

The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking

Double-blind, Peer-reviewed, and Open Access Journal in English

Vol. 6 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2026 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 68-82



www.literaryherm.org

www.cavemarkpublications.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64846/SPLJLH.2026.6138>

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Diaspora, Memory, and Minority Ethics: Re-reading Rohinton Mistry's Fiction

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Research Article

Keywords: Rohinton Mistry, diaspora, minority discourse, Parsi identity, postcolonial realism, Emergency

Article History

Received: June 4, 2026

Revised: June 12, 2026

Accepted: July 1, 2026

Impact Factor

SJIF 3.975



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPLJLH)



Abstract

The three main books of Rohinton Mistry—*Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*—are studied from the viewpoints of diaspora studies and minority discourse. It seeks to show how Mistry reinterprets diaspora as an ethical and psychological condition influenced by memory, minority identity, historical vulnerability, and negotiated belonging within postcolonial India, rather than just as geographical displacement. Using theoretical frameworks from postcolonial and diaspora studies, the study uses a qualitative textual analysis of Mistry's chosen novels. Parsi identity representations, internal displacement, ethical realism, historical violence, and community fragility are examined using key concepts including Avtar Brah's "diaspora space," Homi Bhabha's "minority discourse," and Stuart Hall's theories of identity. To investigate the relationship between individual experiences and more general sociopolitical realities, close reading is used. According to the study's findings, Rohinton Mistry reframes diaspora as a type of minority ethics based on memory, history, and daily battles for dignity. By focusing on internal displacement, demographic instability, and moral tenacity rather than just physical movement, his fiction broadens the field of diaspora studies. The intersections of ethical realism, subnational belonging, and minority identity in Indian English literature may be further examined in future studies, along with comparative viewpoints with other diasporic and postcolonial authors.

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From referring to forced exile and dispersal, the term "diaspora" has come to represent intricate discussions of identity, belonging, memory, and hybridity. According to academics like Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah, modern diaspora studies place a strong emphasis on the creation of identity inside what Brah refers to as "diaspora space"—a location where issues of power, racism, and minority standing converge with migratory histories (Brah 16). The fiction of Rohinton Mistry has a special position in this theoretical framework. While much scholarship situates Mistry within Indo-Canadian diasporic writing, his novels resist simplistic readings of expatriate nostalgia or multicultural celebration. Rather, they highlight historical tragedy, ethical perseverance, and the vulnerability of minorities in postcolonial India. The anxiety surrounding Parsi identity is explained and a useful framework to understand Mistry's fictional universe is very aptly observed by Nilufer Bharucha as:

It is in such a life and death situation that the Parsis are making their last grand stand asserting their glorious Persian past, their Indian connection and their new Western experiences. All these aspects are reflected in the assertion of Parsi identity in recent fiction written by them. (55-71)

Mistry's diasporic status as a Canadian writer or his realist documentation of Indian political crises, especially the Emergency in *A Fine Balance*, are often highlighted in studies, despite the increasing amount of criticism directed at him. The way Mistry reframes diaspora as a state of internal minority consciousness rather than just a geographic dislocation is still understudied. His portrayal of the Parsi community, which is limited in number, culturally unique, and has historically been concerned about survival, challenges prevailing diaspora models that value international movement. Diaspora develops into an ethical and psychological condition influenced by memory, fragility, and negotiated belonging in Mistry's work. Mistry himself acknowledges the archival function of literature emphasizing the need to preserve the collective memory of a diminishing community in an interview with Ali Lakhani at the Vancouver International Writers Festival, when he says, "Well, I suppose it does work in that way. In a sense this novel, will, when the Parsis have disappeared from the face of the earth, will preserve a record of how they fared, to some extent." (31-34)

This essay makes the case that Rohinton Mistry views diaspora as minority ethics rather than a triumph of migration. The study shows that Mistry's narrative universe is organized around three interconnected concerns through in-depth readings of *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*: (1) Bombay's moral geography as a place of layered belonging; (2) the Parsi community's cultural and demographic anxiety; and (3) the conflict between historical violence and individual dignity. The study places Mistry's fiction within larger discussions on postcolonial identity formation and narrative realism, drawing on Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space and Homi Bhabha's definition of minority speech (Bhabha 2).

