

Rohinton Mistry's Literary Universe: A Postcolonial Humanist Exploration

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry, an Indian Parsi author who migrated from Bombay (now Mumbai) to Canada in 1975, stands as an iconic figure of the post-colonial era. His literary journey began with *Tales from Ferozsha Baag*, a collection of short stories published in 1987. Subsequently, he crafted three remarkable novels: *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1997), and *Family Matters* (2002). Additionally, Mistry penned a novella titled *The Scream* (2008), released in a limited edition of 150 copies to support a Canadian charity. While his works primarily delve into the lives of the Indian Parsi community, also known as Parsees, it is essential not to confine Mistry solely to this identity, as his concerns and narratives extend far beyond, embodying a broader humanistic perspective. This article exemplifies the essence of postcolonialism and its enduring relevance in today's global context.

Keywords: Humanist exploration, postcolonialism, Parsi population, migration, third world nations etc.

Postcolonialism, born from an examination of the emancipatory struggles of colonized populations, has undergone significant development over time. India, a nation actively involved in the fight against British colonial rule, witnessed the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as a prominent figure. Gandhi not only spearheaded the inaugural and triumphant non-violent movement but also formulated concepts for a postcolonial Indian society. His profound spirituality enabled him to see all individuals as equals, vehemently rejecting any form of subjugation, whether imposed by external forces or perpetrated within society upon fellow subalterns. Gandhi's commitment to indigenous culture was evident through his support for rural enterprises and the vision of Ram Rajya. His untimely demise left room for those who claimed to be his successors but conveniently abandoned his philosophical principles, engaging in political tactics akin to the British. Consequently, marginalized members of society, known as the subalterns, continue to endure wretchedness.

In subsequent years, within the African context, figures like Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor engaged in discourse concerning the suppressed Black identity imposed by colonial powers. Franz Fanon posited that the persistent and unfavourable depiction of the indigenous population by colonizers led to the internalization of falsehoods. Indigenous individuals attempted to imitate Western cultural traditions without success, revealing evidence of cultural domination.

Edward Said, a prominent Arab academic, conducted an analysis of the biased Orientalist perspective adopted by colonists, highlighting the crucial concept of the self-other divide in postcolonial theory. These thinkers collectively contribute to our understanding of the enduring legacies of colonialism, the struggle for self-identity, and the pursuit of cultural autonomy in a postcolonial world. During the 1990s, Homi Bhabha, an Indian

scholar, made modifications to the concept of mimicry by incorporating the notion of hybridity inside it. He has undergone hybridization, blending their native identity with their adopted English identity, and exists in a condition of liminality, being neither fully English nor fully Indian. This state of in-betweenness is also applicable to the colonizer, which may be met with scepticism by certain groups. The task of addressing the inherent issue of insufficient representation of the subaltern fell upon Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, as he lacked the means to be heard and lacked the influence or authority that is typically acquired through proficiency in the English language.

According to Malik (2010, pp. 143-147), the current portrayal of the third world predominantly stems from a Western perspective.

Postcolonial studies primarily focus on marginalized individuals, often referred to as the "other," who have experienced colonization and oppression, regardless of factors like gender, social class, race, or religious beliefs. This perspective emphasizes the importance of justice and highlights the issue of identity, particularly how the identities of the oppressed are targeted for erasure or distortion by colonial powers or authoritarian regimes. Rooted in the historical context of the struggle for independence, postcolonial philosophy has a political orientation aligned with resistance against oppressive governing systems reminiscent of colonial powers. In the era of postmodern globalization, interactions among immigrants, host country residents, and the merging of cultures are increasing. This necessitates equitable relationships, transcending historical dynamics of colonization, racial divisions, and power imbalances.

Postcolonial scholars argue that marginalized individuals in democratic societies face challenges in a commodified global landscape due to the negative impact of globalization on their well-being. To remain relevant in the era of postmodernity, postcolonial theory should transform itself into a more comprehensive and expansive humanist perspective within the global community. Even Frantz Fanon, a proponent of violence against colonial powers, recognized the importance of fostering unity among colonized individuals through the recognition of a shared history of oppression, regardless of their racial backgrounds. The novel revolves around a Parsi family in Bombay (now Mumbai).

