

**Probing into the Idea of Nation:  
A Study of Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and  
*Family Matters***

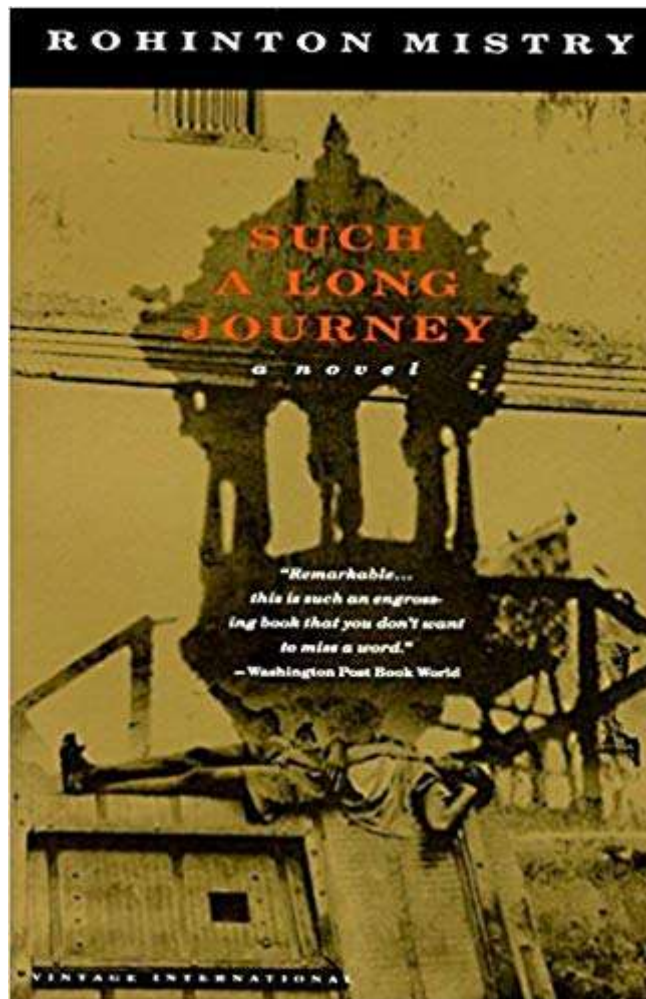
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Courtesy: [https://www.amazon.com/Such-Long-Journey-Rohinton-Mistry/dp/0679738711/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=UTSRCD8L9S6J&keywords=such+a+long+journey+by+rohinton+mistry&qid=1565316928&s=books&sprefix=Such+a+Long+Journey+%2Caps%2C240&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Such-Long-Journey-Rohinton-Mistry/dp/0679738711/ref=sr_1_1?crid=UTSRCD8L9S6J&keywords=such+a+long+journey+by+rohinton+mistry&qid=1565316928&s=books&sprefix=Such+a+Long+Journey+%2Caps%2C240&sr=1-1)

**Abstract**

Rohinton Mistry is an immigrant writer but in his works, he reveals absorbing idea of nation and nationality based on the life of Bombay. He takes glimpse into the lives of Parsi

people who form minor religious group. So, this idea of nationalism is formed from the perspective of these ordinary people. Memory, history, family and beliefs of these people determine the concept of nation. In this way Mistry has tried to historicise his fiction and fictionalise the history of the country. The common people's lives are projected onto the background of the novels. Yet, they achieve success to address the issues fruitfully and faithfully. Fragmentation and dissolution characterize his concept of Nationalism.

**Keywords:** Rohinton Mistry, *Such a Long Journey*, *Family Matters*, nation, nationalism, memory, subaltern, history, ethnic community

The Post-independence period in India has seen production of highly remarkable works. In this period attempt has been made to define new ideas of nationalism and nation. The enormities of caste system, the constant communalism instigated by different segments of religion, and the growing sensitivity to the rights of the disenfranchised minorities have become vital issues in this period. Actually, even after the independence, vast portion of Indians continue to feel that they are under sway of new course of colonialism. In this respect we may remember George Lamming's lamentation "the habitual weight of a colonial relation continues to be felt on the imagination even after Independence is a fact" ("The Occasion for Speaking." 25). The people on the margin have been colonised in their own country in new way. They become neglected often. So, the very catching words 'unity in diversity' became myth because the idea of the nation is gradually changing, and it is becoming fragmented. It is an "idea which, though seemingly clear, lends itself to the most dangerous misunderstanding" (Renan, "What is a Nation?" 8).

