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A STUDY OF THE REFLECTION OF PARSİ LIFE IN THE WRITINGS OF PARSİ WRITERS

DR OM PRAKASH TRIPATHI

Assistant Professor of English

R.R. P.G. College, Amethi

Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

The Parsis have to their credit one of the oldest civilizations on this earth. The majority of the Parsis living across the world reside in Bombay; the rest are scattered throughout the different cities of India. Despite having a very glorious past, the Parsi community is now merely a thing to remember. They are probably the minuscule community in the whole world, for their number is scarcely a hundred thousand. They are chiefly to be found in India, where Bombay, the metropolitan city of India, has been for nearly a century their headquarters. In the midst of the many distinct races that form the Indian population, they are like but a drop in the ocean. It has been a matter of pride for the Parsis to be the progeny of a mighty race of people who occupied Persia centuries before the Christian era. The grandeur, magnificence, and glory of the Parsis remained unsurpassed by any other nation of ancient times; that their kings were at once the most powerful of monarchs and the wisest and most beneficent of rulers; that their armies were renowned for courage and military prowess; and, in short, that they were the foremost Asiatic nation of their time.

Keywords

Alienation, Migrants, Parsis, Nation, Diaspora, Refugee, Progeny, etc.

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DR OM PRAKASH TRIPATHI

Assistant Professor of English

R.R. P.G. College, Amethi

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The ancestors of the Parsis were well trained in all the arts of civilised life, and were remarkable for their valour and energy, bringing up their youth “to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth” (*History of the Parsis* 2). They could boast of heroes as famous for their courage and activity, their generosity and humanity, as for their chivalry and spirit of enterprise; of women as brave as they were fair, and celebrated for the freedom allowed them and for their modesty. It needs to mention that the founder of the Persian Empire known to the Greeks was Cyrus, the Great. He was a powerful and magnificent king, whose mighty armies destroyed the Median power, which before he ascended the throne possessed the rights of commanding his country, and established a Persian empire in its stead. After subjugating Media, he engaged in a war with Croesus, the richest monarch of his age, and thus forced the kingdom of Lydia to come under the Persian sway. Later on, in order to prevent themselves from the persecution, the Parsis abandoned their homes and fled to the mountainous districts of Khorasan, where for a time they succeeded in evading the pursuit of their terrible foe. For about a hundred years, they remained in Khorasan in the unmolested enjoyment and practice of their religion. However, because of persecution, they at last decided to relinquish forever the land of their ancestors, and to remove to some other country where they might hope to live in tranquillity and in the enjoyment of their social and religious rights.

Apparently, they seem to have lived amicably with the Hindus, for during this long period of five hundred years no misunderstanding between them and the children of the soil is ever mentioned. About the year 1305, a circumstance occurred which roused the old fire and warlike spirit of the Parsis and distinguished themselves in assisting the Hindu chief of Sanjan against the aggression of Mohamed Shah or Ala-ud-din Khilji. This chief formed a design for subverting the independence of Sanjan, and despatched to Gujarat a large army under a skilful general named Alp Khan to affect that object. The cause of the Hindu ruler was their own; they knew that if the army of the Sultan were successful their religion would again be imperilled, and that a second persecution of their faith would follow. Zoroastrians, under the leadership of one Ardeshir, was immediately added to the Hindu army.

After the overthrow of the Hindu government the Parsis, fled to the mountains of Bahrut, about eight miles east of Sanjan, taking with them the sacred fire which they had

consecrated at the latter place. Here, however, they did not remain long. According to the *Kissah-i-Sanjan*, the fugitives went to a mountainous district, went a place called Bansda, about fifty miles north-east of Navsari, where a few Parsi families had already settled, and after another fourteen years (i.e. A.D. 1331) they bore the sacred fire to Navsari, where the Parsis had already become an opulent and influential race. The Parsi settlement at Surat is not as old as those at other places in Gujarat, but it was there that the Parsis first gained some considerable importance and came into contact with Europeans. However, there is no authentic record to show the exact date of the arrival of the Parsis in Bombay. It seems probable that the English merchants of Surat induced some of them to settle in Bombay for purposes of trade.

