

## Representations of Cultural Identity in the Postcolonial Narratives of Rohinton Mistry

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### Abstract:

*This study looks at how cultural identity is represented in Rohinton Mistry's postcolonial novels, including Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance, and Family Matters. Mistry's work, which is set in the socio-political context of post-independence India, examines the intricacies of identity creation influenced by nationalism, colonial heritage, communal affiliation, and socioeconomic instability. This research uses detailed textual analysis to analyse how Mistry presents the Parsi minority population as navigating cultural preservation, marginalisation, and adaptation within a fast-changing nation-state. Using important postcolonial ideas like hybridity, displacement, subalternity, and cultural memory, the study makes the case that Mistry's stories portray cultural identity as dynamic, disputed, and rooted in history rather than static or unchanging. The contradictions inherent in postcolonial nation-building are revealed by his characters' frequent struggles between tradition and modernity, private morality and public politics. Mistry also highlights everyday lives to reveal how economic inequality, communal politics, and governmental power influence both individual and social identities.*

**Keywords:** Post colonialism, Cultural Identity, Rohinton Mistry, Hybridity etc.

### Introduction

Indian-born Canadian author Rohinton Mistry depicts the life of common people in post-independence India in her novels. Although his stories appear straightforward, they address important issues including people's identities, social groups, and treatment in a society that is changing. Mistry gives particular emphasis to the Parsi community, a tiny religious and cultural group in India, in a number of his works, particularly Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance, and Family Matters. He discusses what it's like to be a minority in a big, unfriendly country through these characters.

This study examines how Mistry's novels depict cultural identity in a postcolonial context. In this context, "postcolonial" refers to the period following the end of British control in India, during which the country is attempting to develop itself while still dealing with the legacy of colonial power. People in this circumstance are torn between majority and minority, local and international, and old and modern. Mistry's novels demonstrates the fluidity of cultural identity. Political, historical, religious, familial, and financial factors all contribute to its constant change. This essay makes the case that Mistry's characters are always figuring out who they are, where they fit in, and how they might live by drawing on concepts like hybridity, displacement, subalternity, and cultural memory.

### Postcolonial Context and Cultural Identity

India sought to forge a strong sense of national identity after gaining independence from Britain in 1947. Leaders discussed progress, democracy, and unity. But the nation was also split along religious, caste, linguistic, and class lines. Massive violence, terror, and migration resulted from the division of India and Pakistan. Later, tensions increased due to economic disparity, communal unrest, and political corruption. Cultural identification became a significant issue in this setting, particularly for minority groups like the Parsis.

Cultural identification is a person's understanding of themselves as a member of a community based on shared memories, religion, language, customs, and history. Identity is complicated in a postcolonial country because individuals are impacted by both new national politics and colonial history. They might take pride in their heritage, on the one hand. On the other side, people can experience pressure to adapt to the new state. According to postcolonial theorists like Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha, identity is not static but rather is continuously shaped by experiences of mixing, difference, and conflict.

This reality is reflected in Mistry's works. His Parsi characters frequently live in Bombay (now Mumbai) among people of many social levels and religions. Although they engage with the larger community, they are concerned about losing their culture. Although British rule has ended in postcolonial India, its effects may still be seen in the country's legal system, educational system, and class structure. Characters' perspectives on others and themselves are shaped by this conflict between the new country and the old empire.

### **The Parsi Community: Between Belonging and Marginalisation**

A little Zoroastrian group known as the Parsis arrived in India centuries ago from Persia. They had their own social norms, religious rites, and temples of sacred fire. Many Parsis achieved success in business and professions during the colonial era by learning English and collaborating closely with the British. They were in a unique position because they were both Indian and associated with the colonial powers. This status grew complex after independence.