Now memory, history, beliefs, family determine the factors of forming national idea. However, after their colonial period there was a great change about their idea of nation because rule of India by Indians underwent change. So, idea of Nation was being felt in new light and in postcolonial perspective. The later writers who migrated to other countries could not escape the idea of Nation and therefore they tried to encapsulate this idea by mixing historical facts with fiction. In course of time, they tried to historicise the national consciousness of people of post-independence era though they (these writers) were living in foreign countries.

Rohinton Mistry, a Canada-based writer of Parsi descent, presents in his work the new idea of nation. He questions its solidarity and observes the Indian society through his vivid presentation of Bombay. His works are firmly grounded and contextualised within the framework of India's agitating post-independence period. He raises important aspects about the minority position of Parsi identity amidst wider Indian contexts. The Parsis, a unique and multicultural group of people, have added exciting flavour to India's already diverse population. These sectarian groups in Bombay combined many of their indigenous customs with traditional Indian life-style and have created a rich culture all of their own. Writers such as Cyrus Mistry, have made excellent works about their heritage.

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Here I shall discuss the advent of the Parsis in India. The Parsis came to India several centuries ago and thus, they are the descendants of the Parsian migrants who came to India after the Arabians made inroads into their society. However, exact date cannot be determined. It is notable that the Parsis had relationship with India before their emigration into this land. Some archaeologists (i.e. D.B. Spooner) even believe that the Mauryas belonged to the Parsis, though Parsi historians do not think in their lines. However, most of the current historians contend that Indian Parsi community descended from Parsi Zoroastrians and later they were integrated into the Indian society and religion.

The famous Parsian chronicle 'Qissa-i-Sanjan' depicts the different stages of Parsis' migration in Indian subcontinent. It elucidates the process of acculturation of the Parsis that they experienced with their arrival in Gujrat. It recounts the first adventurous moment of the Parsis when they landed in Gujrat and approached the local king named Jadi Rana who imposed five conditions on the Parsis. These are i) The Parsi high priest would have to explain the essence of their religion to the king, ii) The Parsi would have to adopt the local Gujrati dialect, iii) Their women would have to wear the garments of the local women, iv) The men would have to lay down their weapons and v) The Parsis had to perform the marriage ceremony only at night. The Parsis agreed with most of these conditions and adapted themselves with their new ambience and were able to preserve the basic premise of their religion.

Later, they spread to other parts of India, but they brought with them the holy fire. They assimilated various culture, language and tradition and had necessary knowledge of language and business. These helped them mingle with European merchants and those merchants employed Parsis as their chief brokers. This association of Parsis with the European counterparts helped them rise with economic and social identity. So, when the British were developing Bombay as a superb trading centre and city, 'the Parsis started to settle there and today 70,000, or more than 70 per cent of all Indian Parsis, are living in the city of Bombay' (Echerd 34). In later day, they have played huge roles in structuring economic strength of Bombay. They built it as a cosmopolitan metropolis as their business drew members from diverse religion.

At first, three Parsi families - Petit, Wadia and Tata, revamped multiple industries of India. Later, other families of the Parsi communities came and gave powerful formation to the business and industry of India. However, they were never diverted from following the religious dictum. But at the present moment they are undergoing the crisis, decay and degeneration. Thus, though the community achieved prosperity economically and politically and enjoyed privilege, its existence came to be endangered very soon. The gap of socio-economic status widened further, and discrepancy grew. All these facts point out the fact that the community is degenerating, its vitality is exhausting, and it has to struggle enough to maintain unity for surviving in the future. The undermining of the Parsi identity and the

decadent value system characterized the community's marginal existence. Different writers have pointed out these aspects and Rohinton Mistry has proved his excellence in this regard.

I shall discuss Rohinton Mistry's two novels-*Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *Family Matters* (2002) where he is exclusively concerned with the religious group of Parsi and their position in the broad canvas of India. This religious group has become conscious of its own identity and so it can form 'nation'. Indeed, Indian nation covers a large group of individuals who may have distinct traits, characteristics in spite of possessing diverging opinions, interests. However, their unique traits, characteristics help them form the same community in which they build up strong unity.