The patriarch, Nariman Vakeel, is a retired English literature professor in his seventies, suffering from Parkinson's disease. His step-daughter Coomy is more concerned about his condition than his step-son Jal. They all live in Chateau Felicity.

Despite being of marriageable age, both siblings, Roxana and Yezad, remain unmarried. Roxana is Nariman's daughter from his previous marriage to Yasmeen. She is married to Yezad, and they have two sons, Murad and Jehangir, and they live in Pleasant Villa, a property Nariman generously provided them.

The narrative begins with Nariman's accident on the street, resulting in a fractured ankle. He is sent to a medical facility and returns home in a cast after two days. The doctor says it will take several weeks for his ankle to heal, which worries Coomy as she's already exhausted caring for him. A week later, Nariman is temporarily moved to Roxana's house without her prior knowledge, with the assurance that it will be for just a few days. As time passes, Coomy's highly imaginative mind devises a clever strategy to evade the professor's return. Jal intentionally strikes the roof of Nariman's room with force, resulting in the dislodging of the plaster.

Subsequently, Nariman and Coomy visit Roxana's home to inform her about a roof leak, making it impossible for Nariman to stay there. Roxana and her husband Yezad are understandably concerned. Yezad asks Coomy for financial help, but she refuses, leading to a heated argument between them. To save her reputation, Coomy hires Edul, an unskilled handyman from their building, to fix the roof. Inexperienced in the task, a falling iron beam tragically kills both Edul and Coomy.

Meanwhile, Yezad, burdened by the financial responsibilities of caring for Nariman, turns to gambling as a way to alleviate his financial woes. In a politically charged environment, Yezad falsely informs his supervisor about a request from activists associated with the Shiva Sena party. They wanted to change the signboard of the sports emporium where Yezad works from "Mumbai" to "Bombay" in exchange for money. However, the emporium's owner, Mr. Kapoor, is deeply attached to Bombay's heritage and refuses to consider the change, offering money instead.

On the agreed day, a group claiming affiliation with the Shiv Sena arrives, and Mr. Kapoor's angry rejection of their request leads to a violent confrontation. He throws money at them, offending the group, and tragically, Kapoor dies during the altercation. Yezad is emotionally devastated and feels personally responsible for Kapoor's death. In response, he turns to religion for solace in the face of these tumultuous events.

The demise of Coomy instigates a much-needed transformation in the lives of these individuals. According to Jal's proposal, Yezad's apartment has been sold for a sum of forty lakh rupees. A portion of the funds is allocated towards the refurbishment of the entity, while the remaining amount is deposited in banks. The interest generated from these deposits is deemed adequate to sustain the individuals for the entirety of their lives. All individuals have now transitioned to this expansive lodging. Following a period of one year, Nariman succumbs to Parkinson's disease. The Epilogue, which is presented through Jehangir's perspective, depicts Yezad engaging in the activities of reading religious scriptures and engaging in prayer. He currently identifies as a devout adherent of the Zoroastrian faith, displaying a self-righteous demeanour and exhibiting disapproval towards manifestations of contemporary societal advancements.

Nevertheless, according to Jehangir's perspective, he is solely regarded as a bigot. The narrative presents several themes, including the horror caused by the political organization inside the city, the presence of gambling activities, the economic struggles faced by the characters and their effects on children, and ultimately, the themes of guilt and redemption. Mistry's literary works reflect his engagement as a postcolonial writer, wherein he prominently addresses the concerns pertaining to the Parsi community and issues of race.

The work brings attention to the significant matter of postcolonial identity. Mistry demonstrates an understanding of the declining population of Parsis globally. The number of the Parsis in India has experienced a decline, decreasing from 100,000 individuals in 1961 to 75,000 individuals according to the 1987 census (Halder 102). Present estimates suggest that the current population is at approximately 60,000 individuals. The Government of India has officially designated the community as endangered and has implemented various incentives in order to prevent the extinction of this remarkable community. According to Murphy (2019). In the television show "Family Matters," Dr. Fitter and Mr. Masalawala engage in a spirited dialogue regarding the phenomenon of declining population figures. According to demographic analysts, it is widely believed that the

Parsi community would cease to exist in fifty years. Dr. Fitter said that extinction, similar to the fate of dinosaurs, had occurred. The examination of our skeletal remains will be necessary.

