



## Ethnic Identity and Anxiety in the Fiction of Rohinton Mistry

**Abdul Shamim**

Asst. Professor

Dept. of English

Renuka College, Besa, Nagpur

Email: [abdulshamim3@gmail.com](mailto:abdulshamim3@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The development of civilization has accelerated the movement of people from one part of the world to another for economic progress and prosperity. This phenomenon brings a large number of ethnic groups to the same geographical location. It has created the tussle of identity. The majoritarian group always tries to dominate the ethnic groups or minorities consequently the ethnic groups feel the anxiety of submerging into the dominant group so they try to assert their ethnic identity in order to mark their distinction with the dominant group. The ethnic groups make their presence felt among the dominant groups with the help of their ethnic markers such as culture, tradition, customs, costumes, food, language, religion, and history. This becomes the cause of cultural difference between ethnic and the dominant group and the dominant group on account of its majority resorts to violence and other tactics to create the feeling of anxiety among the members of the ethnic group in order to keep them under their dominance. In the present research paper, the researcher has tried to explore how ethnic identity and anxiety have been portrayed by Rohinton Mistry in his fictional work.

Key words: Ethnic-group, identity, culture, anxiety, majority, fear

Rohinton Mistry who is a Parsi, Indo-Canadian writer born in India but now lives in Canada and captures Indian social milieu for his literary works. He seems to be quite concerned about his Parsi community which is the ethnic minority in India. The term 'Ethnic' is defined in the Oxford Dictionary of English as "relating to a population subgroup (within a larger or dominant national or cultural group) with a common national or cultural tradition" (Catherine and August 25). It relates to the group of people having the same ancestry, sharing the common language and history, and celebrating the same culture and tradition in a particular space. It has also been defined by Blumer as "a collectively within a large society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity such as

kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality for physical appearance" (Bharucha 49). Jary and Jary in the Collins Dictionary of Sociology defines an ethnic group as "a group of people sharing an identity which arises from a collective sense of distinctive history" (qtd in Jha and Naik 20). When the discussion is made on the ethnic group it is a well-defined fact the members of the group are clung to each other by virtue of distinct culture of the group which encompasses norms, traditions, value systems and a defined language for communication with and among the members of the group.

There is another term that is used interchangeably for the ethnic group is 'minority.' Yinger asserts "Minorities are defined as those non-dominant groups in a population which possess and

wish to preserve stable ethnic, religious or linguistic traditions or characteristics markedly different from those of the rest of the population" (21). The binary of major and minor often comes to play in society whenever the discourse of ethnic identity is explored in cultural studies. Identity is defined by Soanes and Stevenson as "The fact of being who or what a person or thing is" (Yadav 28). Identity can be taken as the characteristics, feelings, beliefs, thinking, ideology and philosophy that make a person different from the other person. Modern thinkers and social scientists consider identity as dynamic and fluid which always changes. A person can have many identities at the same point of time. Amartya Sen in *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Identity* states "the same person can be without any contradiction and an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a school teacher, a feminist" (xii). So it can be said on the basis of the statement of Amartya Sen that ethnic identity is one of the plural identities that we are encompassed within. Ethnicity binds the ethnic group on the basis of markers such as culture, custom, tradition, language, history and ancestry. Ethnic identity is considered as one of the several determining identities that give meaning to the life of an individual of an ethnic group and make him different from the dominant group.

In short it can be perceived that ethnic identity is the subgroup of a large pool of identities that are fluid and dynamic which can be changed over a period of time in different circumstances and situations. However ethnic identity cannot be altered as other identities which are affiliated to one's religion, nation, region, and politics. Ethnic identity is the most powerful identity which shapes the life of the person in the society and it creates the feeling of solidarity among the members of his group. Amartya Sen opines: Identity is thus a quintessentially plural concept, with varying relevance of different identities in distinct contexts. And most importantly, we have choice over what significance to attach to our different identities" (2005:352). When the ethnic group lives along the dominant group in the society, the members of the ethnic group live in perpetual anxiety as there way

of life is different from the majority group. The members of the ethnic group feel the intimidation of getting submerged in the culture of the dominant group as the majoritarian controls the politics of the nation. The anxiety of the Parsis that constitutes the ethnic group in India is well portrayed by Mistry in the short story entitled *Auspicious Occasion*. Mistry who himself is a Parsi and is quite aware of the condition of his community in India. Although he migrated to Canada in 1975, he returned to his roots (India) for his literary work. His story is largely set in erstwhile Bombay now Mumbai. He becomes the voice of his community and makes his readers aware about the culture, religion, practices, beliefs, food and idiosyncrasy commonly found among the members of his group.

*Auspicious Occasion* is the story of Parsi couple-Rustomji and Mehroo-Rustomji who is older to Mehroo by 21 years when he got married with Mehroo, she was merely 16 years old. When the story opens Rustomji is shown of an old man of 51 years old and Mehroo of 30 years old, she is quite religious. She comes from the traditional Parsi family that observes prayers and other cultural practices of Parsi religion faithfully. Although her husband, Rustomji is quite indifferent to his Parsi religion and festivals, he enjoys the Parsi festivals. The story is woven in a single busy day of the couple at the background of an important festival of the Parsis. It is *Behramroje* which is considered as a significant day according to the Parsi Calendar. The day is full of activities for Mehroo in order to decorate the house according to Parsi culture and visit the Fire Temple. Wadhawan declares:

All the trappings of a Zoroastrian ethnic identity are brought to our attention: Parsi festival of *Behramroje*, the visit to the *agyari* and the couple's spotless white attire in the form of a *dugli* and a sari, meant specially for the blessed occasion of the *Behramroje*. The tradition-bound Parsi community sees itself under obligation to celebrate Zoroastrian festivals that make them stand apart from other communities. The visit to the fire temple is almost mandatory as their distinctive act of cultural preservation (50).

