Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
http://www.rjelal.com; Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com

Vol.4.Issue 4. 2016
(Oct.Dec.)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

BREAKING INTO THE SILENCE ZONE: MARGINALIZED VOICES AND THE FICTION OF ROHINTON MISTRY

Dr. SONIKA SETHI
Assistantt Professor, Dept.of English
S D College, Ambala Cantt, Haryana
Email: sonrok@yahoo.com

Dr. SONIKA SETHI

ABSTRACT

Books and all forms of writing are terror to those who wish to suppress the truth. Anonymous

Literature has always represented society in one form or another because writers are the sensitive souls of the society who are affected by the slightest possible change in their surroundings. These changes get reflected through their works and many a times these sound discordant and distressing notes on the behalf of a certain section of the society. Some of these concerns can be discerned in the fiction of Rohinton Mistry who is a conscientious writer. Most of his concerns are devoted towards the preservation of the Parsi Community which is fast moving towards its extinction. His later works, however, raise voice for the other marginalized sections of the society which include the economically and socially downtrodden, old and decrepit, women, etc. His concerns for the socially downtrodden and socially marginalized have found genuine representation in his works like— *Tales from the Firozsha Baag, Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance, Family Matters and Scream*. India, being a complex formulation of diverse religions, communities and races, can be considered the "melting pot" of the east which sometimes results in anarchy. How these races and communities survive during periods of intense anarchy will be the topic of discussion of this paper.

Key words- Displaced, Marginalized, Postmodernism etc.

Silence that invites me to come and see
Silence that asks me to reveal
Silence that wants me to make unwanted promises
Silence that does nothing but ruptures a wound deep within
Silence that makes me go weak
Silence that unearths agonizing memories
Silence that came so uninvited
Silence that fails to unbreak any Silence…
Pooja Nepal

Ihab Hassan's intervention in the postmodern argument was a moment to celebrate. He defined postmodernism as an "anti-formal anarchism" and brought together the different trends and undercurrents that constitute postmodernism. According to him, postmodernism was an urge to negate and unmask, "a celebration of silence and otherness" that has always been there but in a state of repression in the Western culture. Hassan outlined postmodernism as an impulse to decentre, "to create ontological and epistemological doubts"

as the society accepted and became intimate with disarray and chaos prevalent in the age. (Waugh, 407) These trends slowly got filtered from the Western society to the entire world and the writers belonging to non-western society have finally come to terms with this chaos that is evidently reflected in their work. India is a country of tremendous religious and cultural diversity. This diversity often leads to anarchy where some cultures get subjugated and others dominate. The dominated ones enter a zone of silence which is rather difficult to penetrate. The responsibility then falls upon the writers to highlight such 'others' and raise their voice which has been, till now unheard.

India is a country where almost all the religions of the world found representation and has given birth to four important religions of the world, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. While the overpowering majority of India is Hindu (80.5% of the population), the country also has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world (13.4%). Some of the other groups classified as minorities consist of Christians (2.3%), Sikhs (1.9%), Buddhists (0.8%), Jains (0.4%), and others (0.6%). Prominent among the latter are Parsis (69,601 in number), Baha'is (11,324), and Jews (4,650) (Registrar General of India 2001).

As has already been discussed the Parsis migrated from Iran to India sometime between the 8th and 10th centuries, with the dates of 716CE or 936CE commonly attributed to the arrival of the first migrants in coastal Gujarat, at Sanjan, as per the traditional Parsi account of migration recorded in Kissah-e-Sanjan. While, according to this account, religious persecution by the Arab rulers was instrumental in driving this group of Zoroastrians to India, other scholars have argued that trade, not persecution, was the primary thrust for this migration (Wink 1990). Susan Stiles Maneck is of the opinion that both factors, trade and the desire to establish a Zoroastrian community in an area free from Islamic dominance, "worked hand in hand" in the migration to other parts of the world, including India (Maneck, 1997).

The Parsis are followers of Prophet Zarathustra of Iran, whose Greek name is Zoroaster, who is believed to have preached a message of the one true god (monotheism), Ahura Mazda during the Bronze age between 625-551 BC. Legend tells us that his origin was divine. It is believed that Zarathustra left behind him nearly two million verses in the form of hymns and meditations but these writings were lost and some were destroyed by fire. However, in the later years these were written down by the fugitive Magian priests from memory and the message that he preached was detailed in the Gathas (or Songs of Wisdom), known as the core of the Zend Avesta, the sacred Zoroastrian text (Ahuja, 2008). Zoroastrianism was the predominant religion of Iran until the fall of the Sasanian Empire in the mid-7th century, after which Iran steadily adopted Islam. In contrast, the Zoroastrians in India, who became known as the Parsis, became a prosperous and well-respected community of merchants in western India, increasingly focused in Bombay. The Parsis currently amount to about 70,000 people in India, mostly concentrated in the city of Mumbai (47,000).They account for less than 0.4% of the population of the world and the number is about 2,605,000. Despite recent emigration from India, Mumbai continues to be by far the largest Parsi community in the world, as confirmed by a worldwide study conducted by the Federation of Zoroastrians Associations of North America (FEZANA), in 2004.