Mistry depicts the Parsi community in Bombay in *Such a Long Journey* during the early 1970s, when the war in Bangladesh and political scandals were occurring. Gustad Noble, the protagonist, is a Parsi bank clerk from the middle class. He takes pride in the honesty, altruism, and diligence of his community. He worries about the future, though, because his children do not share all of his traditional ideas, and society as a whole is corrupt and unstable. It is possible to interpret the walls he erects around his home as a representation of his wish to shield his culture and family from a dangerous metropolis.

The Parsis in the book believe that while they were formerly respected and safe, they are now disregarded or exploited. They feel helpless due to government policies, growing nationalism, and corruption. However, since India is their home, they are unable to fully distance themselves from it. Their cultural identity revolves around this conflict between feeling excluded and trying to fit in. They are portrayed by Mistry as devoted citizens who continue to wonder if the country values them.

This stance demonstrates how identity can be both strong and brittle. The Parsis' tiny population and migration to the West put their survival in jeopardy, yet they still wish to maintain traditional customs, such as endogamous marriage and religious rites. Mistry exposes their biases and anxieties rather than presenting them as ideal victims. In this approach, cultural identity is portrayed as a combination of uneasiness and strength.

### **Hybridity and the Mixed Nature of Identity**

"Hybridity" is a central concept in postcolonial studies. The term "hybridity" refers to the blending of identities, cultures, and languages that occurs when individuals from various backgrounds coexist. Hybridity is typical in a place like India where local and colonial cultures have long interacted. People migrate between many social realms, speak multiple languages, and adopt both Indian and Western customs.

In this way, Mistry frequently creates hybrid personalities. Hindi, Gujarati, English, and other languages are spoken by many of them. Even if they attend English-medium schools, they may continue practice Parsi or other religious traditions at home. The four main protagonists of *A Fine Balance*—Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Om, and Maneck—come from various castes, classes, and geographical locations, yet they live together in a small apartment in the city during the Emergency of the 1970s. Their lives become intertwined, demonstrating how such cross-cultural interaction shapes identity.

The city itself is a mixed area where long-term urban dwellers and rural migrants coexist, with traditional crafts coexisting with contemporary industry. Food, attire, speech, and even the connections people make across social barriers are examples of hybridity. According to Mistry's writing, despite people's best efforts to maintain their cultural identity, they ultimately change as a result of social interaction.

This hybridity isn't always cozy. Some characters are perplexed or feel bad about abandoning their customs. If they marry outside of their group, for example, they risk disapproval from their own

groups. Nevertheless, the books demonstrate that postcolonial life is characterized by composite identities. Therefore, identity is something that develops, blends, and adapts even in the face of resistance; it is not something pure to be preserved unaltered.

### **Displacement and the Feeling of Not Fully Belonging**

Displacement is another key concept in postcolonial thinking. Displacement can be physical, such as migration from village to city or from one country to another. People who feel like they don't belong anywhere can also experience emotional or psychological problems. Cultural identity is frequently impacted by displacement since individuals must reestablish their identity in a new setting.

In *A Fine Balance*, caste violence and financial need force Ishvar and Omprakash to flee their village. They carry their memories, abilities, and anxieties with them when they relocate to the city. They are no longer considered equals in the city, but they are also no longer a whole part of their hamlet. Their identity is torn between exile and home, past and present. Their fight for survival and dignity demonstrates how cultural identity becomes difficult and fragile due to displacement.

The young Parsi student in the same book, Maneck, eventually departs India to pursue his studies and career elsewhere. He feels dislocated even though he has a choice. In addition to feeling alone and out of place in the West, he is unhappy with the changes in India. He feels as though the basic ties he once had are gone, and his sense of self becomes fragmented. The representation of identity is further complicated by this emotional displacement.

When Nariman Vakeel, an elderly Parsi man, is forced to move out of his own apartment and into his daughter's family's cramped apartment in *Family Matters*, he experiences bodily displacement. His dignity and sense of belonging are severely impacted by this shift, even though it has nothing to do with international migration. The small area, intergenerational strife, and financial hardship demonstrate how family and urban displacement can occur. In addition to demonstrating how material stresses challenge cultural and familial identities, the way Nariman's children handle his care reflects their ideals, anxieties, and resentments.