In contrast to authors who use postmodern playfulness to aestheticize disintegration, Mistry embraces what could be called ethical realism. His storytelling is meticulous, patient, and sensitive to everyday pain. Family disputes, financial instability, and physical deterioration are examples of the everyday life's texture that becomes the site of greater historical forces at work. The past is always recreated through narrative imagination, as Salman Rushdie notes in his meditations on memory and motherland (Rushdie 10). This reconstruction is part of Mistry's fantasy, but it is tempered with soberness rather than excitement. The city of Bombay, the interior of the home, and the precarious Parsi household become places where it is necessary to continually negotiate a sense of belonging. This study adds to current discussions about realism, ethics, and subnational identities in Indian English literature by redefining Mistry as a chronicler of minority survival within postcolonial modernity rather than just as a diasporic novelist. It suggests that rather than providing a meditation on unstable continuity, Mistry's work complicates celebratory notions of hybridity.

Bombay serves as more than just a setting in *Such a Long Journey* (1991); it is an ethically fraught environment where political disenchantment, private domestic life, and minority worry converge. The novel's emotional core is found in Gustad Noble's modest Parsi home, yet it is set in 1971 against the backdrop of the Indo-Pak war and Indira Gandhi's consolidation of power. Mistry turns the city into what could be called a moral geography—a place where history bears upon the everyday—by grounding national unrest within a confined domestic area.

Here, Avtar Brah's definition of "diaspora space" as a location where "the native and the migrant are constituted in relation to each other" is especially helpful (Brah 16). Gustad has a minority awareness that is similar to diasporic displacement, even though he has not moved. Once economically significant, the Parsis are seen as becoming more and more marginal in India after independence. Gustad's concerns regarding his son's schooling, unstable finances, and societal deterioration are indicative of a community that believes it is culturally fragile. Theoretical discussions of identity further illuminate Mistry's fictional world. Stuart Hall famously argues that "identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of being" and that cultural identities are "never complete, always in process." Such formulations help explain Gustad Noble's unstable sense of belonging. The compound wall that divides the Khodadad Building from the busy city outside is a recurrent image throughout the book that represents both safety and seclusion. The private sphere becomes open to national politics when political slogans start to appear on the wall. Gustad's effort to preserve and repaint the wall shows a determination to uphold morality in the face of turmoil. Minority security is unsettled by the postcolonial state, as evidenced by the loudness, corruption, and bureaucratic manipulation that permeate personal life. The assessment that underlines Mistry's ability to transform a localized community into a universal human experience can be observed in the Study Material by the Directorate of Distance Education, Pondicherry University through the lines, "The inhabitants of Khodadad Building are representatives of a cross section of middle class Parsis expressing all the angularities of dwindling community. All the characters in the novel are individualized and memorably drawn with humour and compassion." (163)

Mistry depicts Bombay with somber detail and moral restraint, in contrast to Salman Rushdie's flamboyant reconstruction of the city as a place of magical simultaneity. Famously, Rushdie describes "imaginary homelands" created by fragmentation and memory (Rushdie 10). However, Mistry steers clear of ostentatious narrative innovation. His realism highlights the significance of historical contingency rather than dissolving the past into myth. The political controversy involving Major Bilimoria reveals how common people become unwitting players in national intrigue by implicating Gustad in secret state

operations. Rushdie himself remarks that "human beings do not perceive things whole" and that the past survives through "imaginary homelands." Mistry similarly reconstructs Bombay through memory, although his mode remains ethically realist rather than magical.

The climate of surveillance and mistrust foreshadows the Emergency, even though it is vividly dramatized in *A Fine Balance*. What Homi Bhabha refers to as "minority discourse," in which marginalized populations negotiate authority without actually owning it, is exemplified by Gustad's moral quandary—whether to help his disgraced friend (Bhabha 2). Despite his lack of political clout, Gustad must react morally to the fallout. His choices are motivated by loyalty, fear, and conscience rather than ideological conviction.