The number may be small but the influence of this ethno-religious group on the economic, social, and political development of modern India, particularly of the city of Mumbai, is extraordinary. Though pioneers in fields as diverse as medicine, law, aviation, industry, and politics, the Parsis today face a unique demographic challenge rather distinct from the still rapid population growth observed in India as a whole. While the population in the country grew by close to 185% between 1951 and 2001, the Parsi population experienced a negative growth of 37.7% during the same period (Registrar General of India 2001). The decline of the Parsi population has been observed for over five decades, and has raised serious concerns amongst social scientists and the community itself of a possible extinction (Unisa et al. 2008). This would represent a tragic loss of cultural diversity for India and the world. The Parsis have played an influential role not

only in the economic improvement of the country but also in social upliftment. Hence, the extinction of this ethno-religious, minority group would be a huge loss to the multicultural tradition of India.

Rohinton Mistry's fictional imagination primarily revolves around the cultural space of the Parsi community as they struggle to find space as well as voice in the cultural and political history of the country while maintaining the uniqueness of their religion. Similarly, the dichotomy of 'Self/Other', 'Dominant/Submissive' is one of the major areas of concern of the writer that often raises the issues of identity, alienation, belongingness, etc. Here, 'Otherness' can be defined as everything that resists or refuses the constant neutralized middle-class identities that have been privileged by the Eurocentric realist novel. According to Nandini Bhautoo

> We find that the world of Mistry's fiction is replete with such characters who hover on the periphery of neutralized, international bourgeois culture and revel in the multiformity of their culturally located existence. Parsis, the working class, the women and the aged people in Mistry's fiction play the role of the 'Other' to Hindus/Muslims, bourgeois/upper class, men and the young. (Bhautoo, 46-47)

We also find that the 'others' represented in Mistry's stories and novels are mostly Parsis who stick to tradition and find it hard to adjust in the modern society. The Parsis are believed to be traditionally conservative and this is one of the reasons that their population has suffered a setback. A number of factors have led to this sharp decline and this concern was first articulated in 1948 by Desai (Demographic Research), who argued that current demographic trends of the Parsis, if unchanged, would lead to the decline of the Parsi population in India. Studies have shown several reasons for this trend. First, fertility has been declining for over a century: the total fertility rate (TFR) among the Parsis in Bombay was 4.41 in 1881 (Visaria 1974), declining to 0.94 in 1999 (Unisa et al. 2008). Deaths have exceeded births in every year since 1955 (*Demographic Research*), and 1961-70 was the first period when the TFR was found to be below replacement level (Visaria 1974). Second, socio-cultural factors, such as large numbers of women never marrying or choosing to marry late, have been identified as potential factors contributing to reduced fertility, and therefore impacting the growth of the population. The average age at marriage in 1962 was 26.5 years for women and 31.4 years for men, and has hovered at about this level ever since (Patel, 2010). A survey in 1973 showed that among women aged 31-45 years, 27% had never married (*Demographic Research*). Finally, emigration to other countries, particularly Britain, the United States, Canada, and recently Australia may also have contributed to the trend. It is argued that emigration has been fuelled by a belief that prospects and lifestyle were no longer as suitable in India for the Parsis as they had been under British rule, when they enjoyed a privileged position in Indian and Bombay society (Kulke 1974; Hinnells 1981; Axelrod 1990qtd in *Demographic Research*).

Another important factor is the potential role of inter-marriage rules prevailing among the Parsi community. This ethno-religious group is an endogamous and non-proselytizing community, which has traditionally refused to convert people of other faiths, and that requires a Parsi father as a necessary legal condition for a newborn to be considered a Parsi. Therefore, if a Parsi woman marries a non-Parsi man her offspring will not be considered a Parsi. She will remain a member of the Parsi community by law, but not by custom, according to orthodox Parsis. If a Parsi man marries a non-Parsi woman, his offspring will be considered Parsi; his wife, however, will not be a Parsi. Although the Parsi population has historically maintained this endogamous character, since the 1970s, and increasingly through the 1980s and 1990s, a rising trend of marriage out of the community has been observed. In 1991 marriages outside the community accounted for 19% of all Parsi marriages in Bombay, and this number had increased to 32% by 2005 and 38% by 2010 (Parsiana April 1992, March 2006 and May 2011).