Nation is constituted through its language, culture, rituals, customs, folk beliefs, myths etc. These interpret the position and place of a nation. However, dominant idea of nationalism is derived from Europe and it is re-appropriated and applied in the colonial countries. When these countries break the yoke of colonisation, they faced the challenge of multiple identities and as a result, numerous new nation states emerged out of the single colonial state. These new nation states required the construction and legitimisation for special identity. Therefore, decolonisation witnessed the creation of new nation states. The creation was not easy one and the task was rather arduous to construct and consolidate a fresh identity of Nation. Indeed, Nation is culturally homogenous group of people who can share common language, religion, historical experience. When "self-consciousness" is injected within the community, national idea gets born.

In the case of Parsi, religion is the common thread and certain common tradition, customs, culture, memory, myths which are implicit within the religion pave the way towards nation-building. Some ideological impulses develop "collective self-consciousness". It can outline the psycho-spiritual concept of nation and develop the self-assertion of a community.

The texts expose the concerns about national identity of the Parsis. They are the ethno-religious minority who are settled mostly in Mumbai. Nani A. Palkiwala observes, "History affords no parallel to the role of Parsis in India. There is no record of any other community so infinitesimally small as Parsis, playing such a significant role in the life of a country so large." (*We the Nation* 317). They maintain a strong sense of group identity; yet this group identity is facing some problems which necessitate the self-determination of the community much more.

Thus, Mistry includes some points which enforce their national identity strongly. Thus, he incorporates the roles of the rituals and their functions which they have retained against all odds. Their sense of honour as well as insult makes them consolidated against their treatment of 'other'. So, they always endeavour to hold on to the glory they had once received. This nation-formation is achieved through the process of nationalism. This nationalism is, as Royal Institute notes, "consciousness of membership in a nation" and a

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“desire to forward the strength, liberty, or prosperity of a nation” (xviii). It may refer to the process of nation-building, to the ideal behind that process and even to the activities of different political parties.

These three ideals are most active in twentieth century when there has been change in political, social and cultural spheres. Still, nationalism as a vibrant issue is broad to analyse and hard to pin down. India is the space for multiple experimentations with the doctrine of nationalism. It inculcates different religious, linguistic, composite, plural culture. However, minority section has often struggled to preserve the pristine purity of their cultural heritage. They have to compromise and negotiate with other competing identities regarding their adaptation and accommodation of the cultural heritage.

The nationalism of the minority section has often been recognized as sub-nationalism, proto-nationalism. Ambedkar was apprehensive of the persecution of minority and he pointed out that the majority should not deny the existence of minority.

Mistry was concerned with the nationalism of Parsi identity in a turbulent period. However, it is not properly structured; rather it is unstructured. When Parsis feel the crisis in contemporary time, they try to redefine themselves by perceiving the sameness to the language, mythic tradition, common history etc. It tries to relocate the culturally homogenous people. Thus, Parsi nation can be understood best in its spirit of nationalism.

This spirit of nationalism can be pointed out in many ways-in its search for ethnic past glory, use of common myths, certain symbols, celebration of rituals etc. Symbols are crucial for the survival of the religion based nation. Symbols persist because they are integral parts of the mythic structure. Myth highlights the traits and features, the unity of a group. It evokes national sentiment and solidarity of the group. They remind us of unique culture and tradition. They serve the purpose of shared cultural element. The nation is ideal formation of a group which is about to break. They can build collective self-assertion of a group.

Both in *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters* Mistry has incorporated the symbolic use of different Parsi physical structures like ‘Fire Temples’ and the ‘Tower of Silence’, ‘Parsi Panchayet’ etc. which are parts of the Parsi lives. As they try to highlight the purification ceremonies and are very careful to keep the bodies of the people and natural elements of this earth pure, they build the Tower of Silence where the dead bodies are thrown lest the earthly elements should get corrupted by them.

The Parsee people lay special emphasis upon the fire because fire, to them, is the symbol for Ahura Mazda (‘Wise Lord’). This fire was kept in a temple. Eckehard Kulke writes in *The Parsees in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change*, “Herodotus reports (1.131-132) that the Persians had no temples or alters” (20). Later sacred buildings were set up for the protection of the fire.

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Thus, temples were being built throughout the countries where the Parsis gradually settled down. Fire is the agent of ritual purity and all major Parsi rituals are solemnized between sunrise and noon in these fire temples. In *Such a Long Journey* Gustad tries to understand the importance of the Tower of Silence after Dinshawji's body was left in the Tower of Silence.