Crucially, Mistry avoids romanticizing Parsi insularity. Gustad's biases, annoyances, and generational disputes are depicted with subtlety. The revolt of his son Sohrab against engineering courses is a sign of the deterioration of social norms and paternal authority. The younger generation's conflicted feelings about inherited identity imply that, in Mistry's narrative, diaspora is also temporal, developing over generations as opposed to geographical boundaries. The spatial dynamics of Bombay exacerbate this moral conflict. A feeling of compression is evoked by packed transportation, bureaucratic offices, and small dwellings. However, the book moves at a slow, almost contemplative pace. Mistry creates an aesthetic of endurance by painstakingly describing everyday activities, such as bank work, family dinners, and nighttime prayers. Instead of becoming a place for display, the city becomes a testing ground for honesty. As a result, *Such a Long Journey* redefines diaspora as internal marginalization within the nation-state rather than as geographic exile. Gustad must balance his political disappointment with his personal allegiance, making his trek more moral than physical. By doing this, Mistry places Bombay in the context of a multilayered area of dread, memory, and brittle belonging. The city is a place where minority identity is always negotiated; it is neither completely oppressive nor nostalgically adored.

A Fine Balance (1995) extends Mistry's canvas to reveal the systemic brutality of the Indian Emergency (1975–77), while *Such a Long Journey* traces minority concern within metropolitan domesticity. Here, diaspora is reinterpreted as forced internal exile—citizens made foreigners within their own country—

rather than as cross-border relocation. Mistry dramatizes how state authority rearranges space, dignity, and survival through the interconnected lives of Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohlah, and the tailors Ishvar and Omprakash Darji. The narrative of *The Emergency* in Mistry is told through its bureaucratic and physical ramifications, such as forced sterilizations, slum demolitions, police brutality, and arbitrary arrest, rather than through lofty political rhetoric. By doing this, Mistry associates himself with a realist heritage that is sensitive to the suffering of common people. Postcolonial realism frequently records the "slow violence" ingrained in state structures, as noted by Pramod K. Nayar (Nayar 78). Because Mistry's realism forces the reader to confront structural injustice without artistic embellishment, it is ethical. As Pramod K. Nayar argues, postcolonial realism often records forms of "slow violence" embedded within state structures. Mistry's depiction of sterilization campaigns and forced evictions powerfully exemplifies this ethical realism.

The novel's central theme is Dina Dalal's shaky independence. Dina is a symbol of gendered weakness and minority fragility as a widowed Parsi woman who defies her controlling brother. For Maneck and the tailors, her tiny apartment serves as a makeshift haven of cooperation amid chaos. However, political intervention and economic forces are constant threats to this haven. Dina's battle to preserve her independence is a reflection of the Parsi community's general fear of deterioration, although via the lens of gendered experience. However, the story of the tailors sharply highlights caste violence. Because of their origins as Chamaar leather craftsmen, Ishvar and Omprakash are positioned within India's established hierarchy. Although metropolitan modernity provides only a partial escape, their movement to the city symbolizes a quest for dignity transcending caste tyranny. The state practically engraves violence on their bodies when they are subjected to cruel punishment and forced sterilization. In this way, diaspora turns into physical displacement—citizens uprooted from their own humanity.

To comprehend this dynamic, Homi Bhabha's theory of minority discourse is helpful. Bhabha contends that positions of structural marginality that reveal inconsistencies within the country give rise to minority discourse (Bhabha 2). Caste minority and Parsis equally expose the frailty of India's democratic self-image in *A Fine Balance*. *The Emergency* exposes the state's potential for

totalitarianism by suspending constitutional guarantees. Mistry illustrates the unequal distribution of vulnerability rather than providing an ideological answer. The diasporic aspect of the book is further complicated by Maneck Kohlah's trajectory. Maneck, who is from a Himalayan village, feels culturally alienated in Bombay. His subsequent relocation to Dubai makes diasporic displacement a reality. Geographical mobility does not guarantee membership, though, as evidenced by his eventual disillusionment and suicide. What Avtar Brah refers to as the mental dimension of diaspora—an uneasy relationship to place and self—is reflected in Maneck's experience of alienation (Brah 16). Maneck is unable to reconcile the past with the present, even while he is overseas.