Considering all these above statistics, it is quite evident that the falling demographic values are a cause for concern and is particularly seen in Mistry's fiction. The detailed discussion between

Inspector Masalawala and Jal Contractor in *Family Matters* is obviously the author's personal concern for his community. The inspector discusses in detail the causes leading to a fall in Parsi population including the Parsi young men refusing to get married until they have separate accommodation. He also comments that since the Parsis are an educated community, they prefer to follow birth control measures rather religiously. He is of the opinion that the more educated a community, the more conscious they are about matters like family planning, etc. On one hand Mistry is highly concerned about the dwindling population of Parsis, on the other, through his fictional world, he raises voice in support of the insecurities they are facing as a minority community in a Hindu dominated country. The resistance offered by the characters to the socio-political and cultural hegemony of the majority communities, is a repetitive motif in Mistry's fiction. 'Auspicious Occasion', the first story of *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, begins with Mistry showing the contrast between the traditional and true to heart feelings of Mehroo, a typical Parsi housewife, and her husband's superficially modern yet conservative at heart attitude towards *Behramroje.* Rustomji gets into a quarrel on his way to Parsi *agiary* when some passerby spits paan juice on his white *dugli* and the crowd instead of sympathizing with him, jeers at him, "Bawajibawaji, *dugli* looks very nice now, red and white, just like in technicolour…" (20) Finding himself outnumbered among these hooligans, Rustomji finds it reassuring to return to the sanctuary of his home in the Parsi building, Firozsha Baag. Later when Mehroo tells him of the murder of dustoorji in the fire temple, Rustomji is shocked and worries about the future of the entire community. His pathetic cry is an appeal to the crumbling values of the Parsis, "What is happening in the world I don't know. Parsi killing Parsi…" (23) His act of shaking his head and gazing at the dilapidated condition of his flat with peeling paint and plaster is symbolic of the community losing its pristine glory. 'One Sunday' and 'The Ghost of FirozshaBaag' project the insecurities of the Parsis in an age of growing communalism. Parsis, who were once masters of trade and commerce in India and were a respectable community, especially in the city of Bombay, now felt insecure in moving out of the safety of their Parsi surroundings. Najamai feels anxious while passing from the Tar Gully, home to a number of ghatis or coolies who leave no stone unturned in aiming their remarks at any Parsi who dares to pass by. When Kersi goes in search of Francis, he is teased by the *ghatis* sitting in the gully. These two stories also bring to focus the inferior status of the two Catholic characters- Francis, the handyman that does odd jobs for Najamai and Jaykalee, the maid servant of a Parsi family residing in Firozsha Baag. Though, Parsis, themselves are a minority community in India, when it comes to another community, they are either indifferent to them or are quick to show their mistrust in them. Francis, who has not eaten for two days, steals food from Najamai's house and is accused of theft and beaten black and blue by one and all without even knowing what his crime is. Thus they show solidarity towards their community while denigrating the only outsider amongst them. Similarly, Jaykalee's name is distorted from Jacqueline, by her Parsi mistress and her young mistress on knowing that the words uttered by the Christians after praying- Father, Son and Holy Spirit- questions her, if it is not the Holy Ghost to whom she prays, the one troubling the inhabitants of Firozsha Baag. Some of the stories in the collection including—'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag', 'Condolence Visit', 'The Collectors', and others— depict the controversial issue of the inability of the members of the community to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. Mistry is of the opinion and many of the characters from his novels and short stories act as his spokespersons in bringing this fact to light. They express their concern about this imbalance and it is believed that this, too, is one of the reasons for the sharp decline in Parsi population and the young Parsis turning away from their religion which is still reeling in orthodoxy. It is rather a paradoxical situation that the Parsi community is considered to be the most anglicized community in India with their indulgence in western music, theatre, opera etc and their exposure to western education. Yet, when it comes to their religion, rituals and customs of the community, they are a highly water-tight community with hardly any changes since the day of its

inception. Gustad Noble, the protagonist of the novel, *Such a Long Journey,* reflects this thinking of his community right from the beginning to the end. He shows enough patience to hear the stories of his Catholic friend, Malcolm Saldanah, but is careful not to be impressed with them and stick to the ideology of his own religion. Throughout the novel, there are many instances of Parsi characters showing social and political insecurity in the state and country. Dinshawji expresses his concern over the growing strength of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and recalls the day when their bank was vandalized by the Shiv Sena hooligans. Mistry openly criticizes Shiv Sena and its intolerance towards members of other communities and considers it the root cause of the Parsis not being able to feel secure in a city that once throbbed with Parsis. In an effort to preserve the compound wall of Khodadad Building, Gustad requests the pavement artist to draw pictures of Gods and Goddesses on it but realizing that the Hindus may not show reverence to Ahura Mazda or his Prophet Zarathustra, he asks the artist to draw pictures of Gods from all religions of the world. This has a drastic effect and people stop misusing the wall. Gustad's visit to the Towers of Silence during Dinshawji's and Major Blimoria's funerals highlights the sanctity and peace one feels in such places. Gustad feels himself lost in the music emanating from the ancient prayers offered by a dustoor for the departed soul. He realizes,

