



## Articulating the Margins: Rohinton Mistry's Novels and the Politics of Minority Representation in Postcolonial India

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### Abstract

This article examines Rohinton Mistry's fictional oeuvre as a significant contribution to minority discourse in contemporary postcolonial literature [1]. Through close textual analysis of his major novels – *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002) – this study explores how Mistry articulates the double marginalization of the Parsi community in India while engaging with broader questions of social justice and state violence. The article argues that Mistry's narrative strategies create a literary space where minority voices challenge dominant nationalist narratives, offering counter-histories that recuperate subaltern experiences. By situating Mistry within theoretical frameworks of postcolonial studies and subaltern representation, this analysis demonstrates how his novels negotiate complex intersections of ethnic, religious, and class-based identities. Mistry's deployment of realist techniques privileges testimonial authority over postmodern experimentation, serving as a form of literary activism that documents systemic violence against minorities. The article concludes by assessing Mistry's contribution to world literature and the continuing relevance of minority voices in an era of rising ethno-nationalism globally.

**Keywords:** Rohinton Mistry, minority voices, Parsi literature, postcolonial fiction, Indian diaspora, marginalization, subaltern studies, Emergency period, communal violence, testimonial literature.

### . Introduction

Rohinton Mistry occupies a distinctive position in contemporary anglophone literature as a chronicler of minority experiences within

postcolonial India. Born into the Parsi community of Bombay in 1952 and emigrating to Canada in 1975, Mistry's transnational identity profoundly informs his literary

explorations of belonging, displacement, and the precarity of minority existence [2]. The Parsis—descendants of Zoroastrian refugees from eighth-century Persia—represent one of India's smallest yet economically successful minority communities, numbering fewer than 60,000 individuals according to recent census data. Yet this demographic vulnerability, coupled with declining birth rates, renders the community increasingly susceptible to cultural erasure.

Mistry's three major novels consistently center on protagonists navigating post-independence India, particularly the authoritarian Emergency period (1975-1977) under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government. However, his engagement extends far beyond ethnic representation to encompass India's broader spectrum of marginalized populations—Dalits, Muslims, the urban poor, and women. This expansive vision positions Mistry's work as simultaneously ethnically specific and universally humanistic.

This article contends that Mistry's fictional universe operates as a "third space" of enunciation, where minority subjects articulate alternative narratives that resist assimilation into hegemonic national discourses [3]. Through detailed textual analysis, this study examines how Mistry's narrative techniques—particularly his use of domestic spaces as sites of political contestation and his deployment of tragic realism as testimonial form—create literary structures adequate to representing minority existence. Furthermore, this article argues that Mistry's aesthetic conservatism constitutes a deliberate ethical and political choice that privileges testimonial authority and historical documentation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "minor literature" proves remarkably illuminating for understanding Mistry's work [4]. They identify three essential characteristics: the deterritorialization of language, the

connection of individual narratives to political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. Mistry writes in English yet deterritorializes it through strategic incorporation of Gujarati phrases and Bombay vernacular. His novels remain resolutely engaged with historical specificities: slum demolitions, forced sterilization campaigns, communal violence, and authoritarian governance.

Homi Bhabha's conceptualization of the "third space" proves particularly relevant for understanding Mistry's literary project [5]. The colonized subject occupies a liminal space that enables subversive identity formations resisting authority. This framework productively extends to postcolonial minority subjects who occupy analogous positions of ambivalent inclusion within nationalist projects.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" raises fundamental questions about representation and voice [6]. Spivak's critique of presumptive speaking for the oppressed frames critical engagement with Mistry's position as a diasporic writer representing minority experiences. The Subaltern Studies collective's emphasis on recovering subaltern voices parallels Mistry's literary recovery of minority experiences from official historical margins.

## 3. *Such a Long Journey* (1991): Minority Anxiety and State Power

Set in 1971 during the Bangladesh Liberation War, *Such a Long Journey* centers on Gustad Noble, a Parsi bank clerk whose loyalty to his childhood friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria leads him unwittingly into a government conspiracy. The novel's temporal setting is significant: 1971 marked nationalist triumph, yet Mistry foregrounds domestic costs—economic hardship and political paranoia—erased from triumphalist narratives.