The title of the book itself alludes to a delicate balance. The term "fine balance" describes survival in the face of instability rather than harmony. Characters temporarily unite across class, caste, and religion, but these links are still susceptible to societal influences. Mistry's ethical reality is highlighted by his inability to offer redemptive closure. *A Fine Balance* emphasizes the price of marginality, in contrast to tales that hail hybridity as creative emancipation.

Crucially, Mistry refrains from turning characters into political emblems. Psychological depth is used to depict Ishvar's tenacity, Om's impatience, Dina's arrogance, and Maneck's sensitivity. This focus on interiority sets Mistry apart from documentary realism alone. According to his fiction, historical violence must be comprehended in terms of how it affects relationships, memory, and physical experience. *A Fine Balance* reorients diaspora studies toward internal displacement and minority endurance through its broad reach. The book shows how postcolonial nationhood can perpetuate exile within its own boundaries rather than eradicate it. Thus, Mistry's story casts doubt on exuberant narratives of post-independence India and reinterprets belonging as provisional, negotiated, and morally problematic.

Family Matters (2002) looks inside to analyze decline at the scale of the body and the household, while *A Fine Balance* dramatizes national breakdown through political violence. Mistry addresses mortality, memory, and the Parsi community's diminishing horizon through the elderly figure of Nariman Vakeel. Although the tone of the book is more subdued than that of its predecessor, its emotional impact stems from its focus on gradual decline—physical, familial, and

demographic. Diaspora is reinterpreted here as temporal fragility—a group facing its own disappearing future. The existential anxiety and demographic decline of the Parsi Zoroastrian community is evident in the following dialogues:

Just before you came, Jai,” said Inspector Masalawala, “we were chatting about the future of the Parsi community.” “Vultures and crematoriums both will be redundant,” declared Dr. Fitter, “If there are no Parsis to feed them. What’s your opining?” ... “We’ve survived, and prospered.”... “Those were different times, a different world,” said Inspector Masalavala, not in a mood to tolerate optimism. “The experts are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left (412)

Because of his Parkinson's condition, Nariman is dependent on his stepchildren Coomy and Jal, whose animosity pushes him into his daughter Roxana and her husband Yezad's already small flat. The home is used as a testing ground for ethics. Fissures in family ties are revealed by caregiving, financial hardship, and unresolved past grievances. By lingering over the commonplace aspects of illness—the shaking hand, the trouble speaking, the humiliation of reliance—Mistry's story turns physical deterioration into a metaphor for societal weakness.

Throughout the book, the Parsis' demographic dread lurks in the background. A community focused on survival is shown by discussions about endogamy and decreasing birth rates. The Parsis experience a distinct form of dispersal—gradual internal diminution—than diasporic groups, which are characterized by dispersion across states. Here, demographic loss might be included in Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space as formed via histories of displacement (Brah 16). A psychological diaspora—a sensation of marginalization within one's own country—is created by the Parsis' perception that they are "outnumbered" in India. Nariman's memories of his early love for Lucy Braganza—a non-Parsi woman he was not allowed to marry—show how personal sacrifice is frequently necessary for the preservation of the community. The conflict between continuity and personal desire is highlighted by the ban on marriages. Homi Bhabha's concept of minority speech as a negotiation of authority is pertinent: The Parsis use strict borders to try to protect their identity, yet these barriers exacerbate internal strife (Bhabha 2). Instead of making fun of these fears, Mistry depicts them with sympathetic ambivalence.