The first work of the Parsis wherever they settle is to construct a tower of silence or what is called a tomb for the reception of their dead, and the claim that the tomb in question had been recently raised is a sufficient proof that no considerable number of the Parsis could have settled in that island prior to its cession to the English. Within a hundred years of the time when the followers of the Arabian Prophet first set foot on Persian soil, the condition of the country had entirely changed. Hence the country which had been the home of peace and prosperity was thrown into the greatest confusion, and hordes of robbers, driven to crime by the distress of the times, traversed every part of the land, perpetrating the cruellest atrocities.

The Parsis of India differ in respect of their dress sense from that worn by their ancestors in Persia and by their present co-religionists in that country. They have adopted to present costume in accordance with their agreement with the Hindu prince who received them in India, and to this is attributable the great resemblance of the *anrakha* (coat) and turban of the men, and the "sari" of the women, to the dress of the Hindus of Gujarat. This costume is, moreover, well adapted to the climate of the country. Beginning with the child, it may be mentioned that its dress, until it attains the age of seven (when it has to be invested with the "sudra" and "kusti," or the sacred shirt and girdle), is simple and not less becoming. It consists of a single garment - a loose shirt of cotton, flannel, or silk - called *jabhla*, extending from the neck and reaching below the knees. The dress of both boy and girl up to the age of six or seven is the same, the girl being distinguished by her long hair and the ornaments on her person. When she is two or three years old both her ears are bored, and rings of thin gold wire are worn in them. On festival days, on their own birthdays, or on those of other members of the family, as well as on occasions of public gathering or rejoicing, both father and mother take more than ordinary pride and pleasure in dressing their children in the best of rich and embroidered silks of variegated colours, and decking them with gold and jewel ornaments.

The Parsi mode of life may be described to be an eclectic ensemble, half-European and half-Hindu. The Greek historians have remarked that of all nations the ancient Persians were most distinguished by their readiness in imitating foreign manners and customs. This peculiarity their descendants have retained to the present day and they now have taken as completely after European manners and customs. The educated and influential classes have already adopted in their domestic life the comforts, conveniences, elegancies, and, we may also add, the costliness, of the European style. An expert on Parsi matters Narendra Kumar endorses the view: "The Parsis dressed like the Europeans, smoked, drank, played cricket and pursued English education but the Parsee life remained unchanged." (*Parsee Novel* 17)

The Parsi women occupy in their society a much more honourable and independent position than either their Hindu or Mahomedan sisters. According to Dr. Haug, a high authority on Zoroastrian scriptures, "The position of a female was in ancient times much higher than it is

nowadays. They are always mentioned as a necessary part of the religious community. They have the same religious rites as men; the spirits of deceased women are invoked as well as those of men." (*History of the Parsis* 127) Education was the safest and most efficient way of improving the native mind that the advancement of the moral and intellectual condition of the people of India would best insure the true prosperity of their country by enabling them to understand and appreciate the character of the rule under which they lived. The natives would be qualified to participate in the administration of their own country. It was by his noble and zealous efforts that ignorance yielded some of its unfruitful possessions to knowledge, though not banished altogether. Then in a little time the languages, literature, science, and philosophy of Europe began to be unfolded before the eyes of an intelligent people too long confined in the outer darkness. The seeds thus sown for the cultivation of the intellect and for the development of the understanding of the people soon grew into a tree, and the precious fruit which it began to yield from the very commencement was recognised as a benefit, making the further development of the human understanding most desirable.

The history of female education among the Parsis is very interesting. Foremost among these be placed the establishment of girls' schools in the year 1849, from which date female education among the Parsis can only be said to have commenced. Before that, Parsi women of the upper classes knew how to read and write a little Gujarati, which was their vernacular. The Parsis of old, following the example of the Hindus and Mahomedans, among whom they dwelt, did not make the least effort to educate their women. What does a woman want to learn for? They may have asked as other have. She has not to go out like men in order to earn her bread. It was thus they replied to any question which might be put concerning female education.