Through these tales, Mistry implies that many people experience some form of displacement in a postcolonial society that is changing. Loss, adjustment, and movement all influence their identities. Wider factors including urbanization, political choices, and economic change are connected to this relocation.

### **Subaltern Voices and Everyday Lives**

The term "subaltern" in postcolonial theory refers to people who are socially, politically, or economically outside the centers of power. They are often the poor, the lower castes, minorities, and women whose voices are not normally heard in official histories. One of the important questions in postcolonial studies is whether the subaltern can speak, and whether their experiences can be represented in literature and history.

Mistry's novels give a lot of space to such subaltern characters. In *A Fine Balance*, the tailors Ishvar and Om, the beggar children, the street dwellers, and many minor figures show how the Emergency and state policies destroy the lives of the poor. They suffer forced sterilisation, slum demolitions, police violence, and exploitation by landlords and rich people. The novel does not focus only on leaders or the middle class; it pays attention to the details of ordinary suffering.

Through dialogue, description, and small acts of kindness or cruelty, Mistry shows how these people think, hope, and resist, even when they have very little power. Their cultural identity is tied to their caste, village background, and shared memories of injustice. Yet they also create new forms of community in the city. Sharing food, stories, and complaints becomes a way to survive.

In *Such a Long Journey*, the domestic worker and other minor characters also show how class and religion shape identity. Their loyalty, labor, and silent support keep the lives of middle-class families going, but their own dreams and fears are usually ignored. Mistry makes them visible by giving them names, feelings, and histories. In this way, he invites readers to see how national politics and economic systems affect the smallest details of daily life.

By focusing on everyday experiences, Mistry challenges grand stories of progress or national glory. He suggests that to understand cultural identity in a postcolonial nation, one must look at how the weakest and poorest live. Their identities are not just given to them; they are formed in struggle against structures of power.

### **Cultural Memory, History, and the Nation**

Cultural memory refers to the way communities remember their past through stories, rituals, and shared images. These memories play a major role in shaping identity. In postcolonial societies, cultural memory is often contested. Some memories are celebrated, while others are silenced or forgotten.

In Mistry's novels, characters frequently recall past events-family histories, communal conflicts, personal losses that continue to influence their present lives. In *Such a Long Journey*, old photographs, letters, and conversations keep alive memories of better days, as well as memories of betrayal and disappointment. Gustad's friendship with Major Bilimoria, and the later revelations about political corruption, show how trust can be broken by forces beyond an individual's control. The shock of this betrayal becomes part of Gustad's and his family's memory of the nation.

In *Family Matters*, the aging body of Nariman and his memories of a past love affair with a woman from a different community reveal the tensions between personal desire and social rules. The fact that his Parsi family stopped him from marrying a non-Parsi woman shows how community identity can limit individual choice. These past decisions continue to affect his children and stepchildren, shaping their resentments and duties.

Mistry also uses national events, like the Partition, the Emergency, and communal riots, as a backdrop to his stories. These events are not just history lessons; they appear as memories, fears, and scars in the minds of characters. Through them, we see how cultural identity is formed by remembering not only success and pride, but also violence and injustice.

This approach questions simple, heroic versions of national history. Instead of a smooth story of progress, Mistry offers fragmented, painful, and complex memories. Cultural identity, in his novels, is something people piece together from such memories; it is never complete and never entirely peaceful.

### **Tradition, Modernity, and Moral Conflict**

A repeated theme in Mistry's fiction is the conflict between tradition and modernity. Tradition stands for old customs, religious practices, family expectations, and community rules. Modernity stands for new ideas, urban lifestyles, education, technology, and political change. In postcolonial India, these two forces often clash, especially in the lives of young people and minority groups.

In *Such a Long Journey*, Gustad wants his children to follow Parsi customs and respect elders, but they are attracted to new ways of thinking. His son does not want to follow the path chosen for him. This generational conflict is not just personal; it reflects how cultural identity itself is being reshaped. For Gustad, certain traditions give meaning and structure to life. For his children, the same traditions may feel like restrictions in a modern world.