Another important theme is Yezad Chenoy's metamorphosis. Yezad eventually moves toward a conservative religious identity after first becoming annoyed by family pressure and financial hardship. It is possible to see his shift toward ritual attendance and social orthodoxy as a compensatory move—an effort to restore stability in the face of uncertainty. In this way, Mistry explores the psychological aspects of minority consciousness: heightened identity performance becomes a source of control when social and economic mobility seems constrained. However, *Family Matters* refuses to use its people as societal parables. Emotional nuance is used to depict Coomy's resentment, Nariman's regret, and Roxana's calm perseverance. Mistry's inability to provide moral absolutes is the foundation of his ethical realism. Love is flawed, care is draining, and hatred makes sense. The novel shifts political discourse into the personal arena by emphasizing aging and caregiving. The Parsi community's frailty is similar to that of the aging body in that both require ongoing, frequently unappreciated care.

Maintaining continuity is mostly dependent on memory. Nariman's memories of Bombay before independence bring to mind a period when the Parsis were more prominent. But rather than being nostalgic, these memories are laced with melancholy. According to Salman Rushdie, narrative is used to reconstruct the past, influenced by loss and longing (Rushdie 10). Memory emphasizes transience rather than restoring authority in Mistry's treatment. In the end, *Family Matters* reinterprets dispersion as a relationship with time rather than place. The community's worry is caused by generational drift and population contraction rather than geographic displacement. Mistry portrays minority survival as a moral obligation that is passed down through the generations by emphasizing the aged patriarch. The challenge is not just where one fits in, but also how one maintains a sense of belonging in the face of uncertainty about the future.

Family Matters, *a Fine Balance*, and *Such a Long Journey* in postcolonial India, Rohinton Mistry continuously questions what it means to belong. Although Mistry is frequently identified as an Indo-Canadian diasporic writer, his most potent examinations of displacement take place in India. His novel questions the notion that international mobility is a necessary component of diaspora. Rather, he shows how types of internal exile are created by political authoritarianism,

caste marginalization, minority consciousness, and demographic instability. Diaspora appears as psychological alienation within the nation-state in *Such a Long Journey*. Gustad Noble is somewhat but steadfastly removed from majoritarian politics due to his Parsi identity. The book illustrates how domestic life is impacted by national events, turning Bombay into a morally contentious area. In this case, belonging is contingent and unstable. Gustad's allegiance to friends and family is constantly put to the test by uncontrollable circumstances. Minority survival in the city now depends more on moral fortitude than on political clout. Mistry's interrogation of official political narratives and his critique of postcolonial state institutions is demonstrated in *Such a Long Journey* as below:

While the alleged facts of this case are certainly unique, what strikes this reporter as even more unusual are the circumstances surrounding this highly imaginative crime. For example, assuming that Mr. Bilimoria has the talent of voice impersonation, is it routine for our national banks to hand over vast sums of money if the Prime Minister telephones?... These questions cry out for answers, and till the answers are heard, clearly and completely, the public's already eroded confidence in our leaders cannot be restored. (195)

By emphasizing structural violence, *A Fine Balance* deepens this understanding. The Emergency highlights the vulnerability of underprivileged bodies and the weakness of constitutional protections. Maneck's last hopelessness and the brutality of the tailors highlight the limitations of mobility as liberty. Even Dina's limited independence turns out to be brittle. Mistry destroys celebratory notions of post-independence modernity with this narrative architecture. In this sense, diaspora refers to displacement within citizenship rather than travel between borders.

By focusing on slow deterioration rather than political catastrophe, *Family Matters* completes the trajectory. A slower type of instability is revealed by aging, caring, and social contraction. *Family Matters* depicts gradual deterioration, while *A Fine Balance* dramatizes stunning state violence. Nariman's physical decline is similar to the Parsis' fear of a declining population. The vulnerability of continuity is embodied by both. Diaspora becomes temporal in this context, a struggle with