> All his life he had uttered by rote the words of this dead language, comprehending not one of them while mouthing his prayers. But tonight, in the dustoorji's soft and gentle music, the words were alive; tonight he came closer than he ever had to understanding the ancient meanings. (*SLJ,* 247-48)

Keeping in mind the postmodern trend of exhibiting doubt and apprehension over everything traditional, Mistry gives the taste of the absurd through the educated, elite class that resides in high buildings about the continuation and the environmental desirability of the Parsi practice of feeding their dead to the vultures. In a semi-comic manner, these people voice their protest:

> 'Your vulture!' the tenants complained. 'Control your vultures! Throwing rubbish on our balconies!' They claimed that the sated birds, flying out from the Tower after gorging themselves, invariably snatched a final bite to savour later. And if the tidbits were lost in mid-flight, they landed on the exclusive balconies. This, said the indignant tenants, was absolutely intolerable, considering the sky-high prices they had been charged for their deluxe flats. (316-17)

But in all seriousness, through his fiction, Mistry has promoted allegiance to the faith. The Zoroastrians believe that the world has two prevailing forces, i.e. the good and the bad and in the fight between good and the bad, ultimately good forces will emerge winner. *Such a Long Journey* is an example of this religious philosophy in which, the protagonist, Gustad Noble is shown to fight these forces all through his life but at the end his reunion with his son, Sohrab, is the victory of his faith.

A Fine Balance again shows the protagonists trying to strike a balance between the good and bad forces. Dina is fighting to maintain her individuality and her independence. In this novel, particularly, Mistry exhibits another kind of 'other' that he never touched upon in his earlier works. These 'other' are Ishvar and Om, the representatives of the Hindu low-caste community or the untouchables who have been subdued by the upper castes in India from times immemorial. As per traditional Hindu customs described in *Manusmriti*, the law book of Manu, who according to Hindu mythology was the mind-born son of the Creator, Lord Brahma, socially the Hindus are divided into four castes- the upper caste Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the lowest caste, Sudras. The castes depicted the profession of the individuals in the society but with the passage of time caste system became rigid and the person was confined to his caste from the time of his birth. It became essential for people to follow the trade of their caste. The caste system which had earlier united the society in an organic whole slowly became an instrument at the hands of the upper caste to wield power over the lower castes. Any

attempt to break this hierarchal order met with severe punishment or social ostracize. M L Ahuja describes this division of power in the following words:

> In this order of hierarchy, the Brahmins are not only placed at the top and in the first rank but are considered to be "superior social beings" worthy of all special rights and privileges and at the bottom the untouchables are treated as "sub-human beings or lesser human beings" considered unworthy of any rights. (Ahuja, 121-22)

This kind of power equation which has been prevalent in Indian society for ages is hard to challenge though a number of laws have been enacted in this context. *A Fine Balance* clearly depicts this chasm between the enactment and the will for implementation of such laws that can help the lower castes to lead the life of dignity. Dukhi mochi, sick to the heart due to such injustices meted out to him at every step of his life, decides to send his children to the town far from his family trade of leather-making in aspiration of a better future and respectable life. He bore all the humiliations meted out to him but when his innocent children are whipped for entering the school room and hearing the shlokas forbidden to the lower caste ears, his patience gives away and he pleads to PanditLalluram, "…for my children, I have come to you. They should not have to suffer unjust beatings…. They are only children, and they were doing no harm." (112-13) His pleas fall on deaf ears and Panditji in all his wisdom tells Dukhi

> Your children entered the classroom. They polluted the place. They touched instruments of learning. They defiled slates and chalks, which upper-caste children would touch. You are lucky there wasn't a holy book like the Bhagvad Gita in that cupboard, no sacred texts. Or the punishment would have been more final. (113-14)

Though Dukhi is not able to question the Pandit further, yet Mistry doesn't lose this opportunity to poke fun at the snobbish attitude of the upper castes. In a comic manner, he shows the chamaars using derogatory and abusive language for all these hypocrites. Though the lower castes are instructed by the Brahmins to respect the rights and privileges of the upper castes, these illiterate villagers do realize that it is a way to keep the lower castes under their thumb and they make mockery of these snobs. On a serious note, we hear Dukhi's son Narayan raising his voice against these injustices and breaking the silence of the centuries. He not only dares to break the traditions by selecting his profession other than his family profession but also takes a step further when he decides to vote against Thakur Dharamsi, the arrogant village Zamindar. Though Narayan and his family meet a tragic fate, the writer manages to convey the message that the time has come when silences would also be heard. Once again, Om and Ishvar, try to break the shackles of their caste by coming to the city of Bombay, 'The city of dreams'. Initially, Dina finds it difficult to have them in her house, not sure of their intentions and her orthodox Parsi psychology coaxing her to be cautious of these men from different religion and upbringing. She feels uncomfortable when Om and Ishvar start using her lavatory. She tries convincing herself, "Living alone for so long, I've grown too fastidious, she thought. Different diets, different habits- it was only natural their urine left a strange odour." (76)

