and is bound to expiate the faults of others. This form of responsibility is nothing like philanthropic altruism. (251-252)

Mistry seems to be talking about more than "philanthropic altruism" or "caring" in his novels. What appears is that the 'dispossessed' and the 'powerless' who are written into the narrative of the work discussed above, can survive only through a mutual ethics of hospitality. Indeed the surprise of the moment of welcoming the other that Levinas characterizes as the moment of the experience of the other's alterity, is complicated in the novels as each character who seeks the shelter of the home is drawn into a network of

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threaten to reduce the denouement of his texts to a stoic reconciliation has been consistently referred to. The ethics of hospitality that has been discussed exists in spite such a drift.

structures which pre-exist her coming. (It is interesting that Mistry caricatures Nusswan and refuses to negotiate with what he represents—the ‘comfortably well off’ variety that believes in personal economic emancipation, wants to live in a city where there is no dirt, filth and beggars jostling about and commands the fragile sense of power by controlling the lives of those around him. It is an attitude that he incidentally had reserved for Jamshed, who I have argued elsewhere, vilifies India out of not simply disengagement with its realities but an embarrassment about the place of his origin, another manifestation of postcolonial guilt and expresses his confusion and vulnerability by turning reactionary.) Only the characters joined by a common sense of loss/responsiveness to the denudation of the other find their way into the alleviating mechanism of inter-subjective exchange.

Hybridization, here acquires a different meaning. The space of the home or the community building where Mistry places the men and women in his fiction was largely undisturbed in his short stories except by intra-community squabbles that had more to do with the needs and wants and search for a dwelling-place than any typically ‘Parsi’ problem. Those who open out to the other, welcome the other disrupt sameness and thus at a very micro-level, hybridize space and memory. When Bhabha says that the Western metropole should confront its postcolonial history as internal to its national narrative<sup>8</sup>, a parallel form of responsibility needs to be replicated if cities are to become “cities of refuge” from cities of slaughter. Though ‘privilege’ is an extremely relative term and cannot be properly defined, it is indeed the “duty” of those who may be loosely huddled in this category, to write the history of the destitute, the ‘minoritised’ (not necessarily belonging to a particular community, but those who experience privation) in order to be absolved, in order that their narratives also be hybridized, not just by the forces of modernity and English education or westernization but also the trauma of those rejected in the process of selection into the nation’s self-image.

### **Locating Responsibility**

The city of Mistry (as we discover through Yezad, Mr. Kapur, Tehmul or Hussain) is perforated with an excess of power looking for victims to inscribe it on. It is clear that the city cannot be domesticated into a secure network of symbols that exonerates those living

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<sup>8</sup> Bhabha, Homi. “The World and the Home”. *Social Text*. 31/32. Third World and Postcolonial issues (1992) 141-153. 30 June, 2006. <<http://links.jstor.org/sici>>

in it or the one who posts the first collection of stories from Canada to his parents. As Derrida argues his *On Hospitality*, the master of the house is as much in need of being liberated from the cage of his subjectivity as the guest. His discussion veers around the question asked by the foreigner and the place of the immigrant/stranger. He makes a very significant intervention when he re-reads Levinas' understanding of welcome:

Does hospitality consist in interrogating the new arrival? Does it begin with the question addressed to the newcomer (which seems very human and sometimes loving, assuming that hospitality should be linked to love...) what is your name? tell me your name what should I call you, I who am calling on you, I who want to call you by your name?...Or else does hospitality begin with the unquestioning welcome, in a double effacement, the effacement of the question and the name? Is it more loving to question or not to question?

(27, 29)

While Derrida is here talking about the "immigrant as guest"<sup>9</sup>, we will translocate his argument in order to see what implications it holds for a politics of the 'minority' based on the ethics of hospitality if indeed that is what Mistry is also trying to articulate. Asking the question to the stranger is an uncertain act since how the query appears to the stranger shall determine whether it is seen as violence or an act of love. The utterance of the proper name is a political act and an extremely private one at the same time. If we stretch the connotative potential of asking the name to include the mode of welcome that a destitute/ marginalized my be accorded, it need not necessarily be a complete stranger of whose antecedents the host has no inkling. The destitute in times of emergency may be the neighbor or as in the case of *Family Matters*, the father, the patriarch. Following an accident that immobilizes him, Nariman Vakeel's stepdaughter plots with her brother to send him to Pleasant Villa, the house where Roxana, his daughter, her husband Yezad and their two sons, Murad and Jehangir live. Both families struggle to make ends meet and Coomy faced with the prospect of nursing a patient suffering from Parkinson's, osteoporosis and a broken ankle, makes haste to expel him from the house and plants him in Roxana's house through subterfuge. Nariman becomes the prototypical destitute here as the ambulance whines through the city to his daughter's place where he is about to become a guest without prior notice, without warning. Though grimly apprehensive of the brittle nature of their family peace and the economic and physical burden that would

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<sup>9</sup> Rosello, Mireille. *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001.

now become palpable, a secret that would be out in the open and the whisper of the undisclosed, Roxana makes space for Nariman as young Jehangir is thrilled at the idea of having a story-teller in the house.