finiteness rather than foreignness. When taken as a whole, these books express what could be called minority ethics. Mistry does not turn sorrow into victorious hybridity, nor does he romanticize marginality. Rather, he stresses tolerance, accountability, and ethical compromise. His attention to the commonplace—meals cooked, debts settled, bodies cared for, and modest acts of kindness—is the foundation of his realism. His narrative restraint sets him apart from his more flamboyantly experimental contemporaries. Mistry emphasizes perseverance, whereas postmodern diasporic fiction frequently celebrates fragmentation. The ethical principles of Zoroastrianism profoundly shape Mistry's conception of moral responsibility and communal solidarity. His views on ethical values and minority consciousness confirms this when he says, "The true Zoroastrian way of life consists in spreading happiness around... A true Parsee lives not for himself but for his family, society and the country as a whole... Men and women are given equal status in every sphere of life. Both have equal opportunities of spiritual evolution and salvation." (21)

Transnational mobility and hybridity are often given priority in theoretical conceptions of diaspora. Cultural identity is a process of becoming rather than a fixed essence, according to Stuart Hall's seminal formulation. Although generational change is acknowledged in Mistry's work, it also highlights the worry that comes with this fluidity (Hall 225). His characters perceive hybridity as a conflict between memory and adaptation rather than as a creative release. In a similar vein, Avtar Brah emphasizes relational positioning in his concept of diaspora space (Brah 16). By illustrating how minority communities deal with both internal and external forces within national borders, Mistry expands on this concept. The minority discourse of Homi Bhabha offers another perspective. Bhabha contends that by taking on liminal roles, minorities reveal the inconsistencies in national narratives (Bhabha 2). Parsis, lower-caste migrants, widowed ladies, and elderly patriarchs all work together in Mistry's fiction to highlight the frailty of India's democratic self-image. Their marginalization exposes structural injustices ingrained in daily existence rather than being purely symbolic.

Crucially, Mistry rejects cynicism. Even in the depressing aftermath of *A Fine Balance*, acts of kindness continue. Dina's tenacity, Ishvar's fortitude, and

Roxana's calm concern all imply that moral behavior is still achievable in spite of systemic unfairness. Relational commitment, rather than ideological resolution, maintains the "fine balance" between optimism and despair. Mistry's work differs from merely sad realism in that it emphasizes ethical continuity. Thus, a conceptual change is necessary to reposition Mistry inside diaspora studies. It is more fruitful to approach his novels as reflections on minority survival within postcolonial modernity rather than solely as a migrant author writing about home from a distance. By emphasizing vulnerability, his work undermines celebratory narratives of multiculturalism and globalization. In his story universe, belonging is brittle and continually renegotiated. Mistry holds a unique place in the larger field of Indian English writing. He does not accept overt political polemic or magical realism. Rather, he develops a patient, meticulous, and morally aware aesthetic of ethical realism. By using this method, he adds to a different lineage of postcolonial writing that values perseverance over spectacle. In the end, diaspora is redefined in Rohinton Mistry's fiction as a state of ethical negotiation influenced by memory, community, and history. His books show that minority identity involves both fragility and resilience, that relocation can happen within one's own country, and that daily acts of kindness rather than victorious declarations are what sustain a sense of belonging. By doing this, Mistry provides an insightful reflection on the tenuous continuity of the contemporary world.

Diaspora is redefined in Rohinton Mistry's fiction as a complex, ethically grounded, historically aware situation. He portrays migration as both a memory and moral burden through the reconstruction of Bombay, the expression of Parsi minority worries, and the investigation of twofold displacement. His stories emphasize vulnerability, resiliency, and moral responsibility rather than joyous multiculturalism. By doing this, Mistry presents himself as a moral historian of everyday life impacted by political upheaval as well as a diasporic novelist. His contribution to Indo-Canadian writing is the transformation of diaspora into an ethical inquiry area where human dignity, community, and memory are used to negotiate belonging instead of just assimilation.

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5. **Funding:** All sources of financial support have been fully disclosed in the manuscript. Where no external funding was received, this research was conducted without specific financial support from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agency.
6. **Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that all financial and non-financial competing interests have been disclosed. Where no such interests exist, the authors declare that they have no known conflicts of interest that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.
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