A great change, however, at last began to take place. The young men who had been educated in Government schools and colleges viewed the question of female education in its proper light. They felt the mental inferiority of their better halves. They plainly saw that their own domestic life could not be rendered happy if their wives remained uneducated, nor could the Parsi community be said to have made any great advance from a moral or social point of view if their women continued in a state only worthy of a semi-barbarous age and society. They perceived that, if the seeds of education were to be generally spread, they should first germinate with the gentler sex. The influence which a mother or sister exercises upon a child was fully appreciated, and the youths, perhaps enthusiastically, determined to do some service to their country and countrymen by earnestly directing their attention to the cause of female education.

Bapsi Sidhwa and Mistry's characters, quite commonly, represent the Parsi community, whose identity has been historically problematized. It all started with their exodus following Arab invasion of ancient Persia which led to their settlement in the hospitable environment of Gujarat, though on condition of off-loading marginally their culture baggage. During the British rule, they hobnobbed with the master race and got alienated from the native people. At this point, the Western lifestyle and mores permeated the Eastern inheritance of the Parsis. Post-independence, they had to adjust with the same people whom a few generations of the Parsis had once learnt to deride and despise. In recent past, another dimension has been added. A large number of young Parsis have chosen to and still continue to migrate to the West, Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa both being among those hoping to recover a life of comfort and bygone pride

In the case of Indian Parsis, this identity is essentially constituted by their religious and cultural positions and practices. It also depends upon their equation with other categories of people in the society. Since the question of Parsis' identity is rooted in history, the historical

trajectory needs a slight description. The Parsis have a glorious past. The question of their torment and torture has therefore, drawn the attention of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry being their Parsi co-religionists. Mistry does often define the true traits of Parsis through his novels. For this purpose, he throws ideal characters in his works. They have Parsi names, they pray and observe rituals the way Parsis are expected to do. Also they eat and wear dresses in a particular way. However all of them are not ideal. In *The Tales from Ferozsha Baag*, we come across a number of characters – like Rustomji or Khoshedbhai. However, there is a thinking individual named Percy who has the courage and vision to put his ideas intonation and lead an authentic life. Bapsi Sidhwa has been to some extent caught in the same crossfire. Precisely what some Western critics have hailed as most ‘authentic’ in her work has been criticized by some sub-continental critics (and some Westerners with a slender claim to be ‘in the know’) as if she were giving the game away. *An American Brat* makes clear that her allegiances to American are far more ambivalent than Mukherjee’s, but in 1988, when *Ice-Candy-Man* was published, her emigration to the United States may have seemed like another repetition of a classic tale: dazzled by success, the backwoods writer is lured to the metropolis and turns her back on the origin which were the raw material for her present fame - much to the chagrin of those left behind. Less than a decade later, anxiety about the writerly brain - drain seems to have been replaced by a celebration of mobility, though a certain righteousness clings to those who have stayed on and toughed it out.

In fact, long before she left Pakistan Bapsi Sidhwa’s work had reflected the cultural multiplicity in which she lived. It was only at the moment of international success and physical migration that what might be called her non-aligned gaze became a ground of contest and she was suspected of alienation. As the daughter of an urbane Parsi family, Sidhwa simultaneously benefitted from a secure cultural identity and from that tolerance of other communities permitted by the absence of dietary and social taboos in Zoroastrianism; and although sheltered, young Parsi girls were not as sequestered as their Hindu and Muslim sisters. Above all, the Parsis have long been famously (or infamously) westernized and were notoriously pro-British, “The Parsees dressed like the Europeans, smoked, drank, played cricket and pursued English education but the inner Parsee life remained unchanged.” (*Parsee Novel* 17) Thus, Bapsi Sidhwa enjoyed many of the benefits of hybridization before leaving home.

In her fourth novel *An American Brat* she delineates the voices of alienation through the character of Zareen after the hanging of Bhutto where Zia had introduced a new ordinance called Hadood Ordinance in 1979 to establish sharia laws across the country. This move of General Zia had created a sense of fear and insecurity among the Pakistanis in general and minorities in special. Zareen being a Parsee feels the same awe and disappointment and vents it as: “She was not a proper Pakistani because she was not Muslim. What was she then? And where did she belong, if not in the city where her ancestors were buried? She was in the land of seven rivers, the Septe Sindhu, the land that Prophet Zarathustra had declared as favoured most by Ahura Mazda. What if, on the strength of this, the 120 thousand Parsees in the world were to lay claim to the Punjab and Sindh?” (*An American Brat* 238)