With Dina herself an 'other' in her community, she feels a bond developing between her and the tailors, struggling to defy their destiny, like Dina. They are able to sustain this bond till the end, even when Om and Ishvar become beggars due to the turn their life takes on their visit to their native village. Thakur Dharamsi extracts his revenge on these two by getting them castrated leading to amputation of Om's leg. Thus, the story of the tailors deals with those who are twice disempowered in the city as in the city they represent the poor, working class encountering the cruelty of the city life. Om and Ishvar visit the office of the ration department; the peon shows them his power by commanding them to come back again on Monday, as the officer was on his meditation break. The ration officer hands them the forms to be filled and also suggests them to get them filled from the experts on the pavement who charge a reasonable amount for doing so. When Om and Ishvar decline

the offer and declare that they can write, the ration officer feels snubbed and "The tailors' literacy was an affront to his omniscience" who prided in his ability to appraise at a glance the origin, financial status, education and caste of the applicants that passed by his desk everyday. (176) Om and Ishvar, both disempowered in their village by the upper caste are doubly disempowered in the city by the selfish, arrogant, insensitive people like the ration officer and his peon. Their experience of suffering makes them the 'others' both to the wealthy as well as to the government.

This 'otherness' is witnessed in Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters*, where the working class people treated as 'others' by the wealthy are brought together. Their voice is raised by Vikram Kapur, the owner of Bombay Sporting Goods where Yezad Chenoy works as the Manager and Husain works as a peon. Another person who breaks the silences of the working class disempowered in the city is Vilas Rane. Rane owns a bookshop next to Bombay Sporting Goods and as a sideline he writes paid letters for migrant labourers into the city who can neither read nor write. Rane charged a nominal fee of three rupees per page but when a client on tight budget became silent, he would offer to continue in the same price. He said, "Nothing is more cruel than a letter cut short for lack of money. It's like death- one moment the words flowing, next moment silence, the thought unfinished, the love unconveyed, the anguish unexpressed… The pain it causes is unbearable." (140) What started as a sideline business for Rane soon turns into social work and he conveys his doubts to Yezad that if he didn't help these people,

> his clients might turn for help to a Shiv Senashakha where they would be exposed to vicious communal propaganda, might even get recruited in their sticks-and-stones method of political persuasion, their fine art of scoring debating points by breaking opposition bones. (141)

Through Vilas Rane, Mistry tries to bring together the powerless 'others' under an imaginary, collective community that formed a regular pattern in the society. He writes

> And Vilas, writing and reading the ongoing drama of family matters, the endless tragedy and comedy, realized that collectively, the letters formed a pattern only he was privileged to see. He let the mail flow through his consciousness, allowing the episodes to fall into place of their own accord, like bits of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope. (142)

He also felt that

> chance events, random cruelty, unexplainable kindness, meaningless disaster, unexpected generosity could, together, form a design that was otherwise invisible. If it were possible to read letters for all of humanity, compose an infinity of responses on their behalf, he would have a God's-eye view of the world, and be able to understand it. (142)

Once again, in this novel, there is an account of misanthropist tendencies of the Parsis towards people of other religion. This time the conservative Parsis treat poor Lucy, the Catholic girlfriend of Nariman Vakeel, as an 'other' and wield their power over Nari to disown Lucy and instead marry a middle-aged Parsi widow, Yasmin, a mother of two. His father had said, "she might be a wonderful person, as gracious and charming as the Queen of England, but she was still unsuitable for his son because she was not a Zoroastrian". (132) Lucy, jilted in love, is unable to overcome her love for him. She takes up the job of a governess to the grandchildren of Mrs and MrArjani, who hire her despite knowing her relationship with Nari, just to humiliate him. Yezad's fanaticism at the end of the novel and his increasing intolerance of his son getting involved with a non-Parsi girl reminds the reader of the bigot views of Nari's father, who was in a legal battle against his neighbour, MrArjani, and who is accused of being a "rabid racist who, in his maniacal quest for purity, wouldn't think twice about eliminating the spouses and offspring of intermarriage."(133) Murad's resilience and rebellion against his father's fanatic views are in contrast to Nariman Vakeel's meek submission to his father. Nari realizes later in his life that that one surrender in his life has been responsible for so

