



Fiction or Reality? Tracing The Imprints of Cultural Memory in The Works of Rohinton Mistry.

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Abstract

Cultural memory studies, study how people remember, preserve, and pass on cultural information and customs. In recent decades with rising discourses on culture and memory, cultural memory has been a prominent area of research in diverse disciplines of history, sociology, art, psychology, literary and media studies. Cultural memory studies explore how memory shapes communal identity and creates and contests historical narratives. Literature can reflect the values, beliefs, political and economic institutions of its culture. Literature shapes historical memory and understanding and may reveal the lives and times of former people and communities. Literature can also assist us understand historical events and their effects on society. This research paper undertakes a close reading to analyse how cultural memory has shaped the writing of diasporic novelist Rohinton Mistry and how the world of fiction that he creates through his writing explores various aspects of diaspora consciousness and questions raised by him concerning his ethnoreligious community.

Keywords:

Cultural Memory, Collective Memory, Diaspora, Postcolonialism, Ethnoreligion.

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I. Introduction

Literature helps to recreate collective memory by recollecting the narratives of the past. Considering how literature constructs our understanding of the past is fascinating. Remembering the past, when viewed through the lens of literature, entails more than just remembering individuals and events; it also means remembering prior texts and reconstructing earlier stories and perspectives. Cultural memory is a relatively new academic discipline that emerged in the 20th century as a direct outcome of Maurice Halbwach's groundbreaking work on collective memory. It's a catchall term for the many ways in which individuals and groups recall the past.

Museums, photographs, oral histories, monuments, historical records, written accounts, and works of literature are just few of the ways in which memories can be preserved and handed on to future generations. That's why we call them "memory sites"; they're the ones responsible for both creating and preserving the memories we cherish.

Cultural memory has emerged as a central topic of study across a wide range of academic fields in recent decades due to the proliferation of discourses on the subject. The popularity of this subgenre may be traced back to the way it integrates elements from the hard sciences with those from the social sciences and the humanities. According to Astrid Erll, cultural memory is significant not because of the rapid growth and publication of articles specifically on personal, religious, social, and national recollections, but rather because it provides an overview of how this developing field integrates with different schools of thought.

Cultural memory is defined by Jan Assmann in his essay "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" as "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour or experience within the interactive framework of society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practise and initiation" (Assmann & Czaplicka, p. 126). He argues that the notion encompasses the accumulation of texts, images, and rituals that can be used across time and space, and that their cultivation serves to anchor and convey a society's sense of itself. Each community's sense of identity and shared history is grounded on its previous experiences and practises. Through its cultural relics, a society is made apparent to itself and the outside world. There is a clear sense of history in this inheritance, and the values that surface during the process of coming to terms with it

have strong ties to the make-up and prevailing inclinations of the society in question (Assmann & Czaplicka, p. 132).

Since Sir Frederic Bartlett's pioneering work, it has been assumed that personal memory is a reconstructive process mediated by several relevant elements, from memory traditions to the inescapable influence of contemporary experience on the past. This basic and seemingly incontrovertible fact has become a double-edged sword in memory conception. On one hand, it has enormously broadened the area of memory studies: memory, far from being a videotape-like reproduction of the personal past, has emerged as a fully textured, multivocal text, as relevant to literary critics and cultural historians as to psychologists. (Bartlett & Brut, 1933)

Assmann believes that many people have the same cultural memories, and that this is a form of collective memory. Think about how much of what we remember about our own past is made up of other people's memories, which are themselves made up of other people's memories. Think about the fact that a lot of what we remember is also made up of stories and images we've read and seen in books, movies, and other places. This makes Jan Assmann opine that Cultural memory is "a form of institution". It is transported from one context to another and passed down the generations in symbolic forms that are stable and situation-transcendent, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures. When you closely read and interpret the works and characters of Rohinton Mistry, who is best known for his realistic portrayals of characters and his exploration of themes such as family, community, and identity, one can find some traces of his personal past and traces of his Parsi community's collective memories that goes into his process of narrativization.

In Mistry's novels, the Parsi community and its cultural memory play a central role. The Parsi characters in his stories are often torn between their desire to preserve their cultural heritage and the pressure to assimilate into modern Indian society. The characters often struggle with the question of how to maintain their cultural identity while also adapting to the changes of a rapidly modernizing world. Mistry's works undertaken for this study explores the impact of cultural memory on the Parsi community in Bombay during the 1970s in "Such a Long Journey". The protagonist of this novel is a Parsi man who is deeply attached to his cultural heritage but is also aware of the challenges facing his community in a rapidly changing society whereas in his other novel, titled as "A Fine Balance," he explores the impact of cultural memory on four characters from different backgrounds and how they are impacted by the political climate of India in the state of emergency of 1975. The characters are forced to confront the devastating effects of cultural erasure and how it affects their lives and relationship.