The Tower of Silence serves as their national symbol. The importance of 'Fire Temple' in Parsi lives is exposed when we see Yezad going to the Fire Temples daily to purify his repentant soul. Again, Parsi Panchayet of Bombay is influential in shaping the sense of community and group identity. Based in Bombay, it has been regarded as the largest Zoroastrian institution in order to maintain Zoroastrian family and social values and implement the Zoroastrian virtue and charity. At first, the selection of the members was inherited but later the benevolent, charitable persons became its members and they provided substantial support to the education, health, shelter, employment, publication projects, and basic religious need of their fellow poor members.

The Parsi Panchayet has always tried to impose indirect rules in order to bind the community in an integrated whole and it has carried on reformatory works on a grand scale. It has become rejuvenated with the new roles and gradually has come to be regarded as effective and influential public organisation. Thus, it administered schools, hospitals, housing projects, orphanages etc. Everybody admits its role in propagating the Parsi educational system, emancipation of women, reformation in religion and political participation. Charitable donations from the parts of the businessman and industrial magnates have become the hallmarks of the Parsi Panchayet. We can understand the power of Parsi Panchayet in Parsis' lives when we come to the fact that Dr. Fitters gives suggestions as to how Parsi population can be increased. He says that Parsi Panchayets must prohibit Parsi youth from going beyond a bachelor's degree.

Mistry has pointed out how the past glory of the Parsis can bind a community which is on the verge of dissolution. It is right that the race has deteriorated to a great extent. But the old Parsi people still cherish the memory of the past days and it only increases traumatic presence. Dr Fitter rightly observes,

When you think of our forefathers, the industrialists and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave us our hospitals and schools and libraries and bags, what lustre they brought to our community and the nation. And this incompetent fellow cannot look after his father. (*Family Matters* 51)

The richness of inheritance only intensifies and vivifies the decadence in present times when it is kept in contrast with the past. Nariman who takes resort to the nostalgia feels

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this situation intently-“But at my age, the past is more present than the here and now. And there is not much percentage in the future” (*Such a Long Journey*128). Actually, when the Parsis are going through crisis, they remember their glorious forefathers; it marks the past glory of a miniscule community. In Yezad’s house the clock of his father serves as the sign of honesty, object of celebration for his family and the story behind it evokes dominant sense of purity and integrity that are the intrinsic quality of a Parsi nation. Yezad could link the honesty in his father’s time with that of ancient Parsian culture but it is gradually breaking down. This past glory can integrate the dispersed community.

Mistry has used the Parsi myth which can evoke the sense of integration among the Parsi people. Remembrance of Ahura Mazda is mythic evocation. He is considered the highest spirit of worship in Zoroastrianism. He is the lord of wisdom to the Parsis. When the Parsi people are vexed or confused, they call Him. Actually, it is the Avestan stem-form *Mazda* and bears similarities to the Sanskrit word *medhas*, which means ‘intelligence’ or ‘wisdom’. It is a religious myth and in Parsi religion it is believed that Zoroaster got the principles of the ‘Good Religion’ at the age of 30 from Ahura Mazda. Zoroaster instructed his followers to abide by rules of Ahura Mazda, which would help them to the right paths. Gustad invokes him when he is befuddled by the day-to-day family matters:

O Dada Ormuzd, what kind of joke is this? In me, when I was young, You put the desire to study, get ahead, be a success. Then You took away my father’s money, left me rotting in the bank. And for my son? You let me arrange everything, put it within reach, but you take away his appetite for IIT. What are You telling me? Have I become too deaf to hear You? (ibid55)

Thus, he wants to identify himself to the ancient myth in any modern problem. Gustad feels apprehensive when he sees that generation gap has widened too far and his communities would reach to the non-existent point. Actually, Parsis have restructured India to the mythic dimension. Every Parsi can pride himself of such constructive roles of the Parsi. Gustad makes such references as Parsi Panchayet, R.D. Sethna, Tata, Wadira Charities which have made notable contributions to Indian education, business and scholarship. Gustad prides himself on those issues. But he feels despair in that his next generation neglects him and pays least dignity and values. The value system is crumbling down in a land gripped under war, corruption and diluted politics.