much chaos in all the lives linked to him. The untimely death of Lucy occurs because she is unable to stand losing Nariman and his love. Yasmin dies in a freak accident while having a quarrel with Nari on the roof top about seeing Lucy. Coomy, his step-daughter, holds him responsible for her mother's death and thus dies nurturing a deep hatred for him in her heart. Roxana's life gets upset when out of hatred, Coomy sends Nari to Roxana's two room flat that puts a financial burden on Yezad and physical burden on Roxana. Yezad's inability to meet this financial crunch leads him to the illegal matka betting and his morality suffers a setback when he plans to swindle Vikram Kapur's money kept in the safe for Shiv Sena extortionists for turning a blind eye to the continued use of 'Bombay' in the shop's name. These characters are representatives of the marginalized 'others' in the fiction of Mistry and their voices can be heard through their silent representations.

In this category of the 'other', one very important group needs to be talked about. This 'other' category includes the women characters of Mistry's novels and short stories. In answer to Bharucha's accusation that Mistry is incapable of presenting complex portraits of his women characters, Nandini Bhautoo suggests that "his women characters are meant to be read within the social and material conditions of their existence." (57) Caste in stereo-typed role of domesticated matron striving to maintain the balance of her family, Mistry's women characters are typical Parsi women for whom the sole centre of their lives rests in their family and home. Mehroo from 'Auspicious Occasion', Dilnavaz from *Such a Long Journey*, Roxana from *Family Matters*, Daulat from 'Condolence Visit', Mrs Boyce from 'Of White Hairs and Cricket', function within the confines and inviolability of domestic space. Socially, Parsi women have always enjoyed status equal to men and as prescribed in their religious texts, Parsi man is required to take proper care of the woman he marries. He is to extend his progeny through his wife and as far as possible he should avoid taking a second wife. Parsis have always respected their wives and are considered to be loyal to their wives. On their arrival and settlement in India, the Parsi women took to wearing traditional Indian costume of Saree, petticoat and blouse. During the colonial period with their extensive exposure to western education system and their close contact with the British, soon they gave up Indian dress and took to wearing western dresses, eating food in a western manner with proper crockery and cutlery along with their husbands, going to theatre and movies and indulging in western pursuits of entertainment. Since Parsis were the first community to learn English, their women were also the first ones to receive western education through missionary schooling. Despite, all these modern trends in the community, Mistry's fiction presents the female characters in subdued and matronly roles. Although they have no say in either social or political matters, they are the ones who are affected directly or indirectly by the socio-political set up of the country. Rising prices, insecurity of job, growing communal tension, all have an impact on the domestic stability of an ordinary household and thus disturbing the mental stability of these women. Yezad in *Family Matters* is aware of the extra burden his wife has to undertake in taking care of her family and her old father. She calmly bears the loss when Yezad tells her that he had taken her carefully arranged money placed inside envelops to place bets on matka and has lost it. But in the epilogue of the novel, we find Yezad accusing Roxana of ignoring them for the sake of her sick father. He calls her melodramatic when she remembers her dead father and also calls her a "virtual slave to her father". A youthful, exuberant man who once married Roxana against his sisters' wishes now passes menstruation laws upon her. Jehangir recalls his father's decision,

> The decree states that Mummy must not enter the drawing-room at all while she has her period. She will sleep in the spare bedroom on those days, and avoid the kitchen. The cook will take her meals to her. (*FM*, 493)

Mehroo, the conscientious wife of Rustomji, the curmudgeon, in the story 'Auspicious Occasion', suffers not only the endless moods of her husband but also his continuous censure of the Parsidustoorjis and traditional customs and rituals. His disapproval of the coveted behaviour of the Parsi

priests trying to touch young women comes under scanner when Rustomji's prayers to Dada Ormuzd include a better glimpse of the maid's breasts. For him, every maid is a *gunga*, a generic name given to all the maids. It is his daily routine to surreptitiously watch the young maid from behind or over the newspaper even with his wife Mehroo, moving around in the house. Mehroo, who is considerably younger to Rustomji, who was thirty-six at the time of their wedding and Mehroo just sixteen, had not imagined that he would be wearing dentures at the age of fifty-two. To Rustomji's daily yellings, Mehroo always responded cheerfully and went about her daily chores as an obedient and dutiful wife.

