

**SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN PARSII IMMIGRANTS AND CONCERN
FOR A DYING COMMUNITY: AN ANALYSIS OF
ROHINTON MISTRY'S FAMILY MATTERS**

Ms. Amrita Arora

Lecturer, English
Government Senior Secondary School
Bandhwari, Gurgaon
Haryana
Email: amrita.arora30@gmail.com

Dr. Bhavya

Assistant Professor
English and Communication Studies
Indira Gandhi Delhi Technical University
Delhi- 110006

“It is bitter-sweet thing, knowing two cultures and being a part of two Universes, each distinct from the other .Once you leave your birth place nothing is ever the same.”⁽¹⁾

Those who immigrate to the alien land in search of better prospects are always overpowered by a sense of not wholly belonging, neither to the motherland nor to the country to which they have immigrated. It is really painful and heart- rendering to be conscious of two worlds. This is what Nariman, the protagonist advises his son-in-law Yezad Chenoy, who wanted to immigrate to Canada but his dream was disheartened by the undue interview practices at the Canadian High Commission.

For Nariman, emigration is “an enormous mistake .The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills”.⁽²⁾

Every human being is emotionally connected with his/her motherland. When an immigrant moves to an alien land, he/she begins to miss his/her own people, culture, language, customs and traditions, cuisine and of course social norms. Thus immigration leads to the loss of “roots”. Although an immigrant tries his/her best to assimilate in the new culture, but he/she feels alienated in the land of whites where they are always classified as the other race. The immigrants thus have to struggle a lot in the beginning that is in the first phase of their immigration. At the same time in the process of acquiring a new identity in the alien culture, the immigrant somewhere starts losing his/her own original identity. It is obvious that an immigrant is born in one culture, spends crucial years of their life in that culture and then moves into another culture. As a result they always feel marginalized and separated from the majority culture. They thus lose

a sense of security and feel themselves at periphery between two cultures. Thus an immigrant feels perplexed and feels his/her identity is lost between two cultures. In other words the expatriate undergoes emotional dilemma and is vexed with identity crisis.

The Asian immigrants who move to any western country be it America or Canada, be it a Muslim or a Parsi, be it a highly affluent or an intellectual belonging to a city or a country dweller from rural India, is forced to use English, that is English at margins, as English is a language least equipped to translate Asian identity, the cultural gap between language and experience being too vast. Even a highly accomplished Asian immigrant writer does not receive that much of attention and is not acclaimed in the west if they write about the society to which they have immigrated, as it is believed that they won't be able to do full justice and won't be able to write about the deconstruction of the society which they inhabit now, for an immigrant is not culturally as well as socially equipped to do so. Examples of numerous writers can be taken to prove this point. Writers like Bharti Mukherjee, V.S Naipaul, Vikram Seth and Salman Rushdie, all these Asian writers mostly write about their own motherland and when they try to write about west then it is classified only as an expatriate writing. Rohinton Mistry is one such writer who seems to be whole-heartedly attached to his motherland and to his own Parsi community.

Rohinton Mistry was born in a Parsi family at Mumbai (erstwhile Bombay) on July 3, 1952. He graduated with a degree in Mathematics from the University of Bombay in 1974. He immigrated to Canada the next year, where he got married to Freny Elavia, who had studied with Mistry in the same college in Bombay in which Mistry had studied. The Parses prefer the West since it offers unlimited scope for growth and prosperity. Parses consider themselves racially pure and culturally superior, being highly qualified and affluent they are the Jaunty-jacinth's of the Indian society, they are given preference in western countries as they bring with them fame and success. So this way they are welcomed in an alien land but at the same time we should not forget that an alien land will always remain alien land for them, the material success and fame it brings for them, notwithstanding. Mistry having identified himself with western or alien culture, and seeing himself as a westernized Indian, was made aware of his outsider status when he arrived in Canada. In an interview with Nermeen Shaikh of Asia source, he not only articulated his sense of not belonging but also introduces the gap between the real and the textual that defines migrant writing:

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 in the west made the 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. "I was a stranger in that culture," Mistry exclaims. ⁽³⁾

Even in India, where Mistry spent the first twenty three years of his life, he had never been a complete insider, as Parses are not even the original natives of India, the adjustment becomes all the more difficult in western countries. Parses originally belonged to Iran so even India is not their motherland. They settled in Bombay which was at that time the center of British administration, they felt allured towards the western culture and became westernized. While assimilating into Indian culture and society they suffered humiliation especially at the hands of

upper class Hindus, which was the dominant culture. As a result Parses moved to western countries, casting off their Indian identity. Adjustment or assimilation in a western country was all the more difficult in an alien land as they had to face even more problems related to racism, social acceptance and multiculturalism; they were treated as outsiders and were not allowed the same rights and liberties in the foreign land. Alien land provided them only monetary security but they felt nostalgic and remained alienated. This is how the Parses suffered double displacement. Dislocation is thus a part of the Parsi psyche. Due to successive immigrations, the Parses have almost lost their own identity and at the same time they have not been able to fully assimilate in the foreign culture, as they hung between two cultures. It is a “neither fish nor fowl” situation. Their search for identity is not complete, it is thus in process.