One of the prominent reasons for choosing his works is their unique perspective on the role of cultural memory in shaping individual and collective identity. His stories demonstrate how cultural memory can be both a source of strength and a source of conflict, and how it shapes the way we see ourselves and the world around us.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the cultural and historical context in which Mistry's novels are set.
2. To understand how Mistry's cultural experiences have influenced his writing.
3. To study how his works shed light on the social and political issues of the time.

Webs of Past Memories in Indian Diasporic Writers:

Talking about the pasts in Indian context, colonial reign and postcolonial years play a significant role in shaping the memories, be it individual or collective. Decolonization, the independence of nations that were formerly subjugated to colonial power, is a major issue in post-colonial literature. Furthermore, post-colonial literature vividly depicts the ways in which invaders adopted the land and culture of conquered people. Freedom fight, migration, displacement, identity crisis, alienation, cultural conflict, diaspora, hybridity, loss, and colonisation were central to the works of post-colonial authors. One of the hallmarks of postcolonial writing is that its authors place a premium on the past at the expense of the present. Postcolonial authors are distinguished by their exploration of the decline of their people following colonialism and by the way that this decline is reflected in their own self-perception and the world around them. While diasporic identity crisis and exploration of self through the cultural memory of the past through writings has provided a shift in the ways in which the diasporic writing and writers were look at. Diasporic writers, often act as sites of cultural memory (Agnew, Vijay, 2005). They use their writing to preserve and transmit the cultural traditions, experiences, and history of their community, even as they navigate new cultures and societies. Through their literature, diasporic writers can also provide a unique perspective on issues of identity, belonging, and displacement. They help to bridge the gap between the past and the present, and between different cultures, by creating works that are both rooted in tradition and speak to contemporary experiences. (Kansteiner, 2002)

Each of the diasporic writer's existence in the postcolonial world is entangled with the customs and rituals of their own people. According to (Zimmermann, 2017, p. 1) "culture is the qualities and knowledge of a specific group of people, characterised by anything from language, religion, food, social customs, music, and the arts". Culture comes from the Latin verb *colere*, meaning "to cultivate," which is where the English word

"culture" also finds its roots. Culture is the way of life of a community or group of people, which includes its ideas, beliefs, behaviours, customs, traditions, rituals, clothes, and language, as well as their artistic and literary productions. People's lives become disastrous when they encounter odd people in foreign areas and are forced to deal with cultural challenges they have never encountered before (Wubbolding, 2011, p. 107). Diasporic writers place a high value on the idea of culture. Most of these authors write with the intention of sharing their way of life with the world.

Mistry's Fiction as A Site of Memory:

Rohinton Mistry is one such diasporic writer whose works often explore themes of cultural memory and often depict the experiences of Parsi community in India. His novels such as "*A Fine Balance*" and "*Such a Long Journey*" portray the lives of the Parsi community in India, depicting the cultural traditions and customs, as well as the political and social changes that have affected the community. Through his characters and their stories, Mistry preserves and transmits the cultural memory of the Parsi community, even as he explores the complexities of living as a minority in a rapidly changing society. He too depicts postcolonial pain, but he does so through the lens created by the collective memory of the Parsi community and the themes of diasporic writings runs throughout his works. Rohinton Mistry, like his predecessors Mulak Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan and his contemporaries Amitav Ghosh, Arun Joshi, Salman Rushdie, and Khushwant Singh, is enamoured with and inspired by India's rich cultural heritage. Similarly, in his books, he examines the negative consequences of imperialism via the medium of literature. Mistry uses postmodern techniques to blend history and fiction to delve into the past. The Parsi people of India are the focus of all of Mistry's books and short tales. Mistry's historical fiction is intriguing and valuable. His compositions are set against a backdrop of political and historical upheaval of many kinds. It's safe to say that the Parsi novelists have staked out a prominent spot in the history of English-language Indian literature. The followers of the Prophet Zoroaster, or Parsis, are known as Zoroastrians. Their native habitat is in southern Iran. In the seventh century, Zoroastrians fled their homeland to escape the spread of Islam from Islamic Arabians. During the seventh century, many Christians and Jews decided to go to India in the hopes of using the country as a haven for their beliefs.

