



RESEARCH ARTICLE



CONTROVERSY AMONG THE MIGRANTS REFLECTION IN THE WORKS OF ROHINTON MISTRY

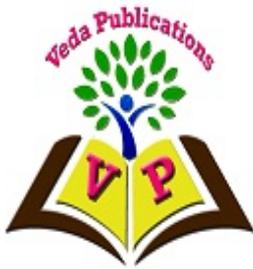
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ABSTRACT



The paper explores the historical displacement of the Parsi community from Iran to India and later to Canada. It highlights the social, cultural, psychological, and political challenges they face as a minority group. The theme of migration and diasporic conflict in the works of Rohinton Mistry, with special reference to *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Stories from Firozsha Baag* has been examined. The study reveals how identity, gender roles, tradition and resilience shape diasporic existence, emphasising the persistent struggle for survival, dignity and belonging.

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INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry is widely recognized as one of the distinguished Indian novelists writing in English, and most of his works have been shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize. He belongs to the Parsi community, was born in India in 1952, and later moved to Canada in 1975.

Historically, the Parsis trace their origins to Iran. Intense religious persecution and the rise of Islamic orthodoxy compelled them to leave their homeland and seek refuge in India. They initially arrived in Gujarat, where local rulers granted them asylum. These events occurred long before the British established their rule in India.

The Parsis followed the teachings of Zoroastrianism and were deeply committed to their religious identity. As a minority community, they faced pressure from the dominant Muslim population, who urged them to convert to Islam. They were confronted with two difficult choices: either embrace Islam—symbolized by accepting the Koran—or resist and face possible death. Their determination to preserve their faith made resistance the only viable path, though many lacked the strength to fight back.

These harsh circumstances eventually pushed them to migrate to India. After arriving in places like Sanjan and Gujarat, they gradually integrated into local society. Despite losing much of their wealth and being subjected to many restrictions, they adapted to the new environment. Parsi women, for instance, were required to follow specific dress codes. Still, the community held on to its religious identity.

Because of their intelligence and industrious nature, Parsis soon earned the trust of local rulers and took up significant administrative roles. Later, during the British period, they continued to prosper and enjoy new opportunities under colonial governance.

The Parsis played a crucial role in shaping modern Bombay. They pioneered India's banking sector, initiated major industrial ventures, and produced eminent business families such as the Tatas and Birlas. Many well-known figures in politics, diplomacy, entrepreneurship, and other fields also come from the Parsi community.

However, like many migrant groups, Parsis are part of a diaspora that often faces discrimination and marginalization. Across the world, diasporic communities are frequently treated as second-class citizens. Though Parsis remained emotionally connected to Iran, the continuous turmoil there discouraged them from returning, leading many to seek safer and more equal living conditions elsewhere.

As migrants, Parsis encounter numerous struggles associated with leaving their homeland. These difficulties parallel the broader challenges faced by diasporic groups, which may include social, political, cultural, psychological, and religious conflicts. Rohinton Mistry's novels reflect these complex experiences, revealing the tensions created by migration and the community's relationship with both their adopted nation and the homeland left behind. Indian diasporas, in particular, often endure what scholars call a "triple displacement," involving loss of homeland, struggles in the host nation, and emotional fragmentation.



Migration results in several layers of displacement for individuals uprooted from their homeland. The first is **spatial displacement**, where people physically leave their native soil and settle in unfamiliar territory. The second is **linguistic displacement**, as migrants must adjust to new languages and communication patterns. The third is **cultural displacement**, where individuals find themselves surrounded by customs, practices, and ways of life vastly different from their own, sometimes even incompatible or unsettling. These experiences affect not only Parsis but all diasporic communities. Humanity has long battled the sense of alienation born from migration, often without recognizing its deeper implications. By the twentieth century, however, the cycles of departure, return, and resettlement became central discussions, prompting both immigrants and migrants to become conscious of their fragmented identities. Earlier scholars have explored diaspora extensively, but Rohinton Mistry's works stand out for their powerful impact on society, demonstrating how novels can serve as catalysts for social awareness and change.