Dina Dalal from *A Fine Balance* is a woman different in character from the ordinary female characters of Mistry's fiction. She seeks to escape from this subordinate position by maintaining her individuality. She is a sceptic as far as her religion is concerned and wants to be fiercely independent in life. Her efforts to strike a balance between her independence and her individuality get disturbed when she is unable to finish her order in time due to the disappearance of the two tailors. Being a woman, it is difficult for her to maintain her independent status with no means of income. She has to be dependent on her brother, Nusswan and his wife, Ruby, in their house, a situation she had long tried to avoid. Her efforts end in naught when her flat is also taken over by the landlord and she once again becomes an unpaid servant in her brother's house. But her resilient spirit that had defied Nusswan, in her younger days, still clings to her. This subversion of authority is seen in her act of feeding the tailors, now beggars, in the plates in which later she would serve food to her brother and his wife. Nandini Bhautoo is of the opinion that

> This is an act of subversion performed by the subaltern woman within the constraints imposed on her. Admittedly, it does not alter the conditions of either Dina or the tailors. What is significant is that Mistry presents it as symbolic resistance, a conscious act of subversion and grants even the subaltern agency. The 'Other' asserts herself whenever the opportunity presents itself. (Bhautoo, 57)

This act of defiance and resistance is particularly visible in Roopa, wife of Dukhi mochi, in the same novel. Her act of stealing oranges and butter for her children in the middle of the night is something she considers to be sacred and though she is molested by the night watchman of the orchard, her spirit is not. So, we see that though most of Mistry's works have male narrative consciousness, all his women characters cannot be considered to be unimportant or pushed to the margins. Some of the female characters do enter the central consciousness and shun their peripheral status. There are certain women characters that are shown in a negative shade by Mistry but if their surfaces could be peeled, the reader would certainly find them to be victims of fate and would thus sympathise with them rather than criticize. Such characters include Coomy Contractor, Miss Kutpitia, Villie Cardmaster, Najamai, Tehmina, Mrs Mody and Khorshedbai. As is evident from the tragic stories of Miss Kutpitia and Villie Cardmaster, these women are to be understood in a new light and should be sympathized with. It is true that in the broader canvas of his life like paintings, these characters are the lesser developed ones yet at no time avoidable. They also contribute in their own limited ways and given a chance they could also develop into individuals displaying complex emotions.

Another group, that inhabits the periphery in Mistry's fiction and can be considered as 'Other' or marginal, is the old as compared to the central status enjoyed by the young. Living on the periphery they are disempowered in more than one ways; their youth has already deserted them and they are no more than a liability to the young members of their family who are already burdened by their social and financial responsibilities, disease and old age have made them good-for-nothing. In several instances, even their rational wishes are rejected on the irrational grounds of their being old and senile. We come across several old characters in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* mostly recalled from the alleys of narrator's memory. The character of Mamaiji is drawn by young Kersi Boyce in 'Of White Hairs and Cricket' with all the alacrity of a loving grandson. Mamaiji though remains in the background wearing dark glasses over her eyes after a recent cataract

operation and with her decrepit spine that "caused her to walk doubled over", involved in her knitting and spinning, does try to convey her thoughts on hair plucking. She feels this plucking of white hair as something that could bring ill-omen, yet in order to avoid a direct confrontation with her son-in-law she keeps her thoughts to herself sometimes muttering them under her breath. Such an act shows her resistance to the young, male-centred dominance in the house. Her defiance to eat bland food and her occasional indulgence in hot searing curries when her daughter and son-in-law are away, displays her insurgence against the young. She is concerned about her children and keeps herself busy in spinning thread for their *kustis* but is not the one that would take things lying down. Such is the case of old Nariman Vakeel, the retired professor of English from *Family Matters*. The character of Nariman Vakeel seems to be a continuity of the Grandfather from 'Of Swimming Lessons'. Both are old and suffer from osteoporosis and Parkinsonism. Both suffer a fall and fracture their hip bone and both are looked after by their daughter. The problems of osteoporosis and Parkinsonism seem to be common in most old members of Parsi community. The old man in *The Scream* also suffers from Parkinsonism and Kersi, the narrator of 'Swimming Lessons' recalls how his grandfather was incapacitated because of these two diseases:

> Parkinsonism and osteoporosis laid him low. The doctor explained that Grandpa's hip did not break because he fell, but he fell because the hip, gradually growing brittle, snapped on that fatal day. That's what osteoporosis does, hollows out the bones and turns effect into cause. It has an unusually high incidence in the Parsi community… We are the chosen people where osteoporosis is concerned. (*TFB*, 276-77)

There is another wheel chair-ridden, paralytic old man, in the same story the narrator comes across in his Toronto apartment. The narrator often meets him in the passage to the lift of his building and he reminds him of his own Grandpa. The old man lives with his daughter who takes good care of him. The death of this old man leaves the young man at a loss of words and he feels a curious bond with the man. We see a gradual shift in the 'centre-periphery' equation as the old take centre stage during the story and the clever shift in narration between past and present subverts the power equation between the young and the old.