However, his Parsi Zoroastrian lineage, makes him a diaspora even in India. His writing, like those of other Parsi authors, is shaped by his own experience of being uprooted twice. In accordance with British records, the Parsis moved from Gujarat to Bombay and (Tindali, 1992) opines that the Parsis may have seen the English's rapid arrival in Bombay as a once-in-a-lifetime historical opportunity that would prove to be as significant for them in the long run as the chance that had transported them to Gujarat a thousand years earlier. (p. 9) "The Parsis are the single largest group of Ethnoreligious," writes (Bharucha, 2003, p. 73). Ethnocentric writing on the Parsis occurs when they are the subject of the work. In his writing, Mistry reflects the modern-day Parsis and the history of his people and nation in the years after independence. Mistry insists, in an interview with Ali Lakhani on the vanishing Parsis, that "his work will...preserve a record of how they lived, to some extent." (Bharucha, 1998). The publication of Behram Malbari's *The Indian Muse in English Garb* in 1877 marked the beginning of a golden age for Parsi literature. Autobiographical literature is a common genre among Parsi authors. Dosabhai Framji Karaka, for instance, makes his intentions clear by saying, "I feel rather that it should be of a personal character as to why I have undertaken this work," referring to the fact that he is writing about the history of his own race and people, even though he knows that English readers will have no interest in it (Dodiya & Dodiya, 2004, p. 64).

Even though Mistry writes on India and Indian culture but seldom visits the country. Mistry is one of those authors whose works exhibit ethno-religious traits. Though on the surface these works deal with their human protagonist and as a rule, Mistry emphasises on story and character development over setting. (Singh, 1997) praises Mistry because "his works display consciousness of their society in a way that the community emerges as a protagonist from their works" (p. 66). Writing short stories like *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was where Mistry got his start as a writer. These accounts focus on the dwellings in Bombay designed with the Parsi people in mind. The religious rites and customs of the Parsi community provide the setting for his paintings. The Parsis' experiences in India are also the subject of his well-known literature, including *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *A Family Matter*. Both "*Such a Long Journey*" and "*A Fine Balance*" are works of fiction, yet they are heavily rooted in real-world politics and history. *Such a Long Journey*, for instance, takes place against the backdrop of the Indo-Pak war and the establishment of the nation of Bangladesh. The postcolonial viewpoint was used to compose *Such a Long Trip*. Mistry, like Ghosh, paints a vivid picture of Indian history, highlighting the ways in which legislation and prevailing power shape the experiences of ordinary people. Characters like Gustad Noble and Major Bilimoria are excellent examples of how communal enslavement impacted the lives of the novel's characters. Mistry adds a fresh perspective to the study of Indian history by focusing on modern-day concerns. It tells Gustad Noble's narrative, the main character. He and his peers have been swept up in the sweep of political and historical upheaval. The author's familiarity with Indian history, especially postcolonial experiences, makes for a remarkable and engaging work. Because of this, his writings have references to real events. Mistry's works, like Salman Rushdie's, are rooted in the past.

Before and after their country's independence, the author explains the historical context of the Parsi people and nation. Mistry used nostalgia as a lens through which to examine both the past and the present. The notion that his works are nostalgic has been put out by many reviewers, although he strongly denies this, saying, "Nostalgia is intriguing as an emotion, but for a writer to write out of a feeling of nostalgia is debilitating because it makes the writing excessively emotional." The values and traditions of his society are extremely important to him. Alienation, oppression, nostalgia, human-relationship, anxiety, and the diaspora are only few of the key themes that run through Mistry's writings.

In addition to being a renowned author, Mistry is also a proud and accomplished Parsi writer. Therefore, Parsi tradition and culture permeate all of Mistry's writings. *Shan-Nama*, written by Firdausi, is often considered to be the finest work of Parsi literature. This book delves deeply into the culture and history of the Parsi people and the region in which they have always resided. They originally lived in what is now Western Iran, but eventually moved to what is now India. Mistry's works are similar in that they examine local and cultural history, "his writing is neither for an audience nor with a message in mind, he writes for the record of the distinct identity of a tiny group to which he belongs." (Dodiya & Dodiya, 2004) The lives of the Parsi people in Bombay are the focus of Mistry's books. Both of his books, *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, accurately portray the government's corruption under Indira Gandhi.

His works tackle weighty topics like communal slavery, the plight of the Parsi communities, migration, alienation, marginalisation, corruption, suppression, untouchability, and other social injustices. In his portrayal, Mistry shows us people who have no choice but to commit criminal acts. His heroes are acutely aware of how their isolation, marginalisation, and suppression are the result of the realism they observe all around them. Through his writings, Mistry exposes his innermost thoughts and experiences. Mistry, who is of Parsi descent, opens a window into his people's customs and beliefs. Mistry is a well-known Parsi author alongside the likes of Bapsi Sidhwa, Firdaus Kanga, and Keki N. Daruwalla. The plight of India's subaltern is the primary focus of his work. Mistry's writings detail the struggles of the untouchables and the Parsis of India.