Yezad, the main protagonist, shared a similar aspiration to move to Canada but was unable to do so, leaving a lasting impact on his mental state. Economic challenges often lead many Parsis in the region to postpone marriage until they have stable jobs or find affordable housing in cities like Mumbai, where a substantial Parsi population resides. The Parsi population has also declined in recent decades due to intense competition among the educated and affluent community members. The island's inhabitants feel vulnerable due to their geographical location amidst densely populated maritime waters.

Purity is another significant issue within Parsi society. Until 2017, the community strictly prohibited individuals of non-Parsi descent from joining through marriage. Conversely, Parsi girls who married non-Parsi individuals were excommunicated, leading to a decline in the population. The removal of this rule resulted from strong protests by young Parsis. Nariman's treatment of his romantic partner Lucy and his children's reaction follows a similar trend, with Nariman's choice to marry Yasmin likely influenced by societal norms and parental pressure. In a critical juncture in his life, Nariman suppresses his innermost longings, only to see them resurface in his dreams.

The investigation of Parsis' identity is a pressing concern, encompassing lifestyle, historical background, mythology, religious practices, and the declining population issue. Mistry's paintings also reflect the Westernized Parsi lifestyle, influenced by English culture. This influence is evident in his works, like the English rhymes in *Such a Long Journey*, English-style birthday celebrations in "Family Matters," and Yezad addressing his father-in-law as "chief" in *Family Matters*. These circumstances significantly shape the Parsi collective consciousness. Efforts are made to pass down religious beliefs and moral principles to the younger generation, though success is not guaranteed. Yezad tells his sons about his father's courageous act during civil unrest at his workplace, symbolized by a clock he preserves as a symbol of his father's integrity and bravery.

Nariman's storytelling of Faridoon and Zuhaak's narrative represents the eternal struggle between good and evil and aims to instill the ideal in the modern generation. However, the children are more engrossed in Enid Blyton books, which concerns Yezad as he fears they may develop an unhealthy mindset. In contrast, Roxana takes pride in her son's care for his grandfather (108).

Postcolonialism is closely tied to politics, as it emerges from the resistance of colonized populations against their occupiers. In Mistry's works, politics plays a central role. "Such a Long Journey" portrays the adverse experiences of Parsi military personnel and a bank employee due to the manipulative actions of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The line between public and private spheres blurs in his works. "A Fine Balance" depicts the suffering of impoverished Parsi and Hindu individuals during the 1975 Emergency, also enforced by Indira Gandhi, exposing the superficiality of the political elite.

In *Family Matters*, Mistry criticizes the Shiv Sena, a political group in India, for its narrow-minded perspective in renaming Bombay to Mumbai, highlighting the clash with cosmopolitan principles. In the same

novel, Husain, Yezad's colleague, suffered family losses during the post-Babri riots, showing resilience despite past trauma. Vilas, an employee at a bookstore, helps illiterate migrant laborers write letters. These characters collectively contribute to a positive outcome in Yezad's life.

Mistry's works embrace a humanistic ethos aligned with postcolonial perspectives, focusing on the elderly, oppressed Parsis, and marginalized groups. In *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, the novel focuses on the socio-economic conditions of rural Hindus in India. Yezad is the main provider for his family despite his limited income. He also cares for his father-in-law. Yezad's wife carefully budgets their monthly income by allocating it to different expenses in envelopes. Yezad's son takes small bribes from classmates as a class monitor to support his father. Their son Murad walks to school to save on transportation costs. In case of a leaking roof in Jal's house, accommodating Nariman in the bedroom becomes a concern, and Murad tries to improvise a shelter on the balcony with limited resources. They search for plastic sheets to cover gaps in the balcony railings but find them insufficient for making a roof. Yezad suggests consulting Villie for a tarpaulin or similar item.

It is surprising to see this portrayal of a lower-middle-class Parsi family, as the Parsi community is often associated with affluence, with prominent individuals like Tata, Wadia, Godrej, Poonawala, and others featured in prestigious lists like Fortune and Forbes. Mistry's work reflects a genuine commitment to postcolonial humanism. He shifts his focus to the less privileged Parsi society, avoiding the act of essentializing and homogenizing his characters, which is viewed suspiciously by postcolonial writers.