In *Family Matters*, the conflict appears in how different family members treat Nariman. Traditional values would require children to care for aging parents with respect and patience. But modern pressures like small flats, financial struggles, and individual ambitions make this difficult. The result is tension, guilt, and sometimes harsh behavior. The novel asks whether a community can maintain its moral values in a modern city marked by selfishness and competition.

In *A Fine Balance*, tradition and modernity meet in the context of caste and urbanisation. Some characters try to escape caste oppression by learning a trade and moving to the city, which seems more modern and free. However, they find that new forms of exploitation exist there. Modern politics and programmes, such as the Emergency's development schemes, do not always bring justice; they can bring new forms of control. The characters must decide what values to hold onto and how to behave morally in an unfair world.

Mistry does not give easy answers. He shows that both tradition and modernity have good and bad sides. Some traditions protect community bonds and ethical behavior, but they can also support exclusion or prejudice. Modern changes can bring freedom and opportunity, but they can also encourage greed and selfishness. Cultural identity, therefore, is shaped in the space between tradition and modernity, where individuals and groups negotiate what to keep and what to change.

### **Economic Inequality, Power, and Identity**

In Mistry's books, cultural identity is invariably linked to economic and social circumstances. Language and religion are not the only factors involved. Work, money, and social standing all have a significant impact. Economic disparity is extremely prevalent in postcolonial India. The lifestyles of the rich and the poor are very different, even though they reside in the same cities.

In *A Fine Balance*, this inequality is very clear. Dina Dalal tries to remain independent by running a small tailoring business. She fears becoming dependent on her brother or losing her flat. The

tailors Ishvar and Om struggle simply to have daily food and shelter. The beggar children are forced into begging and mutilation. The way these people see themselves, and the way others see them, is strongly shaped by their economic position.

Poor characters may be seen as “low” or “dirty” by the rich, which becomes part of their social identity. Yet Mistry gives these characters rich inner lives, showing that they have pride, humor, and moral sense, even when they are treated badly. This representation challenges the notion that the poor are simply victims or background figures. It also shows how power works in daily life—through landlords, police, politicians, and even “respectable” middle-class people.

Money problems also lead to conflict in families, according to *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters*. Relationships are shaped by things like hospital costs, rent, school tuition, and job insecurity. Depending on their ability to support themselves financially, a character's feeling of value may increase or decrease. Economic failure can seriously damage identity in a society where wealth and prestige are frequently used as indicators of success.

Mistry argues that we cannot fully comprehend people without examining the distribution of power and resources by tying cultural identity to economic inequality. Depending on whether a person is wealthy, middle class, or impoverished, their experience of a Parsi, Hindu, or Muslim identity will vary. Other types of identification are complicated and cross-cut by class.

### **Conclusion**

As a result, Rohinton Mistry's postcolonial novels paint a vivid, comprehensive image of cultural identity in India following independence. He illustrates how people and communities fight to define themselves in a society characterized by colonial past, national politics, intercommunal conflicts, and economic injustice in novels like *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*. His emphasis on the Parsi minority provides a unique perspective on issues of preservation, fear of decline, and belonging. Cultural identity is portrayed as fluid rather than static in all of his works. It is influenced by subaltern experiences, where the impoverished and marginalized must struggle to be seen and heard; displacement, where individuals travel across spaces and feel out of place; and hybridity, where people combine languages and habits. Through shared histories and family stories, cultural memory keeps people connected to the past even in the face of a challenging present. Mistry makes a connection between big postcolonial theories and the lives of everyday people by closely examining everyday circumstances and personal feelings. His books imply that cultural identity is a continuous negotiation influenced by human connections, history, and power rather than a straightforward label.

His art thus provides a potent illustration of the ways in which individuals in postcolonial societies still construct, challenge, and embody their identities.

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