In *Family Matters* Mistry shows how people in Parsi society inculcates mythical stories from Persia and gives instances of Good and Evil. Actually, the tale which shows the triumph of virtue over vice fascinates our heart. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is an example. Parsian *Shah-Nama* has many stories which pass from generation to generation. Nariman tells his grandchildren the story of Zuhaak and Faridoon. This story symbolically recounts the fight between good and evil which is at the root of Zoroastrian faith. According to this story, Zuhaak is incarnation of worldly evil and it is “deployed here in another of the

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novel's attempts to lay hold of the roots of evil and sufferings in the world" (Morey 149). He conducts a thousand year reign of terror and murders thousands of young men, whose brains are scooped out to feed the two snakes sprouting from his shoulders. In Parsi folklore there is also a spider which binds Zuhook in the subterranean realm under captivity by spinning the gossamer webs. Cobwebs, thus, play symbolic role of Good which helps individuals keep the Evil under suppression. Through these folklores the Parsis have expressed their ethnic identities and awaken their 'we-consciousness' to quote Eckehard Kulke. Through simple folklore one can easily understand Zoroastrian dictum-good and evil-the former emanating from Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, and the latter being the result of the intrusion of the Zoroastrian Devil.

According to Zoroastrian doctrine clash between the good and the evil is ever present. This doctrine advises the people to cling to truth, honesty, loyalty, etc. Really, these good qualities are part and parcel of Parsi identity. They have been mingled in the cultural hybrid of India, but their own identical folklores and myths always remain ingrained with their lives. Amidst all of the problematic of the minority discourse, these myths and folktales are silver lines for redefining their identities. Indeed, in Mistry the oppressed are given a voice. The myth is exploded, to a certain extent, to refer to the problems of their community. Actually, when a person is dislocated from his tradition, custom and values, he has to search for the roots and that gives him solace. He came to know the purity of this unique and ancient Persian community.

Thus, myth highlights the traits and features, the unity of a group. It evokes national sentiment and solidarity of the group. They remind us of unique culture and tradition. They serve the purpose of shared cultural element. The Parsi nation is ideal formation of a group which is about to break. They can build collective self-assertion of a group by clinging to the mythic tales.

Mistry also refers to the Parsi rites and rituals in this works and at once reinforces the Parsi identity that has survived till now. However, it is in a dwindling situation. Indeed, there is inherent link between the culture of people and its religiosity. Art and literature contain traces of different beliefs. People may migrate from one place to another, but they follow those rituals in new country. Every religion has its own holy places and religious pattern. It obtains hidden knowledge and revelation through seer and the seeress who is sometimes called a *seiokona*. The word is connected with song and it also refers to a small choir which makes a spellbound situation. Elaborate choir and ritual is generally used to provide necessary conditions for receiving inspiration. After Dinshawaji died, Gustad attends the funeral rites and through those rites the author has given suitable situation to discover Parsi religion. This funeral rite is performed in original Persian language which has become obsolete to Gustad. He cannot understand this language, but its spirit touches the core of his heart and lends soothing effect. It instils unparallel inspiration in him.



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 understand the ancient meanings (*Such a Long journey* 248).

Though Parsis migrated from Persia to Gujrat and went to Bombay, they did not leave the verses of ancient Avesta. It helped them understand their own community identities and their popular culture because they have adhered to their customs. Through rituals, myths and customs they have built their nation which feels thwarted in a problem-ridden modern India and Mistry has given free rein to his imaginative faculty to depict the very situation. However, this custom is gradually being overtaken by modernistic views.

Though Gustad and his companions proceeded with the Ahuna-vad Gatha while they were carrying the dead body of Dinshawji, it appeared to Gustad, "Silly custom, to have professional pallbearers. And on top of that, poor fellows treated like outcastes and untouchables" (ibid 252). Avestan language belongs to the Old Iranian language. The verses written in this language retain devotional note. Overall, the Parsi community has maintained its ancient tradition and individual existence. The Parsians like to preserve their own language and build a strong sense of separate cultural identity. In *Family Matters* too Mistry has dealt with the Parsi ritual, to a great extent. When Nariman dies, the sense of mortality dawned upon them and they became conscious of losing of values and culture. Inspector Masalava rightly comments, - "it will be a loss to the whole world. When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser" (*Family Matters* 415).

Rohinton Mistry, thus, explores the subordination of the ethnic Parsi tradition in flowing current dominated by Hindu society. However, he believes that Parsi people had once rich heritage and regard for good reputation. Now they suffer from cultural alienation or some types of inferiority complexities. Mr Kapur, thus, tries to assert the Parsi self, and foster the tradition and culture of the Parsis. He says, - "the Parsi reputation for honesty is well known. And even if it's a myth-there is no myth without truth, no smoke without fire." (ibid 156).