There is one more serious problem that haunts the Parsi community today. The demographic decline of parses is really a matter of concern for the whole Parsi community. Population is an important factor in the visibility and viability of any ethnic identity. Over the years, there has been a drastic fall in the population of the Parsees. Luhrmann records how: “Until 1941 the Parsi population was slowly but steadily on the rise in India. But in 1961 they were down to over 100,000; in 1971, over 90,000; in 1991 there were 76,000 Parsees in India, with around 50,000 in greater Bombay”.⁽⁴⁾

Rohinton Mistry’s novel *Family Matters*, is a celebrated novel which expresses concerns for the vulnerable Parsi community, as it centers on issues of numerical decline. *Family Matters* was published in the year 2002. *Family Matters* can be considered as a discourse on Parsi religious community. In *Family Matters*, the protagonist, Nariman Vakeel is the appellation of the dying Parsi community. The whole life of Nariman Vakeel can be interpreted as the rise and fall of a vanishing community. Parses are disappearing day by day. The lament of Inspector Masalavala and Dr. Fitter may best sum up Mistry’s ache for the Parsi community which is on the brink or verge of extinction. Inspector Masalavala remarks: “But it will be a loss to the whole world. When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser.”⁽⁵⁾

There are various reasons responsible for the community which is vanishing every day. Late marriages, low birth rate and high rate of death are the main reasons responsible for their decline and decay. Extreme westernization and education makes young Parses postpone their marriage and in some cases they also remain single. Jal and Coomy, the step-children of Nariman are a case in point. In the 1991 census report, data relating to population distribution by the marital status and age showed that over 70 percent of Parsi males and 40 percent of females in the high fertility age group of 25 to 29 were ‘never married’. Naturally, this has affected the birth rate. In the 45 to 49 age group about 20 percent of males and 10 percent of females fall in the “never married” group. This comment of Inspector Masalavala in *Family Matters* reifies the fact “take the falling birth rate. Our Parsi boys and girls don’t want to get married unless they have their own flat which is next to impossible in Bombay, right? Our little lords and ladies want sound proofing and privacy, these western ideas are harmful”.⁽⁶⁾ It is a matter of concern that people associated with Parsi community have always had. Earlier Parses used to be more rigid and orthodox; marriage outside Parsi fold or community was prohibited. This is quite evident from the story of Nariman Vakeel, who intensely loved a Christian girl Lucy Braganza and wanted to marry her but Nariman’s parents and relatives refused his marriage with an outsider. Instead Nariman was emotionally pressurized to marry Yasmin, a Parsi widow with two

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

children, Coomy and Jal. They were concentrated mostly at one place that is Bombay, now they have scattered all over the globe that has resulted into inter-breeding with other communities. For Mistry, re-creating the story of his minority ethnic community comes easy because “the characters live in my mind so completely before the writing commences.”⁽⁷⁾ Mistry somewhere resembles Yezad’s character; there is something common between them. Mistry has given an account of his own life through Yezad’s character. Mistry, himself being an emigrant to Canada, could well depict Yezad’s dream of immigrating to Canada. Mistry narrates:

His dream for an end to this apeman commute had led him to apply for immigration to Canada. He wanted clean cities, clean air, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone, where people stood in line at bus stops and said please, after you, thank you .Not just the land of milk and honey, also the land of deodorant and toiletry.⁽⁸⁾

The dedication to the set traditions and sense of belonging to their motherland comes in opposition with new environment resulting in desolate environment and feeling of insecurity. The immigrant faces two questions “Who am I?” and “Where is here?” The latter question is due to the geographical and historical past of the country .Atwood’s remark explicates the above preposition:

“Who am I?” is a question appropriate in countries where the environment the ‘here’ is already well-defined ,so well defined in fact that it may threaten to overwhelm the individual. In societies where everyone and everything has its place a person may have to struggle to separate himself from his social background, in order to keep from being just a function of the structure. ‘Where is here?’ is a different kind of question. It is what a man asks when he finds himself in unknown territory, and it implies several other questions. Where is this place in relation to other places? How do I find way around it?⁽⁹⁾

Mistry expresses his wish to come back to India, to Mumbai despite the fact that he has now assimilated in the new land. Thus the immigrant find themselves out of place, they feel they are lost like Alice in Wonderland. The immigrant is like “Alice” deprived of habitual linguistic codes” and in the throes of an “ontological insecurity.” “Who are you” asks the caterpillar, to which Alice replies, “I hardly know. I can’t explain myself because I ‘m not myself.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Works cited

1. Sarah Turnbull, Almost French: Love and a New Life in Parses.
2. Jaydipsinh Dodiya,ed.Rohinton Mistry:Perpectives on the novels of Rohinton Mistry,(New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006),P.84.
3. Anjali Gera Roy, Meena T Pillai,ed.Rohinton Mistry : An anthology of Recent criticism,(New Delhi :Pencraft International,2007),P.(13-14).
4. (Luhrman 1996 168), Anjali Gera Roy, Meena T Pillai,ed.Rohinton Mistry:An anothology of Recent criticism,(New Delhi : Pencraft International,2007),P.249.
5. Suman Bala,ed.Rohinton Mistry: The Writer Par Excellence,(New Delhi: Khosla Book House,2013),P.313.
6. Suman Bala,ed.Rohinton Mistry: The Writer Par Excellence,(New Delhi: Khosla Book House,2013),P.312.

7. Anjali Gera Roy, Meena T Pillai,ed.Rohinton Mistry : An anthology of Recent criticism,(New Delhi :Pencraft International,2007),P.80
8. Jaydipsinh Dodiya,ed.Rohinton Mistry:Perpectives on the novels of Rohinton Mistry,(New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006),P.84.
9. Jaydipsinh Dodiya ed.The Fiction of Rohinton Mistry, (New Delhi:Prestige Books,1998),P.(61-62).
10. (Rosemary Jackson),Anjali Gera Roy , Meena T Pillai,ed.Rohinton Mistry : An anthology of Recent criticism,(New Delhi :Pencraft International,2007),P.17.