Here no name is asked and no answer given. Only beneath the surface there is *hostility* unintended but inalienable. The question, indeed one that cannot be asked by Yezad of the person (Nariman) who disorients his shelter is an act of hospitality but the effects of this silence are deep and outside the control of those offering love and care to the 'outsider'. Indeed it is not an unconditional hospitality that is offered in the beginning, there is no infinite invitation extended to the other. The guest is bound by the gesture and wishes to return it. Unlike Levinas's prescription that true hospitality arises from the fact that we do not wish to control the alterity of the other, whether the other comes with intentions to rape or murder or inflict violence, Om and Ishvar or for that matter Dina develop and work on the questionable generosity of the initial welcome. It is a tortuous task—Dina is aware of the filthy outsiders, the lice in Om's hair and the fact that if the tailors get to know the address of the Au Revoir Exports they might upstage her to negotiate a contract. Conversely the tailors are wary of being economically exploited by their employer. While as has been mentioned earlier, the house is opened to the other because of an exigency, the act initiates a process that foregrounds 'hospitality' itself, both establishing as well as interrogating it. Derrida underlines the political act that the extension of hospitality is and the fact that it is difficult to imagine a pure encounter, a disinfected space where the self encounters the other. In fact as Martin Hagglund writes in his article<sup>10</sup>, it would be perhaps be instructive to read Derrida through Levinas for the latter's mistrust of politics leads him to imagine a space that brings the host and the guest face to face, in the presence of a vague concept of the third. It seems that in the changing semiotics of 'national' and 'international politics', Derrida's problematisation of hospitality is worth retaining though its possibilities for a hospitable politics need not be ignored.

Thus, a rigorous deconstructive thinking maintains that we are always already inscribed in an "economy of violence" where we are both excluding and being

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<sup>10</sup> Hagglund, Martin. "The Necessity of Discrimination: Disjoining Derrida and Levinas". *diacritics* 34.1 (2004) 40-71. <<http://olcl.ohiolink.edu/search>>

excluded. No position can be autonomous or absolute but is necessarily bound to other positions that it violates and by which it is violated. The struggle for justice can thus not be a struggle for peace, but only for what I will call "lesser violence." ... all decisions made in the name of justice are made in view of what is judged to be the lesser violence. If there is always an economy of violence, decisions of justice cannot be a matter of choosing what is nonviolent. To justify something is rather to contend that it is less violent than something else. This does not mean that decisions made in view of lesser violence are actually less violent than the violence they oppose. (47-48)

Indeed this is borne out by the economy within which the texts of Mistry are lodged. The idea that Hagglund associates with Derrida, is derived from the essay "Violence and Metaphysics". Violence and discrimination are not the antithesis of justice but its possibility, for even the most heinous of excesses are explained with the logic of "lesser violence". When Indira Gandhi declares an emergency, she does it with the rationale of bringing the law and order of the country under control. When Dilnavaz and Miss Kutpitia turn Tehmul into a scapegoat who shall put the shards of the Noble family back in place, they do it with the rationale that the family needs to be saved and the 'expendable' should be sacrificed. When Nariman is not allowed to marry Lucy, the bigger stake is the purity of the community that would be defiled. When Coomy destroys the ceiling of Nariman's room in the fear that he might return, she explains that the old man would be safer and happier with children around him. Still further, the Shiv Sena's project of ethnic cleansing is also executed with the promise of a safer and better Mumbai for local hindus and that cannot be done unless the outsiders have been shown their place. Moreover all these acts of exclusion have strong resonances throughout the novels. What one needs to qualify is that "lesser violence", therefore, is not a better for of action for what it might lead to could be a greater violence

Moreover in any given encounter as I have mentioned earlier there are several others. Derrida in his *The Gift of Death* writes "I cannot respond to the call, the demand, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others" (68)<sup>11</sup> If we read *Family Matters* as a narrative that has allegorical potential for Mistry's ways of negotiating responsibility and hospitality, we will observe how the

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<sup>11</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Chicago: U o Chicago Press, 2001.

decision of Roxana and Jehangir to award an emotional/ethical welcome to Nariman leads to changes in the lives of other characters. Yezad's meagre salary is stretched to the maximum limit, which leads him to gambling. Even Jehangir, to cling to the remnants of their former pattern of life resorts to taking money from homework defaulters in class. The loss incurred by the former is aggravated when he loses his job after his employer is killed which finally ends with his embracing the secure identity promised by religion. That the risk taken by the family is not a consensual act is laid out in the open when Yezad hits Jehangir for touching the bed pan and coming close to the shit and urine of the decaying body. The other in Mistry is self effacing, poses no demands overtly and is certainly not subversive. It is from the world outside the cramped rooms that Mistry places his characters in, that the final challenge is hurled. The decision to let in the 'stranger' (in the sense of one who estranges) dismantles the house of the host, or at least transforms it. The three 'survivors' (because they 'conditionally' loved the 'other' and experienced the loss of self but do not seek to regress to the irrecoverable past) from the novels- Gustad, Dina, Om, Ishvar and Jehangir- appear to be entering into a space that is similar yet quite different from what they inhabited before their dislocation (a permanent condition of being) changed dimension.