Though Rustomji is not a practising Parsi, he shows close affiliation to Parsi –Ethnic Identity. He wears his typical Parsi clothes-White *dugli*/shirt, starched white trousers and *pheytoe* - a cap to cover his head which is the epitome of his Parsi ethnic identity. Bharucha views “What is even more important is the Parsi consciousness and observance of ethno-religious rituals and customs. It is these that have enabled the Parsis to retain their ‘we consciousness ‘and distinct identity in the all-consuming ethos of India.” (77)

The Parsi community is the minuscule community which is fast depleting because of the low birth rate, and most of the young Parsis prefer to get married outside their religion and those who do not get an ideal match for themselves in their community remain unmarried. The concern of the Parsi community towards their ethnicity clearly resembles in that fact that in order to augment their progeny they compel the members of their community to get married in spite of the great difference in age of the couples.

Rustomji and Mehroo live in a Parsi enclave in Firozsha Baag-Mumbai. Parsi is the insular community and prefers to live among the members of their community due to creating the feeling of solidarity and also to prevent unseen danger from the dominant group. They prefer to stay in a Parsi enclave to maintain their distinct identity and preserve their ethnicity from the influence of the outside world. They feel the anxiety with the dominant group as has been pointed out by Mistry through the incident which happened with Rustomji while going to the fire temple by bus. As soon as he is alighted from the bus, the fellow commuter accidentally spits red juice of betel nut and tobacco on his sparkling white *dugli*. He gets fret and fume and the bus moves, he looks at his white *dugli* which has been spoiled with the red stain of tobacco juice. A crowd gathers around him and they start making fun of him because of his typical Parsi identity reflecting from his attire. In a fit of rage, he starts abusing them when he finds instead of consoling him, they try to make a fool of him only by virtue of his ethnic identity. The horde of people starts pulling him from all directions in order to beat him. He

senses the danger lurking behind the angst crowd of beating him, so instantly he vanishes his anger and behaves like a buffoon in order to save himself from the violent crowd and he succeeds in his trick “He reached his fingers into his mouth, dislodged the dentures, and spat them out onto his palm.....With much effort and spittle, he sputtered: ‘Look, such an old man, no teeth even,’.....A general tittering spread through the assembly. Rustomji the clown was triumphant.” (21)

Rustomji becomes so disheartened and anguished from the incident that he does not have the wish to go to the fire temple to pray where his wife was waiting for him. Bharucha states “In this story as well as in his novels Mistry expresses the threat perceived by the minorities in independent India” (42). When his wife Mehroo reaches the fire temple she is also shocked to know that the chief priest of the fire temple-*Dustoor* Dhunjisha was murdered the previous night by a fellow Parsi. Mistry has pointed out that the Parsis live in anxiety in the postcolonial India as their conditions have deteriorated and the fear has gripped them due to rising politics of fundamentalism. Dodiya states “Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated this in responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community, and also to the country. He presents his community through the different narratives of his characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that affect their community” (93). It is reflected by Mistry through this short story and it is more prominent in his first novel *Such A Long Journey* where Dinshawji- the intimate friend of the protagonist –Gustad Noble makes him aware that by changing the names of the city and the roads, the majoritarian group tries to remove the identities of multiple groups living together for years. Yadav asserts “*Such A Long Journey* poignantly brings out the pathos of gradual and deliberate weakening of the cultural markers in the name of majoritism. Dinshawji thinks that this trend would result in complete loss of Parsi identity one day. Hence his fear is the fear of a minuscule minority community which is in doldrums with its anxiety about the impending loss of identity” (71). He squarely blames the politics of fundamentalism for their anxiety

when he says "And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into a second – class citizens "(39). The reason for the anxiety of the Parsis is the changing politics of India when Dinshawji recalls that how narrowly that have escaped from the serious assault when they have been trapped in the bank and the crowd has been shouting at them "Parsi crow-eaters, we will show you who is the boss" (39). In *Family Matters (FM)* also Mistry underlines the incident of anxiety among the Parsis. Coomy, the stepdaughter of Nariman Vakil dissuades him from going out for evening walk because of the fear that in the recent past the old Parsi couple were burnt alive in the house by the fanatics thinking that the fleeing Muslims were given shelter in that building.

The problem of ethnic identity of Parsi community by Mistry in the story –*Auspicious Occasion* reflects the efforts of the Parsi community to preserve and protect their ethnic identity by celebrating their festivals with great zest. The slight assertion of the Parsi community frowns the majority which resorts various tactics to create anxiety in their minds of the ethnic group. Mistry has vividly presented those incidents of his ethnic community which are prevalent and palpable in all his fictional works from attacking the Parsi man to change the name of the streets and to burn the house of the Parsi couple only on the ground of suspicion. Mistry has laid bare the tactics of the majority to dominate the minority like a social scientist.

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