WOMEN CHARACTERS IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S NOVELS

Mistry often portrays his male characters within traditional frameworks, but his women characters are shaped according to a "Parsi-fied" interpretation of the pativrata ideal. This notion, rooted deeply in Indian culture, emphasizes marital loyalty or chastity, leading to a system where a woman's worth is judged primarily through her moral conduct. A striking example appears in Mistry's depiction of Dilnawazji, whose relationship with her husband reflects tensions between personal desire and domestic

expectations. She is shown as a wife unaware of or indifferent to her husband's intimate needs—highlighting the constraints imposed by cultural norms.

Mistry employs various narrative techniques, especially self-reporting through memory. One powerful instance is Gustad Noble's repeated recollections of his father's emotional and professional failures. Alongside this, Mistry incorporates a collective memory rooted in Parsi traditions—rituals, communal practices, and India's broader historical landscape. His characters often refer to the painful narratives of wars and political tensions involving neighboring countries such as China, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These memories enrich the storytelling and reveal conflicts that are psychological, political, and personal.

Parsis, whether in India or living as South Asian migrants in countries like Canada, are well aware of their minority status. This awareness pushes them to seek survival through education, skills, and excellence. The fear of losing their cultural identity becomes strong, and this anxiety is expressed clearly through Gustad Noble's despair in the following sentiment:

What future awaited Sohrab? How could he thrive in a world full of political hostility, linguistic pride, and societal prejudice? His situation resembled the struggles of Black Americans who had to work twice as hard to gain recognition. How could Gustad help his son understand the consequences of rejecting the dreams his father had built for him? Sohrab's choices shattered the very



purpose Gustad had anchored his life to. (**IN TEXT CITATION**)

For Gustad, stability and identity seem possible only through tradition. However, for his son Sohrab, maintaining a single, unchanging identity from childhood to adulthood is unrealistic. Unlike his father, Sohrab embraces the idea that identity is fluid—constantly shaped by cultural interactions, political pressures, and social change. Thus, Mistry suggests that the younger Parsi generation adjusts more easily to new environments, offering hope that diasporic cultures can blend with local cultures to address the challenges faced by displaced communities.

SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

Rohinton Mistry's debut novel explores the political and social challenges that India faced during the period surrounding the 1970s, particularly the turbulence caused by India's second conflict with Pakistan. The narrative blends national upheavals with personal struggles. At its center is **Gustad Noble**, a Bombay resident attempting to navigate the complexities of being a responsible father and husband while dealing with his rebellious son Sohrab and his deeply superstitious wife, Dilnavaz. His close companions include **Jimmy Bilimoria** and **Dhulia**, the latter of whom dies later in the story.

The novel portrays the life of a modest bank clerk, Gustad Noble, whose loyalty to loved ones and commitment to his Parsi identity are repeatedly tested through various events and crises. Themes of loyalty and life's journey form two contrasting threads in the narrative, often giving rise to conflicts. Though he lives an ordinary life, Noble is portrayed

with emotional depth, inviting readers to identify with his quiet strength and vulnerability. Mistry shows that heroism can exist in everyday life—within ordinary people who confront small but meaningful challenges. Unlike the grand characters of myths and legends, Mistry's figures are relatable human beings, full of imperfections but also capable of hope, endurance, and rare moments of triumph. Gustad's sincerity and humanity make his reactions both touching and unpredictable.

Flashbacks reveal that Gustad is still traumatized by his father's humiliating bankruptcy from years earlier. That traumatic episode crushed his own dreams of higher education, helping us understand why he struggles with his son Sohrab's refusal to join the prestigious engineering institute. Gustad sees Sohrab's choice as a denial of the very opportunities fate once snatched away from him. This causes deep emotional conflict, as all of Noble's hopes for his son begin to collapse.