Indeed, Parsis try to stick to the basic values and instil glory and culture into their progeny. In an age of crookedness, this very reality appeared to many as myth. But their religion leads them to the way of perfection. Therefore, the narratives of nation that we see emerging in Mistry's works are evocative accounts of continuous struggle for survival of the marginal, the subaltern, the socially backward section of India, pitted against a ruthless annihilating nation state. People within the excluded minority community forge alliances across class, profession and gender and rise in protests. This is the fragmented idea of 'Nation' where ethnic community is aware of the existence of a sovereign and limited community to which they belong. So, they want to retreat into the past lane and rejuvenate

the national idea as it is, after all, mental construct. In this regard we should remember Nehru's expression,

The present and the future inevitably grow out of the past and bear its stamp and to forget this is to build without foundations and to cut off the roots of national growth" (*The Discovery of India* 391).

It helps the members to be grouped in mutual co-operation, cherishing attachments.

Debate has been going on between the reformists and the orthodox sections within the Parsi community. The orthodox Parsis believe in the traditional method of feeding the corpse to the vultures in Dakhma. It is the unique Zoroastrian method of returning to nature. It is in comparison an eco-friendly mode of feeding them to the vultures, achieved without stain of pollution to the earth, harming nothing of God's creations:

The orthodox defence was the age-old wisdom that it was a pure method, defiling none of God's good creations: earth, water, air, and fire. Every scientist, local or foreign, who had taken the trouble to examine the procedure, using modern hygienic standards, sang its praises' (*Family Matters* 317)

However, the reformist ones prefer cremation over feeding their dead to the vultures. Modern reformists regard the traditional procedure as 'ghoulish system' which does not fit at all for a community with 'a progressive reputation and a forward thinking attitude' (ibid 317) in this age of twentieth century. At this the orthodox argues that 'reformists had their own axe to grind in legitimizing cremation' because they have no compulsory need of 'Tower of Silence'. This 'Tower of Silence' is the flag bearer of their own identity through which this community projects its "we-consciousness". Thus, the controversy goes on endlessly and Mistry does not share any intrusive reflection. It, in a way, shows the breakdown of integration of a community. Joydipsinh Dodiya has rightly observed,

Rohinton Mistry's sensitivity of impending dangers to his community is expressed by his characters' consciousness of those changes. In a nutshell, Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* centralizes the Parsi community in many ways. (*The Fiction of Rohinton Mistry* 95)

The clash concerning the Parsi's religious practices exhibits the crumbling rootlessness of the Parsi community in negotiating with the modernity. Thus, Mistry carves out a new narrative of his Parsi community against the background of modern turbulent lives of India. It delineates elementary issue of identity construction of an ethnic minority. Parsis form a national community through preserving their distinctive culture which is inherited tradition. So, it is interpreted and recreated by each generation and thus, conflict generates.

The Parsis always feel that their community is declining day after day. The Parsi writers express their anxiety through their writings so as to provide foresight about their falling population. In *Family Matters* too Mistry expresses his apprehension about the downfall of the community. Inspector Masalavala, Jal, and Dr Fitters deal with the future of the Parsi community. Several factors are responsible for their downfall such as ‘dwindling birth rate, our men and women marrying non-Parsis, and the heavy migration to the west’ (*Family Matters* 400).

Rohinton Mistry has given every subaltern people voice and visibility in his novels. Mistry’s oeuvre is a long journey achieving appropriate balance and dealing with family’s day today matter trying to come to terms with the notion of nationality and nationhood. His chief achievement is embodiment of the concept of a nation. No historian has given systematic analysis of the idea of a nation. Writers may fill up that lacuna by redrawing the map and by “creating new political communities on the basis of a sense of community derived from historic memories and a myth of common descent” (Smith, *Myth and Memories* 61). However, there are differences of utility of those myths on the basis of the age.

D. Smith, therefore, succinctly points out—“Where previously, these myths were utilized to uphold cultures and kingdoms, today they can just as easily be made to serve the interests of forgotten and submerged communities aspiring to national status and territorial recognition”.(ibid 61) Today, nation-formation has its own historicist character and it is seen under the garb of interplay between various multitudes. In the same strain Max Weber has commented, “A nation is a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own; hence, a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own” (“The Nation” 176). Mistry has penned down several myths in order to refer to communal aspect of narrative and present proper social and psychological mode of community.

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