Two other migrations-on-the-spot have also formed part of her experience, one shared by millions, the other are rare even among writers. In 1947 her country changed under her from India to Pakistan; and later, as a beginning writer she chose to write about a culture which she lived alongside but did not share. *The Pakistani Bride* was embarked on first, though published after *The Crow Eaters*. In Sidhwa’s case migration is as much her theme as her life-story. Indeed, as a writer she sees a kind of constant mental migration as her trade. In *Defend*

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Yoursel against Me, a story about Partition which is set in present-day America, she says: 'As a writer, I am...practiced in inhabiting different bodies; dwelling in rooms, gardens, bungalows and spaces from the past.' (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XXIV, No1)

Sidhwa first published *The Crow Eaters* herself in Pakistan, where there is virtually no English-language publication. In an interview, she told Spivak that friends had advised her to publish that novel, rather than *The Bride* 'because at least the Parsis won't kill you.' But according to the *Karachi Herald* of May 1987, *The Crow Eaters* nonetheless made Bapsi Sidhwa the 'Parsi whom other Parsis love to hate,' a more colloquial version of Spivak's 'privileged native informant,' revealing the family secrets not so much to the 'West' as to the whole world save its handful of Zoroastrians. Unconsciously perhaps, this factor may have contributed to Jonathan Cape's decision to publish the novel in London in 1980: it is very funny, of course, and the authorial voice is distinctive, but the British obsession with privacy makes us particularly curious to know the goings-on in our more exotic neighbours' households. With each of her novels the extent of the community she can be seen as representing has expanded: in *The Pakistani Bride*, both Islamic Pakistan and the international community of women; in *Ice-Candy-Man*, all 'India,' and in *An American Brat* perhaps simultaneously not just the Parsis, or Pakistan, or South Asia but the whole goggle-eyed mass of the not-necessarily poor and huddled who dream the American dream. *The Crow Eaters* celebrates the achievement of a tiny community which has survived migration, re-settled peacefully and prospered without losing their cultural identity. Although most of the action takes place in the first decades of the twentieth century, its end leaps twenty years to Freddy's death in 1940. Independence and Partition are on the horizon, and his defiant dying vision is of a security within the coming storm, which has certainly not been won by self-effacing compromise: "We will stay where we are...let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever, rule. What does it matter? The sun will continue to rise - and the sun continues to set - in their arses...!" (*The Crow Eaters* 283) Thus, he has finally arrived after a life which began with his own migration, "Fareedoo Junglewalla, Freddy for short, embarked on his travels towards the end of the nineteenth century. Twenty three years old, strong and pioneering, he saw no future for himself in his ancestral village...and resolved to seek his fortune in the hallowed pastures of the Punjab." (*The Crow Eaters* 12)

Sidhwa's manner contributes to the matter in her telling of *Ice-Candy-Man*. For most of those who have addressed this terrible theme it is basically a tale of two parties crossing, and a linear narrative is the obvious vehicle to recount their migrations. Nevertheless, the Parsis of Lahore stayed put, and from a position of relative security could see as it happened that Independence and Partition brought about not just a split but also a shattering of a complex social system. At a Jashan prayer meeting to celebrate the British victory (in World War II), the community remembers how docilely and sensibly their ancestors left Persia and settled in India - "We got into boats and sailed to India. Why to India? A good-natured heckler inquires.... If they had to go some place why not Greece? Why not to France? Prettier scenery... They didn't kick us hard enough If only they'd kicked us all the way to California Prettier women." (*Ice-Candy-Man* 38) They are ironically aware of how unwelcome their mass migration to Britain would be, despite their cordial relations with the colonial power. Unlike the Jews and the Chinese, the Parsi Diaspora yearns for neither a spiritual, nor a familial homeland, and their allegiances are to the tribe, not the place of settlement. Thus, it is possible for migration to be a subject of comedy to such a relaxed and cosmopolitan community - in total and poignant contrast with the reactions and fate of the Muslim villagers who have the misfortune to live just a few miles closer to Amritsar than Lahore. For them, the prospect of migration is almost

literally unthinkable, “Do you expect us to leave everything we’ve valued and loved since childhood? The seasons, the angle and colour of the sun rising and setting over our fields are beautiful to us the shape of our rooms and barns is familiar and dear. You can’t expect us to leave just like that!” (*Ice-Candy- Man* 34) In Sidhwa’s work there is no migration or partition without loss. Even Freddy’s jovial rise exerts its price. However, the prevalent comedy of her work also suggests that migration is one of life’s essential rhythms and that the losses it incurs are made good with gains in self-knowledge.