Nariman Vakeel, ailing and old, is pushed to the margins in his own house by his dominating step-daughter, Coomy, who considers him to be a burden, both physical as well as financial. Though the house, Chateau Felicity, is owned by Nari and is run on his pension, his existence in the house is unbearable to Coomy. His fracture comes as a God sent opportunity to Coomy who packs his things and sends him off to Roxana's small flat. Here again, Nari, is pushed to the peripheral status, with his son-in-law grumbling about Coomy's slyness. The flat, in which they live, Pleasant Villa, was a wedding gift to them by Nari. "However, Nariman's fate, both at Chateau Felicity and at Pleasant Villa, shows a gradual regression towards the margins of family life." (Bhautoo, 58) When, the family returns to Chateau Felicity after Coomy's death, he is once again confined to the margins of his room and with no more financial constraints, maids and servants are employed to tend to him. This last exclusion from his family's touch is too much for Nari to bear. He misses Roxana's tender love and care and after his death, Roxana holds herself responsible for neglecting him during his last days when he needed her the most.

The old man in *The Scream* is relegated to the outer room of his home and he feels it to be an injustice to him by his family members. He has been accorded a secondary status in his own house. He is given mattresses to sleep on, milk bottles to deliver his urine into and when he complains of the food being bland or tasteless, he is scolded for being thankless. His fear of mice and cockroaches moving around him at night is also made fun of. When he hears a scream in the middle of the night outside his window across the road, they think it to be a part of his imagination. The old man rues his position in the house. He says,

> I sleep on a mattress on the floor, in the front room… The others use the back room. My place too used to be there, among

them… And yet, it was so much better than being alone, so comforting to lie amidst warm, albeit noisy, bodies when one's own grew less and less warm, day by day. (5-6)

His fears at being neglected in his old age are reflected in his thoughts. "All my life I have feared mice, starvation, and loneliness. But now that loneliness has arrived, it's not so bad. What could I do, the others no longer wanted me among them… I suppose I was a nuisance." (6-7) His emphatic plea to the readers to implore his case with his family members, is a senile man's effort to preserve his dignity in this world "Apathy is a sin. This great age did not come upon me without teaching me virtue and vice… I am kind to the young and helpless. The young, I find, are seldom helpless." (32)

There are other old people that appear in Mistry's works not in important roles yet, have importance of their own. Some of them are Najamai, Miss Kutpitia, Villie Cardmaster, Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle, Daisy Auntie and Ibrahim, the rent collector. Thus, Mistry's fictional world is like a journey during the course of which he offers resistance to different kind of hegemonies, that of, language, race, community, sex and age, and subvert the historical narrative through the eyes of the suppressed characters. This challenge to the metanarrative of history is a particular trait of most postmodern writers yet appears to be an unconscious attempt in Mistry's fiction as he confesses in an interview that "Fashions and trends are things for which I have no talent and it would be hard work for me to try and follow them…" (Gokhale qtd in Roy & Pillai, 54)

References

Primary Sources

Mistry, Rohinton.*Tales from FirozshaBaag*. (1987) London: Faber & Faber, 2006. Print.

_____. *Such a Long Journey*. (1991) London: Faber & Faber, 2006. Print.

_____.*A Fine Balance*. (1996) London: Faber & Faber, 2006. Print.

_____.*Family Matters*. (2002) London: Faber & Faber, 2006. Print.

_____.*The Scream*. Canada: McClelland & Stewart, 2006. Print.

Secondary Sources

Ahuja, M L. *Major Religions of the World*. New Delhi: UBSPD, 2008. Print.

Bhautoo-Dewnarain, Nandini.*Rohinton Mistry: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2007. Print.

FEZANA. *Demographic Research*. Volume 25, Article 17 http://www.demographic-research.org 547. 26 Apr 2012. Web.

Framjee, Dosabhoy. *The Parsees: Their History, Manners, Customs, and Religion*. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1858. Print.

Registrar General of India (Census 2001), National Informatics Centre. New Delhi. http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid =3724 23 March 2013. Web.

Shroff, Zubin C. & Marcia C. Castro. "The Potential Impact of Intermarriage on the Population Decline of the Parsis of Mumbai, India" http://creativecommons.org 26 Aug 2012. Web.

Visaria 1974, Unisa et al. "Demographic Predicament of Parsis in India" Indian Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, India.www.iipsindia.org 7 Sep 2011. Web.

Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: OUP, 2006. Print.

Maneck, Susan Stiles.*The Death of Ahriman: Culture, Identity and* _. Abstract. Ph.D. Dissertation. UA Campus Repository University Libraries. http://www.library.arizona.edu 12 Jan 2011. Web.

Patel, Dinyar. "Understanding Parsi Population Decline in India: A Historical Perspective" Ph. D. Thesis. Jawaharlal Nehru Centre, Mumbai. 7 May 2011. Web.

Roy, Anjali Gera &Meena T Pillai, ed. *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. New Delhi: Pencraft, 2007. Print.