The compound wall surrounding Khodadad Building functions as complex

spatial metaphor for minority identity and vulnerability [7]. This permeable boundary is repeatedly violated, signifying the community's powerlessness before majoritarian indifference. When Gustad arranges for religious images to be painted on the wall, the text suggests fragile strategies minorities employ to maintain dignity. The wall's subsequent demolition by municipal authorities becomes symbolically powerful: state power remains indifferent to minority cultural spaces, destroying them in the name of "development."

Gustad embodies contradictions of minority subjectivity: fiercely patriotic, yet experiencing the state as arbitrary and threatening. His pride in Indian citizenship coexists with acute awareness of his community's vulnerability. Major Jimmy Bilimoria's imprisonment and torture reveal that proximity to state power offers no protection for minorities; they remain suspect despite loyal service. The novel's tragic ending refuses consolatory resolutions, insisting instead on bearing witness to loss without redemption.

#### 4. *A Fine Balance* (1995): Intersectional Marginalization

Widely considered Mistry's masterpiece, *A Fine Balance* directly confronts the Emergency period (1975-1977), when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended constitutional rights and implemented policies resulting in widespread human rights abuses [8]. Historians estimate between 6 and 11 million people were forcibly sterilized, with coercive tactics including blockades of slum settlements and threats to withhold government services.

The novel's structural principle—bringing together characters from vastly different social locations into uneasy cohabitation—enacts an intersectional analysis of oppression. The four main characters represent distinct positions within India's hierarchical order: Dina Dalal (widowed Parsi woman), Maneck Kohlah (young man

experiencing urban alienation), and Ishvar and Omprakash Darji (Dalit tailors). Mistry demonstrates how caste, religion, class, and gender create overlapping systems of disadvantage.

The Chamaar background of Ishvar and Omprakash subjects them to violence exceeding catastrophic suffering visited upon other characters [9]. Their family's attempt to escape caste-prescribed occupations leads to their massacre by upper-caste villagers. During the Emergency, Ishvar and Om are abducted and forcibly sterilized. The government sterilization camp exemplifies systematic violence: "They were doing their part for the national good, for population control, for the twenty-point programme."

Against this backdrop of systematic violence, the novel traces development of solidarity among protagonists. Their domestic arrangements—sharing meals and navigating crises together—suggest utopian possibilities of connection based on shared humanity rather than hierarchical categories. This fragile alternative community represents genuine resistance to systemic oppression.

The novel's devastating conclusion systematically destroys this community: Omprakash's castration, Ishvar's leg amputation due to unsanitary conditions, Maneck's suicide after encountering their degradation, and Dina's return to dependency. This systematic annihilation refuses consolation, proportionate to historical realities. The novel suggests that the Emergency represented not an aberration but intensification of everyday violence the Indian state directs toward vulnerable citizens.

#### 5. *Family Matters* (2002): Aging and Minority Decline

Set in mid-1990s Mumbai, *Family Matters* narrows its geographic focus to an extended Parsi family while maintaining engagement with broader political concerns. The novel chronicles Nariman Vakeel's physical

deterioration from Parkinson's disease and burdens this place on his stepchildren and biological children. Nariman's helplessness symbolizes the Parsi community's demographic precarity. The 2001 Indian census recorded only 69,601 Parsis, a decline from 76,382 in 1991[10].

Mistry explores how demographic anxiety manifests in community attitudes toward marriage, reproduction, and religious practice. The character Yezad Chenoy undergoes dramatic transformation from secularism to rigid religious orthodoxy, a response to financial setbacks and his daughter's illness. His turn toward fundamentalism mirrors the rise of Hindu nationalism in 1990s India, particularly following the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition. Mistry suggests that minorities facing existential anxiety may respond through rigid identity politics as defensive reaction to perceived threats.