Yezad's working life in the TV show *Family Matters* is portrayed in detail. He is fortunate to have a compassionate employer, Mr. Kapoor, who is also intellectually inclined, a rarity in the business community. Kapoor deeply appreciates Bombay's history, as evident in his shop's name, "Bombay Sports Goods Emporium," and his collection of historical paintings and photographs. He expresses sorrow over the city's changes over time. Recognizing Yezad's interests, Kapoor generously gifts him valuable photos from his collection, a selfless gesture appreciated by Yezad. Mr. Kapoor embraces Bombay's cosmopolitan nature and participates in diverse community celebrations, contrasting with Yezad's orthodox Parsi actions, like submerging non-Zoroastrian images in the ocean. Kapoor commutes via local railways, embracing the city's diverse population without complaint. He expresses a philosophical desire to fully engage with the city's people and public transportation.

Yezad finds Kapoor's philosophical decision inspiring but later exploits Kapoor's experiment to extort money from him, taking advantage of the Shiv Sena's atmosphere of terror. However, Kapoor consistently upholds his cherished ideals without making any compromises. He demonstrates audacity by confronting the individuals engaging in extortion, rather than engaging in peaceful dialogue with those seeking to alter the cosmopolitan nature of his beloved city of Bombay. He assumes the role of a martyr in support of a certain cause.

Similar to Mistry's past literary works, those from the lower middle class are depicted as leading a tough existence. The individual's existence is plagued by numerous challenges: their timepieces cease functioning, the water supply becomes depleted at the early hour of six in the morning, their local vendors consistently engage in dishonest practices, and securing suitable housing is an exceedingly difficult endeavour. In this densely populated

urban area, even small rooms in a modest residential building are leased for periods of 8 to 12 hours (138). The everyday journey by rail is characterized by a series of actions reminiscent of Tarzan's acrobatic feats (137). During an interview, the individual expressed that the members of the Parsi community are indeed human beings, possessing physical bodies and emotions, and are subject to the full range of human experiences. They are capable of exhibiting both admirable and contemptible behaviour, similar to any other group of individuals, as they navigate the complexities of life, which inherently encompasses moments of joy, sorrow, cruelty, and compassion.

This is the reason why their narratives possess a universal quality. According to Arzan [13]. Mistry places significant value on the shared experiences of individuals, while also recognizing the importance of introducing disruptive events that challenge established structures within a work of fiction.

The Concept of Salvation through Prayer

Mistry's humanistic beliefs are juxtaposed with matters of faith. The novel's specific circumstances have been manipulated and manipulated in order to reveal multiple facets of the struggle. Mistry's scepticism regarding faith is evident in this online platform. He strongly aligns with the principles and values of humanism.

The last sections of the story depict Yezad as a character consumed by regret, as he acknowledges the abandonment of his moral principles and succumbing to the allure of avarice. The spiritual principles offer nourishment to individuals through periods of adversity, although self-centeredness poses a significant obstacle in this context. This phenomenon is seen in the character of Coomy, who, when confronted with the undesirable responsibility of accommodating her sick father, fabricates the justification of a roof leak, asserting that the occurrence is beyond anyone's control and hence not attributable to any individual's fault. Jal is persuaded to collaborate, however it is said that they express discomfort with portraying God as a helpful figure in their deceptive performance (184). In a remarkable display of poetic justice, she meets her demise as a consequence of expelling "Pappa" from her residence. The role of God can be perceived as having a sports nature, as evidenced by the signboard of the "Bombay Sporting Gods Emporium," which becomes apparent when the letter "o" in "Goods" is removed due to a storm (370). Subsequently, Yezad's suggested scheme is unexpectedly thwarted by a divine intervention, wherein an authentic member of the Shiv Sena emerges instead of the false individual, resulting in the tragic demise of an innocent individual named Kapoor.

Yezad is overwhelmed by guilt and desires retribution, realizing that divine justice may be influenced by kindness, as he expresses remorse for his actions. During financial hardships caused by his father-in-law's hospital expenses, Yezad starts visiting the fire temple. The murder of Mr. Kapoor and his perceived responsibility for it led him to pray at the agiary, a fire temple. Roxana finds solace in Yezad's newfound belief in prayer. The importance of belief varies for individuals, and its impact on one's subconscious and inner self is complex. Connecting with the Absolute is a profound challenge, different from Biblical times.