Noble's troubles do not end here. His peace is further disturbed by the sudden reappearance of his once-close friend, **Major Bilimoria**. Jimmy seeks Gustad's help in carrying out a risky financial operation involving a secret transaction linked to then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Intended to funnel money to Bangladeshi guerrillas, the plan is revealed to be fraudulent, as Jimmy had misappropriated much of the money for his own family's needs. These gripping and dramatic developments push the boundaries of credibility, yet Mistry manages them effectively using techniques such as foreshadowing and flashbacks. Ultimately, the novel becomes more than the story of one man—



it reflects the experiences of an entire community, brought to life by the storyteller's imagination.

A FINE BALANCE

Another significant novel by Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*, was released in 1995. It revolves around the life of **Dina Dalal**, a widow who earns her living by sewing garments and renting out space in her apartment. The story introduces several other characters: her brother Nusswan, her husband Rustomji, her mother Mrs. Shroff, her tenant tailors Ishvar and Omprakash, and Maneck Kohlah. Dina is shown as an independent-minded woman in contrast to her controlling brother Nusswan. Nusswan resents her not only because of her defiance but also because she possesses beauty and independence. His cruelty manifests through physical and emotional abuse—pinching her painfully, threatening violence, and spying on her in private moments. One disturbing scene describes him watching her secretly after she finishes her bath.

Dina's life is further complicated by the intrusive behavior of the priest Framji, whose intentions toward her are openly lustful. His only desire is sensual indulgence, symbolized by the phrase *daab-chaab*, reflecting his morally corrupted personality.

Dina's mother is mentally unfit to offer her protection or support. After Dina's husband passes away, her brother Nusswan takes charge of her, following customary Indian traditions. However, instead of caring for her, he treats her harshly—assigning menial household work, beating her, and demanding complete subservience. Despite these circumstances, Dina remains determined and

courageous, choosing to live independently even after her husband's death.

Ishwar and Omprakash, the tailors who rent a room from Dina, are forced to abandon their slum homes because of the city's redevelopment plans. They arrive in Bombay with nothing but the hope of finding employment. Ishwar suffers terribly—his legs become infected due to gangrene, resulting in the amputation of both limbs. This tragedy destroys his ability to sew, costing him his job as a tailor. Yet he continues to fight for survival. Maneck Kohlah, another central figure, is a young student from a Himalayan village who moves to the city for a better education.

Avinash, Maneck's close friend, becomes a victim of political violence. He is tortured and killed by city police during the Anti-Indira, Anti-Sanjay, and Anti-Emergency protests. To conceal their brutality, the authorities label his death as a simple railway accident. Avinash's family members—emotionally destroyed by continuous harassment—end their lives, as they cannot bear the pressure of fulfilling expected family obligations.

A FINE BALANCE – INTERPRETATION

The narrative of *A Fine Balance* offers a vivid portrayal of Indian society during the Emergency of the mid-1970s, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed authoritarian rule. The political climate forces the destinies of the four main characters to intertwine. The declaration of Emergency shapes the plot and allows the characters to evolve while facing devastating hardships.

Mistry skillfully blends beauty with tragedy, capturing the essence of India through striking



imagery and emotionally powerful storytelling. His novels often feature characters larger than life, and in this work, each individual struggles to maintain a balance—between hope and despair, happiness and suffering. The title *A Fine Balance* reflects this fragile equilibrium. All characters endure adversity, and it is through these hardships that they discover their strengths and weaknesses. Mistry suggests that adversity, rather than prosperity, matures the human spirit. The close relationship between struggle and growth forms the central theme of the novel.

Although many characters experience suffering, the narrative emphasizes that life also holds moments of joy. These brief respites highlight the pessimistic yet instructive nature of existence—teaching future generations to live more wisely through the lessons learned from hardship.