Mistry portrayed the exploitation of society in writing. Disparities in religion, caste, class, and language all contribute to a breakdown in social cohesion. First published in 1998, *Such a Long Journey* by Rohinton Mistry explores the identity crisis that affects the Parsis. The destruction of the Kodadad building's hallowed wall symbolises the Parsis' loss of communal identity in India. The protagonist, Gustad Noble, says his youth was like nirvana. And now, he believes, everything has changed, and modern life has become a living hell due to the dominance of the ruling class and the exercise of political power. Mistry has used his writing as a tool to fight against social injustices and to warn others not to be exploited. Mistry paints a vibrant portrait of the Parsis and untouchables, bringing to life their struggles and triumphs while living in the shadow of the dominant class. In his writings, he rails against the nation's societal ills. He influenced people greatly with his writings. Through Gustad, the protagonist of *Such a Long Journey*, we learn about the struggles that an immigrant child faces throughout his childhood. Because of his status as a lower-class citizen, Noble must endure significant challenges. Illness in his daughter Roshan, resistance from his son to enrol at IIT, and the passing of close friends are just a few examples. In addition, the weird box he received from a friend was the final straw that caused him to commit the major crime and destroy the sacred wall.

Mistry uses the characters to show how the Parsis are confined and enslaved by the other dominating groups in India. He writes on the pain and suffering of the working class in his second novel, *A Fine Balance*. People in higher social classes tend to exert more influence over those in lower social classes. Mistry has used the personal problems of the working class to illustrate the abuses of the upper class. Om, Ishvar, Maneck, and Dina Dalal are some of the protagonists whose lives are chronicled in *A Fine Balance*. All of them perished because of the political unrest in their country. Mistry places emphasis on the untouchable and the enduring idea of the caste system in India. Stories set during the State of Emergency are common in Mistry's writing. His works examine his diasporic perspective with great tact and sensitivity while putting an emphasis on the history of his country and communities. His works inspire people to work toward world peace and equality for all by highlighting the exploitation of the working class and the oppression of minorities. Most of the cast is made up of members of the Parsi community and the working class.

His works "*Such a Long Journey*" and "*A Fine Balance*," are emblematic of the underdog and the struggle of the human condition. Mistry's writings examine the complexities of the human condition and the inequality of society in India. Mistry is India's most accomplished and accomplished writer. He demonstrates concern for ordinary people and Parsis specifically. He wraps things off by adding that the poor become subservient while the rich get richer because of the worst administration ever. As a result, those in the upper class began taking advantage of those in the lower class. Mistry argues that there is no difference between the privileged and the underprivileged in terms of their status in society or their access to opportunities. People who are being mistreated because of political unrest have a voice in his speeches. He captures the spirit of the present day brilliantly in his writing. In India, he speaks up for the underrepresented. When studied, his works shed light on both historical and contemporary problems. His writings reveal an expansive worldview and familiarity with many cultures and nations.

II. Conclusion

The past, present, and future of any given group are heavily influenced by their cultural and communal memories. They may also contribute to the formation of individuality and group solidarity and diasporic writers often operate as centres of cultural memory. While adapting to new communities, they employ writing to record and pass on their community's history, customs, and experiences. Through their literature, diasporic writers can also provide a distinct viewpoint on questions of identity, belonging, and displacement. By producing works that are at once steeped in tradition and relate to contemporary experiences, they help to bridge the gap between the past and the present and across different cultures.

Rohinton Mistry is one such diasporic writer whose works often examine themes of cultural memory. Mistry was born in India, and his stories frequently focus on the lives of the minority Parsi group in that country. His works, such as "A Fine Balance" and "Such a Long Journey," reflect the situations of Parsi community in India, including the group's cultural practises, the effects of political and social change on those practises, and more. Mistry, who himself is a member of the Parsi minority, writes on the difficulties of that group's position in a contemporary world through the lenses of his fictional characters. His depictions also examine the issue of diaspora and how it impacts the cultural memory of the community. Mistry has accomplished the remarkable feat of interweaving historical events with the character's personal lives, all while attempting to interpret the realism achieved through cultural memory. Mistry is included in the canon of postcolonial authors whose works address societal concerns via the experiences of their fictional protagonists. One of the major ideas in postcolonial works is the diaspora, and Mistry examines it in a novel way by blending fiction and non-fiction. His works serve as a model for all postcolonial literature. It's not enough that Rohinton Mistry is one of the prominent English-language Indian novelists of our time; his work is also exemplary because of the universality of its tone and themes. There is a lot of room for further research, as the present study only attempts to link the cultural memories, he has carried with him throughout his life with the social, cultural, and historical components of the selected novels. Postmodernism, New Historicism, and psychoanalytic approaches all lend themselves well to the study of these novels.

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