Yezad's response of "God is great" to Jehangir's query about finding new employment suggests a willingness to comply if it is meant to be. Yezad undergoes moments of epiphany, transitioning from aversion to tending to Nariman's needs, such as offering tea and shaving him. Contemplating mortality can deter unproductive

behaviors, and prolonged acquaintance can evoke various emotions in people, from envy to compassion. Yezad's metaphysical discoveries create a separation between him and the conventional perception of an affectionate paternal figure, diverging from the humanist paradigm.

Jahangir reminisces on the name-game that he had devised during his childhood, reflecting on the innocence of his young mind. The validation of the young individual's subsequent perspective is substantiated by the utilization of a first-person narrative in the "Epilogue" segment of the literary work. After researching the etymologies and significances of the names belonging to the remaining family members, Jehangir arrived at the conclusion that their collective identities constituted an ideal family unit. He perceived them as being fortunate, possessing extensive worldly possessions, being under the protection of a personal guardian angel, and benefiting from the nurturing presence of their mother. However, the parents were engaged in a conflict and experiencing dissatisfaction.

During that particular period, Yezad exhibited amusement by means of laughter and jesting, as well as engaging in activities such as whistling and interacting with the youngsters. The aforementioned statement is outdated. According to the text, the individual in question engages in prayer or reading activities while at home and expresses a disturbance caused by the presence of music. Murad holds the belief that his father has reached a state of extreme religious devotion, characterized by descending into the depths of the metaphorical abyss (493). "You are increasingly displaying signs of fanaticism," he is compelled to express to his father. The user has provided a numerical value without any context or explanation.

Jehangir asserts that his biological father has been replaced by an unfamiliar individual who engages in incessant prayer (Jehangir 500).

Despite Yezad's inability to consistently exhibit honesty in his personal conduct, he possesses a strong desire for his sons to embrace moral rectitude. In this endeavor, he seeks divine assistance by invoking the aid of a higher power.

"May I humbly request the divine blessings of Dada Ormuzd upon my sons, ensuring their well-being and moral integrity. I beseech you to safeguard our entire family in accordance with your divine plan, and grant me the strength to fulfill your divine purpose." (437).

However, Jehangir, the younger child, has characteristics commonly associated with the new generation, displaying a tendency to resist accepting circumstances as they are presented to him. The internal tension experienced by the youngster is evident in his profound yearning, which appears to be shared by the writer, as expressed by the statement, "If only Dada Ormuzd could assist me in comprehending!" What are the reasons for the frequent conflicts between fathers and sons arising from prayer and religion? The question raised is whether that is in accordance with His will (466). The query that humanists pose to spiritualists pertains to the essence of their beliefs.

The novel *Family Matters* exhibits a thematic resonance with T.S. Eliot's play *The Family Reunion*, published in 1939. Both works share similarities in terms of their title and theme. The protagonist of Eliot's play, Harry, experiences persistent feelings of guilt due to his wish to murder his wife, resulting in her accidental

drowning at sea. This remorse manifests itself in the form of the classical Eumenides. The protagonist ultimately seeks redemption, not for his own transgression, but for the wrongdoing committed by his father, who also harboured intentions to harm Harry's mother due to his infatuation with Amy's sister, Agatha. It was Agatha who intervened, motivated by the unborn child, namely Harry. The *Family Matters* does not align with Eliot's perspective on examining events through the lens of original sin, where Adam's transgression held future generations responsible. Nevertheless, the level of responsibility in this case seems more tangible despite the fact that the fundamental issue remains unchanged, namely, the alignment of one's intentions and actions in the context of wrongdoing.

Jehangir's commentary serves as a critique of the ineffectiveness of artificial and simplistic religious beliefs. The individual expresses a desire for a truly compassionate system that resonates with the most profound aspects of one's being and extends beyond the boundaries established by their father within the confines of the drawing room. In the last stages of the tale, the protagonist receives information regarding the provision of sustenance and attire for his deceased grandfather from Dada Ormuzd. In Jehangir's own narrative, it becomes evident that he experiences a profound sense of amusement in response to the concept of a divine enterprise encompassing both apparel and culinary services. Furthermore, he lacks comprehension of the justification for incessantly invoking the name of a higher power while simultaneously neglecting the various manifestations of said power. This is exemplified by their failure to acknowledge the pleas of Nariman.

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