Thus, Mistry's depiction of people and their struggles conveys a moral message, reinforcing the didactic value of the novel.

STORIES FROM FIROZSHA BAAG

Mistry's stories vividly portray the customs and day-to-day life of the Parsi community. The community is predominantly patriarchal, similar to many Hindu social structures. In ancient Hindu law, legislators like Manu and Baudhayana regarded women as inferior, excluding them from inheritance and property rights. Women were forbidden from remarriage, adopting children, or owning assets. Throughout their lives, they remained under male authority—first under fathers, later under husbands, and in widowhood under sons. Some were even burned on their husband's funeral pyre.

Parsi women experienced similar restrictions. One of the stories in *Firozsha Baag*, titled "**Auspicious Occasion**," narrates the marriage of Rustomji, a 50-year-old man, to a 16-year-old girl named Mehroo—reflecting the rigid social norms of the community.

The bridegroom in this story is already advanced in age, while the bride is still in early adolescence—an unusual and troubling combination. Certain traditional customs must have justified such a marriage arrangement. Rustomji, the older husband, does not feel genuine attraction toward Mehroo and cannot fulfill her emotional or physical needs. Instead, he hides his inadequacies by mistreating her, yelling at her, and expressing constant dissatisfaction.

Ironically, Rustomji feels a deep fascination for Gajra, their young domestic worker. His imagination wanders, and he often visualizes her body, recalling her beauty and the elegance of her sarees and blouses. He secretly desires her, though he never openly admits it. In contrast, he views Mehroo as unsuitable for him and continues to mistreat her out of frustration.

Through this narrative, Mistry highlights the emotional and psychological mismatch that arises when an elderly man is paired with a very young girl. The vast age gap between them leads to incompatibility and a lack of intimacy. Their marriage resembles a relationship between siblings—or even between a father and daughter—rather than a romantic partnership. Mistry deliberately avoids any harmonious portrayal of their marital life, underlining the inherent flaws in such mismatched unions.



Marriage, as a social institution, is expected to provide stability, companionship, and the continuation of family lineage. Ideally, both partners should experience emotional and physical fulfillment. When marriages occur too late in a man's life—or are forced despite incompatibility—the result is frustration and dissatisfaction, as seen in Rustomji and Mehroo's case. These kinds of relationships often lead to emotional tension and psychological distress. Mistry explores these themes extensively, not only in this story but also throughout *Firozsha Baag*.

CONCLUSION

Migration is a universal and unavoidable phenomenon. When people move into a new country, they become immigrants or diasporic communities. In most cases, they remain minorities and face challenges that the native population does not encounter. Although laws may promise equality, the lived experience is very different. Migrant groups often suffer indignities, discrimination, and constant social pressure. If they respond to these hardships by relocating again, the cycle continues, and their struggles repeat themselves in new places—just as the Parsis experienced from their journey from Iran to India and later from India to Canada.

Diasporic life is filled with uncertainty, emotional burden, and constant conflict. Migrants often endure psychological stress because there is no proper outlet for their suffering. Their grievances cannot always be resolved, but progress can be made when members of the community advance socially through education and skill development. Yet even with progress, they remain dependent on a limited set of opportunities and frequently confront systemic inequality.

This has been the experience of the Parsi community since their arrival in India. They initially aligned themselves with local rulers and proved their loyalty. Over time, some Parsis became pioneering entrepreneurs, founding banking institutions and industrial enterprises. Others excelled academically and professionally, demonstrating extraordinary capability. However, a considerable number still occupy lower economic positions and struggle to meet basic needs.

What unites the community is the persistent inequality they face in comparison with the majority population. They are often treated as outsiders or second-class citizens. To overcome societal barriers, Parsis have relied heavily on English education, which has enabled them to travel, study, work abroad, and engage in business. Yet, regardless of where they go, the challenges confronting diaspora groups remain strikingly similar.

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