The novel explores economic precarity intensifying family tensions. Yezad's modest income cannot support his family and elderly parents. Economic liberalization in 1990s India, while enriching some, increased insecurity for salaried middle-class families. Mistry documents degrading strategies families employ to manage poverty: borrowing from relatives, pawning possessions, skipping meals. Economic insecurity functions as violence, constraining choices and forcing compromises eroding dignity.

Nariman's role as storyteller proves central to exploring cultural transmission and minority memory. His stories transmit cultural values and historical memory, yet their documentation's fragility—as Parkinson's deteriorates his ability to narrate—symbolizes cultural memory's vulnerability to erasure. The novel leaves ambiguous whether religious orthodoxy represents authentic cultural continuity or reactionary retreat from engagement with contemporary India, reflecting genuine complexity facing small minority communities.

## 6. Narrative Strategies: Realism and Testimony

Mistry's commitment to nineteenth-century realist techniques—detailed social description, psychological characterization, linear chronology—constitutes deliberate ethical and political choice. Realism presumes social reality's intelligibility and its adequate representation through narrative. For minority writers documenting experiences subject to denial or erasure, realism's testimonial claim carries political urgency [11].

Mistry's meticulous historical recreation—1970s Bombay geography, Emergency-era policies, 1990s Mumbai tensions—insists on verifiable truth of his narratives. Period-specific details ground fiction in documented history, making dismissal as exaggeration difficult. This documentary impulse aligns Mistry's work with testimonial literature and human rights discourse.

The tragic mode predominates across Mistry's fiction, systematically frustrating expectations of comedic resolution or upward mobility. Characters displaying courage, kindness, and resilience nevertheless experience catastrophic loss. This tragic vision reflects recognition that global and national historical forces remain indifferent or actively hostile to individual human flourishing, particularly for the marginalized [12].

Mistry's tragedy differs from classical forms in its social rather than metaphysical sources. Characters suffer not from fate or cosmic justice but from structural violence: caste discrimination, state repression, economic exploitation, and communal hatred. This secular tragedy locates responsibility in human institutions and historical conditions, implying possibilities for political transformation.

## 7. Critical Reception and Significance

Mistry's work has achieved significant international recognition. *Such a Long Journey* won the Governor General's Award and Commonwealth Writers Prize. *A Fine Balance*

was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Giller Prize. However, this success generated controversy: in 2010, Mumbai University removed *Such a Long Journey* from its syllabus following protests by the Shiv Sena, a Hindu nationalist political party objecting to the novel's portrayal of Marathi politicians and street violence [13].

This censorship attempt illuminates minority testimony's threatening nature. Mistry's unflattering portraits contradict official self-representations as defenders of Marathi pride. More fundamentally, his novels challenge majoritarian nationalist narratives presenting post-independence India as steadily progressing toward inclusive prosperity. By documenting state violence and systematic oppression, Mistry's fiction constitutes counter-history that powerful interests seek to suppress.

## 8. Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry's novels constitute significant contributions to postcolonial literature's project of recovering marginalized voices and counter-histories. Through focus on the Parsi community, he provides representation to one of India's smallest minorities while using that specificity to explore universal themes of belonging, dignity, and survival under oppression. His expansion of focus to include Dalits, Muslims, women, and the disabled demonstrates solidarity across forms of marginalization [14].

Mistry's commitment to realist representation and tragic narrative serves testimonial and ethical functions. His novels document historical atrocities that official narratives minimize or erase, challenging majoritarian myths of progress and inclusion. In an era of rising nationalism globally – including Hindu nationalism in India and ethno-religious nationalism across regions – this literary work gains urgency.

The questions Mistry's fiction raises about minority survival strategies – assimilation,

preservation, resistance, or withdrawal – remain unresolved, reflecting genuine dilemmas facing minority communities globally. His novels refuse easy answers while maintaining commitment to representation, memory, and truth-telling. This combination of formal conservatism and political courage positions Mistry as essential voice in contemporary world literature, demonstrating that literature by and about minorities performs crucial cultural work: preserving memory, asserting dignity, and demanding recognition of fundamental human equality regardless of social positioning.

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