One may argue that the 'ethics of hospitality' that Mistry posits would have ramifications when we transpose the concept not merely to read the novel along with the characters but also how it can be stretched to include the location of the writer. The purchase of words like nation, identity, allegiance, responsibility acquires new complications, when we approach them through a politics based on the 'ethics of hospitality'. Sarosh/Sid in the "Squatter", Jamshed and Kersi in "Lend me your Light" and in "Swimming Lessons" are migrants to Canada. Jamshed violently disowns India in order to belong to the metropolis, while Kersi's fiction about the Baag life is born between the lubrication of anonymity that he gains in the solitude of the apartment complex and the racial violence of the swimming pool. Sarosh is burlesqued as a comic figure but one is intrigued by the fact that he is rejected for the 'ethical' (problematic, no doubt) stand that he adopts towards the new land, the stand that one should render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, for it does seem to be a unilaterally determined stand that he takes. Percy discovers his sense of responsibility in the remote villages, amid exploitation of the poor and the illiterate. The hostility/escapism of Jamshed, the debasement of Sarosh, the mission of Percy and the irresolution of Kersi who returns to Canada with 'gifts' that will

haunt his later fiction and living, are all played out as a probing of the ethics of the identity and belonging.

As Kersi slips under the water, hoping to gain an insight into his separation and arrival, the bubbles in his memory are those of the dirt and filth of the Chaupatty which made swimming hazardous. In a stark parallel, in Canada the scum is represented by the racial slurs and the “author” skips swimming for some days as he had disengaged himself from the soiled waters in Bombay. But here the narrator takes a dip in the water as has been discussed in the previous chapter, in order to overcome his fear. When he says that it is time to see the things inside, we realize that he is talking of immanence, of responsibility. When he thus takes a creative turn towards acknowledging and confronting the other, he symbolically (whether he is aware of it or not) questions his own escapism in India, the urbanized, English educated stance that remained in the confines of an imploding critique. Water—imagery and the symbolic function of the water that receives a stranger with hospitality also points towards a desire for dissolution of boundaries. One realizes the interrogation of boundaries throughout Mistry’s fiction— host/ guest, majority/ minority, inside/ outside and in the process even though references to his diasporic state dry up in his later fiction, this elision can be easily read as a way of referring through other means- symbol, allegory, metaphor. At the very heart of this discourse is the ‘unhomed’, not a celebration of hybridity but the ones that are the left –overs, the demography of which keeps changing.

Though we lack pegs in the fiction of Mistry to make an elaborate call on his diasporic experience, we shall quote Derrida to end the chapter and hope that by implication, the scraps in his fiction that have explanatory potential for all forms of ‘minoritisation’— whether it is as a Parsi, a migrant (Kersi), destitution (Ishvar and Om) — in the end shall coalesce into a question posed to the clotting of identity under the rubric of nation, community, caste or class. We shall end with a quote of Derrida who seeks to retain the archetypal exchange between host and guest common to all cultures, while underlining the importance of the section *Dwelling* in his beautiful tribute to Levinas on the latter’s death<sup>12</sup>:

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<sup>12</sup> Derrida, Jacques *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Transl. Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.

The ground or the territory has nothing natural about it, nothing of a root even if its sacred, nothing of a possession for the national occupant. The earth gives hospitality above all else, a hospitality already offered to an initial occupant, a temporary hospitality granted to the hote, even if he remains the master of the place. He comes to be received in his own home (92-93).

Thus the responsibility towards the other is also not transcendent but lodged in the temporal, throwing up the impossibility of belonging and the need to confront that desire. We seem to come some way from the consideration of representation, through the memory of violence to what might be easily seen as an attempt at reconciliation. We have mentioned that it does seem to be a feature of the texts of Mistry—the need for “respite”, which as we have argued is also closely associated with the theme of forgiveness. If total forgiveness is impossible and his ‘pilgrimage’ through fiction is aborted at its source (since the very constitution of identity is violent) is the *ethics of hospitality* just a sophisticated way of privileging ‘acceptance’ and thus inaction? I would like to believe that this isn’t the case. That what appears tepid and fragile due to the ‘powerlessness’ of those who resist when our vantage point shows us neat divisions between the ‘oppressor’ and the ‘victim’, acquires significance when viewed as a network of relationships which are all seeking absolution at different levels and that ‘minoritisation’ occurs in various guises, which, as we have iterated, are the ghosts that are still lodged in all the ‘homes’ and cities of Mistry.

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