The changing social milieu and identity crisis which Bapsi Sidhwa accurately depicts was distinctively visible amongst Parsis in British India and is a social problem for many in the community, even in contemporary India and Pakistan. In the newspaper, *The Parsi*, published since 1905 in Bombay an article appeared stressing that the ambitions of most Parsis were aimed at as close a connection with the English as possible, “The closer union of the Europeans and Parsis is the finest thing that can happen to our race. It will mean the lifting up of a people who are lying low, though possessing all of the qualities of a European race.” (*The Parsis in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* 138) Such a feeling is conveyed in the novel but Behram Junglewalla and his family do not consider Westernization as a conscious abandonment of their own group identity. They observe the trappings of ostensibly ‘liberal’ western culture:

They entertained continuously at small, intimate “mixed” parties where married couples laughed and danced decorously with other married couples. “Mixed” parties were as revolutionary a departure from Freddy’s all-male get-together at the Hira Mandi, and Putli’s rigid female sessions, as is a discotheque from a Victorian family dinner. The parties were fashionably cosmopolitan, including the various religious sects of India: Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians, the Europeans, and the Anglo-Indians. (*The Crow Eaters* 245) Parsis maintained group identity by their dress. Nevertheless, even in the matter of dress, generational change is evident. Faredoon and his family took pride in their traditional mode of dress. Whenever Faredoon went to Government House for formal parties or to pay homage to the British Empire he would consciously be, “rigged out in a starched white coat wrap that fastened with bows at the neck and waist, and crisp white pyjamas and turban.” (*The Crow Eaters* 15) His wife Putli and his mother-in-law Jerbanoo never appeared in public.

Charity is an integral part of the Parsi value system as it stems from a firm religious conviction. The religion founded by the prophet Zoroaster is a monotheism, with the sole God Ahura Mazda (“Wise Lord”) being the creator as well as the judge on the day of the Last Judgement. Ahura Mazda rules over the good spirits (Spenta Mainyu) created by him, which are opposed in this world by the evil spirits (Angra Mainyu). The ethics in Zoroastrianism demand active defence of the good, which explicitly includes truthfulness, righteousness and charity. Earthly renunciation and asceticism are condemned by Zoroaster (in sharp contrast to Hinduism and Buddhism) because they indirectly support the evil in its battle. Religion providing the impetus for charity is an aspect well portrayed by Bapsi Sidhwa. The history of the delightful rascal Faredoon Junglewalla is mingled with accounts of his charitable deeds, “with in a year I was handling all traffic of goods between Lahore and Afghanistan. And once you have the means, there is no end to the good you can do. I donated towards the construction of an orphanage and a hospital. I installed a water pump with a stone plaque, dedicating it to my friend, Mr. Charles B. Allen.” (*The Crow Eaters* 2) The overall mode of the novel is comic. It is not a social comedy like that of Jane Austen or a satirical comedy of Swift or a comedy of manners, but is a genial comedy. The view of life of Bapsi Sidhwa is expansive. Human foibles

and follies are treated with tolerance and mild corrective irony. Creditably the author is not moralistic and does not put forth norms of behaviour and attitudes to be emulated. Even when Faredoon Junglewalla resorts to dubious practices like setting his shop deliberately on fire, after hiding his goods in a hired god own, to claim insurance money, the tone is not that of chastisement. With emphasis on a mass of local detail, the comic aspect of the episode is highlighted. Bapsi Sidhwa neither approves nor disapproves. She presents the hilarious saga of a Parsi family, which is not just the social mobility and value system of a man and his family but the movement of the times. Her most perceptive insights are in presenting the marginal personality aspect within the Parsi milieu. Most Parsis in the novel are shown as cultural hybrids, living and sharing intimately in the cultural life, traditions, languages, moral codes, and political loyalties of two distinct peoples, which never completely interpenetrated and fused.

Community consciousness is evident in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*. In this novel, she centralizes the Parsi community and examines several themes of vital importance to the Parsis in the last decade of the twentieth century. For instance, Sidhwa deliberately ridicules the residual colonial mentality or what she refers to as the "gora complex" (*An American Brat* 26) evident among ex-colonials and particularly among the Parsis. The underlying identity crises and quest for security in the Parsi psyche and influence of a patriarchal society also form the basis of *An American Brat*. Above all this novel examines a very contentious and controversial issue amongst the Parsis, the tradition of prohibition of marriage to a non-Parsi. In making this theme the central concern of the narrative, Sidhwa reveals her ongoing preoccupation with an issue that has very serious ramifications and implications for the Parsi community. The Parsis, a minority culture group anywhere in the world, have a tradition of not allowing either conversion or marriage to a non-Parsi and expelling those who marry outside the community. This tradition is based on certain historical factors, like the five conditions imposed by the King of Sanjan Jadi Rana, to allow the persecuted Parsis to settle in his territory, over a thousand years ago. However the repercussions of the prohibition of marriage to non-Parsis, is causing grave concern, as it is linked to the survival of the community. (*The Parsis in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* 28)

As an Indian who now lives in and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of Indian Diaspora. However, Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a person whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in Diaspora even in India. Like other Parsi writer, his writing is informed by this experience of double displacement. As a Parsi, Rohinton Mistry is in yet another Diaspora - a much older one. In pre-colonial India Parsis were allowed to practise their ancient monotheistic religion but there was a price to pay for this freedom. They could not proselytize and had to adopt the customs, traditions and language of their Hindu hosts. In spite of this disclaimer, Mistry's discourse does revolve around the detailing of Parsi identity. It also reveals how Parsis are learning to cope with the reality of postcolonial India and how they are coming to terms with their new lives in the West. However, this is not all that Mistry's discourse does. As a Parsi, he is on the periphery even in India, so his discourse also challenges and resists the totalization of the dominant culture within India itself. Mistry has also experimented with linguistic hybridity and celebrated the unique Parsi idiom in his writing. This is true of both *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Such a Long Journey*.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry presents his readers with ghetto-like Parsi world, where the postcolonial Indian reality is firmly shut out and where the residents display a siege-

mentality. In these short stories, Mistry grapples with what Kulke has called identity-forming elements of Parsiness - the Zoroastrian faith, a shared history of flight from Iran and refuge in India, a colonial elite consciousness and feeling of unease in decolonized India. (*The Parsis in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* 65) In this insular world, the protagonists' lives revolve around the Parsi housing complex of Firozsha Baag, the Zoroastrian religion, the Fire-temple, the Parsi priests, the Parsi calendar, and Parsi cuisine. This discourse also highlights Parsi idiosyncrasies and bloody-mindedness. Among Indians, Parsis have a peculiar reputation for eccentricity and even living in seclusion. This was tolerated in colonial India, where thanks to their proximity to the colonizers, the Parsis had a certain license and were almost treated like honorary sahibs. However, in postcolonial India the Parsis have to contend with a downgraded status and there is little sympathy for their fads and foibles and above all their haughtiness vis- a-vis other Indians.

The fictional work of Rohinton Mistry can be located in diverse disciplines simultaneously - diasporic reality, Indian post-coloniality and Parsi history. These fields allow the reader to probe the multi-layered meanings offered in his fiction - as Mistry does not deliberate upon them himself. He prefers to leave it to the world of critics, reviewers and academics to identity the possible themes and issues in his fiction. In the published works of Mistry till date, the most common identified themes are - the Parsi idiosyncrasies in India, Bombay as background, issues related to the family, and discordant feminine voices.

Parsi writers have, over the years, made their presence felt in the Indian English writing firmament. They were among the first Indian communities to have willingly accepted education in the English language. Rohinton Mistry is a Zoroastrian Parsi who migrated to Canada in 1975. His writing stands testimony to his community's trials and tribulations through the ages and is informed by the success stories of the few who have made it to the top in various fields and the vast majority of those who are relatively unknown and barely manage to eke out a living. These are the people focused upon in his fictional work.

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